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The Dynamics of Dialogue

Edited by

Ivana Markovà and Klaus Foppa

Contents

Preface

We first met in December 1985 at a seminar on 'The social construction of meaning' held at the Werner Reimers Foundation in Bad Homburg, Germany. We had both been invited by Carl Graumann, and we both presented papers dealing with the dynamic aspects of speech and conversation. During the seminar we realized that we shared many concerns about the study of language, and we decided to establish a study group to explore the dynamic characteristics of speech and conversation. The study group, to be called 'The Dynamics of Dialogue', was to be interdisciplinary, including scholars in the social and human sciences. It would focus on both conceptual and methodological issues. The Werner Reimers Foundation accepted our proposals for this project and agreed to host the study group and invite other scholars to our seminars and conferences.

The group is made up of the following people:

Professor Jörg Bergmann, Department of Sociology, University of Konstanz, Germany;

Professor Rob Farr, Department of Social Psychology, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, England;

Professor Klaus Foppa, Department of Psychology, University of Berne, Switzerland;

Professor Carl Graumann, Department of Psychology, University of Heidelberg, Germany;

Professor Per Linell, Department of Communication Studies, University of Linköping, Sweden;

Professor Thomas Luckmann, Department of Sociology, University of Konstanz, Germany;

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# of conversation

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Introduction

One of the most obvious 'dynamic' features of any kind of discourse is the topic development that takes place in and through the succeeding contributions to an ongoing verbal exchange. When talking, people always talk 'about something' and, although there are types of monotopic encounters, in most situations this 'something' does not remain the same as the interaction proceeds. Topic movement of some kind can be found within a single turn, as when a speaker, after finishing his or her story, draws a general conclusion. More often, however, topic development is an event which takes place across a series of turns and in which co-interactants find themselves talking about things that are quite different from the things they talked about a short time previously.

In this chapter I am going to consider a feature of topic talk that is of general relevance for any kind of verbal interaction, but that is most prominent in conversations and related types of discourse. The feature with which I shall be concerned materializes in those stretches of talk in which participants in a verbal exchange make an object or event in their immediate, witnessable environment the topic of their remarks. An instance of this kind of topicalization where *talk turns to local matters* can be found in the following excerpt taken from a family conversation.

I[1]

Family table talk about white collar crime and about a TV report on that issue

> *A:* then they u:h; (.) *sewed–*, then they:: .h sewed a *label* to it
> (0.5) saying 'Made by the People's Own Company So-and-
> so' and = put a label in and re-imported the very same
> shirts to the Federal Republic (0.5) because within the
> domestic trade in Germany, (.) you don't need to pay any
> duties, and = so
> *U:* uhu
>
> (1 sec)
> *A:* A::::nd; that's how they made a killing;
> (0.8)

→ *U:* °Look how the ⌈ cat is sleeping°
                  ⌊ (creaky noise)
→ *M:* I never saw her ⌈ lying like that;
→ *U:*   ⌊ (laughs]

(For a key to the symbols used in this and the following extracts see Atkinson and Heritage (1984, pp. ix–xvi).

Following A's description of a recent TV report on white collar crimes his sister U draws attention to the family's cat and its peculiar way of sleeping. M (who is A and U's mother) responds by confirming that the cat's position is most unusual. During the last part of her mother's utterance, U joins in with laughter.

When listening to recordings of family conversations, instances like the one just cited abound. That in talking to each other people turn to objects and events that are present in the situative context of their utterances is a regular recurring phenomenon that seems to be utterly trivial. During the various opportunities for talking in everyday life people comment on boundless things and events in the world; why shouldn't they attend in their talking to local objects and happenings as well? By itself, the simple fact that a verbal exchange turns to elements of its local environment seems to be most unremarkable. What else, then, makes this phenomenon a noteworthy object of analysis?

Some features of topic talk

Research during the last two decades has repeatedly shown that 'topic' is an extremely complex, multilayered discourse phenomenon

that is not easily accessible to systematic investigation.[2] Any attempt to disentangle some of the components that the notion of topic incorporates will therefore be sketchy and selective. In this section I shall limit myself to a brief description of some of the main features of topic talk that are of relevance for the analysis which is to follow.

Topic progression

An initial characterization of the notion of topic can be obtained by singling out two complementary components which together form a contradictory unit. The first component may be conceived as the force that ensures that there is a topical flow at all. A verbal exchange that consists only of repetitions of the selfsame utterance and that therefore lacks any development would strike us as odd if not impossible (see Foppa, this volume, Chapter 8). There is a constraint of *progressivity* imposing on every speaker the obligation that in turn to talk he or she should be informative and should contribute something new to the ongoing verbal exchange.[3]

Topic maintenance

This component of topic progression is counterbalanced by a second feature. The demand for newness with which every speaker is faced cannot be met by just throwing in any 'new' item. There is a backward-oriented constraint on a speaker to stay on topic (Tracy, 1984), to adhere to the present subject matter and, more generally, to be concerned in the formulations he or she chooses with the 'co-selection of features for topic' (Schegloff, 1971, p. 95). It is part of a speaker's duties to show consideration for the maintenance of an actual topic and for the coherence of the unfolding discourse (Craig and Tracy, 1983). This is done preferably by shaping a single contribution to a verbal exchange in such a way that it is chained to another speaker's preceding utterance and adds something new to the actual topic which is thus sustained and continued. Speakers do, of course, make statements that are obviously produced out of topic. But these contributions are usually introduced by some kind of pre-positioned 'misplacement marker' (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973, p. 258), such as 'oh, by the way . . .', 'speaking of . . .' or 'not to change the topic but . . .'.[4] Through the use of these forms a speaker can display that he or she is well aware of the fact that his or her utterance is not topically coherent and is thus improperly placed. So, even when a speaker does

not actually stay on topic he or she has ways of indicating his or her respect for the constraint of topicality.

Topic talk as joint production

There is a third organizational feature of topic talk that restricts a single participant's capacity to redirect the topic progression of a verbal exchange, in the same way as the obligation to stay on topic. A single utterance may by its form and content have the potential to lead to a change of topic. But whether such a change will in fact take place cannot be decided by the single actor alone, at least not in the case of verbal interaction.[5] Here, topic talk is a joint production and is dominated by the principle that 'it takes two to topic' (Covelli and Murray, 1980, p. 384). The direction into which the subject matter of a verbal exchange will develop is a socially negotiated accomplishment and does not depend simply on a single speaker's contribution. A topic move by one speaker may be supported or blocked, continued or transformed, assisted or ignored by his co-interactants and their response will influence the future progression of topic no less than the original utterance.

Topic formulations

The constraint to produce topically coherent contributions to an ongoing verbal exchange puts pressure on every participant to pay attention to the topic and the course it takes. Otherwise, participating in the talk may become difficult since every purported utterance will run the risk of not fitting the topic's actual state of development. This leads to a further relevant feature of topic talk: although interactants jointly orient to the topic of their exchange, what the topic consists of is by no means always formulated and put into words. Very often participants in a verbal exchange are busy talking without pinning a label on to their topic or announcing every single change in their topic orientation. Retrospectively, a verbal exchange may be described as 'a conversation about some eggheads in the department', even if this categorization did not actually occur in the conversation referred to. *Formulations* of topic[6] may be produced in the actual talk itself and may be seen as an attempt to ensure a shared understanding of what the talking is all about. But since topics develop further and since formulations are by their very nature glosses, meaning more than they can say in so many words, formulations of topic can provide only

a momentary and tentative sense of orderliness and meaning for the participants.

Topic progression, topic maintenance, joint production of topic talk and topic formulations are but a few basic principles of the management of topic in verbal exchanges. They are not just analytic conceptions but features to which participants themselves are oriented in their actions. This will become evident in the rest of this chapter, which now turns to its main focus: the topicalization of local objects and events.

Topic, situation and the principle of local sensitivity

One of the most important general dimensions of social communication (as pointed out by Luckmann, this volume, Chapter 2) is 'abstraction', i.e. the ability of co-interactants to refer not only to components of the actual communicative situation but also to elements which transcend the situation in space or time. This faculty of abstraction by which people are capable of talking about things beyond the world within their reach is by no means self-evident. Clearly, new-born babies are perfectly able interactionally to synchronize their behaviour with other present persons, but they are, without any doubt, unable to communicate with others about some temporally or spatially remote object.[7] Studies in developmental pragmatics have further shown that, overwhelmingly, the conversations of young children are about objects, people or events that are present in the utterance context (Keenan and Schieffelin, 1976). The ability to expand the realm of possible topics beyond the immediate spatio–temporal environment of talking is the result of an ontogenetic development that has a phylogenetic parallel. According to Karl Bühler (1934/1965, pp. 366f.) the transition from basically 'empractical' acts of talking to 'independent, self-supplied speech products' is an act of liberation from situational aids ('*Situationshilfen*') that must be seen as one of the most crucial factors in the development of human language.

The fact that participants in a verbal exchange have chosen as their topic some 'abstract' object outside of the encounter's situational surrounding does not imply that the talk produced is without any situational imprints. Utterances are never spoken out of context; they are always designed and shaped for specific recipients and are bound — particularly clearly in their deictic forms of reference – to extra-

linguistic components of the situation. Language in use is essentially indexical (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970), which is to say that participants in verbal exchanges are sensitive to context, and this holds true even if the subject matter of talk is not to be found within the situational environment of the talking itself.

Adult humans are equipped with the capability to focus their verbal exchanges on abstract – in the sense of extra-situational – objects and at the same time to show in their utterances an orientation towards situational particulars. This observation leads to the heart of the matter. Obviously, a basic feature of the communicative competence of human beings is their ability to split attention in such a way that they can simultaneously deal with objects-at-a-distance (topics) and attend to objects-within-reach (local matters). In telling a story about a past event (and thereby concentrating on an object that transcends the situation) a speaker does not shut off his or her eyes, ears and nose, but remains alert to whatever is going on within his or her sphere of perception. An even stronger split of attention may be found in those cases in which a person participates in a conversation and at the same time is occupied with knitting or some other manual activity. A crucial question arises at this point: how are these two domains of attention related? Do they conflict with each other?[8] Is one of them basically subordinated to the other? Or is there a dynamic hierarchization by which each domain in turn may, for a while, be the dominant one?

I suggest that in every kind of discourse there operates a basic principle which I shall call the principle of 'local sensitivity' and which can be described as the structural tendency built into every topic talk to turn to local matters. This description needs further qualification since it is evident that the term 'local matters' can mean two things. First, at any given moment in the course of a verbal exchange the talk so far and especially the immediately prior utterance can be regarded as the 'local environment' in which every next turn must position itself and to which it must adapt. This notion of 'local', which is the common one in conversation analysis,[9] refers to the talk-so-far-as-the-condition-for-every-next-turn and may incorporate sequential implications, the constraint to stay on topic, etc. But there is another, an extra-linguistic notion of 'local' as well. The talk-so-far does not make up the entire 'local environment' in which a next turn has to be placed. There are matters outside of the verbal flow itself – objects at hand and situative events – which can be perceived by the actors and which in themselves constitute a separate local context for next actions.

It is this second notion of local that I have in mind when I speak of

'local sensitivity'. Thus, the concept of local sensitivity is introduced not to refer to the sequential and topical conditions for any next turn, but instead to the present extra-verbal, situational locale in which a next utterance gets placed and realized. Local sensitivity is meant to capture the tendency built into every topic talk to focus on elements of the encounter's context which are situated or occur in the participants' field of perception but have not been topicalized so far.

Since every discoursive process is situationally embedded, it is possible in every discourse to (re-)focus on components of its local environment and make them the topic of the verbal exchange. However, various types of discourse differ significantly in the degree to which their topic progression is subject to the principle of local sensitivity. This may even be seen as an identifying feature of discourse types, providing each of them with their distinctive character of higher or lesser local sensitivity.

Turning to local matters

The easiest way to observe the principle of local sensitivity in operation is to examine those occasions where in the course of a verbal exchange some object within the participants' field of perception 'imposes' its relevance (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973/1974, pp. 186–90) onto the interactants. An unknown object, a strange sound, a funny smell, a long expected (or surprising) arrival may capture the actors' attention, thus drawing it away from whatever it is presently directed at. Very frequently it can be observed that these events not only lead to a restructuring of the participants' attention but to a change in topic as well. Talk about the previous topic stops and the verbal exchange focuses instead on the intruding object. This happens in example II.

II[10]

    A: ⎡ Branko Zebesch must have been drunk (0.5)
       ⎣ again;
    W: During the week he is sober for three days;
    A: (Laughs)
    HJ: *What?*

                          (3.0)

    W: And his friends and patrons say of him that in those three days during the week when he is sober; he achieves more than many a coach who is sober for seven days;

                          (3.0)

(Hugo, the budgerigar, comes flying into the room)
←   A: (towards Hugo) Hallo there;
                              (1.0)
←   U: (towards Hugo) Hallo = Hallo there
                              (2.0)
←   U: (towards Hugo) Come here (0.5) come!
←   A: (towards Hugo) Come on look
    U: Is there any water left?
    A: It's all gone
→   HJ: But a bird like that for sure is not a gourmet;
    H: Huh?
→   HJ: I said a bird like that for sure is not a gourmet
→   H: (Given that it is always) eating grain
                              (4.0)
→   H: ⌈ It's just all the time on a grain diet
→   U: ⌊ hm – sometimes it eats croissants;

In this instance the members of a family are talking about a
well-known football coach and his publicly reported problems with
alcohol when the family's budgerigar makes its appearance by flying
across the family table. The bird is addressed and lured immediately
by some of the family members (marked by the symbol ←). After some
attempts the interactants stop directing their remarks to the budger-
igar and start commenting about it instead (marked by the symbol
→). In the ensuing talk, this pattern whereby utterances addressed *to*
the bird are continued by comments and stories *about* it, recurs.

The noise of a car accident, or just the rumble given by a
co-participant's stomach, the sun blinking suddenly through the
clouds, or just the cat's peculiar sleeping position, a smell of smoke, or
just a waft of perfume – whatever it is in the local environment of an
encounter that attracts the interactants' attention, it can also be
turned into a topic of talk. However, the principle of local sensitivity
can be found in operation not only in those instances where some
conspicuous object or event intrudes and draws the participants'
attention, and subsequently the topic of their talk, away from their
present involvement. As can be seen in the following data segment,
participants in a conversation may also topicalize objects within their
field of perception that by no means impose themselves, but are just
there in the situation (and have been all along).

    J: Oh I could drive if you want me to.
    C: Well no I'll drive (I don' m⌈ in')
    J: ⌊ hhh
                    (1.0)
    J: I mea*nt* to offah.
                    (16.0)
→   J: Those shoes look nice when you keep on putting stuff on
       'em.
    C: Yeah I 'ave to get another can cuz cuz it ran out.
       I mean it's a⌈lmost (h) ou(h)*t=
    J: ⌊Oh:::ah*he .hh heh=
    C: =yeah well it cleans 'em and keeps⌈ 'em clean.
    J: ⌊Yeah right=
    C: =I should get a brush too and *you* should getta brush'n
       ⌈*you* should—* fix your hiking boo⌈ts
    J: ⌊ yeah suh::   ⌊my hiking boots
    C: which you were gonna do this weekend.
    J: Pooh, did I have time this wk— well::
    C: Ahh c'mon=
    J: =wh'n we get— (uh::kay), I haven't even sat down to do
       any— y'know like .hh today I'm gonna sit down 'n read while
       you're doing yur coat, (0.7) do yur— hood.
    C: Yehhh=
    J: =(ok) (2.0) I haven't *not* done *any*thing the whole *week*end.
    C: (okay)
                    (14.0)
→   J: Dass a rilly nice swe::der, (.hh) 'at's my favorite sweater on
       you, it's the only one that looks right on you.
    C: mm huh.
                    (90.0)
              (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974, pp. 714f.)

It was not J's shoes and sweater that made the topic change by
attracting C's attention. It was C who, out of the multitude of possible
things in the world to talk about, selected and raised those 'sleeping'
objects in the participants' environment and who, by commenting on
those objects, made them the topic of talk.

Whether participants in a verbal exchange start to topicalize
elements or events in their immediately perceptible environment
does not depend solely on the force with which these objects intrude
into the perceptual field of an actor. The street noise that is to be heard
in an apartment can be turned into a topic of talk – but so can the

absence of any street noise. Of course, an unfamiliar object 'draws' the actors' attention to itself by its very unfamiliarity (and so do other surprising or obtrusive events). But the barking of a dog or a conspicuous dirty mark on a co-participant's shirt can also be ignored – and very often must be ignored – by an actor. It is therefore always the interactants themselves who in a given situation allow the principle of local sensitivity to determine the flow and change of topic. As always, however, people cannot just do whatever they want. Whether the topic in a verbal exchange can shift to situational objects is not just a matter of personal choice. There are types of discourse in which the principle of local sensitivity is tightly controlled, and others in which participants are to a high degree permitted to turn – in their attention as well as in their talking – to local matters.

Local sensitivity as an organizational feature of conversation

A discourse type particularly suitable for the study of how and where an ongoing course of verbal interaction is shaped by the principle of local sensitivity is conversation. It is within conversation that a participant may change topic by, for example, commenting on an ashtray he or she is using, by asking about some visible gadget that arouses his or her interest, or by pointing out the peculiar behaviour of a pet. This observation would be quite unremarkable if it were simply the case that the situational environment of a verbal exchange is accessible to 'conversation' – as a thematic field – but off limits to other types of discourse. But the matter is more interesting than that. The possibility of topicalizing local matters is, rather, part of the social organization of conversational interaction and closely related to its other features (see Adato, 1980). Some of these features will be recalled shortly in order to underline the significance that the principle of local sensitivity has for the organization of conversation.

Conversational interaction is characterized, among other things, by the fact that it is not restricted to a single recurrent interactional pattern, such as the question–answer sequence in interviews, or the question–answer–evaluation sequence classroom interaction. Instead, there is a kaleidoscope of social activities (telling jokes, teasing, arguing, teaching, gossiping, etc.) that may occur and shape its course. Furthermore, the flow of interaction is not fixed in advance by formal regulation, an agenda or liturgy. It emerges turn by turn. In the same way, topic progression in conversation is not predetermined

but is usually achieved gradually, by stepwise transition in which one topic flows into another without interactants noticing.[12]

As these features show, conversations are far less tightly bound than other types of discourse by a corset of formal patterns of interaction. Conversations are also far less constricted by thematic bonds originating in the given purpose of an encounter and narrowing the directions of progression. But there is another side to this freedom. Because conversations are not backed up by formal procedural rules, because they are not guided by a developmental scheme and are not kept on a thematic leash they may 'get into trouble'. Transcripts of conversations reveal that very often the self-organizing power of conversation temporally decreases, remarks are not taken up by recipients and are left without comment, a topic dries up without a new topic emerging, periods of silence become more frequent, the overall conversation is in danger of petering out. In an interview, the interviewer would pose the next question; in a business meeting, the chairperson would move to the next item on the agenda. But conversations live on the 'endogenous' production and continuation of topics, for which every competent participant can be held responsible. Since 'conversation' is based on the voluntary commitment of all participants, an increasing number of periods of silence may imply that a closing phase is approaching. They indicate that there is nothing more to talk about and hence no point in staying together any longer.[13] If there is nothing left that participants want to tell each other, they may decide that they might as well depart.

In situations like these, where talk becomes discontinuous and gets stuck in a period of slackness, the possibility of topicalizing objects and events in the local environment is an important resource to ensure the continuation of interaction. Of course, participants in a conversation talk mainly about 'abstract' things beyond the encounter's immediate local context. They argue about Stalingrad or Boris Becker, they imagine a future wedding or jointly remember last year's holiday trip, they tell each other how to ride a bus without paying and they make fun of a distant relative. But as soon as the verbal flow stops, the topic line along which a conversation proceeds is cut off. Given that the old topic line has already come to a closure, a special effort involving the giving of a reason for reopening the conversation would be necessary to pick it up again. In order to start the conversation anew one may instead refer to some element or event within the perceptual field of all participants. Relying in such a situation on the principle of local sensitivity has various advantages.

It is part of our everyday experience that talk that initially focuses

on an object in the participants' immediate presence very quickly moves on from there to quite different topics. An example of such a rapid topical shift is provided in the following segment.

IV[14]

Family sitting at the dinner table, starting to eat

W: Enjoy your meal!

                        (1.0)

HJ: Enjoy⌈your meal!
U: ⌊Enjoy your meal!

                        (3.0)

A: Enjoy your meal!

                        (2.0)

U: M::::, quite garlicky
HJ: Is it?

                        (6.0)

      Well;=°no one could taste it at all yesterday°
      °°(   )°°

                        (3.0)

U: M::::, these little carrots are delicious;
                        (3.0)

A: °°(   )°°

                        (6.0)

U: Oh dear, mum; (0.5) the amount of carrots I eat, I should have
      very good eyes by now;

                        (3.0)

      all fresh ones;

                        (5.0)

U: °I got a prescription for new glasses;°
      I mean just the lenses.

                        (3.0)

A: you kept the old frame, didn't you Uschi.
U: Yeah of course

                        (2.5)

H: With Karin's glasses, (0.5) she wanted to have new frames, =
      but they're not available any more, (.) and on her old glasses (.)
      the *colour's* peeling off; (1.0) and as she really wanted to have
      the same ones and the same ones weren't available any longer
      as I said; (1.0) the optician suggested to her that she should
      get the colour and then they could be resprayed;
HJ: Ye⌈ah,
A: ⌊Uhu:,

In this extract conversation moves from a first comment about the meal ('quite garlicky') to a second remark about another food component (carrots) and from there – via the implicit proposition that carrots are good for the eyes – to information about a prescription for new glasses and then to a story about a woman who was going to get the frames of her glasses renewed in an unusual way. As can be seen in this instance, talk about some local object or event – dinner table conversations with all their empractical activities being a good case in point[15] – may serve as a kind of 'trigger topic'. Thus the ongoing conversation may be shifted quickly to a topic that was hitherto unthought of and that transcends the immediate situation.[16]

The principle of local sensitivity may be used by the participants especially in cases of discontinuous talk as a 'first gear' to set a conversation that has come to a halt in motion again. Those specific conversational circumstances that Schegloff and Sacks (1973, p. 262) have called a 'continuing state of incipient talk' – they have in mind 'members of a household in their living room, employees who share an office, passengers together in an automobile, etc.' (*ibid.*) – provide fertile ground for local topicalization after a temporary halt of topical progression. It is the kind of 'environment' in which people know that they will share one another's presence for a certain time and in which chunks of talk alternate with long periods of silence. These silences are not seen by the co-participants as leading to a definitive termination of talk. None the less, a restart of the verbal exchange is usually not possible simply by 'continuing' the discontinued previous topic line. On occasions like these, participants may choose instead to recommence talking by directing recipients' attention to an object or event in the situational here and now, trusting that a short-range remark will soon trigger off talk on more remote objects.

Topicalizing a local object may be used as a device not only to recommence a discontinued verbal exchange within a conversation but also to initiate a conversation itself. Time and again, conversations between strangers have been started by some remark on the weather, on the slowness of a train, or on the (good or poor) quality of a certain dish.[17] Referring to local matters can function as a topic initiation because the way this activity is organized provides a solution to a structural problem of topic talk. Making reference to an object or event within an encounter's local environment is a topical mechanism that is capable of answering a question which for participants in a verbal exchange is a pervasively relevant issue: the question of placement. In producing or hearing an utterance, conversationalists are continuously concerned with the question of 'why that now?' (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973, p. 241; for some further

differentiations see Bilmes, 1985). That is to say, co-interactants take the verbal exchange immediately preceding an utterance as an interpretative resource by which an understanding of what that utterance was all about can be reached.

At the very beginning of a conversation, or after a long period of silence, no sequential environment is available that could be considered by the interlocutors to explain the occurrence of any utterance. In such circumstances every utterance is, so to speak, placed out of the sequential context which is usually provided by the talk thus far; an important source of understanding is therefore missing. By focusing on a local object or event a speaker invites his or her hearers to draw upon their perceptual awareness in order to identify what he or she is talking about. The speaker thereby not only invokes the perceivable extra-verbal environment as the relevant context of his or her utterance, but also enables his or her hearers to take their own perceptions as a source by which a solution to the placement question may be arrived at. For example, a recipient who sees with his or her own eyes the peculiar sleeping posture of a cat is also able to recognize why his or her attention and the conversation's topic was directed to it by the speaker.

There are further, deeper connections between the principle of local sensitivity and the social organization of conversation as a specific type of discourse, than their usefulness for opening up or restarting verbal exchange. In his famous essay on 'sociability' Georg Simmel showed that:

conversation cannot allow any content to become significant in its own right. As soon as the discussion becomes objective [*sachlich*], as soon as it makes the ascertainment of a truth its *purpose*, it ceases to be sociable and thus becomes untrue to its own nature. (Simmel, 1917/1950, p. 62)[18]

Transcripts of family conversations reveal, however, that despite Simmel's statement, conversations are frequently in danger of becoming 'objective' and of degenerating even into potentially serious quarrels. One reason for this is that on the one hand disagreements are necessary as the communicative activity that keeps conversations alive, while on the other hand disagreements, by their very social organization, may lead to blocking of the topic or tend to escalate. In such a situation the principle option of shifting attention to local objects and topicalizing local events can serve as an effective antidote.

Any type of discourse that submits to the principle of local sensitivity is almost bound to be subject to rapid and unforeseeable

topic shifts. By turning from what is actually talked about to a local event and by virtue of the above-mentioned trigger effect of talk about local objects, the progression of topic – and hence the abandonment of old topics – can be dramatically accelerated. Given this capacity, the principle of local sensitivity can be used whenever, during conversation, a discussion becomes too objective, a disagreement loses its playful character or a topic tends to drag on unduly. 'The ability to change topics easily and quickly is part of the nature of sociable conversation', stated Simmel (1917/1950, p. 63). The principle of local sensitivity is a major component of the social organization of conversation by which this characteristic is brought about and maintained.

When co-interactants turn, in their talking, to local matters, they orient their talk towards components of the communicative situation which are simultaneously accessible to both of them. A remark on the weather may thus not only change the topic of talk but also its 'footing' (Goffman, 1979) by invoking situational circumstances to which both co-participants are exposed in the same way. By directing attention to local matters, co-participants abandon, at least for a short moment, their participatory roles deriving from extra-situational bonds and take on a shared situation identity of being e.g. a 'witness' or a 'victim' of a local event.[19] As talk moves on, this co-membership may, of course, soon be abandoned again in favour of other relational identities. But for a short moment mediated by the shared experience of some local event, there was a sense of mutuality, a realization of 'the synchronism of two streams of consciousness' (Schutz, 1967, p. 102) that joined the co-participants together. Thus, the principle of local sensitivity always implies a moment of 'phatic communion' (Malinowski, 1946). This may be a major reason why this feature of topic management is so densely interwoven with the social organization of conversation.

Controlling local sensitivity

I have portrayed conversation as a type of discourse whose topical organization is forcefully characterized by the principle of local sensitivity. This description is warranted by the fact that, in contrast to other types of discourse, conversation can include two anarchic types of participants: small children and pets.[20] By their way of behaving they often draw the 'ordinary' interlocutor's attention to local matters. It would be insufficient, however, to view conversation as a type of encounter that can tolerate the anomic and unpredictable

activities of these 'participants'. This is merely an aspect of a more generally important feature of this discourse type which is the fact that in order to maintain its flow conversation can systematically capitalize on the impulsive way of acting of children and pets by turning them into the topic of talk.

It is even possible to single out some types of conversational groups whose topic talk is almost entirely based on the principle of local sensitivity. These groups are organized in such a way that the distraction of the group members' attention and the shift of topic talk induced by local events is not inhibited but facilitated. In a classical ethnographic study of a small American rural community (West – pseud. for C. Withers – 1945) one can find a description of a 'loafing group', consisting of old men who spend most of their time exchanging stories and gossip, while sitting on two iron benches in one corner of the square. 'The iron benches control a view of the street and everyone who enters it from any direction. The Old Men daily gather up all threads of current events and gossip' (*ibid.*, pp. 99ff).[21] As can be seen from their specific micro-ecological arrangement, gossip groups of this kind are focused on and strongly dependent upon local events which are immediately turned into 'topical fuel' in order to keep the 'conversational apparatus' running.[22] In these cases, local sensitivity is a dominating feature of talk. But at the other polar extreme, there are types of discourse in which the principle of local sensitivity is tightly controlled.

At the entrance to churches, courthouses or universities, visitors are usually reminded by a special sign that it is prohibited to take pets into those areas. (Similarly, attending a lecture or seminar together with one's small children is, although there is no written notice, mostly regarded as a violation of proper academic behaviour.) Such regulations directly concern the question of how the issue of local sensitivity is handled in official discourse within these types of institution. It is a characteristic feature of institutional discourse types such as courtroom proceedings, seminar sessions or doctor–patient interactions that co-participants are acting under the constraint to orient themselves towards the official, predefined goal of the encounter. Precisely because of its goal- and task-oriented character, institutional discourse is continuously faced with the danger of distraction.

A major source of distraction is, of course, the local, situational environment of these institutional encounters. During a seminar session a helicopter may land just outside the university building; during a wedding ceremony a participant who has fallen asleep may begin to snore; during a courtroom proceeding a window cleaner may

start to do his job. In these situations participants usually feel obliged to disregard the intruding events, that is to say, to control the urge arising from the principle of local sensitivity and concentrate on the matter at hand. But many of them may nevertheless covertly watch the obtrusive happening, while simultaneously pretending to remain faithful to the official topic. At this point it becomes apparent that there is in fact a tendency built into every conversation or, more generally, discourse, to focus on elements of the encounter's context which are situated or occur in the participants' field of perception.

It is a general feature of institutional discourse that it remains insensitive to local matters, which means that the principle of local sensitivity must be controlled. Topic talk in institutional discourse may only turn to local matters in cases of perceivable emergency or in cases of obvious emergency in which some circumstances or happenings make continuation of the institutional discourse impossible. An experience that one can have again and again (e.g. in seminar sessions) is that, once the control of local sensitivity in institutional discourse is relaxed due to some interfering event, participants immediately turn to all sorts of local business and it usually needs several restarts and admonitions before they are tuned in again on the official agenda.

The problem of staying on topic in institutional discourse could, of course, be solved by putting all the burden on the participants and holding them responsible for the effective control of local sensitivity. But it is obviously only to a limited extent that people can prevent themselves from turning to local matters when things happen within their field of perception. A manifestation of this can be found in the fact that institutions themselves take precautions against possible distractions resulting from local irritations, e.g by keeping away children and pets. This may be the meaning of ceremonial regulations within institutions in general – they are there to maintain the situation as defined, i.e. the official topic of the encounter, by preventing the participants' attention from wandering to the bewildering array of diversions presented by the principle of local sensitivity.

Local sensitivity and the 'naturalness' of conversational data: a methodological afterthought

In this concluding section I shall show how the argument I have presented in this chapter has a methodological bearing on studies that deal with 'natural' data. In recent years it has become increasingly

fashionable for sociological, linguistic and psychological research to use audiotapes, videotapes and transcripts of naturally occurring interactions as primary data.[23] Interactions may be regarded as 'naturally occurring' insofar as they are not elicited by a researcher, i.e. are not artifically produced in an experiment or interview, but are happening anyway in and as a real-life event. During the process of data collection, researchers working with 'natural' data find themselves in the position of having to decide whether they should deceive or inform the interactants about the fact that their behaviour will be continuously recorded. (Given the bulkiness – and visibility – of the equipment, this question is mostly irrelevant in the case of video recordings.)

In order to avoid the ethical problems that must be faced when people are recorded without their prior consent, many researchers opt to switch on the recorder only after they have notified those whose behaviour they want to document. But this solution may lead to the very same problem which researchers encounter when they use experimental or survey data and which motivated them to focus instead on 'naturally' occurring interaction in the first place: once people have been informed that they will be recorded, their awareness of that fact influences their behaviour. In his essay on the sociology of the secret, Simmel pointed out the importance and consequentiality of the fact that 'no other object of knowledge than man modifies its behavior in view of the fact that it is aware of being observed' (Simmel, 1908 p. 258). What direction this modification will take is hard to tell. How an actor's awareness of him- or herself as an object of observation may influence his or her actual behaviour varies from one individual to another. In any case it is also an unwelcome circumstance to the researcher who has shifted to 'naturally' occurring interaction as a source of his data to avoid the methodological limitations of experimental and survey data.[24] A common strategy used by many researchers to rescue the 'naturalness' of their data is to instruct the interactants who have been selected for observation to act as naturally as possible and simply to disregard and ignore the presence of the camera and/or microphone. The non-occurrence of any remark about the recording situation is then seen as evidence that the interactants did indeed forget that they were being recorded, and on the basis of this lack of comment, the data are deemed to be natural.

The paradoxicality of the instruction to act naturally and to disregard the recording situation can be fully appreciated once the feature of local sensitivity is taken into account. In the case of discourse types that are characterized by tight control of topic

progression and that protect themselves – often by means of ritualiza-
tion – against possible digressions induced by local events, the
awareness of being observed and recorded does not seem to have a
strong effect on the actors' actual behaviour. Participants in a
scientific debate, in a courtroom proceeding or in a wedding ceremony
know that their behaviour will be scrutinized by a critical opponent, a
suspicious adversary or a curious public audience. These actors are
therefore already under some 'natural' surveillance, to which the
presence of a recording machine as a further observational tool would
not add significantly. Instructing them to act as 'naturally' as possible
in front of a camera would be futile, since for them the constraint of
acting as if in front of a camera is part of the 'naturalness' of the scene
itself.

However, as soon as the researcher moves backstage with his or her
recording equipment, the situation changes entirely. In the case of
discourse types that are characterized by informality, casualness and
privacy, the participants' awareness of being observed and recorded
may heavily affect their actual behaviour. This is in part due to the
fact that words spoken in private are usually produced and looked on
as elements of an 'unplanned discourse' (Ochs, 1979) and are
therefore quite unprotected and vulnerable, and demand con-
fidentiality and benevolent understanding. This is no longer guaran-
teed once those words, spoken in private, are on record.

Given that social behaviour in informal, sociable situations are
particularly susceptible to the actors' awareness of being an object of
observation and recording, how should a researcher proceed? He or
she might be inclined to notify his or her subjects of the recording, and
to urge them not to pay any attention to it during their interaction.
But such an instruction, although generated by the motive of keeping
the interaction as natural as possible, would lead to a particularly
*un*natural situation. It is a constitutive feature of interactional
systems of this kind that they are to a very high degree locally
sensitive and allow for the possibility of topicalizing objects and events
within their situational environment. It is therefore the most 'natu-
ral' thing for interactants who know that their conversation is
recorded, to comment on the recording itself.

The twofold instruction to act naturally and to ignore the recording
situation is thus, at least with regard to conversations and other types
of informal discourse, deeply paradoxical. Contrary to the general
opinion of many social researchers who work with 'natural' data, I
would argue that if recordings of naturally occurring informal
interactions do not contain any part during which the participants

make reference to the fact that they are being recorded, then this absence is conspicuous and can be taken to be a reliable sign of the 'unnaturalness' of the documented interaction.

Appendix: Original German transcripts

Extract I

Familiengespräch, über organisiertes Verbrechen, Wirtschaftskriminalität und eine Fernsehsendung über dieses Thema

A: hen so do: a:; (.) Zettl, neih– hen se::
     .h oba: neignäh:t, (0.5) gefertigd von Vau E Be:
     Soundso::, und=an Zettl neiglegd und die gleiche
     Hemda; .h wieder in d'Bundesrepublik; eigfüh:rd
     (0.5) weil: im innerdeutscha Handel, (.) brauchsch
     koine Zölle za::hla, und=so
U: mhm

                    (1.0)
A: Un:::::d; so hen die:, da Riesa Reibach gmachd;
                    (0.8)
U: °Guck mal wie die ⌈ Katze schloaft°
                       ⌊(*knarrende Geräusche*)
M: So han 'se no nie ⌈ liega säha;
U: ⌊ (*lacht*)

Extract II

A: Na der Branko Zebesch muß ja wieder besoffn (0.5)
        gwesen sein;
W: Drei Tage in der Woche isser nüchtern;
A: (*lacht*)
HJ: Was?
                    (3.0)
W: Und sein Freund und Gönner sagen ihm nach
      daß er in drei Tagen in der Woche nüchtern;
      mehr erreicht als mancher Trainer der auch sieben
      Tage nüchtern is;

                    (3.0)
    (*Hugo, der Wellensittich, kommt ins Zimmer geflogen*)
A: (*zu Hugo*) Grüß Gott;
                    (1.0)

```
U:    (zu Hugo) Grüß Gott=Grüß Gott
                        (2.0)
U:    (zu Hugo) Komm her (0.5) komm
A:    (zu Hugo) paß mal auf
U:    Gibt's Wasser,
A:    Alles weg
HJ:   Aber a Gurmee is so a Vogel wirklich ne;
H:    Hm?
HJ:   Ich sag a Gurmee is so a Vogel wirklich ne
H:    (Wenn er immer) Körner frißt
                        (4.0)
H:    ⎡Der macht halt immer ne Körnerkur
U:    ⎣hm (–) dr frißt mal Kroasoo;
```

Extract IV

Die Familie sitzt am Tisch und beginnt mit dem Essen

```
W:    Mahlzeit!
                        (1.0)
HJ:   Mahl⎡zeit!
U:        ⎣Mahlzeit!
                        (3.0)
A:    Mahlzeit!
                        (2.0)
U:    No, gud knoblauchig;
HJ:   Ja:?
                        (6.0)
      Naja;=°nachdem mr gestern nischt davon geschmeckt
      hat° °°(                              )°°
                        (3.0)
U:    M:::, sind die Möhrlen gud;
                        (3.0)
A:    °°(          )°°
                        (6.0)
U:    Oje Mamma; (0.5) da müsst ja ich schon sehr gutte Augen
      ham=was ich manchmal Möhren ess;
                        (3.0)
      alles frische;
                        (5.0)
U:    °Ich hab mirne neue Brille verschreiben lassen;°
      neue Gläser halt.
                        (3.0)
```

```
A:   in die alte Fassung 'nein, Uschi ja,
U:   ja freilich
                        (2.5)
H:   bei dr Karin ihrer Brille, (0.5) die wollte
     a neues Gestell habn,=des gibts aber nimmer,
     (.) weil bei der alten Brille, (.) der Lack
     abgeblättert isch; (1.0) und nachdem s' dann
     unbedingt wieder die gleiche habn wollte,=und
     's die gleiche wieg'sagt nimmer gibt, (1.0)
     hat jetzt der Optiker gsagt sie soll den Lack
     besorgen, und dann wird se umgespritzt;
HJ:  J ⎡ a,
A:     ⎣ mhm:,
```

Notes

1. English translation of a German conversation. The original German transcript segments can be found in the Appendix.
2. Studies that introduce the concept of topic within an interactional perspective can be found in Keenan and Schieffelin (1976) and in Gumperz, Aulakh and Kaltman (1982). For a recent description of studies in the field of conversation analysis that deal with topical organization, see Heritage (1985).
3. With regard to sequential organization, Schegloff (1979, p. 269 fn) speaks of a 'general preference for "progressivity", that is, for "next parts" of structured units (e.g. turns, turn-constructional units like sentences, stories, etc.) to come next'.
4. See Planalp and Tracy (1980). Goffman (1976, p. 18) refers to these hedged self-reflective comments as 'weak bridges'. Digressions (see Dascal and Katriel, 1979) must be distinguished from encapsulated 'side sequences' (see Jefferson, 1972) after which topic talk is resumed.
5. Someone who is giving a lecture or writing a paper faces a different situation. Within the limits of a predefined subject he or she has got much more freedom to decide by him- or herself the direction in which the topic of his or her text will move.
6. In the meaning developed by Garfinkel and Sacks (1970, p. 350) and described by them in the following way:
   A member may treat some part of the conversation as an occasion to describe that conversation, to explain it, or characterize it, or furnish the gist of it, or take note of its accordance with rules, or remark on its departure from rules. That is to say, a member may use some part of the conversation as an occasion to *formulate* the conversation.
   The concept of 'formulation' was further elaborated by Heritage and Watson (1979), who were able to show that formulations, by virtue of their 'fixing' a conversation's topic, help to render conversations preservable and reportable. That formulations of topic in an institutional setting may turn into a source of trouble is nicely shown in a study of classroom talk by Heyman (1986).

7. See e.g. the research by Trevarthen and Hubley (1978).
8. I remember quite vividly the heated discussions at German universities some years ago when quite a few – male as well as female – students regularly insisted on knitting during seminar sessions.
9. See Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974, p. 725). There the turn-taking system for conversation is characterized by the authors as the 'local management system, in that all the operations are "local", i.e. directed to "next turn" and "next transition" on a turn-by-turn basis.' Allocation of turns and turn-size are 'accomplished locally, i.e. in the developmental course of each turn, under constraints imposed by a next turn, and by an orientation to a next turn in the current one' (*ibid.*).
10. English translation of a German conversation. The original German transcript segments can be found in the Appendix.
11. In Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) this data segment is quoted in order to show that lapses occur in an ongoing conversation which can thus be discontinuous.
12. See Harvey Sacks' pioneering remarks on topic management in his lectures of 1967 and 1968. Jefferson (1984) shows for a certain interactional environment (the continuation of a conversation after talk about a trouble) that co-interactants may have to use some delicate methods to manage this stepwise transition from one topic to another. Despite this preference for stepwise transition, participants in a conversation also use specific topic initial elicitors as is shown by Button and Casey (1984) and Wilson (1987).
13. On the closing-implicative meaning of silences, see Maynard (1980). How, in situations like these, talk can nevertheless be continued is analysed by Button (1987). Luhmann (1975) argues that the occurrence of silences immediately endangers the maintenance of an elementary social system, such as a conversation, that is constituted by mutual perceptibility.
14. English translation of a German conversation. The original German transcript segments can be found in the Appendix.
15. It is not by chance therefore that a dinner table conversation is the object of analysis in a paper by Erickson (1982, p. 45) that deals with the social construction of topical cohesion through the combination of 'three types of production resources that conversationalists can make use of: "immediately local" resources, "local resources once removed" from the immediate scene, and "nonlocal" resources.' And in a paper in which 'displaced and situated language' are systematically distinguished as two separate pragmatic modes, Auer (1988) also uses an excerpt taken from a dinner conversation to demonstrate his point.
16. With reference to a distinction introduced by Jefferson (1984, p. 221), remarks about local objects and events may be regarded as constituting a topic type that is 'open' to immediate introduction of any next topic. whereas e.g. a troubles-telling is topically 'closed' in that it constrains what sort of talk should properly come next.
17. These initiating remarks on local matters very often seem to be made in the format of first assessments which provide the relevance of second assessments to be produced by the recipients (see Pomerantz, 1984). How these initiating assessments, by the way they are shaped, exploit the preference organization operating with respect to assessments, such that topical shifts to non-local objects in the subsequent talk are facilitated, is a question beyond consideration in this paper.

18. I have taken the liberty of changing the available English translation of Simmel's text on the basis of the German original.
19. It can be observed that people who are mutual strangers and who would never exchange greetings when they meet each other on the street in their home city, do exchange greetings (often without making any further remarks) when they meet as mountain hikers. There they share the same situated identity as hikers which is derived from the spatio-temporal surrounding of their encounter and in which they relate to each other. The exchange of greetings is thus a recognition and acknowledgement of co-membership derived from the encounter's local environment.
20. See my paper on pets as communicative resources (Bergmann, 1988), that is in many respects complementary to this chapter on local sensitivity.
21. A similar description can be found in Wylie's (1957) ethnography of a village in the Vaucluse. In this case it is a group of housewives who met daily in a corner of the village square just opposite the café 'which was a strategic place because everybody had to go past it. A more general treatment of gossip groups and their local sensitivity can be found in my book on gossip as a communicative genre (Bergmann, 1987, pp. 102f.).
22. On the concept of 'conversational apparatus' and its functions within intimate social relationships, see Berger and Kellner (1964/1970, p. 61).
23. For some crucial epistemological implications of recordings as data in interpretive sociology and for a critique of some of the ways in which data of this kind are used in social science research, see Bergmann (1985).
24. Textbooks on social research methods deal with this phenomenon under various labels, such as: demand characteristics, social acceptability of answers in questionnaires etc.

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Name index