A Conversation Analysis View of Communication as Jointly Accomplished Social Interaction: An Unsuccessful Proposal for a Social Visit

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A Conversation Analysis View of Communication as Jointly Accomplished Social Interaction: An Unsuccessful Proposal for a Social Visit

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Conversation analysis (CA) focuses on the language, practices and competencies by which people accomplish social actions to create and understand ordinary social life. CA uses naturally occurring data, examining micro-detailed transcriptions from recordings of ordinary interactions. This paper highlights some principles, methods, and insights of CA. We consider a short segment of transcribed phone conversation in which one participant proposes a social visit to the other. We see just how the talk develops as it does, and examine the details of language-in-use that the participants themselves draw upon to construct and make sense of what it is they are doing, of what is going on. How does a ‘proposal’ for a social visit arise from a course of talk, and how is it fitted both to its recipient and to the moment it occurs? How is the proposal understood to be ‘unsuccessful’? We show how turns at talk always emerge and are understood within the rich sequential context of a developing trajectory of interaction that is jointly developed by participants. Linguists are well placed to study communication as naturally occurring talk, and such study can in turn inform linguistics by developing knowledge of the nature and use of language.

Keywords: Action; Communication; Conversation Analysis; Interaction; Linguistics; Social Life

1. Introduction

In this paper we view communication as inherently social, as jointly accomplished social interaction. We share the interest of conversation analysis (CA) in the details of language as naturally occurring talk, as people communicate in real time to interact and accomplish activities to create and understand ordinary social life. CA examines
the practices and competencies by which people organize social interaction, and
discovers how interaction is locally ordered by participants, moment-to-moment.
Our approach will be to consider a short segment of transcribed phone conversation
which represents a thoroughly mundane activity in the lives of two people, discussing
a possible social visit of one to the other. We analyze the segment to see just how the
talk develops as it does, and examine the details of language-in-use that the
participants themselves draw upon to construct and make sense of what it is they are
doing, of what is going on. How do the participants communicate to perform and
recognize the social actions underway? More specifically, how is it that a ‘proposal’
for a social visit arises from the course of talk, and how is its particular organization
(or design), as a ‘plan’, fitted both to its recipient and to the moment it occurs? How
is the proposal received, and how does it come to be understood as ‘unsuccessful’? We
use the segment to show how turns at talk always emerge and are understood relative
to one another, within the rich sequential context of a developing trajectory of
interaction. New talk is fitted to and built upon prior talk, and becomes a resource for
forming subsequent talk.

As both conversation analysts and linguists we seek to highlight how the features of
language traditionally of interest to linguistics can be examined as consequential for
naturally occurring talk and social interaction. Conversation analysis originated in
sociology, from an interest in how the organization of naturally occurring talk might
be revelatory for understanding social order (Sacks et al. 1974; Sacks 1992). However,
linguists’ expertise in the systematic representation and analysis of language might
make them particularly well positioned to advance such studies, and so both further
our knowledge of how language in interaction is realized, and inform linguistics by
developing knowledge of the nature and use of language.

2. The Data

Let’s have a first look at the data. The transcription below is from a recording of a
telephone conversation between two middle-aged men, who we have called Oscar and
Martin. At this point in the conversation Oscar initiates talk on the possibility for
him to visit Martin.

O: so we'll be in Canberra this coming weekend
   of course
M: yes
O: and... going to the game on Saturday night
M: right
O: and we had sort of planned on seeing you on
   our return... to Sydney on Sunday
M: okay
O: is that... okay with you? or or

Downloaded By: [Australian National University] At: 02:43 10 February 2009
M: well look uh probably it’s okay, we’ve been
   invited for a fiftieth birthday ah . . . celebration at
twelve thirty on Sunday.
O:  ah.
M:  right?
O:  it’s not going to work? is it.

At a glance, what can we say about these data, as communication? What is being
communicated? What happens? It seems that Oscar proposes a visit to Martin, with
someone else (‘we’), on his return to Sydney from a trip to Canberra. This ‘proposal’
appears explicitly as a presented ‘plan’, ‘and we had sort of planned on seeing you on
our return . . . to Sydney on Sunday’, for which Oscar then seeks acceptance: ‘is
that . . . okay with you?’. Martin says that ‘probably it’s okay’, then adds that he has
another commitment that day: ‘we’ve been invited for a fiftieth birthday ah . . .
celebration at twelve thirty on Sunday’. Oscar treats this news as indicating that the
proposed visit may not possible: ‘it’s not going to work? is it’. As the conversation
continues the two men negotiate possibilities for a visit, but for our purposes here we
will consider just this segment, to explore how the evolving talk and understandings,
so far, lead Oscar to suggest it will ‘not work’. How does the conversation get to that
moment, to such an understanding?

We can readily see that Oscar is seeking to communicate something, raising the
possibility of visiting Martin. In response, Martin also communicates something, that
the proposal cannot be agreed to immediately and unproblematically. Martin does
not just say ‘yes’. If we think of a traditional communication model as one person
sending a message to another, for example as implied by de Saussure’s classic two
heads ‘speech circuit’ (1983/1916: 11), then it is clear that communication is
occurring. Both Oscar and Martin convey something to the other, and both interpret
and act on what the other is saying. Such information transfer models are often put
forward in basic texts for communication studies, as the simplest and most
recognizable model of communication. Communication is typically defined as a
process of sending and receiving messages. For example, Thompson (2003: 12–13)
presents a diagram of the transmitter (‘the person initiating the communication’), the
receiver (‘the person being communicated with’), and the noise (‘any factors or set of
factors that interfere with the communication’). Likewise, Rosenfeld and Berko
(1990: 3–4) use an archery metaphor in which the archer is the sender (‘the person
who devises the message’), the arrow is the message (‘the information the sender
devises for the receiver’), and the target is the receiver (‘the person who takes in the
message’). Such information transfer models have been criticized, often for being
over-simplistic (e.g. Thompson 2003; Akmajian et al. 1995), however they are still
taught and remain influential by providing an easily understandable representation of
how communication might work (e.g. Reinard 2008).

A message transfer model of communication might gloss or code the commu-
nication here as ‘making a proposal’ and ‘declining a proposal’, but this would not
really capture what is occurring. How does the ‘proposal’ occur just when and as it
does? How is it recognized and treated as a proposal, and how is it understood to be unsuccessful? In short, how do the two men communicate such that the interaction develops just as it does, from among many other possibilities? How does it all happen just like this? Such understanding can be missed if we see communication to be one individual simply bundling information up as a message and then sending it to another individual, who receives it and then sends something back. For example, at first look we see that the ‘proposal’ emerges gradually over a number of turns. We see also that there is no one instance of talk that can be easily identified as ‘doing declining.’ Martin never actually says something like ‘no that’s not possible’. In fact, as Oscar builds his proposal Martin says, ‘yes’, ‘right’, ‘okay’, and finally when Oscar explicitly asks if it is ‘okay’ (‘is that . . . okay with you?’), Martin responds with ‘probably it’s okay’, before then mentioning a birthday on Sunday. The aim of this paper is to address such matters. By unpacking the details of the interaction we aim to demonstrate some ways by which the parties manage the interactional task of making and responding to a proposal. We consider how acts of communication, as social actions, can be seen not as discrete individual acts, for example merely to transfer information, but as developed and interpreted as this or that within a course of interaction that is jointly produced by both (all) parties.

Our approach is grounded in a fundamental conversation analytic notion: that people exhibit in the design and timing of their own talk and conduct their understanding and treatment of others’ prior talk and conduct. Conversation analysts therefore focus on the sequential development of interaction, on seeing what happens and what happens next. So, the basic guiding question becomes why that now? (Schegloff & Sacks 1973). A conversation analyst examines what some detail of talk reveals about how that participant, there and then, understood and acted on what was happening, and made some new contribution by doing something next. The following key principles of CA inform our analyses here, originating in the seminal paper by Sacks et al. (1974): CA is primarily a qualitative approach; CA focuses on micro-detailed transcriptions of interaction; CA examines naturally occurring data (recordings not set up for the benefit of the analyst); CA’s claims are data driven and reliant—demonstrable in the data; CA does not rely on predetermined abstract theories or categories; CA analyzes the sequential organization of interaction; CA views context as both shaping and shaped by talk—context is itself a communicative construct (Linell 1998: 138; Schegloff 1992). Over the past 30 years conversation analysts have focussed in particular on matters of turn-taking, turn design, word selection, overlapping (simultaneous) talk, interactional difficulties (repair), and the organization of talk into sequences and larger courses of action (for introductions to CA see: Hutchby & Wooffitt 1998; Drew 2005; Liddicoat 2007; ten Have 2007; see also Lerner 2004; Drew & Heritage 2006).

Here then is the same segment of recorded phone conversation, but now transcribed in more detail according to conventions of CA, originally developed by Gail Jefferson. We note these conventions as relevant during our analysis, and then outline them more fully at the end of the paper.
A Conversation Analysis View of Communication  79

1. O: so- (.) [we’ll be in Canberra this: (.) comin’ weekend
2. of cou::rse,
3. M: [ye::s,
4. (0.7)
5. ?? .hh
6. O: an: (0.4) goin’ t’ th’ game on Sat’rday ni:ght,
7. M: ri::ght
8. (1.0)
9. O: a- (.) an (0.5) and (.) we had sort of planned on seeing you (0.2) on
10. our retu::rn to Sydney on Sunday.
11. M: [.hh
12. (0.4)
13. M: o:kay
14. O: is that (0.4) okay with you? =|or or:
15. M: [.hh eh-eh-w-we-well look, uh uh (.)
16. probably it’s okay, .hh a- we- we’ve been d’invited for a bir-a
17. fiftieth birth[day ah::, (0.2)] <celebration: > at twelve thirty
18. O: [*a::nh:*]
19. on Sunday?y?
20. O: [aah::.
21. (0.5)
22. M: [right?
23. O: [(ook it’s::: not gonna work is it.

It will be apparent that CA transcriptions include much more than the actual spoken words alone; they seek to represent more closely how talk was produced and was hearable to the participants themselves. For example, CA transcriptions incorporate details of manner of production (prosodic detail like pitch, volume, and sound lengthening, or cut-off sounds and words), or the timing of silences or of turns’ occurrence relative to one another. These details are not just messy adjuncts to the ‘real’ grammatical talk, or unfortunate performance errors, but have been shown by CA studies to be attended to by participants as significant for managing interaction and making sense of what is going on. As Heritage and Atkinson (1984: 4) argue, ‘nothing that occurs in interaction can be ruled out, a priori, as random, insignificant, or irrelevant’. So what’s significant in this piece of interaction?

3. Making the Proposal

The proposal put by Oscar to visit Martin is not a straightforward packaging of information as one complete utterance, such as, ‘can we come and see you on Sunday on our way through from Canberra to Sydney?’ Instead, the proposal is the outcome of the collaborative activities of both parties in the interaction. This comes about mainly by the way Oscar presents bits of information to Martin. Although we know (because we have seen the end of the transcription) that Oscar wants to propose
visiting Martin in Sydney, Oscar does not start with the proposal, but incrementally adds information after information. The first bit of information is presented as a statement, ‘†we’ll be in Canberra this: (. ) comin’ weekend’ (line 1). On the surface, the statement could be in connection with anything. We can hear (as Martin can) that it is likely that this information presents a new topic, through the raised pitch on ‘† we’ll’ (marked by an upward arrow). However, there is as yet no indication as to what is going to emerge. For the recipient of this talk there is so far no explicit precursor to a proposal to visit. Oscar and Martin do know each other and have some prior experiences in common, a shared history, which can inform their interpretations of what is going on, and of how they relate to each other. Maybe Martin thinks that a visit from Oscar is possible? We are interested in how such an understanding or expectation is actually realized and visible in and for social action. That is, while the men’s existing relationship might be thought of as part of the ‘context’ for the interaction, how is it made relevant and manifest in the talk, in how each party contributes, and interprets and acts on the other’s contributions (cf. Schegloff 1987, 1992)?

A possible hint of ‘trouble’ around Oscar’s information is in the hesitation around when they will be in Canberra, with a slight elongation on ‘this:’ and a micro pause before ‘comin’ weekend’. However, instead of ending his utterance with falling intonation, as one might expect at the end of a syntactically complete utterance (Sacks et al. 1974), Oscar continues immediately to add ‘of cou::rse,’ (line 2). This now presents the statement as known to Martin, so a reminder that information has already been mentioned or discussed, that they both know of this Canberra visit. This is not new information. The intonation over the whole utterance demonstrates that Oscar designed his utterance as one unit (in CA called a ‘turn construction unit’) ending at ‘cou::rse,’ rather than as two units, ending first at ‘weekend’ and then ending at ‘cou::rse’. However, the elongation of ‘cou::rse,’ (marked by ::) and the slight rise (marked by a comma) at its end, also show that Oscar is projecting further talk to follow, as a possible multi-unit turn. In other words, the action underway, begun with this statement—this reminder, this first utterance—is not complete. Oscar has designed his talk to be heard as continuing.

Martin responds to this reminder with an elongated slightly rising intonation ‘ye:::s,’ (line 3). This does a number of things. Martin demonstrates that he is listening by producing an acknowledgement token (Gardner 2001); but the vowel elongation and the rising intonation also demonstrate that this ‘yes’ is functioning as a continuer. In other words, it indicates that Martin is not now producing a substantial response; rather, he is prompting (allowing) Oscar to continue talking. So, Oscar’s reminder is itself not sufficient to engender any substantial response from Martin. Martin requires something more.

The talk so far shows how prosody and intonation provide interactants with important detail about what emerging talk is doing, and how it should be treated. It demonstrates whether the talk is designed as a single turn construction unit or part of ongoing talk. It demonstrates whether the turn at talk is possibly complete or whether
there is more talk to come; it demonstrates whether response tokens, such as ‘yes’, should be treated just as an acknowledgement of the prior talk, or whether as a continuer requesting additional information from the current speaker. Thus, it is not just the content of the talk that is important, but how the talk is produced, and so can be heard.

At line 4 there is a second hint of possible trouble within the talk. A pause ensues of seven tenths of a second, potentially long in interactional terms (Jefferson 1988), with neither Oscar nor Martin saying anything. The silence occurs and can be heard in the context of the prior talk. We know, because we have the transcription, that later Oscar will propose a visit, but at this point Martin does not know this. Rather than directly asking to visit, Oscar initially only presents information as a reminder of some event, and to do so with continuing intonation, projecting more to come for the action underway to be complete. Oscar must now deal with the consequence that Martin has given only a minimal ‘yes’ response. In other words, Martin does not say more, he does not act only on the reminder, and so makes it apparent that Oscar will be the one to progress the talk. Previous studies have shown that interactants generally design their turns so that there is minimal gap and minimal overlap (e.g. Sacks et al. 1974; Jefferson 1973, 2004; Schegloff 2000). Longer silences between turns can indicate trouble, such as uncertainty or other difficulty within the interaction. If the continuing intonation had indicated that Oscar was building a multi-unit turn, why does he delay now? So we can see that there is possible emerging trouble as Oscar and Martin determine how to continue, what to do next.

Oscar continues with ‘an:: (0.4) goin’ t’ th’ game on Sat’rday ni:ght,’ (line 6), and by prefacing his turn with ‘and’ he makes salient that this talk is linked to prior talk as part of a bigger project (Heritage & Sorjonen 1994; Nevile 2006, 2007). Once again Oscar’s talk ends with rising intonation, indicating that further talk is projected, that he is not yet at the end of talk for this action. And once again Martin provides an elongated, rising intonation response token, ‘ri::ght,’ claiming that he has heard and understood the information of this new talk to be part of a larger action underway (Gardner 2007). However, once again, there is a long silence of one second (line 8) demonstrating that at this stage in the conversation the trouble has not gone away in that neither participant is taking the turn. So far Oscar has only given information that might enable one to infer that he (or they) would like to visit, without actually asking if they can come and visit, and Martin is simply indicating that he has heard what Oscar has to say, but is not helping him out by offering something like ‘Oh it would be lovely to see you’ or ‘I’ll see if we are free on Sunday’.

Eventually, in lines 9–10, Oscar spells it out by providing additional talk that presents his prior statements as elements of a plan, ‘a- (. ) an (0.5) and (. ) we had sort of planned on seeing you’. Again, an and-preface presents this talk as building upon his prior talk. However, note signs that the talk is said tentatively, with cut-offs, pauses, repeated words, and the mitigator ‘sort of’. It is useful to think about how Oscar could have phrased this proposal, because speakers have options at all stages of the interaction for how they present their talk. Oscar states they had planned to see
them, in other words, it is part of some sort of pre-arranged itinerary that has not, to date, involved Martin. Alternatively, he could have said ‘we would love to see you on our way through’ or ‘if you are free, would it be possible to catch up?’ By choosing to present his proposal as a plan, open to change if times and dates do not work out, Oscar presents the proposal’s success as contingent upon practical, not personal, criteria. It is not the idea of a visit, or Oscar himself, that is presented as vulnerable to rejection. We can see that Oscar incrementally provides bit after bit of information: that they had planned to see Martin ‘(0.2) on our return (0.3) [to Sydney (.).] on Sunday.’ (line 10). The stressed key words (underlined) make salient that these are arrangement details. It appears then that Oscar minimizes the possibility of a personal rebuttal, and so this might be an instance of ‘face-work’, of ‘maintaining face’ (cf. Goffman 1967). Lerner (1996) has shown how face-work can be evident in the sequential details of talk, and argued that ‘[t]o properly characterize the feelings, desires, and motives, as well as the actions, of face and face-work, it is necessary to capture them in the act on the terrain of talk-in-interaction’ (Lerner 1996: 319, emphasis in original).

At various points Martin could legitimately hear Oscar as completing and could take the turn as next speaker. In fact, Oscar’s talk has silences allowing Martin time to do so. We can see that after the (0.3) silence after ‘return’ (line 10), Martin breathes in (‘.hh’), indicating that he is preparing to speak. But all he eventually says, following another silence in line 12, is a third elongated, rising intonation response token, ‘oka:y’ (line 13). In line 14, Oscar eventually has to ask the question, ‘is that (0.4) okay with you?’ Further evidence of ongoing interactional trouble is the ‘or or:’ that Oscar latches (no beat of silence) to the end of his question. This wording hints at an alternative, so Oscar finishes his proposal, built over four chunks of talk, with wording that can project that all is not well with it.

In summary, in presenting his proposal to visit Oscar does much more than simply pass on prepared information of the sort that might fit within more traditional message transfer models of communication. But the question is, why pass information on in this form? In other words, why that now? Why does Oscar use this particular form of words, of utterance, of intonation, of silences, to present the information to Martin? Why does Oscar build one action upon another? Why does he start with a statement, that he turns into a reminder, followed by a further statement (about the game), until he finally presents the proposal in the form of a plan?

We might sense that he doesn’t want to impose on Martin, but what is it about the talk that makes that evident? The detailed transcript shows how Oscar presents each word, each idea, and each utterance. It is this choice of how to present his ideas that makes the transcript look very ‘messy’. At the same time, Oscar is responding to Martin, and to Martin’s minimal responses, adjusting and re-ordering his ideas in the light of what Martin is saying, and more importantly not saying. Thus Oscar’s talk is not only the outcome of Oscar’s efforts, but is jointly constructed in that Oscar orients to Martin’s responses to his emerging talk. What is useful about a detailed CA transcription is that it shows us how this is actually occurring. How the emerging talk
is treated depends on what the recipient does—we change and modify our talk as it progresses in the light of how it is received (Goodwin 1979, 1981).

Therefore, we do not just put words and meanings together as a bundle of information we transfer to another person. We design what we say for a recipient and a moment in interaction. We can see this at a minimal level when thinking about how Oscar refers to ‘th’ game. For example, there is no explanation of the game, which tells us that Martin knows what it is that Oscar is talking about. But it is not just at the level of word choice that we can see evidence of recipient design. It is also evident in the way in which utterances are constructed. For example, Oscar adds one phrase (technically called an increment) after another to his initial utterance in line 9. On the one hand this gives more and more information, but on the other hand it is produced in such a way that it covers up the fact that Martin is not talking substantially, even though he is given opportunities to do so. By building his talk with increments, Oscar can make it look as if he designed his talk in this way, and so make it look as if there is not an interactional ‘trouble’ that has to be interactionally sorted out. This is the delicate nature of this conversation, as Oscar tries to avoid imposing on Martin, and Martin tries not to say ‘no’ to a proposed visit.

4. The Proposal is Unsuccessful

The possibility of Oscar’s visit has emerged as a proposal, from Oscar, in the form of a plan (‘we had sort of planned on seeing you’), which was explicitly presented to Martin for acceptance (‘is that (0.4) okay with you?’). The segment ends with Oscar himself saying ‘(‘ook) it’s::: not gonna work¿ is it.’ In this section we examine how Oscar comes to understand that his proposal is unsuccessful, that it will not be possible to realize the plan to visit. We consider not just the nature of Martin’s response, but also its sequential placement relative to Oscar’s proposal and to how the proposal originally developed, as together available and relevant for Oscar to make his interpretation.

Let’s start with Martin’s turn in response, worded in full as follows: ‘.hh eh eh w- we-well look, uh uh (.) probably it’s okay, .hh a- we- we’ve been d’invited for a bir-a fiftieth birth[da:y ah:, (0.2) <celebra:tion: > at twelve thirty’. On the surface, Martin offers a qualified acceptance of the proposal with ‘probably it’s okay.’ So how does Oscar treat this as sufficient for indicating the visit is not possible? We’ll focus on both the organization and production of Martin’s turn. First, the turn exhibits numerous signs of problem. Martin begins with an audible in-breath (‘hh’), potentially signalling a lengthy turn and so therefore early evidence to Oscar that Martin’s response will not be a simple ‘yes’. Then follow two non-lexical vocalizations, ‘eh-eh,’ before the turn is begun with the preface ‘well’, actually as ‘well look’. This ‘well’ itself shows signs of production trouble, being restarted twice as ‘w-w-well’. Like the earlier audible in-breath, a preface of ‘well look’ flags Martin’s talk as other than a simple ‘yes’. Indeed it occurs exactly where a ‘yes’ might otherwise have been. Then follow further perturbations in the smooth progress of the turn, hesitation
markers ‘uh uh’, and a micro-pause, before Martin provides a qualified acceptance of the proposal with ‘probably it’s okay’. So we see that Martin’s turn is rich with signs that it is, in CA terms, a dispreferred response (Pomerantz 1984). That is, it is not in keeping with the projected, or preferred, response, as set up by the design of Oscar’s question ‘is that okay?’; which is a ‘yes’. A dispreferred response can be heard as noticeable and accountable, and can be attended to and interpreted as somehow significant, and so typically exhibits signs of trouble, and requires extra interactional work (Sacks & Schegloff 1979; Schegloff et al. 1977; Bilmes 1988).

In short, we see evidence in the talk that responding to Oscar’s proposal is problematic for Martin. Note that Martin’s qualified ‘okay’ is said with slight rising intonation (‘okay’), signalling the turn as incomplete, and is immediately followed by another audible in-breath, further evidence that Martin will continue talking. So what direction might Martin’s talk take? One possible now-relevant action for Martin would be to inquire about the possible time of the visit, were timing the issue for him, because Oscar is proposing a visit ‘on return to Sydney’ and hasn’t yet said a possible time. Martin doesn’t do this. Instead Martin describes a prior engagement for that day, an accounting for the qualified ‘okay’ (‘probably’): ‘hh a- we- we’ve been d’invited for a bir-a fiftieth birthday ah, (0.2) <celebration: > at twelve thirty’.

How might Oscar hear Martin’s response to form an understanding that a visit is ‘not gonna work? First, like the beginning of Martin’s turn this talk also exhibits signs of production trouble, reflecting the possibly problematic or dispreferred nature of the response to Oscar’s proposal. It begins with a cut-off word, ‘a-’, before ‘we’ is also cut-off and then restarted as ‘we- we’ve’. Second, notice that Martin’s talk has a number of ‘upgraded’ elements that present his prior engagement in more specific and socially significant terms. These upgrades can therefore amplify the sense of Martin’s involvement and commitment, and so increase the hearable implications for Oscar’s proposed visit. That is, Martin could have made vague reference to being ‘busy’ in ‘the middle of the day’, or that maybe the ‘afternoon is best’. Instead, Martin makes explicit that the engagement is a birthday. Indeed, it is not just any birthday but a ‘fiftieth birthday’. Martin noticeably treats ‘birthday’ as insufficient by cutting off ‘birthday’, ‘a bir-’, and repairing it as an upgraded ‘a fiftieth birthday’. Also, nor is it just a party that they (‘we’) are going to, but a ‘<celebration: >’. This word is preceded by ‘ah’ and a 0.2 second silence, is said in hearably slower talk ( < . . . >), the first syllable is emphasized (‘cel’), and two sounds are lengthened (‘a; ‘n’). All these features can serve to enhance the word’s salience, both audibly and for the interactional work it can be interpreted to be doing. Martin is not just going to any old party. Indeed, Martin is not just ‘going’ at all, but has been ‘invited’. Martin also offers a specific time ‘at twelve thirty on Sunda::y’, so the commitment is right in the middle of the day. Like ‘celebration’, the time and day are also made salient with emphasis and sound lengthening (e.g. ‘Sunda::y’). These upgrades are not mere lexical choices, but right here, right now, can be heard by Oscar as they occur in a response to his proposal, in light of the interactional circumstances for how that proposal was developed and presented, as evidence for how the proposal is being
acted upon. Oscar can hear the upgrades for their strategic or interactional significance, for what they are doing in particular.

Whatever visit Oscar had ‘sort of planned’, at no mentioned time, must now compete with what Martin presents as a specifically scheduled and socially significant prior commitment, an invitation to a fiftieth birthday celebration. This is an occasion for which one might specially prepare (e.g. dress for, buy a present), might have to travel to, and over which one does not control the time involved. Oscar can now understand that his proposal to visit, that Martin described as ‘probably okay’, would necessitate particular arranging and place demands on Martin (and the other member of the ‘we’ pairing). Oscar indicates early that he recognizes the possible significance of Martin’s response. Halfway through Martin’s saying of ‘birthday’ Oscar begins a lengthened *a:::h*\textsuperscript{2}. This ‘ah’ therefore occurs at the earliest point for Oscar to safely project and act on the trajectory and import of Martin’s talk, the specific nature of Martin’s prior commitment as a ‘birthday’. As Martin comes to a pragmatically and grammatically recognizable end of his turn, ‘at twelve thirty on Sunday?’ again Oscar offers early recognition, starting up as Martin finishes saying ‘Sunday’. Note that Oscar’s first ‘ah’ was said with rising or continuing pitch, hearably orienting to Martin’s turn as continuing. The second ‘ah’ is said with falling pitch, and as a response marker the ‘ah’ can be heard, like ‘oh’, as a change-of-state token (Heritage 1984), a recipient’s claim to some new understanding. After 0.5 seconds of silence, and no further talk from Martin, Oscar makes explicit his interpretation that likely the visit is not possible: ‘(ook) it’s::: not gonna wo\textsuperscript{2}k¿ i\textsuperscript{3}¿ is it.’

We want to finish by extending our analysis of the sequential context for Oscar’s understanding that the planned visit is not possible. Recall that Oscar’s proposal had emerged incrementally, over a number of turns, ultimately building to a ‘plan’ presented to Martin for acceptance. We saw that the talk emerged this way in part because each time Martin responded with only minimal recipient responses, ‘yes’, ‘right’, ‘okay’, repeatedly handing the floor back to Oscar. Martin passed up possible opportunities, even with substantial silences of 0.7, 1.0, and 0.4 seconds, to respond with actions that might have given the interaction a different trajectory. For example, Martin might have recognized the upshot of Oscar’s first mention of a trip to Canberra (e.g. ‘you could see us’). On hearing of Oscar’s plan to visit, Martin might have pursued a relevant matter such as the timing of Oscar’s travels (e.g. as in ‘when will you be returning?’), or made a positive assessment (e.g. ‘it’d be great to see you’). Indeed, Martin could have obviated the need for Oscar to propose at all by offering an invitation (e.g. as in ‘you’re welcome to visit us’, ‘why not drop by for a visit?’ etc.). Martin does none of these, and such absences are available to Oscar when interpreting Martin’s response that a visit is ‘probably … okay’ in light of Martin’s prior birthday engagement. That is, Oscar’s understanding of the plan’s unacceptability to Martin is informed not only by Martin’s response, but also by the sequential circumstances in which Martin makes that response, including how the proposal came to be presented, as a ‘proposal’, in the first place. Oscar can notice and interpret Martin’s apparent lack of interactional investment in the possibility of a visit. Martin’s response had simply presented information
concerning a fiftieth birthday celebration as sufficient for Oscar to make the next move, to interpret for himself the significance of this detail. Martin avoided saying ‘no’. Indeed earlier evidence that Oscar himself anticipates trouble for the possible visit is apparent in the ‘or or:’ that he adds to the end of ‘is that (0.4) okay with you?’ (line 14). So Oscar already flags the alternative to a preferred ‘yes’ response, where ‘or’ can initiate something like ‘or not?’; or ‘or are you busy?’ The ‘or’ can undermine his own proposal by projecting wording for a negative dispreferred response.

Indeed, note that in the very first turn of this segment Oscar says ‘so- (.) ↑we’ll be in Canberra this: (.) comin’ weekend of cou::rse,’ to which Martin replied ‘ye:::s.’ Oscar’s ‘of course’ presents this information as already known to Martin, and Martin’s ‘yes’ confirms this. So, if Martin knew that Oscar was in Canberra, and a visit by Oscar is a possible and ‘proposable’ event, might not Martin have been able to make the proposal, as an invitation, as an initiating action, prior to any further talk on this from Oscar? Might Oscar have been ‘fishing’ for just such an invitation (Pomerantz 1978, 1980)? Certainly the slow development of Oscar’s proposal left Martin many opportunities to do so. Oscar’s interpretation of Martin’s response can therefore be informed by the immediate contextual knowledge that Martin did not invite him to visit.

5. Conclusion

By analysing one small apparently straightforward and mundane segment of transcribed naturally occurring interaction we have sought to show how conversation analysis (CA) conceptualizes communication as social interaction, jointly accomplished by the participants, in situ and in real time. CA uses micro-detailed transcriptions to reveal not just what people said, but how and when they said it to sequentially develop interaction as coordinated social actions. Such transcriptions can reveal details of how the participants themselves interpreted and acted upon one another’s contributions, jointly to do whatever it is they are doing. Participants design and coordinate their communication as turns at talk in sequentially ordered interaction to meet the contingencies of the moment, and to be recognized and carried off for what they are, for particular social ends, and with real social consequences. So, communication in naturally occurring interaction is not a mere transmitter of information, but is a means of accomplishing actions for participating and jointly producing social life.

Conceptualizing communication this way means that it really matters how one represents language. In our analyses we showed how matters traditionally of interest to linguists, for example the sounds, syntax or grammar, organization and meanings of language, could be shown as significant for the course of interaction. Many CA studies have made such a focus explicit (see e.g. Ochs et al. 1996; Selting & Couper-Kuhlen 2001), sometimes under the banner of ‘interactional linguistics’. For example, of grammar Schegloff et al. (1996: 2–3) comment that ‘matters of great moment are missed if grammar’s order is explored as entirely contained within a single,
self-enclosed organization ... grammar’s integrity and efficacy are bound up with its place in larger schemes of organization of human conduct, and with social interaction in particular. Here, for example, we saw how ‘and’ made salient that new talk was linked to and built upon prior talk. We saw how a ‘grammatically’ dependent or fragmented piece of language, ‘an:: (0.4) goin’ t’ th’ game on Sat’rday night,’ (line 6), could be seen as produced to fit its interactional role as one element in a developing social action, making a proposal.

We have given a glimpse of CA’s data-driven method for studying communication without drawing on pre-determined analytical constructs and abstract theories, but instead treating the data as participants’ phenomena, as evidence for how participants themselves understood and acted upon one another’s contributions. We used naturally occurring data, a transcription from an ordinary phone conversation, to examine one moment in the social life of two men in which one proposes a social visit to the other, and later comes to understand that such a visit may not be possible. We asked only what is happening here, and how it happens like that. We saw how the proposer did not do so directly, as a suggestion or request, but rather presented the proposal in the form of a plan for the other’s acceptance. The proposal emerged gradually over a number of units of talk. We noted the role of the other party. By not taking available opportunities to suggest a visit, perhaps as an invitation, he allowed (prompted? compelled?) the other’s proposal to emerge. Subsequently he did not explicitly reject the proposal as unacceptable (due to his prior commitment), but said enough, in such a way, for the other to come to this interpretation himself. Our point is that things panned out like this because of the contributions of both parties. Of the many possibilities, this is how these two men, at this point in this conversation, handled the matter of a possible social visit. It is in this sense that thinking of communication as simply conveying information can miss the rich details of how people experience social life. Communication is much more than simply transferring information in messages sent from one person to another. Any ‘messages’ are necessarily developed and delivered in an interactional moment, and are fitted to that moment. CA’s conceptualization of communication can make visible the taken-for-granted competencies for using language as a means for social action.

6. Common Conversation Analysis Transcription Conventions (after G Jefferson—see for example Lerner 2004; ten Have 2007)

- **hello.** falling intonation
- **hello,** slight rising intonation
- **hello?** rising intonation, weaker than that indicated by a question mark
- **hello?** strongly rising intonation
- **hel-** talk is cut off
- **> hello <** talk is faster than surrounding talk
- **<hello >** talk is slower than surrounding talk
- **HELLO** talk is louder than surrounding talk
"hello" talk is quieter than surrounding talk
↑ or ↓ marked rising or falling shifts in pitch
he::llo lengthening of a sound or syllable
hello emphasis
(1.0), (0.3) timed intervals (silence), in seconds and tenths of seconds
(.) short untimed pause, less than 0.2 of a second
.hh audible inhalations
hh audible exhalations
*hello* creaky voice
= latched talk—talk following previous talk with no gap
[ ] simultaneous/overlapping talk
(ook) transcriber uncertainty

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