

■ Bringing Mobiles into the Conversation

Applying a Conversation Analytic Approach to the Study of Mobiles in
Co-present Interaction

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IN FOCUSING ON THE MUNDANE conduct of everyday life, Erving Goffman's work drew attention to the fundamental practices that define mutual co-presence. Now, in the so-called digital age, we increasingly find ourselves having to reconcile new forms of communication with Goffman's chief domain of face-to-face interaction. Although scholarly interest in new forms of mediated interaction has grown steadily, only recently have scholars begun to consider how communication technologies—particularly mobile devices—are woven into co-present interaction. It is the intersection of these two domains, specifically co-present interaction and mobile usage, that is the focus of this chapter.

This chapter summarizes a study involving a single instance of conversation taken from a larger collection of videotaped naturally occurring interactions involving mobile phones. Using a conversation analytic approach, we draw on the concept of technological affordance and Goffman's distinction between primary and secondary involvement to provide a nuanced look at how mobiles become integrated into co-present interaction. Three themes emerge from our data when mobiles are used during co-present interaction: shifting between primary and secondary involvement is highly dynamic, the shift to mobile use as a secondary involvement depends on the speaking role that is being enacted during the co-present involvement, and the distinction between primary and secondary involvement is blurred when reference to mobile interactions is made during co-present interaction. In each case we argue that these occurrences can be explained with reference to the time and space transcending affordances of mobiles.

Mobile Communication Studies and the Study of
Co-present Interaction

Although a substantial and growing body of research has focused on the implications of mobile use for a variety of outcomes (see Campbell and Park 2008; Katz 2006, 2008,

2011), only a handful of studies have directly examined mobiles in everyday social encounters. Ling (2008), for example, draws upon the ritual-centered theorizing of Durkheim, Goffman, and Collins to discuss what he calls “mediated ritual interaction,” interactions afforded by new communication technologies.¹ Ling describes a “social limbo” surrounding these mediated forms of talk, in which participants must balance competing lines of activity while dealing with “the pressure to either be clearly in or clearly outside a social interaction” (2008, 173). Humphreys (2005) offers a related account of how participants in public spaces respond to their interlocutors’ incoming mobile calls. Using observations of public places and in-depth interviews, she identifies a range of general themes. One theme, referred to as “dual front interaction,” occurs when participants on the phone were observed to engage in various nonverbal behaviors to maintain interaction with their co-present interlocutor (such as iconic illustrators or the rolling of the eyes), unknown to the caller. This shows how mobile use may create situations in which participants must simultaneously manage their relations across multiple distinct speech events.² One limitation to Humphreys’s study, however, is the exclusive focus on mobile use to make voice calls as opposed to other functions such as sending and receiving text messages. In this chapter we focus specifically on the occurrence of mobile texting during co-present interaction.

To frame our understanding of how mobiles are used in co-present interaction, we draw on the concept of technological affordance. The concept originated from the work of Gibson (1977), who posited that animals and humans have an innate ability to recognize the opportunities that objects in their environments afford for particular actions. The concept has been adopted more loosely by computer and social scientists to refer to the idea that technology provides opportunities and constraints on human action, without the assumption that these opportunities and constraints are innately known by individuals (see Norman 1999). The concept has been used to strike a theoretical middle ground between technologically deterministic approaches that downplay the role of human agency, and social constructionist approaches that ignore the physical properties of technology (see Hutchby 2001). The concept is particularly well suited to our purposes because we wish to acknowledge the opportunities that mobile devices provide, while examining autonomous behavior of our participants outside of their use of this technology. As is discussed in our analysis, the affordances of mobile devices to transcend time—that is, asynchronous communication—and space, by permitting communication with distant others, are particularly relevant to understanding the behavior that emerges in our data.

To frame our understanding of the interactional dynamics of co-present conversation, we draw on Goffman’s (1963) distinction between primary involvements and secondary involvements: “Men as animals have a capacity to divide their attention into main and side involvement. A main involvement is one that absorbs the major part of an individual’s attention and interest, visibly forming the principal current determinant of his actions. A side involvement is an activity that an individual can carry on in an abstracted fashion without threatening or confusing simultaneous maintenance of main involvement” (43).

Contemporary scholarship in the disciplines of linguistics and anthropology has extended Goffman’s theorizing by examining the inherently multimodal nature of hu-

man interaction (LeBaron and Streeck 1997; Norris 2004, 2011; Schegloff 1984; Stivers and Sidnell 2005). Kendon (2004) and Goodwin (1986, 2000, 2003) have explored the semiotic dimensions of face-to-face encounters, including the array of linguistic, material, and embodied aspects participants draw upon within the interactional situation. Recent work has focused on the emergent negotiation of social action in such diverse contexts and environments as a subway control room (Heath and Luff 2000), cars (Haddington and Keisanen 2009), airplane cockpits (Nevile 2005), and beauty salons (Toerien and Kitzinger 2007). This chapter extends this work by examining the interactional resources used when negotiating mobile involvements during ordinary conversation.

Data and Methods

We draw on the inductive methods of conversation analysis (for example, Atkinson and Heritage 1984), where video or audio recordings of episodes of naturally occurring interaction are reviewed closely in order to generate rich, detailed descriptions of the interactional practices through which participants co-construct and interpret social actions. In collecting the data, participants signed informed consent forms and were asked to use a video camera to record a time when they would ordinarily be together. They were not explicitly told to use their mobiles during the interaction. The recordings were then transcribed using a modified version of the standard Jeffersonian transcription conventions (see appendix) and analyzed to examine participants' mobile-related actions.

We focus on a single instance of interaction to illustrate some of the trends that emerge from our larger collection. This particular episode of interaction consists of three female college students hanging out in the kitchen of one of their homes (see fig. 7.1 below to better understand their initial body positions, which remain generally constant). As the conversation progresses we discover that one of the women is



■ Figure 7.1 The participants (from left to right): Amy, Brianne, and Caitlyn (Amy and Brianne's phones are circled in white).

waiting for a male friend to join them. One of the women completed the video recording with her two friends using a small digital video camera for the purposes of extra credit in an undergraduate course on research methods. Her only instructions were to capture a social activity that would have occurred regardless of whether it was being recorded. None of the women were encouraged to use mobile phones at any point during the data collection process.

Analysis and Discussion

A consistent finding from our exploration was that participants continuously oscillate between attending to the co-present interaction as their primary involvement and their mobiles as their secondary involvement. Although we do not have data on the specific activity that occurred on the mobile devices—the video camera did not capture the screens of the devices—the mobile activity followed a consistent pattern that is most clearly recognized as an exchange of text messages.

One way these back-and-forth shifts in involvement were prompted is through the chimes that are emitted from mobile phones. Most mobile models today give users the option of having the device produce a chime to indicate that a new text message has been received. This feature is strikingly similar to Schegloff and Sacks's (1973) notion of the summons-answer adjacency pair, a pair of social actions in which a participant may be called (or summoned) by a ringing phone so that he or she may engage in opening a conversation with the caller. The subsequent response from the individual answering the phone (for example, "Hello?") can be understood to be a responding action to the opening summons initiated by the caller (Schegloff 2007). However, unlike a voice call summons, a text message summons affords the possibility of establishing mobile side involvements *without* suspending the co-present interaction. This is of great significance since participants' monitoring of the turn-by-turn details of interaction (including syntactic and gestural relevancies) is crucial for projecting and negotiating the availability of speaking turns (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974; see also Bolden 2003). The following case illustrates how this affordance allows for dynamic switching between primary and secondary involvements, and how this switching is dependent on the situated organization of turn taking.

Case 1

In the following excerpt Amy and Caitlyn are discussing therapists while Brianne is outside talking to a friend. Just prior to this excerpt, Amy has been telling a lengthy story about her reasons for considering therapy:

Excerpt 1 [MIC1:314–321]

- 01 AMY: With my parents splitting
 02 up and my mom staying no-
 03 like yester- the other
 04 day [she's like]
 05 [(phone chimes)]



■ Figure 7.2 “She’s like. . .” (line 04).

- 06 sh- like I heard it from
 07 my family that they’ve
 08 been talking about it
 09 but from hearing it from
 10 my mom like really like killed
 11 me she was like it’s
 12 your fault me and daddy
 13 got split up. And I was
 14 like What? And my mom
 15 blames me for everything
 16 because it’s just easier
 17 to blame somebody el[se]
 18 CAT: [ye]ah
 19 of course.=
 20 AMY: =for something. So it was
 21 just like always me like

At the beginning of this exchange (lines 01–04), Amy continues to hold the floor as she reports further details about her family circumstances. Just as she is producing the utterance “she’s like” (line 04, see fig. 7.2), her mobile chimes to indicate the receipt of a new text message. However, Amy does not shift her gaze toward the mobile and maintains her primary involvement with Caitlyn as she continues with her multiunit turn (lines 06–17, 20–21).

As we will see below in a segment occurring nearly four minutes later, Amy finally shifts her gaze to her mediated secondary involvement while Brianne reenters the room:

Excerpt 2 [MIC1:094–127]

- 094 AMY: I have- I don't
 095 think I have any
 096 memories of my parents
 097 being affectionate towards
 098 each other,
 099 (0.2)
 100 AMY: That's why I don't understand
 101 why I'm such like a mush.
 102 I don't know if it's cause like=
 103 CAT: =You yearn for it.
 104 AMY: Yeah.
 105 (0.3)
 106 AMY: Cause like usually like
 107 they say like if a kid is
 108 like brought up into like,=
 109 CAT: =Is he coming? ((to BRI))
 110 BRI: He didn't want to come in.
 111 CAT: Why,
 112 BRI: I don't know. I told him about
 113 the video and he didn't want to.
 114 AMY: ehh heh heh
 115 BRI: You can put your foot there.



■ Figure 7.3 “You can put your foot there” (line 115).



■ Figure 7.4 “seen them being affectionate” (lines 121–22).

- 116 CAT: O:h that’s okay.
 117 (0.2)
 118 CAT: So what were you saying Amy,
 119 cause your parents aren’t
 120 like (.) affectionate?
 121 AMY: Yeah like I’ve never seen
 122 them being affectionate
 123 so I I’d thought that
 124 I would like not
 125 want affection? But
 126 I feel like (.) I’m
 127 the complete opposite.

Just after Caitlyn offers an assessment of Amy’s account making clear her need for affection (lines 106–8; “you yearn for it”), Amy begins a new turn at talk. Next, before Amy can come to a point of possible completion, Caitlyn interrupts her (with “Is he coming?”) in order to address Brianne, who just has just reentered the room. Brianne provides a brief answer (“He didn’t want to come in”), followed by Caitlyn’s pursuit of an account (“Why”) as to why the friend Brianne was visiting with outside the house did not join the three of them inside. Brianne then provides a brief answer (“He didn’t want to come in”; line 110) and account explaining why he did not join them (“I told him about the video and he didn’t want to”; lines 112–13), which elicits laughter from Amy (line 114).

Immediately after the floor is taken from her, Amy shifts and holds her gaze on her mobile and proceeds to type into it with both hands. This lack of gaze and mutual orientation with Brianne and Caitlyn’s actions displays Amy’s lack of in-

teractional availability to take the speaking floor. Caitlyn produces a question (“So what were you saying Amy, cause your parents aren’t like (.) affectionate?” lines 118–19) that is addressed to Amy and designed as an attempt to return to the topic they had been discussing before it was interrupted by Brianne’s entrance into the room. It is worth noting that her question is designed with an address term (“Amy”), presumably as a means to explicitly select Amy to take the floor. This reliance on explicit address (as opposed to pursuing mutual gaze) demonstrates Caitlyn’s orientation to Amy’s lack of involvement with their co-present conversation and her privileging of her secondary involvement with her mobile. Immediately following, in line 121, Amy places her phone back on the table (see fig. 7.3) and takes the floor to respond to Caitlyn’s request for topic resumption (“Yeah like I’ve never seen them being affectionate”; lines 121–27).

This case illustrates the importance of the time-transcending affordance of mobile texting. The asynchronous nature of mobile texting allows Amy to make her secondary mobile involvement dependent on the dynamics of her role in the local turn taking organization of the primary co-present involvement. If the summons had occurred through a synchronous voice call, Amy would have been forced to choose between suspending her co-present interaction as a primary involvement and switching to the voice call, or ignoring the voice call completely and rejecting the summons altogether.

This tolerance for response delay may also be explained through reference to the space-transcending nature of mobile devices. A lack of shared place means that nonpresent individuals are unaware of the extent to which the individual that they texted is available for interaction. For these reasons, mobiles afford a less constrained set of expectations regarding the response time between the initiating chime and the responding action. This allows Amy to carry on her co-present interaction as a primary involvement, while meeting her obligation to respond to the mobile summons when the time is right. Finally, one can also observe that Amy’s opportunity to shift her gaze toward her phone is occasioned by Brianne’s reentering into the room where she and Caitlyn were conversing. Such a shift in participant structure—where Amy now has two interlocutors in the immediate, local context—provides an opportunity for Amy to redistribute her attention between the co-present and mobile involvements.

Case 2

This case shows how participants may attempt to blur the boundaries that exist between their secondary mobile and primary co-present involvements. In the following excerpt the women are just coming to the end of a series of tellings related to substance addiction:

Excerpt 3 [MIC1:790–828]

- 42 CAT: =Like his friend that
 43 just got out of rehab
 44 three months ago, he’s

- 45 in law school.
- 46 AMY: ((drops her mouth))
- 47 CAT: Like (.) how
- 48 [does that like (.)
- 49 that's crazy.]
- 50 [((Amy picks up phone))]
- 51 (0.5)
- 52 CAT: °Like° I
- 53 [dunno it's
- 54 just (.) nuts.]
- 55 [((Amy begins
- 56 typing into phone))]
- 57 (1.2)
- 58 BRI: [((yawns))]
- 59 [(0.9)]
- 60 AMY: Trish says she thinks
- 61 Tom just read my text
- 62 message.
- 63 (0.2)
- 64 AMY: Cause I was like (.) she
- 65 was like (.) um (0.3) she
- 66 was like um (.) she was
- 67 like (dislike) Tom question
- 68 mark? and I was like no



■ Figure 7.5 Bri yawns during silence (line 58).



■ Figure 7.6 “Tom just read my text message” (lines 61–62).

69 just upset with him and
 70 I was like that wouldn't
 71 have been nice of him I
 72 was like he's hurting my
 73 baby and she was like
 74 (0.2) she was like I
 75 think he just read your
 76 message and I was li:ke
 77 (0.2) I was like why do
 78 you say that and she goes
 79 because he opened my
 80 phone saying oh you have
 81 three messages like with
 82 an attitude? and I was
 83 like s:o? I didn't say
 84 anything wrong I'm just
 85 stating the truth,
 86 (2.0)
 87 CAT: Drama drama drama
 88 drama drama hhhheh-heh

Starting in lines 42–45, Caitlyn produces a multiunit turn built upon their prior discussion of substance addiction (“Like his friend that just got out of rehab three months ago, he’s in law school.”). Amy then produces an embodied assessment by

dropping her jaw as a display of disbelief in response to Caitlyn's telling. Possibly as an attempt to elicit a proper response from Brianne, Caitlyn recompletes her telling and provides her own assessment ("that's crazy"; lines 47–48). Simultaneous with Caitlyn's recompletion, Amy picks up her mobile (line 50), directs her gaze toward it, and begins typing into it (lines 55–56). No visible or aural sign of uptake to Caitlyn's concurrent actions is displayed. Thus, up to this point, Amy has managed both the co-present and mediated involvements as distinct from one another.

Next, after a noticeable silence (and yawn from Brianne) where a story response was still relevant (lines 57–59), Amy takes the floor to present a summative report ("Trish says she thinks Tom just read my text message"; lines 60–62), presumably related to her current text message exchange (see figs. 7.5 and 7.6). Following this, Amy goes on to produce a story about her text exchange ("Cause I was like . . ."; lines 64–85), complete with several uses of the English quotative "like" (Dailey-O'Cain 2000; see also Golato 2000) presumably to mark the reporting of the individual text messages that made up the exchange (see related work on reported speech in conversation, such as Tannen 1995; Holt and Clift 2007). It is unclear what Amy refers to when she says, "he's hurting my baby . . ." (lines 72–73) or "I'm just stating the truth" (lines 84–85), but for our purposes understanding the meaning of these remarks is secondary to our analysis. As a result of Amy's actions, what may have previously been considered a secondary involvement through the mobile phone has now been explicitly acknowledged in the co-present interaction and made into a legitimate topic of conversation (essentially spoken into the here-and-now context of the encounter). Furthermore, Brianne and Caitlyn are both granted greater epistemic access to Amy's mobile-bound communicative activities (via her report that "Trish says she thinks . . ."), thus reconfiguring the previously independent nature of the two interactions.

In this case, the affordance of the mobile device to transcend space is particularly relevant to explaining this behavior. Here the interlocutors have only visual or aural access, effectively positioning them as a type of bystander (or unratified participant) in the participation structure of the mobile-related side involvement (Goodwin and Goodwin 2004). Because of this constraint on Brianne and Caitlyn's involvement in the mobile exchange, Amy was afforded the opportunity to refer to the text exchange in the co-present conversation, thereby blurring the boundary between her secondary and primary involvement. If the individual with whom Amy had the text exchange was co-present, such a blurring would have been unlikely, if not impossible, since any interaction between Amy and the individual would have been a primary rather than secondary involvement.

Conclusion

Our study has at least two implications for the study of discourse and new media technologies. First, at the theoretical level, we show how the concept of primary and secondary involvement is relevant to understanding the dynamic switching and blurring that takes place when mobile texting occurs during co-present interaction. We further show the relationship between this switching and the local management of conversational turn-taking. This may point to emerging social norms regarding mobile

usage among friends or peers, but further research is necessary to support this possibility. Second, we show how a conversation analytic approach can be used to understand the increasingly technologically rich nature of social encounters. Using such an approach we demonstrate how mobiles are woven into the various linguistic and embodied resources that participants draw upon to produce social actions.

This study points to at least two areas of future work. This study is exploratory in nature and would benefit from the use of a larger collection of instances of interactions to enhance the rigor of our findings. Our analysis does not incorporate the actual content of the text messages that were sent and received during the conversation. Researchers would do well to consider how the study of everyday discourse can be extended to examine both of these mediums as they unfold concurrently in situated context.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION KEY

.	indicates falling intonation (not necessarily end of sentence)
(0.5)	indicates amount of silence, in tenths of seconds
—	underlining shows a sound that is stressed
:	indicates that the preceding sound is extended or stretched
(h)	indicates laughter incorporated into a word
?	indicates rising intonation (not necessarily a question)
[]	marks the beginning and ending of overlap
hhh	marks an audible outbreath
°	encloses speech that is produced quietly
-	indicates a cutoff in the course of production
=	indicates no interval between two utterances (that is, they are latched together)

NOTES

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1. Ling ultimately argues that these forms of interaction should not be excluded from having the potential to create and maintain the social solidarity often associated exclusively with co-present rituals. Collins (2004) takes the opposing position. Although he acknowledges the possibility of mediated rituals, Collins concludes that such forms of interaction are incapable of generating the type of emotional energy characteristic of co-present ritual interaction.
2. Humphreys further acknowledges cases where the participants across both interactions converge to create “three-way interactions,” or when the participant on the phone serves as a type of mediator between the co-present and nonpresent interlocutors (2005, 821–22). Although we hope to explore this type of interactional event in future research, we do not pursue it in this chapter.

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