

FIGURES OF SPEECH:  
AN EXPLORATION OF THE USE OF  
IDIOMATIC PHRASES IN CONVERSATION

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of the use of figures of speech, idioms, commonly used metaphors, and various types of cliched, formulaic, and largely figurative language, in naturally occurring conversation. It investigates both the interactional environment and the position in which these expressions are employed.

Chapter one explores some of the existing literature on idioms from a variety of disciplines including linguistics, sociology, psychology, and philosophy. It reveals that, despite these analyses, authors have failed to consider figures of speech on the occasions of their actual use. Thus I select a methodology which will allow me to fulfil this research aim.

Chapter two begins the analysis of the interactional environment of idioms etc in conversation, revealing that these expressions recur in particular conversational topics: complaints, troubles-tellings, disagreements, and so on. The "fit" between idioms and this sequential environment is then explored, and it is discovered that idioms are well suited for use in rather "delicate" situations.

In chapter three I demonstrate that idioms also recur in a particular sequential position: at the completion of topics. Topic changes involving idioms are then explored, and it is found that they are, in many ways, distinct from more common (stepwise) transitions: they are brief (occurring within three or four turns) and they involve disjuncts prior to the introduction of the new topic. It is then suggested that one reason for the association between idioms and topic changes is that they summarise the previous topic.

Chapter four notes that idioms sometimes contain puns, and this conclusion is used to further investigate the relationship between idioms and the talk in which they occur.

Having concentrated on idioms in informal conversation, chapter five seeks to establish whether the findings of the previous chapters can be applied to idioms in a more formal setting. Thus idioms in radio news interviews are examined, and some general statements, relating to idiomatic language and the nature of formal talk, are made.

## CHAPTER ONE

### AN INTRODUCTION TO IDIOMS IN CONVERSATION

#### 1 INTRODUCTION

In conversation speakers use words or phrases which fall into the category of slang, colloquialisms, and idioms. For example, in talking to a group of friends one might use the slang expression "cop", or "hassle", or, if one came from the north east, ask for a "tab" (a colloquial expression for a cigarette). This is in contradistinction to formal settings where such expressions may be avoided. For instance, if one were a witness in a court trial the term "police officer" may be regarded as more appropriate than the slang term "cop". Indeed, Jefferson (1974) gives the following instance in which a defendant in a trial begins to say "cop" ("Ku-") but self-corrects to replace it with the more formal title of "officer".

[PTC Materials:I:49]<sup>1</sup>

(The defendant, Bassett, has been accused of committing a traffic violation.)

Bassett: En I didn't read that ((description of violation  
--> the officer wrote on the ticket)). When thuh ku-  
--> offi- cer came up I s-  
Judge:            [ 'Red traffic signal approximately thirty feet  
                  east of the crosswalk, when signal changed to red.'

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<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of the symbols used in all the extracts from transcripts see Atkinson and Heritage (1984) pp.ix-xvi.



(2) [Her:01:1:2-3]

--> Shirley: Ah::nd I'm really lef'between th'devil'n deep blue sea:

(3) [NB:IV:35-36]

--> Emma: ...I's gahn duh pot.

(4) Holt:Dec:86:A:35]

--> Leslie: So he had a good innings didn't he?

(5) [Heritage:I:6:6]

--> Ilene: En they'll scream blue murder'f y(h) d(h)o  
th(h)a(h)-t

Mrs H: [hih hih Y(h)eh ah Well I've given ih up  
ez a bad job anyway.

(6) [MH:Therapy:1972]

--> Pam: Rome wasn't built in a day.

Such phrases stand out as being idiomatic in spite of the fact that conversation has often been seen as formulaic and routine (see for instance Goffman 1981), by which analysts seem to be pointing to the fact that it is often characterised by utterances and sequences that are similar to those which have been used many times before. For instance, in the following two extracts it is possible to see the similarity between these two conversation opening sequences:

(7) [Holt:1988:U:2:2:1]

Kevin: Two one four?

Leslie: .h.t.hhh Oh hello Kevin is that you,

Kevin: It i:s yes

Leslie: .hhh Leslie here,

(0.3)

Kevin: Oh hello Leslie

Leslie: .hhhhhhhh How're you:?

(8) [Holt:88:1:5:1]

Leslie: Oh hello::- Is it (0.2) you: Robbie,

(.)

Robbie: It's me Robbie?

Leslie; Oh: yes. .hhh uh Leslie Field.

(.)



Robbie: Oh hel<sub>l</sub>o : : ,  
 Leslie: .m.t Hello :=  
 Robbie: =I wz thinking about you toda:y,

But despite the formulaticity of conversation, it is still possible to identify phrases that are distinctively formulaic or idiomatic. As we shall see, one of the features that distinguishes these expressions is that the majority are metaphorical: that is, they have a meaning which is independent of the meanings of the individual words. So, in (2) Shirley is not claiming to be literally between the devil and the deep blue sea, and in (5) Ilene is not saying that the dogs will literally scream blue murder.

A second feature which distinguishes idioms is that many are frozen.<sup>5</sup> Whilst "Oh hello Kevin is that you," in (7) is similar to "Oh hello:- Is it (0.2) you: Robbie," in (8), there are substantial differences between the phrases. Idioms, on the other hand, are often repeated in much the same form. Some idioms are highly syntactically frozen and even a slight alteration to their wording or sequence results in them sounding strange, if not nonsensical or humorous. This is true of all the following instances; "a rolling boulder gathers no moss", "no moss is gathered by a rolling stone", "Florence wasn't built in a day", "it took more than a day to build Rome". Many idioms, however, are less syntactically frozen: a word or the order of the phrase may vary on successive productions, but the idiom will still sound natural or "nativelike".<sup>6</sup> But in order for an expression to appear natural and as a version of a commonly used idiom, any alteration to its order or wording must be within a limited range: for instance,

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<sup>5</sup> On frozen idioms see Gibbs (1980).

<sup>6</sup> On nativelike production see Pawley and Syder (1983).

while " I've been bashing my head against a brick wall" and "you feel like your banging your head against a wall" both sound natural, "knocking myself against a stone wall" begins to sound like a novel metaphor, and less of a nativelike idiom.<sup>7</sup>

Because the term "frozen" refers to a collection of words being used in the same form and order, frozen or semi-frozen idioms must, by definition, be multi-word expressions. The idioms on which this analysis is based are all longer than a single word. So, although many single words can be seen as commonly used metaphors, I have not included them in my data collection. I shall not be concerned with examples such as the following: "he drove me to it", "the wait is killing me", "I flew back".

In sum, in this analysis I shall be exploring idioms in conversation. These idioms are larger than one word and many are metaphorical or figurative. I shall not be concerned with other figures of speech such as slang, colloquialisms, and conversational routines, nor will I include unfrozen metaphors or similes. Also I leave aside the debate which sees all language as in some sense metaphorical because the choice of words we use for things is arbitrary and the original meaning of words is no longer known (c.f. Bolinger 1976).

So, however formulaic ordinary conversation might be, and whatever the metaphorical origins of language, there are phrases which stand out as being idiomatic, and it is these kinds of expressions with which I shall be concerned. Such expressions not only stand out as distinct to

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<sup>7</sup> See extracts (1) and (10) for an example of two slightly different versions of the same idiom.

me, the analyst; speakers often display an awareness of the distinct and special nature of these figures of speech. Idioms are sometimes explicitly marked as being commonly used expressions. For instance, in the following extract the speaker marks that the phrase is common by following the idiom with the phrase "ez they say".

(9) [Heritage:III:1:14:1]

Jane: .hhh Uhm:: (0.2) .t.hh Tha:nk you fer ringing ah-u  
We just had u-this: comment made to 'ss this mohning  
by: u-Mister Michael Gannon actually .hhh ahnd u:m I  
--> wonderd whetherr in fact it's uh: (h)t(h)rue ohr  
--> false ez they say.  
Edgerton: Well I was (.) eh it so hap'n thet I met him yestihday  
eveni:ng=

Here Jane explicitly marks that "(h)t(h)rue ohr false" is a commonly used expression through her use of the phrase "ez they say". Other examples of such phrases include "to use a cliché", "if I might use that expression", and "the proverbial...". I refer to such phrases as disclaimers because they seem to act to introduce some distance between the speaker and the expression, thus displaying the speaker's awareness at using such a common phrase: "ez they say" explicitly refers to the fact that the phrase is not the speaker's own expression, but a common way of referring to something.<sup>8</sup>

Comparable phrases sometimes accompany puns; for example "excuse the pun", or "no pun intended". Again these seem to demonstrate the speaker's special awareness at having used the pun, and to introduce some distance between the utterance and the speaker.<sup>9</sup>

In using disclaimers before or after idioms, speakers display their awareness of the formulaticity and clichéd nature of such expressions.

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of disclaimers see chapter five.

<sup>9</sup> For more on this issue see chapter four.

Thus they orient to certain phrases as being frequently used, rather than being their own way of expressing something. Other formulaic language such as slang or frequently used, routinised expressions (e.g. "how are you?", "I'm fine thankyou", "have a nice time") are not accompanied by disclaimers. So it seems that speakers orient to idioms in a distinctive way.

Therefore, this category of idioms is not only distinct to me, but also to speakers and other authors on language. Having begun to identify idioms as a distinct group of objects, I shall now explore the features of this category in greater detail. The rest of this section will be divided into subsections in which I investigate various aspects of the distinction between formulaic and other kinds of language. I begin by further exploring the nature of idiomatic language and the way in which it differs from non-idiomatic language. I then consider the metaphoric nature of idioms, psycholinguistic and linguistic literature on formulaic language, the derision of idioms, and their emphatic nature. In later sections I discuss the methodology I intend to employ in investigating idioms, and I consider some general features of idiomatic and metaphorical language.

### 1.1 Distinctions Between Idiomatic and Non-idiomatic Language

Having identified idioms as a distinct category of objects within our language, I was interested to see how they are used in conversation; so I began by building up a large collection of these recognisably idiomatic utterances. My corpus is mainly drawn from the transcriptions of taped telephone conversations; from this I gathered over four hundred instances of these idiomatic expressions. My collection consists of a wide variety of conversational objects

including sayings, proverbs, cliches, frequently used metaphors and similes, and many other kinds of formulaic and figurative utterances. What I have not included are less archetypal idioms, formulaic routines such as greeting sequences, colloquialisms, metaphors of one word, and novel similes and metaphors.<sup>10</sup>

The data corpus on which this analysis is based was compiled as a result of reading through a large collection of transcribed conversations and pulling out any instances of idioms. The question arises as to how idioms may be distinguished from non-idiomatic utterances. Authors have attempted to identify the characteristics which render idioms distinct: for instance, Estill and Kemper (1982) see idioms as belonging to one end of a continuum which ranges from original to formulaic language:

"Utterances may be located along a gradient of originality that ranges from reflexive expressions such as expletives, through more variable but nonetheless repetitive and formulaic utterances like greetings, to unique expressions and novel allusions (Bolinger, 1978:Steinmann, 1973). Figurative language spans this gradient; original metaphors and similes take their place at one end, while idioms, proverbs, and frozen metaphors fall towards the other." (P.560)

Thus, in Estill and Kemper's terms, the kinds of expressions which this analysis focuses on are all grouped at the unoriginal end of a continuum.

Unlike Estill and Kemper I will not attempt to define idioms. I believe that it is not possible to give a simple, all encompassing definition of these objects. The same problem which Taylor<sup>11</sup> identifies when attempting to define proverbs, applies also to idioms:

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<sup>10</sup> For a further discussion of my data collection and analysis see the final section of this chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Referred to by Sacks (1965, Unpublished lecture:6).

"The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately arrive at a single definition combining all the essential elements and give each the proper emphasis, we should not even have a touchstone. An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial."

Like Taylor, I believe that various features of idioms lead to them being seen as idiomatic, but no single feature seems common to all.<sup>12</sup>

Wittgenstein's (1958) observations of the category of games may, perhaps, be seen to apply to the category of idioms. They are not "defined by reference to some fixed core of essential attributes" (Heritage 1984a) but by "family resemblances" which constitute "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (Wittgenstein 1958).<sup>13</sup> And just as there are more central members of the category games, so there are more central members of the category idioms. Hence, just as most people would have little difficulty identifying the phrase "a rolling stone gathers no moss" as a clear example of a proverbial expression, so too cases (1)-(6) above are clearly recognisable as idioms.

This particular proverb ("a rolling stone gathers no moss") has various characteristics which we might use to explain its designation to the category. Perhaps most importantly it is figurative: it has a literal meaning which has to do with stones and moss, but it also has a metaphorical meaning which has nothing to do with either of these. A glance at the idioms in extracts (1) to (6) above, reveals that they

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<sup>12</sup> But for a fuller account of, and conceptual distinctions between, types of idiomatic expressions see Fillmore et al. (1986).

<sup>13</sup> For a summary of Wittgenstein's main thesis see Lakoff (1987, especially pp.16-17).

also have figurative meanings. Thus, in (2), the idiom "between th'devil'n deep blue sea" is not meant literally: it has a figurative meaning which suggests that the speaker is in a difficult situation, not that she is literally between the devil and the sea.

In linguistic and psycholinguistic analyses of idioms their figurative nature is often seen as a distinguishing feature. In the following subsections I will draw from this literature in order to discuss a variety of features of idioms beginning with their figurative character. In this way I hope to identify some of the characteristics of idioms which render them distinct from other utterances, and which demonstrate why they are of particular analytic interest.

## 1.2 Idioms in Linguistics and Psycholinguistics

### (i) Metaphoric Language

That idioms have a figurative and a literal meaning is one of the main characteristics which linguists and psycholinguists use in distinguishing idioms from other objects. Bobrow and Bell (1973) give the following review of the definition of idioms:

"Weinreich (1969) defines an idiom as 'a complex expression whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of its elements.' Chafe (1970) has pointed out that many idiomatic expressions are ambiguous, with one interpretation (the literal meaning) deriving from the meaning of the words involved and the other (idiomatic meaning) following the Weinreich definition." (P.343)

Here, idioms are defined as having an idiomatic and a literal meaning. But caution must be used in attempting to define idioms in this way: it must be remembered that not all idioms have figurative meanings. (For example, "that's the way life goes" does not have a clear-cut literal and figurative meaning.) Further, phrases which are recognisably idiomatic are occasionally meant quite literally (see Gibbs 1989.)

But many authors do concentrate on idioms which have a literal and a metaphorical meaning. Sacks (1965) refers to these kinds of phrases as "atopical". That is, because they have a figurative meaning they do not refer to the particular situation in which they are used. In other words, the phrase "between the devil and the deep blue sea" can be applied to a number of situations, and it will be interpreted according to the context in which it occurs: if a speaker uses it while discussing two friends who are trying to persuade her to take alternative courses of action, the "devil" and "the deep blue sea" will be seen as referring to the two conflicting points of view. In (1) Shirley uses the expression "it's like (.) banging y'r head against a brick wa:ll" to refer to her attempts to convince an estate agents that she has not recieved some important information, but in the following extract the same idiom is used by a teacher talking about the difficulties she faces in trying to teach her class.

(10)[Holt:M88:1:5:29]

(Robbie has started teaching a class that was taught by Leslie.)

Robbie: I am enjoying it I just get very frustrated as no doubt you did too<sub>:</sub>.

Leslie: .hhh Ye:s:. Yes 'n quite depress::ed but uh::m (.) perhaps it won't get you that way  
(0.3)

--> Robbie: I: find (.) I feel'z if I'm knocking my head against a  
--> brick wall. I know all the beautiful things<sub>th't we=</sub>

Leslie: ( Hm )

Robbie: =should be doing,

Thus, in this extract the same idiom (though "knocking" is used instead of "banging") is employed to refer to the difficulties a teacher encounters in performing her job. So we see that, in instances (1) and (10), an idiom is used in two very different topics.



Because idioms are atypical, Sacks (referring to them as "proverbials"<sup>14</sup>) argues that they are treated as "correct about something":

"You get a piece of knowledge, like 'a rolling stone gathers no moss', which is in the first instance correct about something. If you paraphrase it into some particular domain, like 'a man who doesn't settle down doesn't gather possessions,' then it may not have the same kind of correctness; it may be questionable."  
(P.11)

Thus, because they refer to stones and moss, rather than settling down and possessions, idioms cannot be objected to or rejected on empirical grounds. If they referred to people who do not settle down, then counter examples would undermine them: but because they are atypical, if they are not correct in any situation it is because they are inappropriate to that situation, and not because they are wrong. Due to the fact that proverbials are treated as "correct about something", they are particularly resilient to being challenged, and, as we shall see in chapter two, this may be one reason that they often occur in disputes.

#### (ii) The Learning and Processing of Idioms

Another consequence of the figurative nature of many idioms is that they are thought to be learnt as a whole. It is recognised that the metaphorical meaning of an idiom cannot be derived from the individual words. Hence, if a speaker had never encountered the phrase "he kicked the bucket" before, he or she could only assume that it described someone literally kicking a bucket: the speaker could not possibly know the metaphorical meaning without having learnt it independently of the meaning of the constituent words. This metaphorical meaning would be

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<sup>14</sup> Sacks has in mind a slightly narrower category than my category of idioms, but his observations on proverbials apply just as well to idioms.

learnt in toto. Hence, the figurative meaning of idioms must be learnt in a very different way from the meaning of literal phrases.

Fillmore et al (1986) use the fact that idioms must be learnt as a whole in formulating a definition. To them it is one of three distinguishing features and does not apply to all idioms.

"We think of a locution or manner of speaking as idiomatic if it is assigned an interpretation by the speech community but if somebody who merely knew grammar and the vocabulary of the language could not, by virtue of that knowledge alone, know (i) how to say it, or (ii) what it means, or (iii) whether it is a conventional thing to say." (P.3)

Thus, Fillmore et al distinguish between idioms which speakers could not interpret without having learnt them separately (called "decoding idioms") such as "kicking the bucket"; and idioms which a speaker "might or might not understand without prior experience, but concerning which they would not know that it is a conventional way to say what it says" (called "encoding idioms") like "answer the door", "wide awake", and "bright red". Therefore, Fillmore et al include idioms which could be understood without prior knowledge but which a speaker could not know was a conventional way of talking. Most linguists and psycholinguists take a narrower definition of idioms. They include only those which fall into Fillmore et al's category of decoding idioms. For instance Swinney and Cutler observe:

"In its simplest form an idiom is a string of two or more words for which the meaning is not derived from the meanings of the individual words comprising that string." (P.532)

That the majority of idioms are learnt and understood as a whole distinguishes them from unidiomatic but routinised phrases such as "how are you", "have a nice time", or "Oh hello Kevin is that you," and "Oh hello::- Is it (0.2) you: Robbie" in extracts (7) and (8). Here, the constituent words of each utterance can be learnt and understood

independently. If one had never encountered the phrase before, one could still understand it if the meaning of the constituent words is known. Also each phrase need not be repeated in much the same form for it to make sense and sound natural. As the two utterances taken from extracts (7) and (8) demonstrate, although the order of words in each is different, this has no effect on the naturalness or routineness of the phrases.

Because idioms are learnt and understood as a whole Bobrow and Bell (1973) conclude that they must also be processed as a whole:

"Discovery of the idiomatic meaning of an idiom seems to result from processing the idiom as a word." (P.343)

Similarly Schweigert and Moates (1987) comment:

"It is generally assumed that the literal meaning of an idiom is derived from the meanings of the individual words in the phrase. The figurative meaning, however, reflects the meaning of the whole phrase, not its individual words, and cannot be constructed from the meanings of the words in the phrase. This meaning is assumed to be stored in the memory." (P.3)

So, for psycholinguists and linguists, idioms are distinct because they have a figurative and a literal meaning, and to retrieve the figurative meaning they must be processed as a whole. Consequently psycholinguists have investigated the ways in which idioms are processed. Many have carried out experiments to discover whether, in the first instance, idioms are interpreted literally or metaphorically. They have presented subjects with idioms that have a literal and a figurative meaning, and have devised ways to discover which meaning is retrieved first. For instance, Gibbs (1980) presented subjects with a story, the last line of which was an idiomatic expression. He then noted the amount of time it took for them to read the line and to make a paraphrase judgement. Swinney and Cutler (1979) presented subjects with idiomatic word strings and grammatical word strings as a control.

These strings were then displayed on a screen for two seconds at a time. Subjects were instructed to decide whether these strings formed a meaningful, natural phrase in English, and to indicate their decision by pressing one of two buttons. The number of presentations before the subjects came to a decision, was recorded.

As a result of these kinds of experiments, psycholinguists have arrived at three models of idiom comprehension: the literal processing model, where the literal meaning of an utterance is retrieved before the figurative meaning (c.f. Bobrow and Bell 1973); the simultaneous model, where both meanings are retrieved together (c.f. Schweight and Moates, unpublished manuscript); and the idiom processing model, where the figurative meaning is retrieved before the literal meaning (c.f. Swinney and Cutler 1979, Estill and Kemper:1982, and Gibbs 1980).

Besides seeking to discover whether idioms are interpreted metaphorically or literally in the first instance, many of the experiments also test the effect of the context on idiom comprehension (that is, the effect on the comprehension of an idiom if it is preceded by a sentence or paragraph). For instance, Ortony et al. (1978) compared the speed of subjects' comprehension of the metaphorical meaning of idioms which were not placed in a context, with the comprehension of literal phrases, and with that of idioms which were preceded by a paragraph. They found that it took subjects longer to understand the metaphorical meaning of idioms not placed in a context than it did for them to understand the literal meaning of these phrases. However, when the idioms were positioned in a context, there was no difference between the speeds in which subjects understood the idiomatic and literal phrases.

Gibbs (1986) also tested the effect of context on children's comprehension of idioms. He found that when children were presented with an idiom without context, they had great difficulty in explaining the figurative meaning, but this was not the case when the idioms were given a context.

Schweigert and Moates (unpublished manuscript) see context as one factor which affects idiom comprehension, and they point to the variation in the use of context in the experiments carried out by psycholinguists. For instance Swinney and Cutler (1979) place the idioms in phrases, Brannon (1975) and Schweigert (1986) position the idioms in sentences, while Ortony et al (1978) use paragraphs (p.5). In their experiment Schweigert and Moates position the idiom in a sentence which is preceded by a short paragraph.

Therefore, one of the main themes of the psycholinguistic literature on idioms is the importance of context. Van Lanker (1973) claims that idiomatic or "automatic" language is "used in close association with situational context. Some instances one might even call highly stimulus bound." (p.201). Thus, in many of the experiments, phrases or paragraphs were invented in order to provide the idioms with a context. In this analysis I also recognise the importance of context. Indeed, I would argue that it is only because of the context that idioms can be seen as having a figurative meaning at all. In other words, in a discussion about diving, the expression "go off the deep end" is likely to have a literal meaning; but in a discussion about one person reprimanding another, the participants will be employing its metaphorical meaning. It is only by virtue of occurring within a particular speech context that phrases can be seen as idiomatic. Therefore, in this analysis I will be exploring idioms in the speech

context in which they occur. My data is drawn from naturally occurring conversations, and the talk surrounding the idioms will be considered along with the idioms themselves. (For a further discussion of the importance of context in my approach to the data, see section 3.)

Besides conducting experiments to discover which of the meanings of idioms is retrieved first, psycholinguists have also been concerned with whether idioms are interpreted figuratively by all kinds of language users. Thus, they have taken various groups of people who may be viewed as being non-competent language users, to see how they interpret idioms. Groups of non-competent speakers include children, people with brain disorders, and people to whom English is a second language. Gibbs (1987), for instance, tested children's recognition of frozen and unfrozen idioms. He found that when the idioms are placed in context, young children understand frozen idioms better than unfrozen ones. Van Lancker (1973) studied people with aphasia and other speech pathologies. She found that those who had suffered damage to the left hemisphere of the brain retain some idiomatic or "automatic" language while losing some or all original or "propositional" language use. She concludes that propositional language is represented in the left hemisphere only, while automatic language is represented in both hemispheres.

We can conclude that psycholinguists are mainly concerned with the recognition of idioms which have a figurative and a literal meaning. But for participants in conversation whether to interpret an idiom literally or figuratively is not a common problem. In my data I have no cases of speakers interpreting idioms wrongly or appearing to be troubled by the meaning of an idiomatic phrase used by a participant. In every case the idiom is interpreted metaphorically. I do have one

instance of a (rather borderline) idiom being treated literally, but there is no indication that the recipient misunderstands the expression. Instead she treats it literally in order to disagree with the speaker. The extract is taken from a telephone call to a suicide prevention centre. The caller, Mrs B, has been talking about a number of problems, one of them being that she has a lot of debts.

(11)[SPC:IV:6:13-14]

Mr K: I'm trying tuh figure this situation ou:t.  
(1.2)

Mr K: Trying tuh understand what c'n be done tuh help you.  
Becuz in: (.) there is s-something thet c'n be do:ne.  
--> Things can't be that bad.  
(0.3)

Mrs B: Well they ARE that ba:d'n if you don't believe it come on out'n see fer yerse:lf.

Mr K produces the idiom "Things can't be that bad" and Mrs B treats it literally by responding "Well they ARE that ba:d"; thus challenging Mr K's contention. In conversation whether to treat an idiom literally or metaphorically is overwhelmingly not a problem for speakers. If idioms are treated literally it is because the speaker disagrees with their appropriateness, which is an entirely different matter. By treating an idiom literally in order to disagree with its use, there is no suggestion that the speaker is interpreting it wrongly.

In sum, in conversation, idioms which have a literal and a metaphoric meaning, are overwhelmingly treated metaphorically. Sacks (1972a) argues that interpreting idioms metaphorically amounts to a preference rule:<sup>15</sup>

"detecting that a sentence containing concrete materials is or contains a proverbial yields that it is to be understood idiomatically, not concretely. The foregoing sentence contains what we call a 'preference rule' for understandings: Given the

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<sup>15</sup> On preference organisation see Atkinson and Heritage (1984:53-56).

detection of a proverbial in a sentence, Prefer to use idiomatic over concrete understanding of it." (P.138)

In conversation speakers treat idioms figuratively, and do not normally face the problem of deciding whether to treat an idiom literally or metaphorically. In this analysis I will be concerned with the way idioms are treated in conversation: unlike psycho-linguists, I will not be concerned with the potential misunderstandings of idiomatic expressions, nor with indeterminacies associated with ways in which they are recognised and comprehended.

(iii) Psycholinguistic and Linguistic Distinctions Between Idiomatic and Non-idiomatic Language

So far we have been concerned with the figurative, literal character of idioms, and we have drawn from linguistic and psycholinguistic literature on idiomatic expressions. A second theme of this literature is the distinction between idiomatic and non-idiomatic language, and it is to this issue which I now turn.

The psycholinguistic experiments referred to above are the result of a growing recognition, in linguistics and psychology, of the metaphoric nature of a large part of our language. Only recently have analysts begun to realise just how much of our language is bound up with idiomaticity or metaphor. In the past it was assumed that the majority of spoken language consisted of novel arrangements of words, but linguists have now begun to view language as largely consisting of memorised phrases or combinations. Instead of being seen as mainly novel, language is now thought to be frequently formulaic. Thus Bolinger (1976) views language as "an organism" rather than an "erector set" (p.1). He argues that many phrases might be a result of repetition rather than invention, and that, in the words of Tannen, language "may



have more to do with memory than with novel production" (1987:217).

Bolinger (1976:3) writes:

"what we are now in a position to recognise is that idiomaticity is a vastly more pervasive phenomenon than we ever imagined, and vastly harder to separate from the pure freedom of syntax, if indeed any such fiery zone as pure syntax exists."

Thus, linguists distinguish between novel and idiomatic or formulaic language. For instance Van Lanker (1973) draws a distinction between "propositional" and "automatic" language:

"Propositional language behaviour includes all newly created, original, novel sentences; automatic language encompasses conventional greetings, overused and overlearned expressions (such as Be careful and First things first), pause fillers such as you know and well, certain idioms, swearing and other emotional language, perhaps stereotyped questions and answers, commands and so on." (P.197)

Linguists have come to realise that although many expressions might be grammatically correct, only some of them are commonly used. Pawly and Syder (1983) refer to such commonly used phrases as "nativelike". They note that only some sentences are recognisable as being ordinary, natural forms. The use of such sentences is referred to as "nativelike selection". Pawley and Syder argue that speakers achieve nativelike fluency through the use of "lexicalized sentence stems":

"fluent and idiomatic control of a language rests to a considerable extent on knowledge of a body of 'sentence stems' which are 'institutionalized' or 'lexicalized'. A lexicalized sentence stem is a unit of clause length or longer whose grammatical form and lexicalized content is wholly or largely fixed; its fixed elements form a standard label for a culturally recognized concept, a term in the language" (P.191)

Thus, for Pawley and Syder, a large number of sentences in conversation are not novel, rather they are memorised as single units.

For Van Lanker (1973) and for Pawley and Syder (1983), sentences fall along a continuum ranging from novel or propositional language, to idiomatic or automatic language. Pawley and Syder suggest

that sentences which fall towards the idiomatic end of the continuum will be more fluent. For them, nativelike selection leads to nativelike fluency:

"we find that multi-clause fluent units -apparent exceptions to the one clause at a time constraint- generally consist partly or wholly of familiar collocation." (P.208)

Having drawn a distinction between idiomatic and novel speech, these authors often then formulate conclusions about the fluency of each type of language. Kendon (1973) also draws a distinction between novel and prelearned phrases, and concludes that the former are associated with fluent speech:

"Thus periods of fluent speech correspond to the running off of well organised phrases, or of phrases that are prelearned (as for example in conventionalized phrases or repeated phrases that form part of the individual's habit of speech) whereas influent speech corresponds to the interpretation of the processes of speech production by organizing processes." (P.82-3)

However, Fillmore (1979) argues that prelearned phrases, or "formulas", can be associated with either fluency or nonfluency. He claims that people who rely too much on formulas are regarded as nonfluent; but those who have a "large repertory of ready-made responses to a wide range of situations" are regarded as fluent (p.94). So that the distinction, often in the form of a continuum, between novel and idiomatic language is used as a basis for arguing that idiomatic speech is more fluent than novel speech.

### 1.3 The Derision of Idioms

A consequence of the division drawn between formulaic and original language is that some analysts of language have criticised the former kind of speech as being a corrupt form of language. Unlike

any other common building block of language, idioms are frequently derided. For instance Nierenburg and Carlero (1973:15) write:

"Stale worn out phrases and expressions known as cliches are frequently used by people too lazy or unimaginative to perceive a situation and describe it freshly...these pre-packed sentiments never quite fit the situation, they lack the type of mental challenge which furthers communication. A cliché usually elicits a reaction of silence or the mouthing of another cliché."<sup>16</sup>

One of the strongest critics of idiomatic or cliched language is Zijderfeld (1979). He argues that through their overuse cliches have lost their meaning.

"A cliché is a traditional form of human expression...which -due to repetitive use in social life- has lost its original, often ingenious heuristic power. Although it thus fails positively to contribute meaning to social interactions and communication, it does function socially, since it manages to stimulate behaviour (cognition, emotion, volition, action) while it avoids reflection of meanings." (P.10)

Zijderfeld views cliches as stimulating behaviour whilst discouraging any consideration of their meaning.

"It is my contention that cliches thus manage unobtrusively to penetrate into man's consciousness and to influence behaviour on the attitudinal level, while potential relativizations are excluded because cognitive reflections are being avoided."(P.13)

Further on in his analysis Zijderfeld refers to the "tyranny of cliches" (p.105).

The derision of idioms by analysts has its base in a general discomfort with cliched language. That members of society often voice

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<sup>16</sup> Idioms or "cliches" are sometimes followed by the mouthing of a second idiom, but, as this analysis demonstrates, this has to do with the fact that the speaker who produces a second expression is collabortating with the delicate interactional work carried out in the first idiom (see chapter three).

their objection to idiomatic language has been noted by some analysts of formulaic language.<sup>17</sup> Tannen (1987:221) observes:

"Americans...are inclined to regard relatively fixed expressions with suspicion and are likely to speak with scorn of cliches, assuming that sincerity is associated with novelty of expression and fixity with lack of it."

Drazdauskiene (1987) argues that idioms or stereotypes must be used subconsciously because many speakers find them offensive and would otherwise avoid them:

"If stereotypes really do recur in speech, they must be a result of some subconscious process because, otherwise, speakers who, in theory, find it offensive to their sense of pride would try to and, probably succeed in avoiding them." (P.55)

In contrast to these authors Pawley and Syder (1983) argue that the construction of novel clauses or sentences is only one element of the creative use of language. They suggest that through freeing speakers from having to compose their sequences word-by-word, they enable them to concentrate on the timing, tone and rhythm of utterances, to produce novel variations of ready-made constructions, and to create new sequences by using formulaic phrases as "building blocks" (p.208).

Thus, some authors have argued that idiomatic language is somehow inferior to novel constructions. But despite the derision of idioms by both analysts and speakers, idioms are widely used. One of the reasons that they may be hard to avoid is because they are interactionally valuable: that is, they fulfill a number of interactional tasks. Identifying and exploring some of these tasks

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<sup>17</sup> But an analysis of Greek and Turkish formulas by Tannen and Oztek (1981) does, perhaps, suggest that idioms are not derided in all societies. In Greek and Turkish certain formulas are treated as the only appropriate action in a wide range of circumstances (e.g. a parting, or a death).

is the burden of this analysis. But I would like to begin by exploring one of the features of idioms: that is, their emphatic nature. My reason for singling out this aspect to discuss here is mainly because it seems to be one of the most essential and distinguishing features of idiomatic expressions, but I hope this will also give some insight into the angle of my interest in idioms and the kind of analysis I shall perform.

#### 1.4 The Emphatic Nature of Idioms

By describing idioms as emphatic I mean that many can be seen to be extreme forms: to be unable to "say boo to a goose" is to be more than just shy, to be "as good as gold" is to be more than just good, and to be "between the devil and the deep blue sea" is to be more than simply in a difficult position. In many instances the use of idioms in conversation seems to be associated with this emphatic quality. For example, in the following extracts all the idioms have, and may be chosen specifically for, their emphatic nature.

(12)[PB:9-15-71(ms)25-26]

(Brenda is talking to her psychiatrist, Laurel. She is complaining that Laurel has never told her to ring if she needs help between their regular sessions. At this point Laurel is explaining why she has never rung without being told she could)

Brenda: I wouldn't care how bad it was because .hhh If I: felt I would have to call you up .hhh and you couldn't talk to me, .hh because you were too busy with something e:lse. .hh then that would u:m (0.2) .t.hh (1.5) that could really throw me (h)off the deep end.

(13)[AH2Jewitt]

(The patient, P, is complaining to the doctor about his headaches)

P: that I could understood (.) because it (.) it's the headaches: was the thing thats: got me  
(0.4)

P: (more than anything else)  
(1.2)

--> P:           more than the devil in hell because they were gettin  
                  more or less (.) permanent yer know::

In (12) the idiom suggests that Brenda would not just be upset if her psychiatrist was unable to speak to her, but it would "throw her off the deep end". In (13) the patient is not merely in pain, but the headaches are hurting "more than the devil in hell". Thus, the idioms have an emphatic quality and are used to describe something in an extreme way.<sup>18</sup>

Because of the emphatic quality of many idioms they have been seen as a way of communicating intensity. Labov (1984) defines intensity as "the emotional expression of social orientation toward the linguistic proposition" (p.44). In his analysis he considers intensity markers such as "really", "sure" and "just". Although he does not mention idioms, he does consider metaphors and similes:

"We encounter in spontaneous speech a wide variety of metaphors that serve as intensifiers: bleeding like a pig, darker than pitch or pitch dark." (P.45)

In chapter two I demonstrate that a large number of idioms consist of these kinds of metaphors; and throughout this analysis I show that many idioms, whether or not they are metaphors, function in a way which is similar to intensity markers.<sup>19</sup>

In considering "affect keys", which include intensity markers (they are "linguistic features that intensify or specify affect"), Ochs and Schiefflin (1989) do include formulaic expressions. They found that affect keys are characteristic of narrative openings and closings, formulaic expressions being particularly associated with "initiators".

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<sup>18</sup> For more of these extracts and a further discussion of the emphatic nature of these and other idioms, see chapter two.

<sup>19</sup> For a further discussion of this issue see chapter two, especially section two.

This is especially pertinent to chapter three in which I also investigate the relationship between idioms and the opening and closing of topics.

Affect keys are a way in which speakers express emotion. Thus, because idioms are seen as similar to affect keys, they too have often been associated with the expression of emotion. In sociolinguistics particular contexts are seen as being particularly emotional, and, therefore, as contexts in which idioms are especially common. Tannen and Oztek (1982), in their analysis of Greek and Turkish formulas, found that the situations which seemed to require formulas were "emotionally loaded" (such as funerals, partings etc). They distinguish three types of events which are associated with the use of formulas: "anxiety-provoking events" (such as an illness, a death, or a departure), "happy events" (such as an arrival), and "rappport establishment" (p.520).

In their analysis Tannen and Oztek examine the kinds of events in which idioms occur: that is, they examine funerals, partings, arrivals etc, and find that idioms are common in such situations. Further they link these situations together by referring to them as "emotionally loaded". The approach of Tannen and Oztek, and other sociolinguists, differs from that of conversation analysts. Whilst sociolinguists adopt a definition of the situation or event (for instance, as a funeral and therefore "emotionally loaded") and interpret the talk in terms of that definition, conversation analysts do not use a definition of the situation in their analysis of interaction: a sequence of talk will not be seen as having various characteristics because it is occurring in a doctor's surgery for example, instead it will be seen as having various characteristics because it is a troubles-telling, complaint etc. In

other words, conversation analysts concentrate on speech activities (such as complaining, praising, criticising, etc) rather than the event in which they are employed.

There is an expectation that the speech activities and the events in which they occur will be of the same nature; for example, that in partings the speech activities will be of an emotional nature, but this is not always the case. The telling of good news can occur in situations which are seen as distressing; talk about troubles can occur during weddings; informal talk can occur in formal settings; etc. Thus there is a danger in incorporating a definition of the setting in the analysis of the talk: if talk during a funeral is seen by the analyst as having various characteristics because it occurs in an "emotional setting", then problems will arise if the talk also includes the telling of good news etc.<sup>20</sup> Consequently conversation analysts concentrate on the speech activities within an interaction; seeking to discover how a situation is created as formal, as a doctor/patient consultation, as a news interview, and so on.

An example of the emphasis placed by conversation analysts on speech activities rather than settings, can be seen in the analysis by Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff (1987) of "improper" talk, that is talk which is coarse, rude etc. They see the introduction of "improper" talk as an indication that the interaction is informal and intimate. Further, they suggest that the association between "improper" talk and informal, intimate interaction can be used by participants. Speakers can introduce this kind of talk in order to display that they take the interaction to be an intimate one:

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<sup>20</sup> For further discussion on the problems involved in adopting this approach to the analysis of data, see chapter five.



"The introduction of 'improper' talk may have an interactional basis. It is a convention about interaction that frankness, rudeness, coarseness, profanity, obscenity, etcetera, are indices of relaxed, unguarded, spontaneous; i.e., intimate interaction. That convention may be utilized by participants. That is, the introduction of such talk can constitute a display by a speaker that he takes it that the current interaction is one in which he may produce such talk; i.e. that the interaction is informal, intimate." (P.1)

Thus, whereas linguists tends to use the setting as an index of the kind of talk taking place, conversation analysts use the talk as an index of the kind of interaction or setting. (For more on this see chapter five).

In sum, we began by recognising that whilst much of ordinary conversation is formulaic, some utterances are particularly idiomatic. I then gave a loose characterisation of idioms, touching mainly on two features, namely their figurative and emphatic qualities. An examination of linguistic and sociolinguistic literature on idioms revealed it to be mainly concerned with their comprehension. But in this analysis, through employing the methodology of conversation analysis, I attempt to investigate the ways in which idioms are employed in ordinary conversation. In the next section I consider how a conversation analysis perspective leads to a rather different approach to the analysis of idioms than psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic approaches, and I examine the analytic aims of a conversation analytic investigation.

## 2 CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

In analysing idioms linguists, psycholinguists, and psychologists all fail to investigate the way they are used in naturally occurring conversation. Sacks (1965) notes that authors on idioms (particularly

in the folklore literature on proverbs) do not examine the way they are used, but comments that this is precisely where his interest lies.

"Nobody seems to deal with actual occasions of their use. And that's because it is the folklorists, with their particular interests in proverbs, who have been collecting them. I want to consider proverbs in terms of occasions of actual use." (P.4)

Similarly Levinson (1983), in trying to establish a pragmatic approach to metaphor, also notes the lack of more concrete analyses of their use:

"More concrete suggestions for a pragmatic theory of metaphor simply do not, at the time of writing, exist." (P.158)

Levinson goes on to argue that conversation analysis could be used to overcome many of the problems inherent in a pragmatic approach. By employing the methodology of conversation analysis one could begin to look at occasions of the use of metaphors or idioms, and from this derive an analysis of their interactional functions.

Above we found that Zijderfeld (1979) argues that cliches fail to add any meaning to interaction:

"A cliché is a traditional form of human expression...which -due to repetitive use in social life-has lost its original, often ingenious heuristic power. Although it thus fails positively to contribute meaning to social interactions and communication, it does function socially, since it manages to stimulate behaviour (cognition, emotion, volition, action) while it avoids reflection of meanings." (P.10)

Zijderfeld makes this claim without conducting any detailed analysis of the ways in which they are used in interaction. Such an investigation may reveal that cliches or idioms are in fact highly meaningful or useful in conversation. This is exactly the kind of analysis I intend to perform. I will, therefore, be able to test the validity of Zijderfeld's claim.

In this analysis, like Sacks (1965), I want to consider idioms "in terms of occasions of actual use". Therefore, I will employ a

methodology which focuses on ordinary conversation, and which seeks to discover the sequential environment of objects, and to develop an analysis of their particular interactional functions. Conversation analysis is a suitable methodology due to its concentration on the design and the sequential position of turns. In the following subsections I will consider how these tenets of conversation analysis relate to my investigation of idioms. (For more general introductions to conversation analysis see Heritage 1984a:chapter 8, Atkinson and Heritage 1984:chapter 1, Atkinson and Drew 1979:chapter 2, Levinson 1983:chapter 6, and Wootton 1989.)

(i) Context, Coherence, and Turn Design

One of the most fundamental insights of conversation analysis is the observation that at every turn at talk, participants are aware of, and take into account, the context. Turns at talk are responses to previous turns and as such they are made to "fit". Thus every turn is the result of the speaker's assumptions about the nature of the context. These assumptions are displayed in the design of the turn and in the choice of action.

In designing a turn speakers select between appropriate words and actions. What makes certain words and actions appropriate is whatever preceded the turn. So, regarding the choice of an action, if the preceding turn is a greeting, another greeting is appropriate; if the preceding turn is a question then an answer is appropriate; or if the preceding turn is an invitation then an acceptance or a rejection is appropriate. By responding to a question with an answer the speaker produces a response which is appropriate and is, therefore, fitted to the previous turn. This is not to say, however, that a speaker could not respond to a question with another question, for example, but the

lack of an answer is noticeable and accountable (see Atkinson and Drew 1979:50-57). Insertion sequences are an example of a question being responded to with another question, for example:

A: Are you coming?  
B: Is it tonight?  
A: Yeah.  
B: Okay.

Here B responds to A's question with another question, and only replies to the initial question after A has responded. (On insertion sequences see Schegloff 1989).

Question and answers, invitations and acceptances or rejections, requests and grantings or refusals are all examples of adjacency pairs. Nowhere is the fit between turns more obvious than in such paired action sequences. Thus, in each of the following instances, the arrowed turns are designedly fitted to the previous turns. Further, we can see that an examination of the prior turn is essential to an understanding of the current turn.

(14)[Holt:X(C):2:1:6:1]

Leslie: Ah that's better I think, Can [you hear]me:?  
Skip: ( )  
--> Skip: ( )- Yes I c'n hear you very clearly c'n you hear me,

(15)[Holt:SO:88:1:11:1]

Mum: How is things=  
( ): =hh  
--> Leslie: hQh:: alright thankyou

(16)[Holt:1988:2:1]

Leslie: So we wondered if you'd like to meet us.hh  
--> Arnold: Yes certainly.

In each of these examples there is an adjacency pair. In (14) and (15) there is a question-answer pair, while in (16) there is an invitation-acceptance pair. Sacks (1972b:1) argues that:

"The adjacency relationship between utterances is the most powerful device for relating utterances...adjacency pairs

constitute the institutionalized; i.e., formal, means for exploiting the relating power of adjacency."

That is, that any two adjacent utterances can be related to each other. Adjacency pairs are a powerful way of using that relationship in order to relate two utterances. Adjacent positioning is a basic structure of conversation, and adjacency pairs are where this relationship is most overt. Hence, conversation analysis has directed a great deal of attention at adjacency pairs (see, for example, Heritage 1984a:chapter 6, Atkinson and Drew 1979:49-50, and Schegloff and Sacks 1973).

The second part of an adjacency pair represents one way in which participants select particular actions in order to make their turns fit a previous turn. In producing a turn at talk speakers can select from a range of actions: if the preceding turn was an invitation they can produce an acceptance, a rejection, they can ask for a repetition or a clarification, and so on. Alternatively they could breach the expectation that their turn will fit by introducing an entirely new matter, responding with a greeting, etc. So, in order to fit their turn to a previous turn, such as a question, speakers select from a range of actions, such as an affirmation or a negation. And not only after the first part of an adjacency pair do speakers face choices between appropriate actions, they do so at every turn. In the following example the speaker's choice of action is particularly exposed.

(17)[NB:IV:7:4]

(Emma is talking to her daughter, Barbara, about the row she has had with her husband, Barbara's father)

Emma: .hhh En I: talk'to 'im la:s'night I been kahnda sick  
about it en:d .hhhhhhhhh uh::: hIt's a pro:blem  
I-ah'll ah'll tell you when I see: you ah mean it'll  
work out I knø:w,hh I don't know whether we're gunnuh  
s::eperate I: don't know what the who:le thing's  
about h h

--> Barbara: Oh: really?

Emma: .hhhhhh

Barbara: Is this been goin on lo:ng er wha:t.

By replying to Emma's complaint about her marital problems with "Oh: really?" Barbara treats it as news (see Heritage 1984b on news receipt tokens). In responding to this as news Barbara has choosen between a number of appropriate actions. Most noticeably she does not respond with a sympathetic affiliation such as "oh how awful for you". Thus Barbara chooses between the actions of aligning as a troubles recipient, and treating Emma's utterance as news.<sup>21</sup>

Having selected an action, speakers face a further choice of how to design their turns to carry out that action: having decided to reject an invitation speakers face choices between an infinite number of ways of designing that rejection. The following extract (taken from Drew and Heritage forthcoming) clearly illustrates the way in which speakers design turns by choosing from among alternatives. In this excerpt two speakers respond to an utterance, selecting the same action but designing their turns differently. The extract is taken from a conversation between a health visitor (HV), a mother (M) and a father (F). They are discussing the progress of the couple's two week old baby.

(18)[HV:4A1:2]

HV: It's amazing, there's no stopping him now, you'll be  
amazed at all the di fferent things he'll start doing.  
F: (hnh hn)  
(1.0)  
--> M: Yeh. They [learn so quick don't they.  
--> F: [We have noticed hav'n't w-  
HV: That's right.  
--> F: We have noticed (0.8) making a grab for your bottles.  
(1.0)  
F: Hm ::.

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<sup>21</sup> For more on this issue and this extract see chapter two, section 4.

HV: Does he: (.) How often does he go between his feeds?  
In response to HV's comment "you'll be amazed at all the different things he'll start doing", M and F both produce agreements. However, although the agreements are produced in overlap, they are each designed differently. The mother agrees by referring to children's development in general; "They learn so quick don't they.", while the father agrees by describing an example of the baby's behaviour, "We have noticed (0.8) making a grab for your bottles." (Drew and Heritage forthcoming.) So, in this instance both M and F respond to an utterance by selecting the same action (that of agreeing) but design their agreements rather differently.

Other instances which illustrate the choices speakers face in selecting between alternative words and formats (rather than actions) can be found in examples of self-repair.<sup>22</sup> In such instances it is possible to see that speakers treat one version as somehow "better" or more appropriate than another version. The following is a case in point.

(19)[Upholstery Shop:20]

Vic: Dey did their buisness fuh three days en ney come back  
--> en, took care a' her dey gih- .hh showered her with,  
whatever kinda gifts they wanted.

Here, it seems that Vic begins to say something like "dey give her whatever kinda gifts they wanted", however he self-corrects in favour of "showered her with whatever kinda gifts they wanted". We can identify various reasons why "showered" might be chosen in preference to "give". For instance, the former is a much stronger version; "showered her with gifts" suggests a much larger number than "give her gifts". This strong version is appropriate because Vic is complaining

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<sup>22</sup> On self-correction see Jefferson (1981a).

that his wife expects too much because she has been spoilt by her lovers. Thus the number of gifts she received is important to the detailing of the story. Therefore, Vic treats "showered" as a better or more appropriate version.

The use of idioms in conversation represents the choice of a particular action and format from among alternatives; and it is possible to examine instances of idioms in order to discover why an idiomatic version is chosen over a literal alternative. To illustrate, the choice between a literal and an idiomatic version is particularly exposed when speakers self-correct a literal version in favour of an idiomatic one. In (19) Vic selects the figurative "showered" over the literal "give". In the corpus of idioms there are a number of cases where a figurative version is selected over a literal one. In the following examples the speaker similarly begins to produce a literal version and then self-corrects in favour of an idiomatic version.

(20)[Rahman:I:6]

Jenny: .hh Ye:s:. .h An' it ezzuh yihknow suht'v 'n: e- it  
en:ded with a great big bahng eh<sup>h</sup> he h hn I jumped  
Vera: Oh-huh::  
--> Jenny: outta the e seat I [jump'd  
Vera: L( )  
(.)  
--> Jenny: e shot about thrrree feet in the air ah think

(21)[Holt:Dec-Jan:86-87:A:370]

Leslie: .hhh Well I said it was about three twenty one I think  
--> because by the time we- (.) we- the penny had dropped  
un' we got up again that was three twenty fi::ve,

In (20) Jenny is describing the end of a film. She begins to say "jump'd" but changes it to the idiomatic "shot about thrrree feet".<sup>23</sup> In

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<sup>23</sup> For more on this extract see chapter two.



(21) Leslie begins to say something like "by the time we realised" but self-corrects to produce the idiom "the penny had dropped".<sup>24</sup>

Contrastingly, in very few instances is an idiomatic version corrected in favour of a literal version. The following is a case in point.

(22)[T:2:II:6]

P:           En they: en u-en en:: (.) end uh:m (0.2) e:nd uh in  
fact Maree sez well I wz hysterical here this gal thet  
comes outta the employee entr'n she wunz what's kuh-  
-->           what's cookin what's happening en the: geh man s'd get  
away get away get awa::y.

Here P begins to say "what's cookin" but self-corrects to produce the literal version "what's happening".

In examples such as these speakers orient to selection by correcting one version in order to produce an alternative version; they demonstrably treat one version as being "better" or more appropriate than another. Thus analysts can examine any utterance to discover why it has been chosen over other alternatives. We can ask of any turn at talk, why is this more appropriate than some other version; what interactional work does it do which an alternative could not do?

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<sup>24</sup> A further example of this is included in the following extract, which is taken from a radio interview on the Gulf war. Up until the outbreak of hostilities the phrase "go the extra mile for peace" became commonly used. In the extract the phrase is used for one of the first (possibly the first) time in the media. The speaker is the American charge d'affaires in Baghdad who was about to meet with the Iraqi foreign minister. He uses the phrase in explaining the purpose of the meeting.

[F.N. 3/1/91]

A:     ...We are prepared to exhaust aw- to go the extra mile  
for peace...

Thus A begins to produce a literal version (something like "we are prepared to exhaust all possibilities") but self-corrects in order to employ an idiom.

Further evidence that speakers orient to selection is derived from instances where speakers produce an idiom, but one that is not quite appropriate for the context. Thus, in the following extract, a speaker responds to an idiom with another idiom which is treated as inappropriate by the recipient. The speakers are discussing the assassination of the President and the Attorney-General.

(23)[NB:II:1:12]

Emma: Well it's a sa:d thing whenyih think two:  
 (0.5)  
 Emma: lorvely  
 Lottie: G o : d.  
 (.)  
 Lottie: Theh jis  
 Emma: me:n : wih ther brainsu knocked out I mean it's  
 --> just a horrible God ih jist like a nightma:re,  
 Lottie: Thd e-  
 --> Seems like a fairy storeh I couldn't believe it.  
 Emma: I-  
 --> Emma: I thaw ih wz js like Orson Welles.  
 (0.5)  
 Lottie: Ye:a:h  
 Emma: .hh W'l honey ah'll say g'bye tih Bud he's leav'n  
'n m:maybe later o:n you c-

Emma compares the assassinations to a "nightma:re". Lottie responds with a second simile "like a fairy storeh". However, this is not quite appropriate because fairy stories generally have pleasant connotations. Thus Emma produces a third idiomatic simile "like Orson Welles". She is referring to the Orson Welles production of "War of the worlds" which, like a fairy story, has the quality of being incredible, but also has horrific connotations. It is noticeable that these idioms come just before a topic change (in the final utterance Emma initiates a closing sequence). In chapter three I demonstrate that topics are often closed with each speaker producing an idiom. However, in almost all the other cases there are no more than two idioms: so in producing a third idiom, Emma treats Lottie's simile "like a fairy storeh" as inappropriate. The

final idiom is a repair<sup>25</sup> of the second, and this is why the sequence is unusually long.

A final source of evidence for speakers orientation to selection comes from the following extracts.

(24)[FN:EH:90]

--> Steve: I slept really well last night, I was out like a log.

(25)[Upholstery shop:20]

--> Vic: En when I tell 'er about I, you c'd lead, same, old fashioned shit, you c'd lead a-a old horse tuh watuh  
--> but chu can' make im drink, I'm thiridy fi:ve. My wife's twunny:: six. Twunny seven. Yihknow, .hh 'm not saying I'm older than huh, maybe she learned mo:re, than what I know. (0.7) But where is sh:in, ih-ih-i:: where is anybody intuh telling, (0.9) I, I. (0.6) -what tuh do.

In each of these extracts there is a mixed idiom or a "fused formula" (Tannen 1987:222). In (24) the speaker mixes "I slept like a log" and "I went out like a light". In (25) the speaker mixes "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink" and "you can't teach an old dog new tricks". So in each instance the speaker fuses two idioms, both of which are appropriate. Tannen (1987) gives further examples of this, and points out that the speakers have not made a mistake. Rather, both idioms are relevant and both add something to the utterance. Thus in (24) the fused idiom suggests that the speaker "went out like a light" and "slept like a log". Extract (25) is similar, but a little more complicated. Vic is complaining that his wife makes too many demands on him. The fused idiom suggests that although she can bully him, she cannot make him change his ways; "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink", and furthermore he is too old to change his ways; "you can't teach an old dog new tricks".

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<sup>25</sup> On other repair see Jefferson (1981a).

By using these mixed idioms, speakers are orienting to the sequential position as one at which an idiom is appropriate: but more than one idiom is appropriate, and the result is that the speakers fuse two idioms.

So, in extracts (23) to (25) we see speakers orientating to a sequential position as one in which an idiomatic utterance is an appropriate action; but either producing an inappropriate idiom or fusing two appropriate idioms. Further evidence that speakers orient to certain sequential environments as appropriate for the production of an idiomatic expression derives from instances, such as the following, where each speaker produces an idiom simultaneously.

(26)[NB:II:2:23]

(Nancy has been complaining about her estranged husband, particularly with regard to financial matters which have resulted in her having to forward a cheque to him.)

Nancy: But uh,h .hhhh So I js stuck it e-in en on:velope.h  
 (0.2) en sent it on t'R\*oul .p.hhhh So:: if he's eh (.)  
 getting these things he's got some idea of what's  
 hh-happ'ning. Yih kno<sub>w</sub>,

Emma: <sub>Mm</sub>

(0.3)

--> Emma: .hhhhh WE:LL kid<sub>'</sub>at's tough.

--> Nancy: He better kno :ck it o:ff. Ye:ah.

In response to Nancy's complaint Emma produces the idiom "WE:LL kid 'at's tough". In overlap with this Emma produces the idiomatic "He better kno:ck it o:ff".

Thus, the simultaneous production of idioms by both speakers is further evidence that participants orient to certain sequential environments as being appropriate for the production of an idiom. Indeed, in cases such as the preceding one, we see both speakers orienting to a position as appropriate for the use of an idiomatic phrase. In this analysis I shall investigate what it is about idioms

that makes them an appropriate word and action selection for certain sequential positions.

(ii) The Sequentiality of Conversation

We have seen that each turn at talk represents a choice between alternative actions and alternative words. Thus we can examine the design of turns to see why that particular choice of words and that particular choice of action are appropriate. In this analysis I investigate instances of idioms to see how they are designed, what choices of words and actions they embody, and why these choices are particularly apt.

Now, the selection of particular words and actions will have consequences for the utterance that follows it. That is, if each turn is fitted, or appropriate, to a previous turn, the design of each turn will affect the design of a next turn. In the following example the effect of one turn on another is particularly exposed. Edna is commenting on some of Margy's friends who she recently met at a party. Edna remarks on Reinaman's eight children and how hard it must be for her to look after them all. Margy then explains that only four still live at home.

(27)[PT:2-3]

Edna: En that Reinam'n:: (. ) She SCA:RES me.=  
Edna: =with eight kids en u-Oh-my God what she doe:s.=  
Margy: └(eY:::eh.)  
--> Margy: = Mm hm:.  
--> Edna: Fantastic?  
Margy: Course I think she:'s u-over that, (0.3) pla:ce:  
yihknow wer s-e-she ha(d)- becuz see four a'thum er  
(.)  
Margy: (Y'know-what I )  
Edna: └Ye:::::ah,=  
Edna: =Ther go└i:::::ne,  
Margy: └Shony ha]:s two et home no:w. .hh-.hh-.hh

Following Edna's almost awestruck evaluation of Reinaman and the work she must do to bring up her eight children, Margy gives a minimal agreement token. A more appropriate response (and the kind Edna was probably expecting) would be something like "Yeah she's incredible isn't she". Margy's use of the minimal agreement " Mm hm:" seems to be connected to Edna's mistaken assumption that Reinaman has eight children living at home. Margy does not here correct Edna, but nor does she affiliate with Edna's assessment. We can see that Margy's use of the minimal agreement token has direct consequences for Edna's next turn. She again produces an upgraded assessment of Reinaman, "Fantastic?" which she might have been expecting from Margy. This gives Margy another chance to affiliate, which again has direct consequences for the following turn. Margy is once more placed in the position of having to agree with Edna's assessment of Reinaman (based on a misunderstanding), or correct Margy. She takes the latter course, explaining that Reinaman only has four children at home now (and it seems only six in total).

In this extract the consequences which one turn has for a next are particularly clear: because Margy gives a minimal agreement token to Edna's upgraded assessment, Edna recycles the sequence by producing a second assessment, thus giving Margy another chance to affiliate. This again places Margy in the position of having to affiliate or correct Edna, and that she chooses to correct her. So, this extract clearly demonstrates the way in which a previous turn affects what is done in a current turn.

Conversation analysts refer to every turn at talk as context shaped and context renewing (See Heritage 1984a:chapter 6). That is, each turn can be analysed in terms of the way it is shaped by the utterances

which precede it, and in terms of the way in which it shapes the utterances that follow. Conversation analysts are, therefore, interested in the sequential position of turns. Because each turn is seen as context shaped and context renewing, every turn at talk must be analysed in terms of, and with reference to, the turns that surround it: unlike linguists, conversation analysts do not analyse turns independently of the sequential context in which they occur.

### (iii) Sequential Positions

There are three kinds of sequential positions or environments in which conversational objects have been found to occur. First, a particular kind of utterance may recur after or before another particular kind of utterance, for instance introductions regularly follow greetings, and arrangements (e.g. to get together, or when next to speak to one another) often precede closings. Second, an object may recur at a particular position within a topic or a conversation, for instance greetings occur at the beginning of a conversation, and summaries often occur at the end of a topic. Third, objects may recur in particular kinds of topics, in other words an object may recur within troubles-tellings, complaints, praisings, or the telling of good news. An example of an object which occurs in each of these three sequential position follows.

To illustrate conversation analysis' sequential approach to utterances I will give two examples of objects which have been found to have recurrent sequential positions. The first example is an analysis which discovered an object to have a recurrent sequential position of the first kind: that is, to recur after another particular conversational object. Drew (1987) found that teases are generally produced after a limited range of other activities, such as "extolling,

complaining, bragging etc". Furthermore, Drew points out that these activities have the property of being "overdone" or "too enthusiastic, over eager, bitterly/outraged complaining etc". The following extract is a case in point. The speakers are dicussing a function which they are attending that night. Larry says that is missing an opportunity to do overtime in order to go. Alice reminds him that that the event has already been "set up" and they have to go (Drew 1987).

(28)[TC(b):13:3-4]

Alice: Bu:t .hhh since this w'ns already set up there's not=  
 Larry: Yeah.  
 Alice: =m'ch w'c'n do bout it.  
 Larry: Oh:::~::~. hih-hih-ree ri(h):::~:ght ri:::~:ght.  
 Alice: [Right? .hh hh [Uh:::~:~: [Hey try'n git  
 home etta decent hour cz [Ye]ah be home by ni:ne.  
 Larry: (.)  
 Alice: No: (. ) get home pretty early okay? .hh  
 Alice: Please,  
 --> Larry: [Well I c'n leave right now if yih want,

Drew points out that Alice responds seriously to his (Larry's) teasing agreement "be home by ni:ne" (two hours after the function has begun). She then restates her request and he responds with a second tease "Well I c'n leave right now". Drew observes:

"There is a sense in which Alice's po-faced response after Larry's first tease, "No: (. ) get home pretty early okay?", contributes to the sense of her carrying on about it unnecessarily, and so generates the environment for his second tease."

Thus, Alice can be seen to overdo her request that he be home early.

This, then, is an example of a conversational object; a tease which has been found to have a regular sequential position. That is, it regularly occurs after a range of particular other activities which have the character of being overdone.

A second example, to be more fully explored in chapter four, spans our two final categories of types of sequentiality, outlined above. In



other words, the following object can be seen to be associated with particular types of topics, and to recur at a particular position within those topics. The conversational object is the pun. Sacks (1972a) noticed that puns often occur in proverbials. He then points out that proverbials themselves are often produced at the completion of a story. Thus, in the following extract, Ken is telling a story about his sister's bedroom. At its completion Louise produces a proverbial which contains a pun.

(29)[Extract 1 from Sacks (1972a)]

Ken: W'l-the-her whole room she's got it wall-papered. She just- she just got done rewallpapering it about a month ago-

Louise: -with the pictures of the Beatles.

Ken: No. A month ago Mom had it done in grasscloth like junk yknow it looks like // Hawaiian.

Louise: Yeah I know we have it.

Ken: She came in there the other night with scotch tape an' every inch of the room. You couldnt- the roof I think she's got done in Beatle pictures and she lays in bed at night---

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Roger: She's doing that cause all her friends are ( // ) the Beatles.

--> Louise: Well they need some kinda idol you know, something //

--> to look up too.

Here, the proverbial contains a pun resulting from a congruence between a concrete detail of the story (Ken's sister lying on her bed looking up) and the literal meaning of the proverbial "they need...something to look up to".<sup>26</sup>

Sacks argues that proverbials regularly occur on story completion and puns regularly occur within proverbials. Hence, proverbials are recurrently associated with a particular kind of conversational

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<sup>26</sup> For a further discussion of this extract see chapter four.

activity or topic, that is, story tellings and they regularly occur at a particular position within that topic, that is, at its completion.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, in approaching idioms, besides investigating their design, I shall also be concerned with identifying their sequential positions or "distributionalising" them (Sacks 1972a). I shall examine them to see where they occur within topics or conversations, whether they are associated with any other conversational objects, and whether they recur in particular kinds of topics. In chapters two and three I describe the results this analysis.

#### (iv) Interactional Tasks

Now, a very important result of looking at the design of turns and of their sequential position, is that one can begin to see what interactional tasks they are designed to fulfil. For example in (18) above we can see that by receipting Emma's complaint as news, Barbara avoids aligning herself as a sympathetic troubles recipient. Thus an identification of the sequential positions of turns can facilitate an analysis of their interactional work or function. For instance, in exemplifying conversation analysts sequential approach to data I gave a brief summary of Drew's (1985) analysis. We saw that he found teases occur in a particular sequential position, that is, after the recipient has overdone or "gone on about" something. Having identified the sequential position of teases, Drew considers the interactional work that they are designed to fulfil. By taking into account the sequential position of teases -that is, following an overdone activity- he is able to conclude that part of the interactional work that they are designed to do is to act as a mild form of sanction for the "transgression".

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<sup>27</sup> For more on this issue see chapter four.



uninformed of this matter, they are now informed (p.304). Heritage summarises:

"it is proposed that "oh" specifically functions as an information receipt that is regularly used as a means of proposing that the talk to which it responds is, or has been, informative to the recipient." (P.307)

In sum, Drew's (1985) work on teasing, and Heritage's (1984b) work on the receipt token "oh" demonstrate that analysing the sequential position of an object in conversation is directed towards the identification of the interactional work which it is designed to perform.

Above I argued that each turn at talk must be analysed with reference to the turn that precedes it and the turn that follows it. We have seen that idiomatic utterances will be fitted to the previous turn. Thus, we have seen how an analysis of the previous turn is essential to an understanding of idiomatic utterances. But so far we have paid little attention to the turns which follow idiomatic utterances. Therefore, I will now consider how an analysis of the turn subsequent to an idiomatic utterance can be used in the investigation of idioms.

#### (v) The Analysis of Next Turns

In conversation analysis, analysts do not rely on their own assumptions about the interactional task that a turn is designed to do. Instead they examine the next turn in order to discover the recipient's interpretation of the interactional work of the preceding utterance. As Heritage (1984a) observes:

"The point here, and it is a crucial one, is that however the recipient analyses the first utterance and whatever the conclusion of such an analysis, some analysis, understanding or appreciation of the prior turn will be displayed in the recipient's next turn at talk." (P.255)

For instance, if it is thought that the interactional work which a particular turn is designed to do is to bring a topic to a close, then

analysts will examine the next turn to see if the recipient interpreted the turn in the same way. If, in the next turn, the recipient introduces a new topic, then the analyst can conclude that the interactional work of the turn was to bring about a topic completion. This approach to the data is fundamental to conversation analysis, and has been summarised by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974:729):

"while understandings of other turns' talk are displayed to co-participants, they are available as well to professional analysts who are thereby afforded a proof criterion (and search procedure) for the analysis of what a turns' talk is occupied with. Since it is the parties' understanding of prior turns' talk that is relevant to their construction of next turns, it is their understandings that are wanted for analysis. The display of those understandings in the talk of subsequent turns afford both a resource for the analysis of prior turns and a proof procedure for professional analyses of prior turns-resources intrinsic to the data themselves."

Therefore, as well as analysing a turn in terms of its prior, each turn is also analysed with reference to the recipient's analysis as displayed in the turn which follows it.

(vi) Summary

In sum, conversation analysis may be said to have three main foci of attention, each of which is thoroughly entwined with the other: analysts examine the design of turns, the sequential position of turns, and the interactional work which each turn is designed to perform. Thus, my investigation will result in three kinds of findings about idioms. First, I aim to discover something about the design of idioms and of the turns in which they occur. Second, I will identify their sequential positions within topics. Third, and as a result of the former two types of analysis, I will identify the interactional work

which idioms are designed to perform. In practice each of these ways of investigating the data is inseparable. Thus, although chapters two and three will be mainly concerned with the sequential environments of idioms, they will involve an analysis of the design of the idiomatic utterances, and will lead to conclusions about the interactional work of these utterances.

### 3 IDIOMS, METAPHOR, AND SOCIOLOGY

During the previous section I noted that there is a growing interest in idiomatic speech in the fields of linguistics and psychology. I also noted that this is a result of the realisation of just how much of our language is idiomatic or metaphoric in nature. Ortony (1979) notes the growing interest in metaphorical language in a number of disciplines. Besides noting philosophy's growing interest in the subject, he observes:

"More recently there has been a growing interest in metaphor in a number of other disciplines. In linguistics, for example, an increasing concern with linguistic performance and pragmatics (in contrast to the emphasis on linguistic competence so characteristic of the Chomskian revolution), and an increasing interest in the nature of text, have resulted in an increasing interest being given to nonliteral uses of language. In psychology, especially cognitive psychology, the processes involved in the comprehension of metaphors not only constitute an interesting challenge in themselves, but their specification also constitutes a good test for the power of theories of language comprehension in general." (P.4)

This thesis embodies my attempt, as a conversation analyst, to add to this multi-disciplinary interest in idiomatic and metaphoric language. As I have explained, my interest is a specific one. I focus on the occasions of use of such objects in conversation.

However, I want to begin by taking a look at metaphoric language from a more general stance. I have noted that the growing multi-disciplinary interest in nonliteral language has resulted from the

realisation that it is a lot more pervasive than was first thought. In this section I shall, very briefly, consider the pervasiveness of metaphor, examining a variety of areas where metaphor is used. (For more detailed, in depth, investigations of just how much of our language, our concepts, and our thought is metaphorical, see Ortony 1979, Lakoff and Johnson 1980 and Kittay 1987.)

Dirven and Paprotte (1985) note that Ortony (1979), a multidimensional perspective on metaphor, inspired many linguists to investigate metaphor.

"As a result, the conviction grew that metaphor is deeply engrained in cognitive processes, social acts and verbal usage, that metaphor in fact is a constitutive factor of all mental constructions and reconstructions of reality." (P.viii)

Dirven and Paprotte observe that as a result of research into metaphor, linguistics and psychology have been challenged to redefine "their scope, their aims and their methods" (p.ix). The idea that words have "fixed, schematic meanings, still treated as complexes of universal primitives" is no longer so popular, and nor is the idea that metaphor is the result of verbal displacement" (p.ix). Dirven and Paprotte observe:

"Metaphor is now considered an instrument of thought, and a transaction between the constructive effects of context, imagistic and conceptual representations, and general encyclopaedic knowledge. For psychology, metaphor research has effected a rethinking of the process-product distinction; concepts and representations -as dynamic constructions- are now seen to depend on and to participate in the processes of formal and informal reasoning." (P.x)

Just how much of our language and thought is metaphorical has been demonstrated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). They argue that our conceptual system "is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (p.3). Their analysis takes a broad view of metaphor, demonstrating that a

very large number of our most commonly used concepts can be said to be metaphorical. Lakoff and Johnson observe that:

"we typically conceptualize the nonphysical in terms of the physical -that is, we conceptualize the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated." (P.59)

Thus, many concepts are "orientational metaphors", for instance a spatial orientation such as up-down is used to structure an abstract concept. An example of this is "the happy is up", "sadness is down" metaphor which results in the following expressions: "I'm feeling up", "that boosted my spirits", "My spirits rose", "you're in high spirits", "I'm feeling down", "I'm depressed", "he's really low these days" and "I fell into a depression" (p.15). Another kind of metaphor is the "structural metaphor" where one highly structured concept is used metaphorically to structure another concept: for example, the concept argument is structured by the concept war. This results in expressions such as "your claims are indefensible", "he attacked every weak point in my argument", "his criticisms were right on target", "I've never won an argument with him", and "he shot down all of my arguments" (p.4).

Lakoff and Johnson argue that because so many of the concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated, we achieve a grasp on them using concepts that we understand more clearly, such as spatial orientations and objects (p.115). They conclude:

"The reason we have focused so much on metaphor is that it writes reason and imagination. Reason, at the very least, involves categorization, entailment, and inference. Imagination, in one of its many aspects, involves seeing one kind of thing in terms of another kind of thing -what we have called metaphorical thought. Metaphor is thus imaginative rationality." (ibid. P.192)

This is a refreshing alternative to the traditional view which classes metaphors, idioms, and all figures of speech as an insignificant appendix to the language. Under the traditional view



metaphors are to be distrusted because they deviate from the correspondence between word meaning and physical objects, entities, etc. In recent years this relationship has come to be regarded as not as straightforward as previously supposed, and that our conceptual system is now considered by some authors to be metaphorically structured. Therefore, metaphors and other figures of speech constitute a way in which we understand and create reality.

In this section I want to show this process at work. In the examples below metaphors, including idiomatic metaphors, are used to present particular version of reality. The examples are drawn from settings where the person's ability to put forward his or her version convincingly will have dramatic consequences, for instance, two of the examples are drawn from a tribunal hearing. Furthermore, most of the examples are taken from settings in which one might not expect to find metaphors. They are settings where people are trying to establish the truth, and the traditional view suggests that metaphors are not objective or truthful due to the fact that they are mere comparisons.

The first examples are drawn from a tribunal inquiry. Obviously in trials, tribunals, etc, the version of events which the jury accept will be particularly consequential for certain people, especially the defendant. The following extracts are taken from the cross-examination of an R.U.C. police officer during a trial focusing on events which occurred during the disturbances in Belfast during 1969, in which he

was involved. During cross-examination, the police officer is accused of taking insufficient action to control a crowd of Protestants.<sup>28</sup>

(31)[ST:84,34H]

C: At this stage we had better be quite clear: at no stage during the course of the night did you take any action against any Protestant civilians?

--> W: No. The police were far too thin on the ground. We could not afford to do anything to antagonise this crowd which was not badly disposed towards us as the other crowd was. We were between the Devil and the deep, if I may use that expression: we just had no choice in the matter. To have tried to arrest any of the Shankill Road crowd would have taken more of my men, the crowd, I realised would have turned on us; they were fairly high at the time and we just had to act as best we could under very difficult circumstances.

(32)[ST:84,42C]

C: Did you not know the mob were liable to follow you on this occasion?

W: What I knew and what actually took place are two different things. I was powerless to prevent quite a lot of things that did happen. In fact we were just a drop in the ocean with so few a number. I realised certainly that there would be some of them following behind. I could not do anything to prevent that. I saw damage caused and tried to prevent it. I realised it was bashing my head against a brick wall really; we were completely ineffective.

In these extracts the witness uses a number of idiomatic metaphors to support his version of the events. The idioms all serve to emphasise the overwhelming problems he faced which prevented him from taking more effective action. The first metaphor emphasises the small number of police: "The police were far too thin on the ground". This idiom is similar to intensifiers, mentioned in section 1 above and further explored in chapter two; it depicts the number of police officers as hopelessly small. It is more effective than, say, giving an actual or estimated number because, first, the number of police officers

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<sup>28</sup> These extracts are taken from Atkinson and Drew (1979:164).

may not seem small to the jury, and second, because the recipients may think that it was a sufficient number to control the crowd, whereas "too thin on the ground" suggests that, whatever the number, it was not enough.

The second metaphor in (31) "between the Devil and the deep" depicts the hopelessness of the police's situation. The two crowds are compared to "the Devil" and "the deep", with the police stuck between them. Thus their situation is portrayed as highly problematic, one in which they have no choice, and are therefore innocent of any blame. In chapter two we shall see that a large number of idioms are able to portray the speaker as innocent, and this partly accounts for their use in circumstances such as this.

In extract (32) the witness again uses two idiomatic metaphors to depict the impossibility of the situation he was in, and again the first is used to emphasise the small number of police officers, while the second is used to describe his powerlessness to do anything about it. Therefore in saying "we were just a drop in the ocean" the witness draws a comparison between the police and "a drop", whilst the crowd are compared to "the ocean". Again this is more effective than any literal description because it is able to depict the number of the police as miniscule and the number of the crowd as countless: being figurative, the counsel cannot easily object to his description of the proportions, which he may have done if the witness had literally estimated numbers.

The second idiom in (32) draws a comparison between the speaker's actions in trying to control the crowd, and "bashing my head against a brick wall". This depicts his activities as completely useless. Again it is a powerful metaphor because it is an intensifier, portraying the

uselessness of his actions in a very strong form. Further, it portrays him as innocent: he did the right things but they made no impression whatsoever and therefore he is blameless due the difficulties he faced in trying to act appropriately.

Thus, in these two extracts, metaphors are used to put forward a particular view of reality, and to portray an entity in a particular way in order to support a particular version. Metaphors are powerful partly because they cannot be objected to on empirical grounds and because they can portray the speaker as innocent. Therefore, idiomatic metaphors are invaluable in a situation such as this, where a speaker is trying to convince a non-sympathetic audience. In chapter two I explore further examples of idioms used to put forward a version of events in a hostile or non-sympathetic environment.

The next extracts are drawn from a sociological text.<sup>29</sup> In "The presentation of self in everyday life" Goffman (1959) explains social life in terms of a dramaturgical metaphor. This metaphor has had an immense impact on our knowledge of society. Goffman writes:

"The issues dealt with by stage-craft and stage management are sometimes trivial but they are quite general; they seem to occur everywhere in social life, providing a clear-cut dimension for formal sociological analysis." (P.26)

Thus, in front of others a person takes on a "role" and gives a "performance", the situation is a "setting" and along with the person's clothes, expressions etc, form part of the "front". This metaphor has been adopted by many sociologists and has become an important part of the way in which sociology views society, and thus part of the

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<sup>29</sup> For a further analysis of the use of idioms in sociological texts see Sacks (1965).

knowledge about society. Schegloff (1988) gives an indication of the impact of Goffman's analysis on the study of society:

"It is easy to forget how startling and novel Goffman's work was in 1956/1959 when *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* was published. That he habilitated this field initially through the dramaturgical metaphor is not surprising, for if anyone had seen this vision before it was the dramatist, for whom the most telling way of getting at the human and the social was to put several people on stage and have them talk together, and otherwise conduct themselves, for the observation of others. But it was not only dramaturgical imagery which Goffman made accessible to sociology." (P.90)

In "Seductions of crime" Katz (1988) considers metaphors concerned with rage and humiliation in his enquiry into our understanding of the nature of these two emotions. In a similar way to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) he attributes idiomatic metaphors about rage to our physical experience of it. He writes:

"rage proceeds in an upward direction. It may start in the pit of the stomach and soon threaten to burst out of your head. 'Don't blow your top' and 'hold your lid on', we counsel the angry." (P.27)

Katz also points out that we view rage as a hot gas:

"Thus, a person 'boils' in anger and then, like Yosemite Sam after he has been humiliated by Bugs Bunny, 'blows off steam.'" (P.28)

Therefore, in his analysis Katz uses metaphors as a resource for understanding rage and humiliation, and as evidence for his formulation of our understanding of them.

These examples taken from Goffman (1959) and Katz (1988) illustrate two of the ways in which metaphors are used in sociology in its quest to understand society. Our third example illustrates how hard it is to avoid idioms and metaphors even while writing an objective text, and however much one might disapprove of them. Above (section 1) we saw that Zijderfeld (1979) is highly critical of idioms of cliches, but he acknowledges that they are difficult to avoid:

"Throughout this study, we will struggle with the fact that cliches are wellnigh unavoidable; even a critical treatise of the cliché, like the present one, is bound to fall prey to them."  
(P.18)

Besides "fall prey to" in this extract, Zijderveld uses a number of idioms in his book. The following are some of the more clear-cut examples:

--> "It usually connotes a lot, but if one searches for the precise meaning in which an author employs it, one usually remains in the dark" (P.18)

--> "In short, cliches are the appropriate moulds of modern consciousness and the very corner stone of modernity." (P.27)

--> "As meaningless as they may actually be, if taken to the letter, cliches are yet able to arouse behaviour as in a stimulus-response sequence." (P.65)

Thus, we can see that idioms and metaphors are pervasive, that they are an intergal part of our language, and are not easily avoided.

A third setting from which I have drawn some examples of metaphors, is that of advertising. Here metaphors and idioms are, perhaps, less unexpected. At certain times metaphors and idioms seem to come into fashion in the advertising world. At present clever or ingenious plays on words are in vogue. The following are just a few examples:

"Hertz are driving people off the trains" (From an advertisement for self-drive cars which can be picked up at stations)

"Our low start mortgages open doors you thought were closed"  
(From an advertisement for a building society)

"Clarins the best under the sun" (From an advertisement for suntan lotion)

"Eye openers for people blinded by science" (From an advert for a newspaper with articles about science)

Each of these advertising slogans uses or trades off an idiomatic expression: "driving people away" in the first, "opens doors" in the second, "under the sun" in the third, and "eye opener" and "blinded by" in the fourth.

Here, in a similar way to the idioms in the extracts from the trial, idiomatic expressions are being used persuasively. Thus in the third example the double meaning of "under the sun" suggests that the lotion is the best for lying in the sun and the best on the earth. In the second "open doors you thought were closed" suggests that with a mortgage from this building society you will be able to afford more expensive houses, and it will open up new opportunities. A second feature of the idioms here, is that they embody an attempt to attract the attention of the reader. Thus, in the first, a person reading the advert is likely to interpret it as meaning that Hertz are discouraging people from using the trains, this creates a puzzle (particularly as most of the adverts were on stations) and the reader is likely to look closer in order to solve the puzzle. In the second and third adverts there is a pun. This is due to the fact that the idioms apply literally and metaphorically, as we have already seen. (Puns in idioms will be further explored in chapter four). In the fourth advert there is just a neat contrast between "eye openers" and "blinded".<sup>30</sup>

In sum, idioms and metaphors occur in a variety of settings, some of which are against expectation, and they are used to fulfil a variety of tasks. In the extracts from the tribunal it is particularly clear that they are used persuasively. In the sociological texts idioms are used to explain issues, as a resource, and as evidence, and in the advertisements they are used persuasively and they encompass a pun, a puzzle, or some device to catch the readers attention.

This section has, I hope, given some insight into the pervasiveness of idioms and metaphors, and some indication of how important they are

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<sup>30</sup> For an interesting analysis of word play in advertising, focusing on puns but including some idioms, see Redfurn (1984).

in portraying and understanding the world: they are a medium by which we create and recreate the world. I have also begun to point towards some of the more specific tasks which they are used to fulfil: it is with this final issue that we will mostly be concerned throughout this analysis, and to which we now turn.

#### 4 INTRODUCTION TO THE DATA AND THE ANALYSIS

Throughout this chapter we have been concerned with metaphoric and idiomatic language. We have seen that, although interest in this area is growing, no one has investigated the use of idioms in ordinary conversation. The current investigation is an attempt to do this. It will be informed by the methodology of conversation analysis. Hence, I will be interested in the selection and design of the idiomatic utterances, their sequential positions and the interactional work which they perform.

The analysis will be based on a corpus of about four hundred idioms. These have been drawn from naturally occurring conversation. As with most of the data in conversation analysis, these instances are mainly derived from telephone conversations. This is because, in listening to a recording, I have the same access to the interaction as the participants, and am not missing vital nonvocal communication. The data comes from a number of collections, recorded in both Britain and America. A large part of the data was recorded by myself. I attached a tape recorder to my family's telephone (though I have not used any conversations in which I took part), and these calls were then transcribed.

Having gathered a huge collection of transcribed conversations from a number of sources, I then went through it and pulled out all



the idioms (along with their surrounding talk). At first I included utterances which were vaguely idiomatic. Later on I eliminated any cases that seemed to be borderline. Hence, cases like the following were omitted.

(33)[NB:I:6:11]

(Emma has had an operation on her toe)

Emma: .t.hhh I sat on the fan the other day right on the very  
e:dge onna to:wel so: ah min ah d'n get mah foot in the  
(0.2) fa:n b't I'm fi:ne,  
(0.2)  
Lottie: Ye:ah.  
Emma: I think ah'll make it.

(34)[PT:13]

Edna: Is that his publicity then Sundee=  
Edna: =thet wz in the payber with Ly:nch?  
Margy: i:y e h?  
(.)  
Margy: M m h m?  
Edna: Ah'll be,  
(.)  
Edna: da::rned,  
Margy: uY a h  
Edna: Oh: Go:d Isn't it fa:ntastic how things work out,

Expressions could be judged as borderline for a variety of reasons. For instance, in (33) the utterance "I think ah'll make it." was omitted because it is not figurative in any straightforward way, nor was it syntactically frozen ("I'll make it alright, I think" sounds just as natural), and it is debatable whether this phrase is used frequently and in roughly the same format. In (34) "Ah'll be, (.) da::rned" is an expletive, and all such objects were avoided as they were judged to warrant independent analysis. In sum, no one feature of these phrases resulted in their being eliminated. Instead it was often a variety of characteristics which lead to a decision that they are not full blown idioms.

Having amassed a large collection of clear-cut idioms in conversation, I then examined each instance in terms of turn design, selection, sequential position, and interactional work. The results of my analysis are reported in the following chapters.

I begin with the question of whether the idioms have a recurrent sequential position. In chapter two I detail my findings as to whether the idioms recur in particular kinds of topics. In chapter three I report on my findings as to whether the idioms recur at particular positions within these topics. But as the different aspects of my approach cannot be separated, these chapters also involve analyses of the design and interactional work of the idioms. In chapter four I consider the association between idioms and puns, and this leads to further observations about the sequential position of idioms. Then, in chapter five, I investigate idioms in a more formal setting. I set out to discover whether my observations about idioms in conversation apply also to talk in a more formal setting.

So, we begin with an analysis of the sequential environment of idioms, and of the kinds of topics in which they recur.

## CHAPTER TWO

### IDIOMS AND COMPLAINTS<sup>1</sup>

#### 1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I outlined two tenets of conversation analysis: that is, the analysis of the sequential position of turns, and of the design of those turns. Thus my investigation into the instances of the occurrence of idioms in conversation began with an attempt to see if, instead of occurring just anywhere, they might have some kinds of orderly sequential positions. My enquiry revealed a marked pattern of idiomatic usage in sequences where speakers are complaining about some personal difficulty, mistreatment, and so on. Moreover, these idioms occurred quite commonly within such sequences at positions where recipients of complaints had thus far not affiliated, or had withheld affiliating, with the complainants. Having discovered an orderliness to the occurrence of idioms, it is then possible to examine the design of the turns and thus begin to account for the interactional work which the idioms are methodically employed to manage.

Therefore, in this chapter I will be concerned with the sequential positions of the idioms. This will lead (in the latter half of the

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this chapter appeared in *Social Problems* (1988) Vol. 35, No 4, pp.398-417.

chapter) to an examination of the design of the idioms in order to explicate the kinds of interactional work which they are employed to perform, and how they are fitted to manage these tasks.

Besides those idioms which occurred in the sequential environment of complaints, two other marked patterns of usage were revealed by this analysis. The first can be seen as roughly opposite to those which occurred in complainings; instead these occurred in the environment of praisings, extollings and talk about something especially pleasurable. Second, a number of idioms occurred in sequences where speakers are performing a dispreferred activity such as turning down an invitation, giving advice, disagreeing and so on. But in neither of these sequential environments did the idioms occur quite so frequently as they did in complaining sequences. Thus, although I shall briefly return to these other two sequential positions below, idioms in complaints will be the main focus of this chapter.

The way in which many idioms are employed in the making of complaints is exemplified by the following extract. The extract is taken from a psychotherapy consultation between Brenda, the patient, and Laurel, the therapist. Brenda expresses her fear that if anything "traumatic" occurred in the period between consultations, she would have to wait until their regular Wednesday session before Laurel could help her. Out of this she constructs the complaint that Laurel has never told her to call any time she should need help.

(1) [PB:9-15-71(ms)25-26]

Laurel: Why didn't you call me (then)  
(3.9)

Brenda: I didn't want to bother you? I figured you would  
have another patient?  
(2.8)

Laurel: (If I had another) patient I might not be able to  
talk to you right away I could call you ba:ck.  
(4.3)

Laurel: How come you never trig:d.  
(5.9)

Brenda: Because you never told me.

Laurel: But I didn't tell you not to.  
(0.8)

Brenda: I know, (.) but you never told me um: (1.5) if I  
ever felt (1.4) I needed (.) to:, then I could  
(2.4) u-ca:ll you, (0.9) so I wouldn't. (0.4) If  
I'm not told I wouldn't do it.

Laurel: You wouldn't?  
(1.4)

Brenda: I wouldn't care how bad it was because .hhh If I:  
felt I would have to call you up .hhh and you  
couldn't talk to me, .hh because you were too busy  
with something e:lse. .hh then that would u:m (0.2)  
--> .t.hh (1.5) that could really throw me (h)off the  
--> deep end.

Brenda uses the idiom "throw me (h)off the deep end" in her complaint against Laurel. It expresses her fear of rejection should she call and find Laurel unable to talk to her.

Thus, the idiom is used in making a complaint. It is noticeable that in this sequence there are other elements besides the complaining. For instance, Brenda can be seen to be criticising Laurel for failing to tell her that she should ring if it becomes necessary. Also the sequence is bound up with Brenda's trouble which is what would lead to her needing Laurel's help. These activities can, however, be classed under the generic term "complaining". So although the term "complaining" is used to describe the sequences in this chapter, it is clear that they involve other elements, such as criticisms and talk about troubles.

Some of the variety of the sequences which fall under the generic term "complaints" can be seen in the following extracts, beginning with two that are clear-cut complainings. In the former Emma is telling Lottie about the experience she and her husband had of a well known hotel, at which her husband was playing in a golfing event. In the latter Jenny and Ann are complaining about the problems they have in

cleaning their double glazing.

(2) [NB:IV:10:35-36]

- Emma: W'l you know we were there in Ju:ne yihknow Bud played go:lf?h hhh En w'n the air c'nditioner went o::ff?h hhh En wir bout (.) th'oanee ones that ha:d'n air conditioned room the rest of'm were bro:ken. .hhh An'we went down duh brekfiss 'n there wz oanee abou' two people duh help fer brekfiss with all these guys goina pla:y go:lf. They w'r a:ll teed o:ff..
- Lottie Ye<sub>1</sub>:ah?  
Emma: Becuz (.) uy Bud u-c'dn e:v'n eat iz brekfist. He o:rdred he waited forty five minutes'n he'a:dtuh be out there duh tee off so I gave it to Karen's liddle bo:y.  
(0.7)
- Emma: ((swallow)) I mean that's how bad the service was  
--> .h hh (.) It's gahn duh pot.
- Lottie: u-Oh:: (.) e-Ye:: a h . Ye<  
Emma: But it's a be auti ful go:lf course.

(3) [Rah:(18):5-6]

- Jenny: Ahn' the trouble is you see if you tighten th'clips too much they snahp.
- Ann: Yes. Well thaht's w't I do. Breakin' them.
- Jenny: Ye:s [::  
Ann: [I've been a bit mohr cahreful this time b't the trouble is I don't get th'm ( ) tih the windows actually.  
(.)
- > Ann: You cahn't wi:n really.
- Jenny: Ny<sub>o</sub>::  
(.)
- Jenny: Oh no.  
(0.2)
- Ann: No.  
(0.3)
- Ann: Hahv you bean t'school th's mohrning.

In (2) Emma uses the idiom "gahn duh pot" in her complaint about how poor the service is at the hotel. In (3) Ann uses the idiom "You cahn't wi:n really" in her complaint about the difficulties of cleaning the double glazing.

Extracts (4) and (5), on the other hand, are predominantly criticisms. In the former Mrs H is talking to Ilene, whose son is a physiotherapist. Mrs H is trying to make an appointment for her sister,

Iver, who is visiting for christmas, to see him. Ilene suggests it might be easier for Iver to consult a physiotherapist in her own area (i.e. close to where she lives). But Mrs H says she is trying to arrange the appointment for when her sister comes to stay with her, because Iver needs to be forced to attend. The latter is an extract from a group therapy session: the doctor has been asking George a number of questions regarding his dietary problems and their relation to his psychological difficulties. Pam then interrupts to make an implied criticism of the doctor for his prolonged questioning of George.

(4) [Heritage:1:6:7]

Mrs H: u-We:ll. You see I:ver is (.) eh- (.) she's the  
 --> ty:pe . .hh thet (.) one hastuh take huh by the  
 --> no:se.  
 Ilene: Oh and ihh heh heh he h-heh-hn==  
 Mrs H: And-  
 --> Mrs H: =I:'m: I:'m the only puhrs'n available t'take huhr  
 by the no:se.

(5) [MH:Therapy:1972]

Dr: Were you upset after:wards?  
 George: No. (1.0)  
 Dr: So you eat at// the convalesent home something  
 you knew would normally upset you. What was that?  
 Pam: ( )  
 --> Pam: Rome wasn't built in a day. Tryin to keep myself  
awake tryin to keep myself//( )  
 Dr: Well er the easist way to do it can you hear what  
 George was saying?  
 Pam: Saying he wants to go home that he eats bacon for  
 dinner and::: (.)? ((clears throat)) (4.0) I think  
 he should be at home doing it-  
 Dr: Well what was he saying though.  
 Pam: I don't remember exactly=  
 Dr: =So you can't have been listening. What was he  
 saying Cathy?

Extracts (6) and (7) can be seen as predominantly troubles-tellings. In the former Emma is talking about her dismay over the assassination of the President and the Attorney General. In the latter

Emma has been discussing a series of family problems; including the fact that her daughter's father-in-law is ill, which may prevent her daughter from bringing her family to stay with Emma over Thanksgiving.

(6) [NB:II:1:12-13]

Emma: Well it's a sa:d thing whenyih think two:  
 (0.5)  
 Emma: lo<sub>o</sub>vely  
 Lottie: G o: d.  
 Lottie: The<sup>h</sup> jis  
 Emma: me:n : wih ther bra:insu knocked out I mean  
 --> it's just a horrible God ih jist like a night  
 ma:<sub>re,</sub>  
 Lottie: Thd e- seems like a fairy storeh I<sub>I-</sub> couldn'  
 Emma:  
 Lottie: believe it.  
 Emma: I thaw ih wz js like- Orson We:lles.

(7) [NB:IV:9:3]

Emma: .hh Her hu- u-her father in la:w's in the  
ho:spit'l so I don't know what the deal honey  
 --> I've jis relea:sed myself'v evrything I'm jis  
 going along wih th'ti:de.  
 Margy: Yih-hih-huh? hh-hhe:h<sub>hhh</sub>  
 Emma: <sub>hhh</sub>  
 Margy: Well ('at's o-)  
 --> Emma: En the w i n d blows'n ah'll go wih the wind  
 --> blo:o:ows  
 Margy: ihhhh hOkhha(h)a(h)y,  
 Emma: .hhh Ah'll be dow:n a few minutes?

Therefore, within the generic heading of "idioms in complaints" we see them being used in the making of criticisms, and in talking about troubles or misfortunes.

So, by examining the idioms to discover whether there is some orderliness to their occurrence, it has transpired that a frequent pattern of usage is in the sequential environment of complaints. Within this generic heading we have seen that the idioms are used to fulfil a variety of tasks, such as complaining about some circumstances, criticising another person and discussing a trouble or a misfortune. Complaints are not the only sequential environment in which idioms



systematically occur, but they are certainly the most frequent.

As mentioned above, two other sequential environments were also identified as a result of an investigation into the orderliness of the occurrence of idioms. Although less common, these provide an interesting contrast to idioms in complaint sequences. Thus I shall return to them on occasion during this chapter, and I shall begin now by briefly describing these alternative sequential environments.

First, a number of idioms occur in what may be seen as an opposite category from complaints, that is, to praise, extoll or report something pleasurable, exciting and so on. The following three instances are cases in point. In the first Nancy is recounting a pleasurable conversation with a particularly eligible man, she describes them as "talkin up a sto:rm". In (9) Emma is talking about her and her family's enjoyable weekend away, she describes them as having "hadda ball". In (10) Jenny and Vera are praising the children of a mutual friend. Jenny describes them as being "ez good ez go:ld".

(8) [NB:11:4:14]

Nancy: He's fifty two:,  
Emma: Mm [hm:],  
Nancy: .hhhh mBut he:'s ju:st a ri:l: (.) dear,h (0.4)  
ni:ce:: (0.2) gu:y. Ji [st a r: i:l: [ril n]ice gu:y.  
Emma: We:ll: goo [: :d.]  
--> Nancy: hh hh So wew'r rilly talkin up a sto:rm en: havin  
a r:il g'd time....

(9) [NB:11:1:8]

Emma: Well the kids sure hadda lotta fun down here 'at  
wz a(w) beautiful weekend fer the:m:.  
M\_y-  
Lottie: Oh :: ye [ :ah.]  
Emma: Go: :d. that wz beautiful we went the  
--> fun zone en (0.3) .hh (.) oh we hadda ball. Took'm  
fishin but no fi:sh

(10) [Rah:B:2:JV(14):2]

Jenny: Ahn' they look so well.the chilreh theh

go:hrɡ{iss ahrn't they  
 Vera:                    └D'you know theh-  
 --> Jenny:       He wz- they w'rr ez good ez go:ld,

Second, a slightly larger number of idioms (though still small compared with the number of idioms in complaints) were used in contexts where a speaker is performing a dispreferred activity, such as turning down an invitation, disagreeing, giving advice, criticising, and so on.<sup>2</sup> The concept of dispreferred activities originates in the conversation analytic observation that when speakers are faced with a pair of alternative actions (such as rejecting or accepting an invitation), these alternatives are not equivalent; some are preferred while others are dispreferred.<sup>3</sup> Dispreferred activities include turning down an invitation, apologizing, disagreeing and so on. The following extracts exemplify this cluster of use. In the first, Edgerton employs the idiom "unduh the weathah:" to suggest that his wife is feeling unwell. This is used to explain why he must turn down Jane's invitation to both of them to come around for drinks.

(11)[Heritage:01:13:2]

Edgerton: Ah must apologi::ze (.) the ahnswer is negative::.  
 Jane:       Okay,  
 Edgerton: Bihcau:se uh: she's (0.2) she's feeling a little  
 -->                   unduh the weathah:  
                           (0.2)  
 Jane:       Oh-hho::.

In the following extract Gladys turns down Emma's invitation by claiming that she wants some time alone. In doing so she uses the cliched simile "Like Garbo", thereby implicitly referring to the much

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<sup>2</sup> Saville-Troike (1982) observes that proverbs and metaphors are often used in constructing criticisms. He suggests that one reason for their use in performing such dispreferred activities is that they depersonalize what is said, allowing for indirectness (p.36).

<sup>3</sup> On preference organisation see Atkinson and Heritage (1984:52-6).

quoted line "I want to be alone".

(12)[NB:IV:11:3]

Gladys: I've loo:k' fohw'd t(h)hho ihhht (h)so  
          [ l(h)aw-.hh  
Emma:       [ O h : : : : [ : : : : [ : : : :  
--> Gladys:       [ yihknow [ like Gahrbo:,  
Gladys:       .t[.hhh  
Emma:        [y:Ye :hhh[h hheh  
Gladys:        [eh:hhh[h heh he  
Emma:        [h A h [WAghNT to be aLO:::ne.

In (13) Edna uses the idiomatic expression "I don't know where the week went" as an excuse and an apology for not ringing Margy sooner.

(13)[PT:3]

Edna:        .hhhhhhhhhh En I j's thought I'd give you a buzz=  
Edna:        =I shoulda ca:lled you sooner b't I don't know  
-->        where the week we::n't,  
Margy:        [ u-We:ll::

In sum, an analysis of the sequential positions of idioms revealed three main patterns of usage. First, idioms are often used in the making of complaints. Second, idioms are sometimes employed in extolling, praising or describing an especially pleasurable event. Finally, idioms are also sometimes used in the performing of a dispreferred activity such as turning down an invitation, giving advice, or disagreeing. But idioms do not occur equally in each of these sequential environments. Instead a vast majority occur in the environment of complaints, and far fewer occur in the latter two environments. Thus, as indicated above, it is the former with which I shall mainly be concerned, and I will begin with a closer examination of the environment as a whole.

## 2 IDIOMS AND COMPLAINTS

It is beginning to become apparent that the idioms and the complaints in which they occur are extremely diverse in nature. Above

we have seen idioms being used to complain about poor hotel service, cleaning double glazing, a sister who needs to be coerced into consulting a physiotherapist, a doctor who asks too many questions during a therapy session, the assassination of two American statesmen, family problems, and a psychiatrist. The following extracts are further examples which demonstrate the diversity of both complaints and idioms which occur in this sequential environment. The first is taken from a medical consultation between a specialist and a patient who has been referred by his doctor, Doctor Macphales. The specialist has just given his diagnosis of the patient's headaches.

(14)[AH2Jewitt]

- Dr.: .hhhh I'm sure: Doctor: Macphale:s; right (.) I'm  
sure that these headaches:: yer gettin are:: er::  
associated with a bit of arthritus:  
(0.5)
- Dr.: in yer er:: (0.7) in yer neck (.) really: (.)  
more than your spine:: er:m: (.) .hh I mean  
more than your lower spine it's the in your neck  
thats causin the::
- P: is it
- P: it seems to be he:re:: anywa\_y:
- Dr.: the problem that's correct  
(0.2)
- Dr.: yes mhhh  
(3.2)
- P: that I could understood (.) because it (.) it's  
the headaches: was the thing thats: got me  
(0.4)
- P: (more than anything else)  
(1.2)
- > P: more than the devil in hell because they were  
gettin more or less (.) permanent yer know::  
(1.2)
- P: they were coming even when I was never pain in  
the back of my neck  
(28.0)
- Dr.: hhhhhhhh right: well I'll tell what we'll do  
Mister Tarrett (.) I'll give....

The patient uses the idiom "more than the devil in hell" to describe the severity of the pain he has been experiencing.

In the following extract A is complaining about what she regards as

a quite inadequate pay rise. She depicts the strength of her feeling by using the idiom "ahm dsho: ghowd damn ma:d I khant see straight". Then she continues by reporting that she said to a colleague at work, who appears to have attempted to justify the pay rise (as the expected five and a half percent), that it "doesnt cut a go:damn bida ey:ce with me". Further, she adds that in turn she intends to keep strictly to her hours of employment, and if her employers do not like it "they can take a flying=you know, scre:w at thu mhoo:n".

(15)[JG:III:19]

A: <ah:(0.1) tell: you dupey:. ahm dsho: ghowd  
 --> damn ma:d (.) I khant see straight.>  
 (.)

B: hmm.

A: tchhh So then: (.) y'u know= I ws sayin sumin  
 tu Lee Schae:fer about it, an Lee: sai:d, (.)  
 Well, she said, Iz -that- five an a ha'f per  
 sse:nt, (.) .hhh  
 (.)

A: an:I: said, w:ell I: dun kno:w, I guess it i:z:.  
 (0.4)

A: hhh So, -y'know:,- (0.5) they stuck ri:ght tu that  
 five an a haff per cent deal.  
 (0.6)

A: chh an aye: said <houht ah'll tell: yu one: thing.  
 --> I: sai:d tha:t doesnt cut a go:damn bida ey:ce  
 with me:  
 (0.4)

A: hh I said furst of a:ll I said they've seen the end  
 of my ten:our daize (.) an ma ni:n:e hour daize  
 (0.3)

B: oh: you damn right.  
 (.)

A: an: aye sa:id they:kn goadu hell= ahm takin' an  
hour fur lu:nch (.) an if they: don li:ke it, an  
 I: dont intend tu ca:l' um an tellum whe:re >hell:  
 --> -I:- am?< they can take a flying= you know, scre:w  
 --> at thu mhoo:n.=

In (16) Shirley, is selling a house, and Ilene is acting on behalf of a third party (her son) trying to buy the house. They are in dispute as to whether Shirley's estate agents ("Moss and company") have, as they claim, sent some necessary documents to Ilene. Ilene claims not to

have received these documents and has maintained that the agents never sent them. Having spoken to her agents, Shirley is now calling Ilene to confirm that she will "have to accept" her agent's version. While acknowledging Shirley's position, Ilene continues to contest the claim of the estate agents and concludes by complaining that arguing with them is "like...banging y'r head against a brick wall".

(16)[Her:OI:1:2-3]

Ilene: .hhh We've checked now on all the paypize's has  
 .hh an' we have had n:nothing fr'm Moss'n Comp'ny  
 through the post.  
 (0.3)

Ilene: Anyway,  
 (.)

Ilene: Tha:t's th- uh you know you c'm(b) (.)  
ahrgue ih it's like (.) uh: m

Shirley: (.)  
 Well

--> Ilene: banging y'r head against a brick wall.  
 Shirley: E z fahr ez I'm  
 c'ncerned on this situ:ation, oll private  
 negotiations between us mus' cea:se.

Extract (17) is taken from a business negotiation. Giles is complaining that if the firm's current deal goes through the company will lose seven thousand pounds "down thih:...tu:bes".

(17)[Anderson:Coca Cola:B:16-18]

Giles: Now last year from Coke. And we're talking on  
 the Coke one at the moment .hhh (2.3) For the  
 last two years if we keep these figures the sa:me,

Henry: [Twenty sev en t h o s a n d ]  
 Giles: ( )w e were talking t'wenty seven  
 thousand to ourse:lves. .hhhhh If we l:ook at (1.2)  
 thirty eight thousan:d. (0.7) uh split on a forty  
 five f::fifty five basis. ((smack)) Don't know.  
 twenty one thousand, say, (.) whoever it might be.  
 .hhhh Whe:re (0.2) .hhh phhh! wihh split over two  
 years. .hh we're already. (.) .h uh:: seven gra:nd  
 --> down thih:: [the the the tu:bes.  
 Henry Mm.

Extract (18) is taken from a conversation in which Emma is reporting to her daughter, Barbara, that her father, Emma's husband,

has left her. Emma uses the idiomatic phrase "CA:N'T..SAY BLUE IS BLUE" in complaining about the way her husband has treated her.

(18)[NB:IV:7:4]

Barbara: Is this been goin on lo:ng er wha:t.  
Emma: OH::: I DON'T KNOW I JIS CA:N'T SEEM TUH SAY  
--> BLUE IS BLUE HE AR:GUES e-WITH ME ER:: \*u- (. )  
u-SOMETHING EN: AH: DON'T DO THIS RI:GHT'n  
THAT RI:GHT. hhhhhh I NEED hhHE:L:P .hh  
(.)  
Emma: EN BARBRA wouldju CA:LL im dihn<sub>i</sub>:ght for me,h

Finally, in the following extract Emma is complaining about her family's lack of support over her husband having left her. She says that her family "don't give me two cents worth".

(19)[NB:IV:10:29]

(At the start of the extract Emma is talking about a friend who was very appreciative of her company)

Emma: t.h Buh wha:ta ga:l. Thirty eight year ol'gal:,  
'n she (.) lef'me tihnight shiz oh Emma syer so  
much she siz I love duh have yih rou::nd en in::  
yihknow tuh made me feel so goo::d'n I thut why'n  
the hell my fa'mly be that w\*a:y.  
Lottie: Ye::ah.  
--> Emma: They don't give me two cents worth of:,h

In these examples the complaints and the contexts in which they are made are quite various. They range from complaints about one's family to an insufficient pay rise, and from an unprofitable buisness deal to severe headaches. But although the complaints and the contexts differ a great deal, all the examples have one thing in common: that the complaint itself is formulated through the idiom. In other words, although the idiom may be accompanied by detailing as to the nature of the grievance, it is the idiom which is used to say exactly what the nature of the complaint is. So, if we look again at extract (2) we see that the idiom is preceded by detailing about aspects of the hotel's terrible service.

(2) [NB:IV:10:35-36]

Emma: W'l you know we were there in Ju:ne yihknow Bud played go:lf?h hhh En w'n the air c'nditioner went o::ff?h hhh En wir bout (.) th'oanee ones that ha:d'n air conditioned room the rest of'm were bro:ken. .hhh An'we went down duh brekfiss 'n there wz oannee abou' two people duh help fer brekfiss with all these guys goina pla:y go:lf. They w'r a:ll teed o:ff:.

Lottie: Ye[:ah?

Emma: [Becuz (.) uy Bud u-c'dn e:v'n eat iz brekfist. He o:rdere he waited forty five minutes'n he'a:dtuh be out there duh tee off so I gave it to Karen's liddle bo:y.

(0.7)

Emma: ((swallow)) I mean that's how bad the service was --> .h hh (.) It's gahn duh pot.

Lottie: u-Oh::: (.) e-[Ye : : a h . [Ye< ]

Emma: But it's a beauti'ful go:lf course.

Thus, Emma details the failure of the air conditioning, the small number of people to serve breakfast, the long wait for it to arrive and the fact that it arrived too late. But the idiom "It's gahn duh pot" formulates these details by specifying the nature of the complaint being made out of them. A variety of complaints could have been made from the details, but the idiom acts as a kind of gloss which specifies the complaint which is being made.

In all these examples, that is extracts (1) to (7) and (14) to (19), the complainant engages in these two distinct activities; that is, he or she reports details concerning the grievance, and then he or she explicitly formulates a complaint out of those details. They are distinctive activities in that they occupy different components in the telling, and that the point of the telling is stated in the idiomatic complaint. The details which the complainant tells about the grievance may be quite brief, as in (16):

Ilene: .hhh We've checked now on all the paypize's has .hh an' we have had n:nothing fr'm Moss'n Comp'ny through the post.



Or they may approach being a story about the circumstances of the grievance, as in extract (2):

Emma: W'l you know we were there in Ju:ne yihknow Bud played go:lf?h hhh En w'n the air c'nditioner went o:ff?h hhh En wir bout (.) th'oannee ones that ha:d'n air conditioned room the rest of'm were bro:ken. .hhh An'we went down duh brekfiss 'n there wz oannee abou' two people duh help fer brekfiss with all these guys goina pla:y go:lf. They w'r a:ll teed o:ff..

The detailing in Emma's story is built so as to very clearly implicate a complaint; thus, she mentions quite a number of details which illustrate the poor service they recieved at the hotel. She then uses the idiom to specify her complaint about just how bad the service was. Therefore, a complainant's story detailing the circumstances of the grievance may be distinguished from the explicit formulation of, or "naming", the grievance itself. In each of the extracts, (1) to (7) and (14) to (19), the complaint is made explicit in a separate object from the telling of the details of the grievance; an object which formulates the circumstantial details through the use of an idiomatic expression.

So, each of the above sequences consists of the detailing of a grievance and of an idiomatic formulation. They differ, however, as to whether the detailing precedes, or follows the idiom. For instance, in (3) details about the problems with double glazing are followed by the idiomatic formulation "you cahn't wi:n really".

(3) [Detail]

Jenny: Ahn' the trouble is you see if you tighten th'clips too much they snahp.  
Ann: Yes. Well thaht's w't I do. Breakin' them.  
Jenny: Ye:s:.  
Ann: | I've been a bit mohr cahreful this time b't the trouble is I don't get th'm ( ) tih the windows actually.  
(.)  
--> Ann: You cahn't wi:n really.  
Jenny: Nyo:.

Similarly, in (15), A's complaint about her pay rise is followed by the idiomatic formulation "take a flying...scre:w at thu mhoo:n". In (16) the details about Ilene's attempts to get through to the agents are followed by the idiomatic formulation "it's like...banging y'r head against a brick wa:ll". Finally, in (17), the detailing about the shortcomings of the business deal are followed by the idiomatic formulation "seven gra:nd down thih:....tu:bes".

Because the idioms in cases such as these formulate all of the detailing of a grievance, they commonly link back to all, or large sections of the previous talk. This issue will be explored in much greater detail in chapter three, but at present I will note that many of the idioms which formulate complaints can also be seen to summarise those complaints.

The feature of these idioms which seems largely responsible for their being summaries of the talk, is precisely that they link back beyond the preceding utterance to encompass many, or all, aspects of the foregoing detailing. And, as they are no bigger than single utterances, they reduce the whole of the preceding detailing into a single utterance or component. Thus, because the idioms link back to, and reduce, the previous telling, they act as summaries. Further, a necessary feature of formulations is that they link back to, and reduce, elements of the detailing. Therefore in formulating a complaint idioms also summarise it. They can often be seen to contain what may be seen as a "theme" of the details; the idiom makes explicit a point of view that has been implicit in the detailing.

In conversation speakers do not simply describe events in an objective way. Instead they do so in such a way as to make explicit whether what they are describing is to be seen as good, bad, exciting,

depressing and so on. Thus implicit in the detailing is an attitude towards the events being recalled. Frequently this attitude is made explicit at the completion of the telling, and this is often done with an idiom.<sup>4</sup> In other words, that the speaker is complaining about an event is implicit in the detailing, but it is made explicit through the use of a formulating idiom at the end of the detailing. In chapter three we will investigate this further, but at present I note that in a number of the examples of complaints, detailing which describes a variety of complainables is often summarised by an idiom which formulates the exact nature of the complaint. This is, again, clearly illustrated by extract (2).

(2) [Detail]

Emma: W'l you know we were there in Ju:ne yihknow Bud played go:lf?h hhh En w'n the air c'nditioner went o::ff?h hhh En wir bout (.) th'oannee ones that ha:d'n air conditioned room the rest of'm were bro:ken. .hhh An'we went down duh brekfiss 'n there wz oannee abou' two people duh help fer brekfiss with all these guys goina pla:y go:lf. They w'r a:ll teed o:ff..

Lottie: Ye<sub>l</sub>:ah?

Emma: Becuz (.) uy Bud u-c'dn e:v'n eat iz brekfist. He o:rdered he waited forty five minutes'n he'a:dtuh be out there duh tee off so I gave it to Karen's liddle bo:y.

(0.7)

Emma: ((swallow)) I mean that's how bad the service was h hh (.) It's gahn duh pot.

Lottie: u-Oh:: (.) e-Ye ;; a h . Ye<

Emma: But it's a be auti-ful go:lf course.

As already noted, Emma details a variety of faults with the hotel's service. These are then followed by an idiom which formulates the complaint. It makes explicit Emma's criticism of the hotel, a criticism which up until then has been implicit in the detailing. Hence it can be

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the association between between idioms and the completion of a telling see chapters three and four.

seen to relate back to all of the preceding talk about the hotel: besides being a formulation of the detailing, it is also a summary.

But not all the idioms occur at the end of the detailing. As mentioned above, in some cases the idiom precedes the detailing of the complaint. In these it acts as a gloss, which states the nature of the complaint, and is followed by elaborating details. The idiom informs the recipient that a complaint is being made and that the details which follow are the substance of this complaint. For instance, in (14) the idiom describes the extreme pain which the patient is in, and is followed by details relating to the the severity of the headaches.

(14)[Detail]

- P:           that I could understood (.) because it (.) it's  
              the headaches: was the thing thats: got me  
              (0.4)
- P:           (more than anything else)  
              (1.2)
- > P:       more than the devil in hell because they were  
              gettin more or less (.) permanent yer know::  
              (1.2)
- P:           they were coming even when I was never pain in  
              the back of my neck

Similarly, in (5), Pam's idiomatic complaint against the way the doctor is questioning George is followed by detailing about her difficulty in staying awake: and in (18) Emma's idiom which is a complaint about her husband's argumentativeness is followed by detailing about the way he treats her. It will be noticed that in these cases, where the idiom precedes the detailing, the detailing is limited to a single object.

To sum up, whether the idiom precedes or follows the detailing, the nature of the complaint is made explicit in an object which is separate from the detailing of the complaint. There is a specific object which formulates the point of the details and is idiomatic.

Further, the idioms work in a specially "powerful" way with respect to the details they summarise or gloss: they represent their egregious character. Thus, for instance, in (1) Brenda would not just feel rejected if she were unable to speak to Laurel, but it would "throw her off the deep end"; in (2) the hotel service was not merely bad, but it had "gahn duh pot"; in (4) Mrs H's friend does not merely have to be encouraged, she has to be "taken by the nose"; in (6) the assassinations were not merely unbelievable, but they were a "night mare"; in (14) the patient is not merely in pain, but it hurts "more than the devil in hell"; in (16) trying to convince the agents is not merely difficult, it is like "banging y'r head against a brick wall"; and in (19) Emma's family are not just unhelpful, they do not give "two cents worth". In each case, the idioms go further than the circumstantial detailings do in characterising the strength of grievance to be found in those details.<sup>5</sup>

In the next section we shall further investigate the role of idioms in characterising the strength of complaints, but first I want to note that not all idioms which occur in complaints are used to formulate the nature of that complaint. There is a second category of idioms which occur in the sequential environment of complainings but which work in an entirely different way from those with which we have been concerned up until now. Instead of formulating the detailing of a complaint these idioms contrast with the preceding complaining by suggesting that despite the problem the speaker is optimistic or at least resigned to the situation. For instance in the following extract the complaining is followed by an idiom which suggests that, in spite of everything, the

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<sup>5</sup> On the association between idioms and intensity see chapter one, and section 3 below.

speaker is optimistic. At the beginning of the excerpt P is discussing his unemployment.

(20)[D.(2)[JGI(S):X15:4-5]

P: but u-certain: (.) things wi:ll do that you know  
they're BOUND to. [hhh in certain industry.  
M: [Yah.  
(0.2)  
M: Yah,  
P: Different things'll pick up when it- begins to be  
Spring of the yea:r and everythi:ng,  
M: Yah.  
--> P: hhh But I think it'll iron itself out,  
M: I sure hope so.  
P: [I'll see you Tuesday.

Talk about P's problem (i.e. his unemployment) is followed by the idiom "it'll iron itself out," which is used to demonstrate that P believes the problem will soon end.

In a number of instances a complaint or troubles-telling is followed by an idiom which suggests that the speaker is either hopeful or at least resigned to the situation, and that therefore the recipient of the telling need not worry. In the following extract a speaker again uses an idiom to suggest that despite her problem she is optimistic and not worried. Ann has been describing some alterations she has had made to the house, they are now completed but she is left with clearing up.

(21)[Rah:1:JA(11):4]

Jenny: So have you got it all ohrganized then [more'r less?  
Ann: [Well  
Ann: Well excep'thet thez mu:d fr'm the front do:h  
ri:ght up. tuh the .hh trai:led up'n down  
t'the garage with screwdriviz 'n  
[God knows what ( ).  
Jenny: [O h : : : d e a : u h.  
--> Ann: Nevuh mind it'll all come right in the end,  
Jenny: Yeh. Okay you go'n getta clean trousihs on

Ann uses the idiom "it'll all come right in the end" to suggest that in spite of the mess she is sure that the problem will soon be resolved.

In the following extract the troubles-teller, Edgerton, uses an

idiom to show that even if he is not exactly optimistic, he is at least resigned to the situation, he is no longer upset by it. Alf has asked about the litter of puppies to which his wife's dog (Tessa) has recently given birth. Edgerton tells him that the puppies have died, that his wife, Ilene, is upset, and that the dog is pining for them.

(22)[Heritage:IV:2:4:Ex:2]

Edgerton: ukhh! No they uhm .hh lahst one die:d,  
 Alf: Oh:: I'm sorry t'hear that ]  
 Edgerton: A:nd u h : :-]m uhm I-ilene wz  
 very distressed by it .hhh  
 Alf: I bet she was.  
 Edgerton: Uh::m she- she's (.) she's got oll huhr fam'ly  
 heu:h ovuh heah fuh th'weeke:nd so:: ah got (.)  
so much on huhr plate. .h she cah't think about  
it but pohr little uh::: pohr li-th' pohr little  
 dah:g Tessa.  
 Alf: Yeh  
 Edgerton: She's pinning.  
 Alf: Yes::=  
 Edgerton: =en she won't eat,  
 Alf: No=  
 Edgerton: =ah:: end a'course that gets Ilene moh wuhrried.  
 Alf: I'll bet it does.  
 Edgerton: So uh:m anyway,hh uh,hh thea:hr ther ih ti:s,  
 Alf: M-mh  
 --> Edgerton: Uh:: jus'g'nna haftuh s- try agay:n nex'time.  
 Alf: Yes  
 (0.2)  
 Alf: Oh yes .hhhh Anyway Edgerton'n eokay so w'l leave  
 the arrangements'z they ah:re,

Edgerton uses the idiom "jus'g'nna haftuh s- try agay:n nex'time" to suggest that he is resigned to the problem and that he is hopeful that in the future they might have more luck.

In these examples, instead of formulating the egregious character of the complaint, the idioms work in the opposite way. That is, they end the complaint on a positive, optimistic note. Thus, we have seen that although idioms often formulate the egregious nature of a complaint, they do not always do so. There is a second category which encompasses those idioms which contrast with the complaint by suggesting that the

speaker is optimistic, unworried etc. We will return to this second category in chapter three. But before then we shall further investigate those idioms which formulate the egregious nature of complaints, exploring the sequential/interactional work being managed by this conversational phenomena.

### 3 CHARACTERISTICS OF IDIOMS

In the previous section we saw that idioms are often used to formulate the egregious nature of the complaint and in so doing, they go further than the details do in characterising the strength of the grievance. Such idioms are, as seen in chapter one, similar to the linguistic concept of intensity, although, in the literature on intensity, idioms are rarely taken into account. To reiterate: Labov (1984) states that most analyses of intensity concentrate on adverbs such as "really", "so" and "very". His analysis is also mainly concerned with adverbs such as these, but he does consider metaphors:

"We encounter in spontaneous speech a wide variety of metaphors that serve as intensifiers: bleeding like a pig, darker than pitch, or pitch dark." (ibid. P.45)

Many of the idioms in extracts (1) to (7) and (14) to (19) are metaphors. In a similar way to Labov's examples, they compare the complained about matter to something which epitomises a quality of whatever it is that is being described. Hence they are intensifiers in the same way as those metaphors in the above quotation. Just as the metaphor "darker than pitch" creates a comparison between the present situation and pitch which epitomises darkness, so "take huh by the no:se" creates a comparison between what Mrs H has to do to get her sister to go to the physiotherapist and leading her by the nose like a stubborn animal. Many of the idioms are intensifiers resulting from



the fact that they compare the situation at hand to an extreme version of that situation.

In (5) the idiom "Rome wasn't built in a day" is an intensifier as a result of comparing the doctors supposed assumption that he can change George by asking him a number of questions, to a belief that Rome could be built in a day. Similarly, in (6) Ilene compares her attempts to convince the agents of the truth of her claim to banging her head against a brick wall. Thus, the comparison results in portraying Ilene's attempts as useless, making absolutely no impression, and being positively painful. Again in (18) the idiomatic simile "CA:N'T...SAY BLUE IS BLUE" draws a comparison between the kinds of statements that she has been making, with which her husband has been disagreeing, and this statement of an obvious truth. *Therefore, by* portraying her husband as disagreeing with inconsequential and undeniable statements such as this, she characterises his behaviour as totally unreasonable.

In sum, speakers use intensifiers in order to make a strong case. They are, therefore, very similar to "extreme case formulations". Pomerantz (1986) found that extreme case formulations such as "brand new", "didn't say a word" and "completely innocent", "assert the strongest case in anticipation of non-sympathetic hearings", and hence are frequently used in complaints. She writes:

"Part of the business of complaining involves portraying a situation as a legitimate complainable. This may take the form of portraying the offence committed and/or the suffering endured in such a way that it would not be dismissed as minor. So as to legitimize a complaint and portray the complainable situation as worthy of complaint, a speaker may portray the offence and/or the suffering with Extreme Case Formulations. In both the accusing and defending, participants often present their strongest cases, including specifying Extreme Cases of their claims." (ibid. P.12)

In extracts (1) to (7) and (14) to (19) a strong case is being made by portraying the egregious character of the complainable matter in either an idiomatic gloss or summary of the details. The idioms differ, however, from extreme case formulations in that while the latter are often used in the detailing of a complaint, idioms are separate objects which serve to gloss or summarise the details. In the following extract, extreme case formulations are used in the detailing of a complaint which is then summarised by the idiomatic expression.

(16)[Her:01:1:2-3]

- Ilene: hhh We've checked now on all the paypize's has  
 .hh an' Moss'n Comp'ny said wuh sent through the  
 pos' we have had n:nothing fr'm Moss'n Comp'ny  
 through the post.  
 (0.3)
- Ilene: Anyway,  
 (.)
- Ilene: Tha:t's th- uh you know you c'm (b)  
 (.) ahrgue ih it's like (.) uh:<sub>m</sub>
- Shirley: <sub>Well</sub>  
 (.)
- > Ilene: banging y'r head against a brick wa::ll.<sub>]</sub>  
 Shirley: <sub>E z fahr ez ]I'm</sub>  
 c'ncerned on this situa:tion, oll private  
 negotiations between us mus' cea:se.

In detailing her claim that the estate agents have failed to send her certain important papers, Ilene uses two extreme case formulations in describing the search they have made: "checked all the papers", and again in drawing a conclusion from that search, "we have had nothing fr'm Moss'n Comp'ny". She then goes on to use the idiom "banging y'r head against a brick wa::l" to summarise her grievance with the agents. Thus, in detailing the case, a speaker may attempt to portray the complaint using extreme case formulations. He or she may then summarise the grievance in a separate object, through an idiomatic formulation.

A second difference between extreme case formulations and "intensity" conveyed through idioms is that, while the former are

treated as literal descriptions of the facts, idioms are figurative.<sup>6</sup> Extreme case formulations purport to be literal descriptions of concrete facts, as is illustrated in (16) above; thus they are subject to being empirically tested and validated. However, as we saw in chapter one, idioms are recognizably figurative (or should be recognized as such by competent users of the language<sup>7</sup>). Idioms remove the complaint from its supporting circumstantial details. This, as was demonstrated in chapter one, may give them a special robustness: since they are not to be taken literally, they may have a certain resistance to being tested or challenged on the empirical facts of the matter.

But besides these two differences between idioms and extreme case formulations, there is one important similarity which will be the focus of the following section.

#### 4 SEEKING AFFILIATION THROUGH IDIOMS

Pomerantz (1986) states that extreme formulations are used when speakers anticipate a non-sympathetic hearing. There is evidence in many of the extracts quoted above, as elsewhere in the data, that when speakers use idiomatic expressions in complaint sequences, they cannot rely on their recipients' sympathy or affiliation. For instance, in (16) Ilene uses the idiom "banging y'r head against a brick wa:l" as a complaint which contests the claim of Shirley's estate agents to have posted the papers, a claim which Shirley, just before, has said she must accept. Insofar as Ilene is taking a contrary position to Shirley's, she is making a complaint in a sequential context in which

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the figurative nature of idioms see chapter one, section 1.

<sup>7</sup> See Sacks (1964-65) and (1972a), and Gibbs (1987).

she cannot rely on her recipient's affiliation. There are, then, clear sequential grounds on which Ilene can anticipate a non-sympathetic response. A similar case can be found in (14) where the patient describes the intensity of the pain he is suffering as a result of the headaches.

(14)[Detail]

- P: ...because it (.) it's  
the headaches: was the thing thats: got me  
(0.4)
- P: (more than anything else)  
(1.2)
- > P: more than the devil in hell because they were  
gettin more or less (.) permanent yer know::  
(1.2)
- P: they were coming even when I was never pain in  
the back of my neck

The intensity displayed in the idiom "more than the devil in hell" is then related to the permanence of the pain; the patient claims that it was felt at times when the he was not experiencing pain in his neck. The patient appears thus to be raising a doubt about the doctor's preceding diagnosis:

- Dr.: .hhhh I'm sure: Doctor: Macphale:s; right (.) I'm  
sure that these headaches:: yer gettin are:: er::  
associated with a bit of arthritis:  
(0.5)
- Dr.: in yer er:: (0.7) in yer neck (.) really: (.)  
more than your spine:: er:m: (.) .hh I mean  
more than your lower spine it's the in your neck  
thats causin the::
- P:     └is it
- P:     └it seems to be he:re:: anywa-y:
- Dr.:     └the problem                     └that's correct

The patient is presenting evidence contrary to both the doctor's assessment of the lack of the severity of the condition ("a bit of arthritis") and the source of the headaches (arthritis in the neck). Thus he is complaining about his experienced ill-health (it is not in that respect a complaint against the doctor). But in doing so the

patient may be heard not to concur with the doctor's diagnosis, which is a clear basis for the patient to anticipate the doctor's non-affiliation.

So, in cases such as (16) and (14) there is a clear sequential reason for speakers, in formulating their grievance in an idiomatic complaint, to anticipate an unsympathetic response. The reason being that the utterance in which the idiom is used is designed to contest a position taken by the recipient in his or her prior turn. These complaints are being delivered in what is, therefore, a hostile environment.

Idiomatic complaints also occur in a second inauspicious environment. Besides being delivered after a recipient has already clearly demonstrated non-affiliation, they can be delivered in an environment where the speaker merely suspects that the recipient's affiliation cannot be guaranteed. In these the speaker does not have clear sequential evidence that the recipient will not align with the speaker's version, but, due to the nature of the complaint, he or she assumes that the recipient may not readily affiliate. Analysis of these instances begins to reveal evidence that idiomatic formulations of complaints are being deployed after recipients have had opportunities to sympathize and hence affiliate with the complaints, but have declined those opportunities. Thus the hostile environment in which idiomatic expressions are delivered may arise from complainants treating such missed opportunities as withholdings of affiliation/alignment by recipients. One such case is extract (18).

(18)[NB:IV:7:4]

Emma: .hhh En I: talk'to 'im la:s'night I been kahnda  
sick about it en:d .hhhhhhh uh::: hIt's a  
pro:blem I-ah'll ah'll tell you when I see:  
you ah mean it'll work out I kno:w,hh I

don't know whether we're gunnuh s::eparate I:  
 don't know what the who:le thing's a[bout h h  
 Barbara: Oh: really?  
 Emma: .hhhhhh  
 Barbara: Is this been goin on lo:ng er wha:t.  
 Emma: OH::: I DON'T KNOW I JIS CA:N'T SEEM TUH SAY  
 --> BLUE IS BLUE HE AR:GUES e-WITH ME ER:: \*u- (.)  
 u-SOMETHING EN: AH: DON'T DO THIS RI:GHT'n  
 THAT RI:GHT. hhhhhh I NEED hhHE:L:P .hh  
 (.)  
 Emma: EN BARBRA wouldju CA:LL im dihni:ght for me,h

It will be remembered that Emma has called her married daughter, Barbara, to tell her that her husband, Barbara's father, has left her. This takes place a few days before Thanksgiving when Barbara and her family were due to come down for a holiday. After some detailing of the trouble by Emma, Barbara responds with two kinds of objects: a surprise-marked news token "Oh: really?" (see Heritage 1984b<sup>8</sup>); and a question about the trouble "Is this been goin on lo:ng er wha:t". Thus she treats it as unexpected news; she does not receive it as bad news, nor does she sympathize with her mother (she does not, for instance, say something like "Oh how awful for you"). In so doing she retains a manifestly neutral stance with respect to what Emma has told her. Emma has, therefore, no sequential evidence to suggest that Barbara will affiliate with her point of view. Furthermore, she may also have reason to be cautious about anticipating a sympathetic hearing on the grounds that complaining about one member of a family to another is rather a delicate thing to do, the delicacy concerning with which of them will Barbara affiliate.

Whether or not the absence of some empathetic response at such a point is treated by the complainant as a withholding, a deliberate declining to affiliate or sympathize, it is not possible to tell.

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<sup>8</sup> Also for a summary of Heritage (1984b) see chapter one.

However, a similar issue has been explored by Jefferson (1980) in the environment of troubles-tellings. Jefferson found that in response to the announcement of some trouble (which Emma's announcement "I don't know whether we're gunnuh s::eparate" is), recipients typically use either a form which "marks arrival at and elicits further talk on the matter but does not necessarily align recipient as a troubles recipient" ("Oh really" being one such form: see Jefferson 1980:19), or a form "which commits recipient as now, a troubles-recipient" ("Oh no" being such a form which affiliates with the teller regarding the trouble). In the extract Barbara's response is an acknowledgement rather than an aligning with the teller. Barbara has not displayed sympathy or in any way affiliated with Emma's predicament as a result of being left by her husband not knowing whether they are going to separate or not. So when Emma continues in response to Barbara's inquiry, her daughter is not yet a sympathetic recipient. It is in this environment that Emma uses the idiomatic formulation of her complaint, "CA:N'T SEEM TUH SAY BLUE IS BLUE".

From the talk that follows extract (18) we can see more clearly that Barbara is withholding affiliation. After this more overt indication of Barbara's non-affiliation, Emma produces another idiomatic version of her complaint.

(23)[NB:IV:7:4]

- Emma: EN BARBRA wouldju CA:LL im dihni:ght for me,h  
(.)
- Barbara: Ye:ah,
- Emma: .h HU:H?h
- Barbara: Well if he dez't co:me I won't uh:: (0.2) t-dra:g  
(.) Hugh en evrybuddy do:wn
- Emma: CUZ I:D L::OVE duh cook for yuh,
- Barbara: We:ll I don't- you know i don'wanna git'n vo:lved  
down- I don'wanna haf: yihknow ah come dow:n over  
the weeken'n stay with yuh b't I don'want yihknow  
Hugh tuh come: (.) down if it's a mess,
- Emma: .t It's NO ME:SS IT A::LL. I ta:lk to im





it occurs not long after the conversation between Emma and Barbara. Emma is talking about the visit of a friend (who "ga:l" refers to) who expressed appreciation of Emma's company. Emma then contrasts this with the opinion of her family.

(19)[NB:IV:10:29]

Emma: t.h Buh wha:ta ga:l. Thirty eight year ol'gal:,  
'n she (.) lef'me tihnight shiz oh Emma syer so  
much she siz I love duh have yih rou::nd en in::  
yihknow tuh made me feel so goo::d'n I thut why'n  
the hell my fam'ly be that wa:y.

Lottie: Ye::ah.

--> Emma: They don't give me two cents worth of:,h  
(0.2)

Lottie: I: know it.

--> Emma: I'm no bol'l a'melk, .hhh=  
Lottie: =<sub>[Nu:h.]</sub>  
Emma: =<sub>[En LO:T]</sub>TIE I'm (.) uh::, Let's don't us  
have any pro:blem plea:se,hh

Lottie: Oh I'm n<sub>[o:t]</sub>  
Emma: <sub>[Fere<sub>[ver.]</sub>]</sub>

Lottie: <sub>[No:]</sub>: I'm no:t (.) dNo: I'm not  
gunnuh have'ny problem bud I<sub>[mean I've]</sub>diss:  
Emma: <sub>[O k a y.]</sub>

Lottie: Yihknown ah won'have the Chrismas p a r t y  
Emma: <sub>[Well yihkno]</sub>w  
tha:t's Bud's fau:lt,  
(0.2)

Lottie: No::? Id<sub>[i:sn't?]</sub>uh:: thet's juh uh: duh ah'll  
Emma: <sub>[((sniff))]</sub>  
(.)

Lottie: Ah'll git the (.) Chrismas pres'n next Mondee

In using the idiom "They don't give me two cents worth" Emma demonstrates her recognition that, earlier, Barbara did not display support and sympathy. However, the extract is also interesting because of the similarity between it and extracts (18) and (23). Again Emma is complaining about a member of her family to another family member (Lottie is her sister), and she does not receive fully affiliative responses from the recipient. In the same way as in (18) and (23) she produces two idiomatic versions of the complaint. Similarly the recipient's failure to affiliate and sympathize is displayed by her

orientation to the complaint in terms of her own self-interest.

Following her complaint "why'n the hell my fam'ly be that wa:y" Lottie gives only a minimal agreement "Ye::ah". Emma then produces an idiomatic version of the complaint "They don't give me two cents worth" to which Lottie gives a slightly upgraded agreement "I: know it". But this is only a confirmation rather than a sympathetic affiliation, she neither shows any sympathy for Emma nor does she collaborate with the complaint against Emma's family. Emma's final idiom, the self-criticism "I'm no bol'l a'melk" is therefore being delivered in a non-sympathetic, non-affiliative environment, similar to that in extracts (18) and (23). Here, too, Lottie responds to the complaint in terms of her own self-interest; rather than sympathizing with Emma over her problems, she introduces the subject of the Christmas party which she was going to hold. The lack of affiliation implicit in Lottie's first two responses becomes even more overt in this response to Emma's plea (that they should not "have'ny pro:blem"). She further fails to affiliate by rejecting Emma's attempt to blame her (Emma's) husband (Bud) for Lottie's decision not to hold the party.

Although in these two extracts the speakers are not complaining about a point of view held by the recipient, as in extracts (5), (14), and (16), they are complaining in circumstances where a recipient has not yet affiliated and can therefore be treated by complainants as possibly withholding affiliation. The absence of affiliative responses constitutes an environment in which complainants may anticipate that they cannot rely on the recipient's support. Thus an idiomatic formulation of the complaint may be used by the complainant to persist with it in an implicitly or explicitly non-sympathetic and generally "inauspicious" sequential environment (Jefferson 1985:451-62). This is

obvious in instances where there is some conflict between the speakers, but less so in instances such as (18), (23) and (19) where recipients may have divided loyalties, and in which complainants, aware of that fact, may try to win the recipients' sympathy to their side of the conflict.

In sum, in telling a complaint, speakers may seek the recipient's affiliation and sympathy. In the extracts examined here, recipient's have failed to affiliate or sympathize, though they have had opportunities to do so, and in some cases they have conspicuously withheld affiliation. The complainants, however, have persisted in making the complaint, using idioms in order to do so. The use of such idiomatic formulations may be explicitly linked to this feature of the context: they may be used because they are objects which will retain their strength over subsequent versions of the complaint in inauspicious environments.

#### 4.1 Idioms and Innocence

In chapter one I described several features that result in idioms possessing a certain strength or robustness, and which may account for their use in such inauspicious environments. For example we saw that idioms are robust because they are assumed to be "correct about something"<sup>9</sup>. Also we found that their often figurative nature renders them hard to undermine on empirical grounds.

A further feature that is of relevance here, is that idioms can be used to portray the speaker as an innocent victim. For instance with

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<sup>9</sup> See Sacks (1965, Winter, Lecture 8). For more on Sacks' thesis see chapter one section 1.

the idiom "CA:N'T SEEM TUH SAY BLUE IS BLUE" Emma portrays herself as merely stating an obvious and uncontroversial truth. Furthermore it suggests that her husband is disagreeing with her over indisputable and inconsequential statements. Emma is therefore innocent and in an impossible situation. Similarly idioms such as "hol'n me onna spot" and "They don't give me two cents worth" all portray the speaker as innocent victim of an impossible situation. A particularly clear example of this can be seen in the following extract which occurs after Ilene's idiomatic utterance in extract (16).

(16)[Her:01:1:2-3]

Ilene: Anyway, (.) Tha:t's th- uh you know you c'm(b) (.)  
ahrgue ih it's like (.) uh:~m  
Shirley: [Well  
(.)  
--> Ilene: banging y'r head against a brick wa:ll.~  
Shirley: [E z fahr ez~] I'm  
c'ncerned on this situa:tion, oll privite  
negotiations between us mus' cea:se.  
(0.2)  
Shirley: .hh  
Ilene: M~m hm  
Shirley: [Ah:nd (.) any c-negotia:tion:s you: wish to  
enter in on th'propity you haftih go vIa  
Moss'n Co.  
Ilene: Mm:.  
Shirley: .hh I been on t'th' s'licitih (he thowt thet)  
yihknow give me s'm legal gui:dan~ce  
Ilene: [Yeah:~. Yah.  
--> Shirley: Ah:~nd I'm really lef'between th'devil'n deep  
--> blue sea: I have no ohption BAH:T.h (0.2) tuh  
revuhrt tih thah'.  
(.)  
Shirley: Uh:~: becoss 'of the c-the cost eenvoh:lved an:d  
Ilene: [Mm  
Ilene: Ye~ah.  
Shirley: [w'n it beek- ended up in en ahr:gument,

Shirley uses the idiomatic utterance "between th'devil'n deep blue sea:" to suggest that she is innocently caught between two intractable forces. Therefore, in this sequence, both protagonists use an idiom to present their complaint. Ilene uses an idiom in her complaint against

the way the agents have treated her, and Shirley uses an idiom in depicting the impossible situation she is in. Both these idioms portray the speakers as innocent. But although the idioms portray the speaker as innocent, they do so without accusing the recipient. For example Ilene's idiomatic complaint focuses entirely on the company, and Shirley's idiom portrays her as being forced to act against Ilene's interests when she would rather not.

Thus, another feature of some idioms that may account for their frequent use in inauspicious sequential environments (such as complaining in an environment of non-affiliation) is that they can be used to portray the speaker as innocent. Further, they are able to do so without directly accusing the recipient, even if the recipient holds an opposing view, (about which the speaker may be complaining). In sum, we have uncovered another feature of idioms which may help to account for their frequent use in complaint sequences.

#### 4.II Idioms and Affiliation in Complaints

Idioms in complaints, then, often occur in an environment of non-affiliation. Here I want to note that this is not always the case. Above we saw that idioms in complaints fall into two categories, those which formulate the nature of the complaint, and those which contrast with it by demonstrating that the speaker is optimistic, cheerful in spite of it, etc. We have discovered that idioms which formulate complaints are often delivered in an environment of non-affiliation. In this section I want to note that this is not the case for those idioms which contrast with the complaining.

Idioms which contrast with the complaint often follow a clear

affiliative response on the part of the recipient. Extract (21) is a case in point; the recipient of the complaint gives a sympathetic, affiliative response just prior to the idiom. Jenny responds "Oh::: dea:uh" to the detailing about the state of the house, this is immediately followed by Ann's idiomatic formulation "it'll all come right in the end". Thus Ann is delivering the idiom in an environment where the recipient's sympathy and affiliation have been clearly demonstrated.

(21)[Detail]

Ann: Well excep'thet thez mu:d fr'm the front do:h  
ri:ght up. tuh the .hh tra:i:led up'n down  
t'the garage with screwdriviz 'n  
[God knows what ( ).  
Jenny: [O h : : : d e a : u h.  
--> Ann: Nevuh mind it'll all come right in the end,  
Jenny: Yeh. Okay you go'n getta clean trousihs on

Similarly in (22) Edgerton produces the idiom "jus'g'nna haftuh s-try agay:n nex'time" after Alf's response "I'll bet it does" which demonstrates sympathetic affiliation with the fact that Ilene is becoming *more* worried because the mother of the dead puppies is pining. Therefore, the idiom is again being delivered in an environment of recipient affiliation.

(22)[Detail]

Edgerton: =ah:: end a'course that gets Ilene moh wuhrried.  
Alf: I'll bet it does.  
Edgerton: So uh:m anyway,hh uh,hh thea:hr ther ih ti:s,  
Alf: M<sub>mh</sub>  
--> Edgerton: [uh:: jus'g'nna haftuh s- try agay:n nex'time.  
Alf: Yes  
(0.2)  
Alf: Oh yes .hhhh Anyway Edgerton'n eokay so w'l leave  
the arrangements'z they ahire,

Thus, a further difference between idioms which formulate a complaint and those which contrast with it by being optimistic, resigned and so on, is that while the former are often delivered in

inauspicious environments, the latter are generally deployed where recipient sympathy/affiliation has been forthcoming.

#### 4.III Idioms Which Perform a Dispreferred Activity and Innocence

In this chapter it has been discovered that idioms which formulate complaints often occur in an environment of non-affiliation. In the previous section, I applied this finding to idioms which contrast with complaints and discovered that the latter occur in environments of overt affiliation. Another finding resulting from the previous analysis is that idioms in complaints often portray the speaker as innocent. In this section I shall briefly apply this finding to idioms which occur in another sequential environment in order to discover whether it is a recurrent feature of idioms other than those which occur in complaints.

A second sequential position in which idioms frequently occur is in the context of a speaker performing a dispreferred activity such as turning down an invitation, disagreeing and so on. By examining this context it is possible to distinguish certain similarities between it and idioms in complaints. Most noticeably, here too, the idioms frequently portray the speaker as innocent. Extract (11) is a case in point.

(11)[Detail]

Edgerton: Ah must apologi::ze (.) the ahnswer is negative::.  
Jane: Okay,  
Edgerton: Bihcau:se uh: she's (0.2) she's feeling a little  
--> unduh the weathah:  
(0.2)  
Jane: Oh-hho::.

Just prior to this extract Jane has invited Edgerton and his wife over for drinks. After a consultation with his wife he says that they must decline the invitation because his wife is "unduh the weathah". Not

only does this suggest that Edgerton has nothing to do with his having to reject the invitation, but it also portrays his wife as innocent: it is not that she does not want to accept, it is that she is forced to decline because of her health. The idiom suggests that they are having to refuse the invitation through necessity, not choice.

This extract demonstrates that idioms which portray the speaker as innocent are not restricted to the sequential environment of complaints; rather many idioms from a variety of environments display this characteristic.

#### 5 IDIOMS AND THEIR RELATION TO TOPIC TERMINATION

One final aspect of idioms that formulate complaints, which until now has only been touched upon, is their position within the topic. In the course of this chapter we have identified a number of features of complaining idioms. Firstly, (as we have explored briefly here and will investigate in more detail in the following chapter) by using an idiomatic expression, a speaker may move away from the detailing of a grievance to a more general formulation, a figurative summing-up of the complaint. Moreover, complaints may be formulated where there is a lack of alignment between speakers. Certain of their characteristics such as being taken to be "correct about something", their figurative nature which resists empirical verification, and that they often portray the speaker as innocent, result in their depicting the complainant's point of view in such a way that it is hard to disagree with. All these factors combine in accounting for a position in which idioms are often used, that is, in terminating a topic. An idiomatic formulation of the complaint may be used to bring the matter to a close on a point with which the recipient may concur; to bring speaker and recipient into



some kind of alignment before changing the topic. The following extracts, taken from a variety of topics (i.e. not just complaints), illustrate the topically terminal sequential position in which idioms frequently occur.

(24)[Heritage:1:6:5-6]

(The conversation is about cutting dogs' claws.)

Ilene: You know you- you musn't cut it very fahr  
down, hh=  
Mrs H: =Yes.  
Ilene: You musn't cut it onto the bla:k becuz it's  
li:ke cutting into ar own quick.  
Mrs H: Yes of course ih tis.  
--> Ilene: En they'll scream blue  
--> murder' f y(h)' d(h)o th(h)a(h) [t  
Mrs H: .hih hih Y(h)eh  
--> ah Well I've given ih up ez a bad job anyway.  
Ilene: eh heh  
heh heh hih-n-hn-[n  
Mrs H: [You kno:w, h But l:look ah I wz  
(0.2) I'm havin:g s:sti:ll. dah-a big pro:blem.=  
Ilene: =Ah:,  
Mrs H: with my: sister's ba:ck.

(25)[NB:IV:13:26]

Emma: .hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh A:ND AH'LL sghEE YIH NEXT WEEK, I  
GUESS I BETTER GO BA:CK ho:me this week'nd hhhhhh  
ah don'know uh hate tih do it but I think I will,  
Lottie: Mm  
(.)  
Lottie: O[k a :y.  
Emma: [You- [Yer pob'ly have  
(0.6)  
Lottie: No: I'm no:t uh: (0.2) doin anything,  
Emma: nArn'tje?  
(0.2)  
Lottie: Huh-uh:  
(0.7)  
--> Emma: ((swallow)) W'l ah'll see how the (b) (0.2)  
--> ba:ll ro:lls  
Lottie: Okay,=  
Emma: =.t Evrything's fi:ne he:re.  
Lottie: Ye:ah.  
(0.2)  
Emma: [Goo:d.  
Lottie: [A'right ho:ney,

(26)[NB:II:4:23]

Emma: Gee:: wouldn'tha'be ni:ce,

Nancy: Ya:h he says they rilly treatche ril ni:ce:,  
 (.)  
 Emma: Wu:l gooU::D.  
 Nancy: .t at those place<sub>s</sub>  
 Emma: Qh:: I'm gla:d.  
 Emma: .hhh<sub>h</sub><  
 --> Lottie: SO THINGS ER LOOKING UP DEAR, hhh<sub>h</sub>  
 Emma: THA:T'S  
 Emma: GOO<sub>h</sub>:D.  
 Lottie: Y::AH.  
 Emma: W'L LET ME SEE HOW the: the BAH:LL RO:LL:S  
 H E : R E  
 Lottie: .p ALRI: ? =  
 Emma: =A<sub>h</sub>:N:D UH:,  
 Lottie: Ya:h.  
 (0.2)  
 Emma: I'm dis GUT MY FOOT UP NOW I DON'WANNA WA:LK  
 too fa:r,

In each of these examples the talk is summarised with an idiomatic expression; for example "I've given ih up ez a bad job anyway", "ah'll see how the...ba:ll ro:lls", and "SO THINGS ER LOOKING UP". The recipient then gives a response which aligns with the position taken in the idiom in the prior turn, in a form that does not lead to further talk about the matter in question. One of the speakers then introduces a new topic. For instance in (26) Lottie's idiom "SO THINGS ER LOOKING UP" summarises the previous talk which has been about how she met a very nice man, how well they got on, and her hopes for a further meeting. Emma responds with an assessment which aligns with the idiom but does not introduce further talk on the topic. Lottie gives an agreement token and then Emma introduces a new topic which concerns a plan to go shopping together.

Thus, it seems to be the case that a topic can be brought to a close through the use of an idiom which summarises the talk which precedes it. This is dependant, however, on the recipient affiliating with the position taken in the idiom and refraining from introducing further talk on that topic.

A number of the idioms which formulate a complaint can also be seen to summarise the complaint and occur in just such terminal positions as the idioms in (24) to (26). The following are three cases in point.

(2) [Detail]

Emma: Becuz (.) uy Bud u-c'dn e:v'n eat iz brekfast.  
 He o:rdred he waited forty five minutes'n  
 he'a:dtuh be out there duh tee off so I gave it to  
Karen's liddle bo:y.  
 (0.7)

Emma: ((swallow)) I mean that's how bad the service was  
 --> .h hh (.) It's gahn duh pot.

Lottie: u-Oh::: (.) e-Ye::: a h . Ye<  
 Emma: [But it's a be anti ful go:lf course.

(3) [Detail]

Ann: I've been a bit mohr cahreful this time b't the  
 trouble is I don't get th'm ( ) tih the  
windows actually.  
 (.)

--> Ann: You cahn't wi:n really.

Jenny: Nyo:::  
 (.)

Jenny: Oh no.  
 (0.2)

Ann: No.  
 (0.3)

Ann: Hahv you bean t'school th's mohrning.

(7) [Detail]

Emma: .hh Her hu- u-her father in la:w's in the  
ho:spit'l so I don't know what the deal honey  
 I've jis relea:sed myself'v evrything I'm jis  
 --> going along wih th'ti:de.

Margy: Yih-hih-huh? hh-hhe:h hhh  
 Emma: [hhh  
 Margy: [Well ('at's o-)  
 --> Emma: [En the w i n d blows'n ah'll go wih the wind  
 --> blo:o:ows

Margy: ihhhh hOkhha(h)a(h)y,  
 Emma: .hhh Ah'll be dow:n a few minutes?

In these cases the formulating idiom summarises the preceding talk: in (2) the idiom "gahn duh pot" summarises the detailing about the bad service they received at the hotel; in (3) "You cahn't wi:n" summarises the detailing about the problems she experiences in cleaning the double

glazing; and in (7) the idioms "going along wih th'ti:de" and "go wih the wind blo:ows" summarises the detailing about her daughter's father-in-law's illness and other family problems. In each case the idiom is followed by an alignment by the recipient who does not introduce further talk on that topic: in (2) the recipient affiliates with "u-Oh:: (.) e-Ye::ah. Ye<"; in (3) with "Nyo:: (.) Oh no."; and in (7) with "hOkhha(h)a(h)y". None of these affiliative responses introduce further talk on the topic. Following these utterances a new topic is then introduced by one of the speakers: in (2) with "But it's a beautiful go:lf course"; in (3) with "Hahv you bean t'school th's mohrning"; and in (7) with "Ah'll be dow:n a few minutes?".

A number of the idioms which formulate complaints do not precede a topic change, and this is often because they do not receive the alignment of the recipient. For instance, in the following extract the idiom can be seen to summarise the preceding detailing, but it does not receive a supporting affiliation from the recipient; instead she initiates further talk on the same topic.

(16)[Detail]

Ilene: .hhh We've checked now on all the paypize's has  
 .hh an' we have had n:nothing fr'm Moss'n Comp'ny  
 through the post.  
 (0.3)

Ilene: Anyway, (.) Tha:t's th- uh you know you c'm(b) (.)  
ahrgue ih it's like (.) uh:<sup>m</sup>

Shirley: <sup>Well</sup>  
 (.)

--> Ilene: banging y'r head against a brick wa:ll.  
 Shirley: <sup>E z fahr ez I'm</sup>  
 c'ncerned on this situa:tion, oll private  
 negotiations between us mus' cea:se.

The idiom "banging y'r head against a brick wa:ll" can be seen to summarise the detailing about the problems Ilene has had in trying to convince the company that she has not received the papers which they

claim they sent. This is not followed, however, by a recipient affiliation which aligns with the position taken in the idiom (as something like "Yes I know" would have done). Instead Shirley fails to respond to the idiom, and shifts the focus of attention in order to say that their "private negotiations...mus' cea:se", which initiates further talk on that topic.

Thus, when Ilene uses the idiom she may be attempting to gain the recipient's affiliation, so that they are aligned, and to bring the topic to a close. This attempt fails because the recipient does not align but introduces further talk on the topic. In chapter three I shall examine these issues in greater detail and shall explore further the association between recipient alignment and topic termination. At present I note that out of those formulating idioms which do not precede a topic change, many are summaries of the preceding details, but because they do not receive the recipients affiliation and collaboration in terminating talk about a complaint, the topic is continued.

The association between alignment and topic termination, suggests that in circumstances where recipients have demonstrated affiliation with the complainant, topic termination is then able to take place. Above we noted that one difference between idioms that formulate a complaint and those which contrast with it by being optimistic and so on, is that the latter occur when the recipient has displayed affiliation with the speaker. Further examination of these reveals that many are followed by topic terminations. Thus, while idioms which formulate complaints are not associated with terminations, idioms which contrast with the complaint are. In each of the following cases the summary idiom is followed by the termination of that topic and

introduction of a next (or rather the initiation of a closing).

(20)[Detail]

P: Different things'll pick up when it- begins to be  
Spring of the yea:r and everythi:ng,  
M: Yah.  
--> P: hhh But I think it'll iron itself out,  
M: I sure hope so.  
P: I'll see you Tuesday.

(21)[Detail]

Ann: Well excep'thet thez mu:d fr'm the front do:h  
ri:ght up. tuh the .hh trai:led up'n down  
t'the garage with screwdriviz 'n  
[God knows what ( ).]  
Jenny: [O h : : d e a : u h.]  
--> Ann: Nevuh mind it'll all come right in the end,  
Jenny: Yeh. Okay you go'n getta clean trousihs on

(22)[Detail]

Edgerton: =ah:: end a'course that gets Ilene moh wuhrried.  
Alf: I'll bet it does.  
Edgerton: So uh:m anyway,hh uh,hh thea:hr ther ih ti:s,  
Alf: M mh  
--> Edgerton: uh:: jus'g'nna haftuh s- try agay:n nex'time.  
Alf: Yes  
(0.2)  
Alf: Oh yes .hhhh Anyway Edgerton'n eokay so w'l leave  
the arrangements'z they ah:re,

In all these cases the idiom summarises the preceding detailing; in (20) "it'll iron itself out" summarises the detailing about P's unemployment, in (21) "it'll all come right in the end" summarises the detailing about the disruption caused to Ann's house, and in (22) "try agay: nex'time" summarises detailing about the death of the puppies and the troubles it has caused. In each case the idiom is followed by an affiliation from the recipient who thereby aligns with the speaker's position taken in the idiom; in (20) with "I sure hope so", in (21) with "Yes", and in (22) with "Yeh". This is then followed by the introduction of a new topic which, in all three extracts, is also the initiation of a close.

The association, which is beginning to be evident, between idioms and topic termination (including complaining idioms) will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter.

## 6 SUMMARY

In this chapter we have explored the major sequential positions in which idioms occur. The most common of these was found to be in complaint sequences. However, we have also noted that idioms commonly occur in two other sequential positions, namely where a speaker is performing a dispreferred activity, and where speakers are praising, extolling or describing something pleasurable, exciting and so on. Within the category of idioms in complaint sequences we saw that there are two subcategories, that is, idioms which formulate the complaint and those which summarise the complaint with a positive, optimistic statement. The former were found to frequently occur where the recipient's affiliation cannot be relied on, whereas the latter occurred in circumstances where the recipient's affiliation had been clearly demonstrated.

Furthermore, it was suggested that the idioms which formulate a complaint may embody an attempt to create alignment between the speakers. One of the characteristics that enables them to do this was found to be that many portray the speaker as innocent, without directly accusing the recipient. We noted that this feature may also help to explain their occurrence in performing dispreferred activities such as turning down invitations. Finally, we noted that a number of the idioms which formulate complaints are topically terminal, and out of those which are not, many seem to be attempts to close the topic which fail because they do not receive the recipient's affiliation. On the other

hand, a vast majority of the positive, optimistic idioms do receive the recipient's affiliation, and are topically terminal.



## CHAPTER THREE

### IDIOMS AND TOPIC: THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN IDIOMATIC UTTERENCES AND TOPIC TERMINATION

#### 1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter we began to explore the sequential environments in which idioms frequently occur. Particular attention was paid to one common sequential environment of idioms, that of idioms in complaints. Towards the end of the chapter a second common sequential environment of idiomatic phrases began to emerge: it was discovered that idioms are often followed by topic shifts. For example in the following extract (which we examined in chapter two) there is an idiom which precedes a clear topic shift.

(1)[Heritage:I:3:2]

(Lisa has been grooming Ilene's dog)

- Ilene: Uh I got rid'v the other one cz [there wz a big Lisa:  
[Yes.
- Ilene: lump the:re too:.  
(.)
- Lisa: Uh yes well there wz [only a little on e there.'v Ilene:  
Ilene: [M m : .]
- Lisa: [course=  
Ilene: [Ye:s.  
Lisa: =b't [there wz a big one-( [ ) th' left  
Ilene: [Ye:(s). ] [There wz a big one  
Lisa: ear.  
Ilene: behind the left ear yes. Yes, yes.  
(.)
- Ilene: [.hhh  
-->Lisa: [Yeh ah I'll tell you I'll give you chapter'n verse,  
Ilene: Right.  
Lisa: ehh heh heh he- ]hh=  
Ilene: [U h : m]

Ilene: =Well now look d'you want me tih come over'n get her? or  
wha:t.

At the beginning of this extract Lisa and Ilene are talking about grooming. Lisa has groomed Ilene's dog, and they are discussing the state of its' coat. But by the end of the extract, following the disjunction marker "Well now", they begin talking about collecting the dog. Thus what they are talking about at the beginning of the extract is topically distinct from what they are talking about at the end. The disjunction marker indicates that what is about to be said is topically distinct from what was being discussed, and therefore forms a topic transition.

This transition can be seen to occur over a small number of turns in the middle of the extract. Lisa's turn "There wz a big one behind the left ear. Yes, yes." completes talk about the difficulties involved in grooming the dog. It is followed by an utterance which concludes with the idiom "I'll give you chapter'n verse", through which Lisa postpones further talk about the matter until a later date. Thus, the idiom completes the topic by implying that they will continue it next time they meet. This is followed by the agreement token "Right", through which Ilene collaborates with Lisa's move to finish talking about grooming. Ilene could have introduced further talk about the dog, thus continuing the topic. Instead she collaborates with Lisa's move to close it. Lisa follows this with laughter and Ilene overlaps with the agreement token "Uh:m": again neither of these introduce further talk on the topic of the dog's coat. Ilene then introduces the subject of whether she should come to collect the dog.

Thus, in this extract, we can identify a topic change, and furthermore, we can trace the closing down of one topic and the

introduction of a next. This termination of the talk about grooming the dog occurs gradually over a number of turns. As we have seen, Ilene's utterance "There wz a big one be hind the left ear" completes the talk about the difficulties she faced. Lisa's idiom moves away from the detailing about the state of the dog to formulate the whole subject as "chapter'n verse", and postpones further talk about it until another time. This is followed by three turns in which both speakers collaborate in moving to a close, through each choosing not to continue or pursue the topic by introducing further related matters. Ilene's utterance "Well now look d'you want me tih come over'n get her? or wha:t" introduces a new topic; that of making arrangements for returning the dog. So in this way we can identify the termination of one topic and the introduction of a next.

In sum, in extract (1) it is possible to identify a clear termination of one topic, occurring over a sequence of a small number of utterances which is initiated by an idiom, and results in the introduction of a new topic. This kind of topic transition, involving the termination of one topic and the introduction of a next, contrasts with the way in which the majority of topic changes take place in conversation. In most, there is no overt closing down of one topic and introduction of a next over a small number of turns. Instead the majority of topic changes are seamless, that is, one topic flows gradually into a next with no obvious beginning or end. Sacks (1972b) refers to this as "stepwise" movement. It involves connecting what was being discussed to what is currently being said although they are not the same thing; resulting in changes in the subject under discussion being gradual and innocuous. Thus, in the following extract, the speakers begin by discussing the cancellation of P's visit to her

friend, Muriel, and end up talking about driving at night, but, unlike extract (1), there is no overt termination of one topic and introduction of a next.

(2) [Abbott:8]

- M: .hhh and eh- but. eh- they phoned up tonight to say, you know t-would I mind not going .hh because her and her sister now are sitting up with her mother. .hh ehm: I think they're going to try and get her into a private nursing home.
- M: ah yeah gettin' a bit mu ch
- P: .hhh I think her memory's going (.)
- M: yeah:=
- P: =and so now she really can't be left and Muriel and her sister are havin' to take turns in sitting up with her at night .hh and they're tired out. .hh so I think now they're trying to get her into a private nursing home. .hh so they said really it would be better if we didn't go tomorrow.
- M: wait a bit yeah:
- P: so I think-
- M: well we were gonna go down and see Florrie last Sunday 'cos what we do we go and see her (.) .h and then we come back and spend the afternoon with Ena like you know to make a day out of it. (0.7) but we didn't go because of the roads and ni ght
- P: that's right yeah:
- M: it's never worth it see is it?
- P: n-eh-well this is it, it- .hh it's not so bad going in the daylight but it's coming back in the dark.
- M: Well that's what George says and now when your gettin' on a bit=
- P: =well that's righ t.
- M: the blimmin' lights up your back an' all the rest of it

At the beginning of this extract P is talking about her plans to visit her friend Muriel, which have had to be abandoned because Muriel's mother is ill. This leads to her giving quite a lot of details about Muriel's mother's illness and its effect on Muriel and her sister. She completes these details with a summary that links back to the talk about the cancellation of her visit ("so they said really it would be better if we didn't go tomorrow"). M then begins talking about a visit

her and her husband were planning, but have had to cancel because of the weather. This leads, in turn, to a discussion about the difficulties of driving at night.

So, at the beginning of the extract the speakers are talking about P's plans to visit her friend. But by the end they are talking about driving at night; yet there are no terminations of one topic and introductions of a next. The changes are gradual and are a result of a number of shifts in the focus of a topic, rather than overt topic changes, but as a result, the place at which the speakers start is very different from where they end.

Thus, normally one topic leads gradually into a next with no overt termination of a current topic and introduction of a next. However, in some cases there is an overt topic termination and topic initiation. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) describe the alternative methods of topic change:

"One procedure whereby talk moves off a topic might be called 'topic shading', in that it involves no specific attention to ending a topic at all, but rather the fitting of differently focused but related talk to some last utterance in a topic's development. But co-conversationalists may specifically attend to accomplishing a topic boundary, and there are various mechanisms for doing so: these may yield what we have referred to above as 'analyzable ends', their analyzability to participants being displayed in their effective collaboration required to achieve them." (P.305)

Therefore, in many cases speakers change topic without creating topic boundaries; they fit their talk to previous utterances while shifting the focus, thus creating a stepwise transition. But in these idiomatic topic changes there is an overt termination of one topic and an introduction of a next. Thus, the speakers are creating topic boundaries involving an analysable end to the first topic. In the next section I shall investigate exactly what is meant by topic, and how

topic boundaries are essential for the analysis of topic as a whole. In later sections I shall examine the ways in which participants collaborate to produce these analysable ends.

## 2 TOPIC AND TOPICAL COHERENCE: ITS ANALYSIS AND PROBLEMS.

For analysts of language and conversation (especially discourse analysts), one of the most fundamental concepts is coherence, thus the way in which the coherence is suspended in order to change topics is of primary importance. But deciding exactly what constitutes a topic (and therefore a topic transition) has proved extremely problematic. There is little agreement in the literature on the subject. Conversation analysts have tended to concentrate on larger sequences, whilst discourse analysts and sociolinguists have tended to concentrate on single sentences or very small sequences (there are of course exceptions, see for instance Halliday and Hasan 1976). Furthermore, while linguists have imposed an idea of what constitutes a topic on particular sentences, conversation analysts have looked for the way in which participants orient to topic through their talk.

For many linguists topic constitutes what a section of discourse is about. Particular sentences announce the theme of the discourse by stating it in sentence-initial position. The coherence of the section on that topic is achieved through the use of pro-terms (such as he, she, it) which link back to the initial announcement of the theme of the sequence. Sentences such as the following are seen to state the topic of the discourse:

As for education, John prefers Bertrund Russel's ideas.	
Topic	Comment

Here, education is the topic. Subsequent sentences are seen as using proterms in order to maintain the topic. Thus in the following "he" coheres with "John" in the previous sentence:

He always was philosophically minded.

Accordingly, linguists such as Li (1976) refer to topic as "the 'center of attention'; it announces the theme of the discourse". Topic occurs in sentence initial position and only in sentences such as the one above. Chafe (1976) agrees with the idea that topics are only to be found in certain sentences. He points out that examples such as that given above are contrastive sentences, the topic is a focus of contrast. He concludes that

"a topic would be...or might have originated as- a subject which is chosen too soon and not as smoothly integrated into the following sentence." (P.52)

Other Linguists have taken a broader view of where topics can be said to reside.<sup>1</sup> Keenan and Schieffelin (1976) use the term "discourse topic" and argue that every sentence can be said to contain a topic.

"We take the term discourse topic to refer to the proposition (or set of propositions) about which the speaker is either providing or requesting new information." (P.339)

Thus for Keenan and Schieffelin a question and answer pair has a single discourse topic. They do not concur with the idea that topic can be expressed by a single correct noun phrase, as do many discourse analysts, but, according to Brown and Yule (1983), they do suggest that the topic of any fragment can be described by a single proposition.

Brown and Yule criticise this approach on the grounds that it does not represent the complexity of matter. They argue that for any text

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<sup>1</sup> For example Ervin-Tripp (1973) gives this definition of topic: "Topic includes both gross categories such as subject matter (economics, household affairs, gossip) and the propositional content of utterances". (p.67)

there are a number of different ways of expressing the topic. They advocate a more dynamic approach to the identification of the topic of a piece of discourse, analysing the way speakers design their turns to fit into the general framework which represents participants' understandings of what is being discussed. This, they claim, enables the analyst to "produce a version of 'what is being talked about' (i.e. the topic of conversation) which is far more comprehensive, and certainly of much greater analytic interest, than the single word-or-phrase title which is often used in a fairly trivial way to characterise 'topic' in the study of conversation." Maynard (1980) supports this more dynamic approach to the study of topic. He sums up this innovation in the following way:

"Recent work in Conversation Analysis suggests, however, that topicality is an achievement of conversationalists, something organised and made observable in patterned ways that can be described. Thus, attention is directed to the structure whereby topicality is produced in conversation." (P.263)

One of the ways in which conversationalists achieve topicality is by making each turn cohere with a previous turn, thus treating it as belonging to the same topic, and building up coherent units of talk. Each turn is made to cohere by being designedly responsive and fitted to the prior utterance (c.f. Schegloff and Sacks 1973<sup>2</sup>). In producing a turn; a speaker makes use of elements of the previous turn, for instance, like linguists, conversation analysts have identified the use of pro-terms such as "he" and "she" as ways in which speakers make their turns fit with previous utterances. Thus if a name was mentioned in the previous turn, a speaker may not need to repeat it but instead substitute "he" or "she": the person referenced by this anaphor will

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<sup>2</sup> See also Drew (1989) pp.100-103.



only be discoverable from its sequential context, i.e. from the previous utterance. If a speaker says "how's Ann?" a recipient may reply "she's fine"; the use of the anaphor means that the utterance is both tied to the previous utterance and only understandable in terms of it.

Both analysts and speakers seek to explain the occurrence of an utterance by asking "why that now?", and the answer may be partly derived from the previous turn. So on hearing the utterance "she's fine" speakers and analysts would answer "why that now" by taking into account the previous utterance in order to understand it as an answer to a question about Ann's wellbeing.

Hence, what a speaker does in his or her turn may be understood in terms of the previous turn. For instance, in the following extract Nancy's final utterance "what'd she sa:y:." (arrowed) would be extremely hard to understand if we did not have Hyla's utterance which precedes it.

(3) [HG:34]

Hyla: .hhhhhhh 't's not a bad idea.hh [hhhh [heh]  
 Nancy: [Huh [y] ea:h. No  
 Hyla: that's hitt'n ho:me. [You mi(h)ght You might try  
 Nancy: =that .hhh hhh .h [h If all else-  
 Hyla: [nNo- o r u sh  
 (.)  
 Hyla: .h [hh  
 Nancy: [If all else faihhls,=  
 Hyla: =hhhyeh .hhh=  
 Nancy: =Dear Abby, hmh  
 (.)  
 Hyla: .hhhh [h  
 Nancy: [.hhh [hh  
 Hyla: [No:: I c'n Oh:, she said something mea::n  
 yesterday I didn' [like h e r ,  
 --> Nancy: [ ( ) what'd sh e sa:y:..

Nancy's utterance can be understood as a request for an elaboration of the "mea:n" thing which "she said", mentioned in Hyla's utterance. Nancy's turn is explicitly responsive to the previous turn in a number

of ways. First, it is a request for an elaboration of Hyla's utterance. Second, it repeats the "she" used by Hyla, and the "said" in Hyla's utterance becomes "sa:y::" in Nancy's. Thus, "what'd she sa:y::" is designedly connected to "she said something mea:n" in the previous utterance; there is a "fit" between the two. As a result of this fit both utterances are likely to be seen, by speakers and analysts, as being on the same topic.

Furthermore, Hyla's turn "Oh: she said something mea:n yesterday I didn't like her" itself forms a link with the previous talk. At the beginning of the extract Hyla and Nancy are talking about a problem with Hyla's boyfriend. At the completion of this topic Nancy refers to Abby who is an agony aunt, so the talk at the beginning is not about Abby, it is about Hyla's problem. However, Hyla introduces Abby as a new topic. The only link between the two topics is her use of the pro-term "she". Hence one of the ways in which speakers create coherence across both adjacently positioned utterances and topically distinct sections of talk is by the use of pro-terms or anaphors.

But though speakers can create links across topically distinct sections of talk, the most basic form of coherence is between adjacently positioned utterances.<sup>3</sup> The expectation that a turn will be fitted to a previous turn, and be understandable in terms of the previous turn, is so strong that a disjunctive turn is likely to be misunderstood by a recipient. To be easily understood a speaker must produce a turn which fits; or make explicit the fact that the current turn is not to be interpreted in terms of the previous utterance. If a

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<sup>3</sup> On adjacency pairs see chapter one, section 2. For a general introduction to the importance of adjacency pairs in conversation analysis see Heritage (1984a:Introduction) and Atkinson and Drew (1979:Chapter Two).

speaker produces a turn which is disjunctive, but does not make explicit the fact that the coherence has been suspended, then the recipient might seek a connection between it and the previous turn. Hence, it is through designedly fitting an utterance to the preceding turn that speakers create the coherence of conversation, and by examining the way turns are fitted to previous utterances it is possible to discover how the speakers orient to a section of talk as a coherent unit.

So, rather than having to impose an idea of what constitutes a topic, we have a way of identifying what speakers treat as topics, or coherent sections of talk. Maynard (1980) summarises this in the following way:

"Topicality, then, is a matter not only of content, but is partly constituted in the procedures conversationalists utilize to display understanding and to achieve one turn's proper fit with a prior." (P.263)

Schegloff (1989), in his detailed examination of an extended sequence of talk, analyses the organization of talk into coherent sequences. Because of the problems regarding the notion of topic, Schegloff chooses to use the concept of sequence. He proposes the use of sequence

"...as another type of candidate unit, the practices of which can underlie the production of clumps of talk. The organization of sequences is an organization of action, action accomplished through talk-in-interaction, which can provide to a spate of conduct coherence and order which is analytically distinct from the notion of 'topic'." (ibid. P.5)

In the sequence he examines, the speakers can be seen to discuss a wide range of "topics". Therefore, he argues that topic must be treated independently of coherent sequences even though the two concepts may occasionally overlap. Schegloff concludes that the linking together of utterances to form a coherent sequence of talk is more important than any notion regarding what is being talked about.

"This sequential structure leads us, as it leads the participants, to search for a meaningful relationship between topically disparate exchanges of talk. The coherence here is provided by the sequential structure, not by any topical linkages. Indeed it is the sequential structure which provides the basis for finding some topical linkage across what are, at the surface topically unrelated and non-cohering utterances" (ibid. P.19)

Other authors have also emphasised the need to examine the structure of sequences rather than the content of the talk under analysis. In a similar way to Schegloff, they emphasise the coherence of segments of talk. Thus, unlike linguists, their notion of topic is based primarily on the coherence of sequences rather than on what is being discussed. So although, unlike Schegloff, they retain the term topic to refer to segments of talk, the concept they have in mind has more to do with coherent sequences of talk than with the content of the utterances involved.

For instance, Levinson (1983) concurs with the view that we should pay primary attention to an examination of the coherence of sequences of talk. He argues that coherence cannot be found by "some independently calculable procedure for ascertaining...shared reference across utterances". Instead he points out that coherence is constructed across turns by the participants. Therefore

"What needs to be studied is how potential topics are introduced and collaboratively ratified, how they are marked as 'new' or 'touched off', 'misplaced' and so on, how they are avoided or competed over and how they are collaboratively closed down." (ibid. P.315)

Taking this line of enquiry we are able to avoid imposing an idea of what constitutes a topic on the data. No longer is it necessary to consider the content of utterances in order to decide what the topic is and where its boundaries are, as linguists do. Instead we can examine how the speakers orient to the talk as belonging to, or continuing, a

particular topic. We can analyse how speakers create coherent sections of talk and how they suspend the coherence to create boundaries.

As stated earlier, when speakers do not wish their utterances to be interpreted in terms of the preceding utterance, they have to indicate that they are breaching the coherence. They do so through the use of disjunction markers such as "by the way", "oh", "anyway", "well" and so on. Extract (1), as we saw above, includes the disjunction marker "Well now". Ilene uses it to indicate that what she is about to say should not be interpreted in terms of the previous utterance. The following are three further cases.

(4) [Holt:2:12]

(Joyce and Leslie are talking about how fast Leslie's son, Gordon, has grown up)

Joyce: You know you see:, (0.3) yer own every day an' don't notice it b't u=  
 Leslie: =Mhm:  
 Joyce: [see Go:rdon the other day I thought (.) go:sh hasn'ee grown u:p. You know .tch No longer  
 Leslie: [Mmhm hm-hm  
 th' little boy,  
 Leslie: [No:::,  
 --> Joyce: .t.hhhh Anyway what I'm phoning for in the:, .hh in that envelope, there's a:: an N.H.R. program.

(5) [Holt:2:2:2:3]

(Leslie is telling Carol about a book she has been reading which was the story of a woman who's plane crashed in the mountains)

Leslie: they jus' crashed, j's fifteen feet below the summit'v a mountain. .hh If eh- another fifteen feet higher an'=  
 Carol: [(Oh yes.)  
 =they'd of been: safe 'n:d alri:ght.  
 (Carol): (Mm hm:. Hm:.)  
 (1.1)  
 Leslie: But as it wa:s, hhh there wz two hundred,h (0.4) mi:les'v mountain behind her. ((smile voice))  
 (2.2)  
 Leslie: .tch Uh::: but she managed tih get aw a:y.  
 (Carol): (Mmm)  
 (1.1)  
 --> Leslie: .t.hhh Okay then. How's Melissa.  
 (0.5)  
 Carol: Oh:,hh (.) .hh We nearly fetched her ho:me 'cause she

wz in such distress on: (0.3) when wz it Wednesdee  
night,

(6) [Heritage:I:3:5]

(Lisa is complaining about her doctor)

Lisa: (eeEe) wasn't worried when ah broke my thumb twelve  
month s ago (en i<sup>r</sup>t's still broken).  
Ilene: .t E:h.  
(0.8)  
Ilene: Oh really they are casual aren't they.  
Lisa: (Well he i<sup>r</sup>s.)  
Ilene: Ye:h,  
Ilene: Yeh, .hhh  
Lisa: ( )=  
--> Ilene: =Uh: well look .hh uh ahs k Joe what sor- uh what  
Lisa: (Okay)  
Ilene: time he'll be cz (see) I want tuh be he:re,

In all these extracts a speaker produces an utterance which is topically distinct from, and non-coherent with, the preceding utterance. In each case the non-coherent utterance is preceded by a disjunction marker. In (4) the speakers are discussing how quickly Leslie's son has grown, Joyce then introduces the subject of the envelope she has sent Leslie, preceded by the disjunction "Anyway". In (5) the speakers are discussing a book about a plane crash, Leslie then introduces the subject of Carol's daughter, Melissa, preceded by the disjunction "Okay then". In (6) Lisa is complaining about her doctor, Ilene then reintroduces the subject of when Lisa and her husband Joe will come over, preceded by the disjunction "Uh: well look".

By using such disjunction markers speakers indicate that the utterance is not to be understood in terms of the preceding utterance; that its meaning or reference is not to be found in what was just said, thus the coherence is "breached". In suspending the coherence they are treating the utterances as topically distinct. Such suspensions of the coherence form the boundaries of sections of talk, and can be used by analysts in the investigation of topic. What is required is access to

the ways in which speakers orient to utterances as being on the same topic, or as being topically distinct. Disjunctions give us just this kind of access. Through them we can investigate speakers' orientations to topic, and we can then use this information to learn more about the way in which speakers create coherence.

This is in accordance with Schank's argument that we should turn our attention away from what topics are about, and, instead, concentrate on their structure. Referring to the problems inherent in earlier analyses of topic, he argues

"Much of the reason for this problem is that we have been working on a possibly erroneous assumption. Rather than concentrating on what a topic is, it might be more fruitful to concentrate on what the rules for topic shift are" (Schank 1977, p.424)

Therefore, we should ignore issues of what is being discussed and concentrate instead on how sequences of talk are constructed as coherent segments. Brown and Yule (1983) point out that such an approach will result in discovering a structural basis by which we will be able to divide segments of discourse into smaller units.

This chapter will not offer any solutions to the highly complex problems surrounding the notion of topic. Instead, in line with these recommendations, the analysis will focus on the structure of segments of talk and disjunctions in the coherence. As we shall see in the following section, idiomatic topic changes (such as those identified at the beginning of this chapter and the end of chapter two) involve disjunctions. Hence, they also involve the suspension of the coherence of one topic in order to introduce a next topic. Examination of them will reveal more about the way in which participants orient to topics, the way they treat utterances as topically distinct, and the way they create boundaries between topics. Therefore, we shall be able to add to

the literature on speakers' orientation to topic and the mechanisms of topic change.

As to the question raised by Schegloff's (1989) analysis of whether the notions of topicality and sequences are distinct, in section 7 I will present evidence to suggest that speakers do retain a notion of topic in constructing coherent sequences.

In sum, one of the ways in which some of the complex problems inherent in the concept of topic can be avoided, is by refraining from imposing an idea of what constitutes topic on the data. Instead we should follow the proposals made by Levinson (1983) and Schank (1977) and investigate the way topics "are marked as 'new' or 'touched off', 'misplaced'" and "what the rules for topic shift". This chapter will focus on topic shifts (or topic transitions as I shall refer to them). We shall examine the ways in which speakers treat utterances as topically similar or topically distinct. Thus, it becomes important to examine those instances where speakers suspend the coherence of sequences, so treating subsequent utterances as topically distinct. It turns out that idiomatic topic changes involve just these kind of breaches, therefore, by exploring them, we will be able to gain some purchase on speakers' orientation to topic.

### 3 IDIOMS AND TOPIC CHANGE

The observation that idioms are associated with topic change is not entirely new, but has been made by a variety of other authors. For instance Schegloff and Sacks (1973) state:

"Another 'topic-bounding' technique involves one party's use of a proverbial or aphoristic formulation of conventional wisdom that can be heard as the 'moral' or 'lesson' of the topic being thereby closed." (P.306)

Similarly Brown and Yule (1983) say:



"Formulaic expressions such as 'once upon a time' and 'they lived happily ever after' can be used explicitly to mark the boundaries of a fragment." (P.60)

These observations are, perhaps, rather simplistic, suggesting that only a restricted category of formulaic expressions can occur in these positions. But they do, nevertheless, point towards the association between idioms and topic boundaries, particularly the termination of topics. They suggest, further, that idioms may be a way of identifying the boundaries of topics. Stubbs (1983) recognises that a wide range of formulaic phrases might be used to signal the completion of a telling:

"One way to signal the end of a story in casual conversation is to use a cliché-cum-proverb with little informational content, of the type: Still, that's life; Well, that's the way it goes; But something may turn up- you never know; Still, we may as well hope for the best." (P.24)

He explores an instance taken from the recording of two school children talking to a researcher: "it might have been something...you know - that might have been something...it makes you think". About this utterance Stubbs writes:

"Such utterances with little significant propositional content, provide no new information which can serve as a resource for further talk, and can therefore serve as endings." (P.24)

In what follows we shall explore the association between idioms and topic boundaries, analysing in detail the interactional work idioms do in relation to terminating topics and hence in forming topic boundaries and managing transitions.

In section 1 it was observed that many topic changes are seamless; that one topic flows gradually into a next with no apparent completion of one, and introduction of a next. However, we also saw that in some cases speakers use disjuncts in order to introduce an unrelated matter, and that these result in more abrupt topic changes which do involve the



the form of utterances which are treated as topically unrelated. Also we shall investigate the interactional work which idioms are used to do in forming topic boundaries. In the following section I will demonstrate that the idiomatic topic changes we saw in extracts (7) and (8) are not only numerous but also surprisingly uniform.

#### 4 A STANDARD SEQUENCE FOR IDIOMATIC TOPIC CHANGE

Investigation of the structure of instances of idiomatic topic changes reveals that they are remarkably similar. In extract (1) it was found that the idiom was followed by minimal responses and then the introduction of a new topic (preceded by a disjunction marker). Many of the extracts in my collection follow just this pattern. Further, it appears that these topic changes are so uniformly structured that it is possible to describe them in terms of a standard sequence. The following pattern illustrates the way in which they tend to occur.

A:           Idiom.  
B:           Minimal response/Acknowledgement  
A/B:         New topic.

A speaker produces an idiom, the recipient responds, usually with a minimal agreement token or an acknowledgement such as "yah" or "uh huh", then a speaker (usually A, the speaker who produced the idiom) introduces a new topic. The following are just a few of the instances in which this pattern can be identified.

(9) [JG:I:15:4-5]

(P and M are discussing P's unemployment)

Idiom       P:       .hhh But I think it'll iron itself out.  
Response   M:       I sure hope so.  
New Topic  P:       I'll see you Tuesday.

(10)[Rah:B:1:JA(11):5]

(Ann and Jenny are discussing the state of Ann's house after some alterations which have just been made)

Idiom Ann: Nevuh mind it'll all come right in the end,  
 Response Jenny: Yeh.  
 New Topic Ann: Okay you go'n getta clean trousihs on

(11)[NB:IV:10:36]

(Emma is describing the bad service she recieved at a hotel she stayed in)

Idiom Emma: ((swallow)) I mean that's how bad the service  
 was. .h.hh (.) Its gahn duh pot.  
 Response Lottie: u-oh::: (.) e- Y e : : a h. Ye<  
 New Topic Emma: But its a be auti ful  
 go:lf course.

(12)[Holt:Dec:86:B:391]

(L and M are discussing L's son, a friend of whose picked up the plectrum of a well known musician at a concert and allowed him to hold it)

Idiom L: So: he came home from college absolutely (.)  
 tickled to bits huh hhuh  
 Response M: Uhhhhhhuh hhuh Uh Oh dear hhuh hu  
 New Topic L: Anyway if  
 you see Rachel tell her he went to see  
Big Country.

In extract (9) P uses the idiom "But I think it'll iron itself out", Jenny responds with "I sure hope so", then P introduces a new topic which is a move to a close involving making arrangements to meet again. In all these extracts a first speaker produces an idiom, a second speaker responds with an acknowledgement or a minimal agreement token, then the first speaker introduces a new topic. In each case the recipients are collaborating in terminating the first topic by not developing it. For instance in extract (9) M could have prolonged the topic by responding to the idiom with a question about how the situation might iron itself out, but by failing to develop the topic and by responding with a simple agreement she collaborates in the termination.

Thus, although the pattern exemplified in the standard sequence can



agreement token, or they could have prolonged the first topic.

Second, in a number of cases the sequence is extended by laughter. After the idiom there is laughter which precedes the introduction of the new topic.

(14)[Holt:1:1:20]

Idiom Leslie: .hh Yes yer coming over loud an'clear  
Response Mum: ( ) good.  
Laughter Leslie: hheh huh .uh<sub>h</sub> .hh .hh  
Laughter Mum: hu:h .uhh .uhh .uhh .uhh  
Laughter Leslie: .hh<sub>h</sub>  
New Topic Mum: Okay love,

(15)[ITB:6]

Idiom Fran: We:ll that's th' way it goe:s.  
Response Ted: Well one ti:me maybe hhumh uh  
Laughter hu:h: huh heh hu-heh-heh huh<sub>h</sub> hoh, hoh-hoh-hoh-huh  
Laughter Fran: Ye : : : : : ah::: hha hha  
Laughter Ted: Uh!=  
New Topic Fran: =Uhhhhhh Where'r you staye:n:hh

In (14) there are several turns of laughter by both speakers after Leslie's use of the idiom "loud an'clear" and Mum's agreement "( ) good". The laughter is followed by the introduction of a new topic which is a move to a close. In (15) there are also several turns of laughter after Fran's use of the idiom "that's th' way it goe:s" and Ted's response "Well one ti:me maybe". The laughter and Fran's second response is followed by the introduction of a new topic.

Third, in some cases the sequence may be extended because there is more than one idiom, for instance, a speaker may produce an idiomatic utterance which the recipient responds to with a second idiom. The following are two cases in point.

(16)[Holt:2:2:6]

Idiom Bond: Down it's down f'posterity<sub>hey</sub>  
Idiom Leslie: No  
STATE secretes,=  
Laughter Bond: =ha ha ha ha eh oh  
New Topic Leslie: hh heh heh heh .hh .hh Okay then,

(17)[Heritage:I:6:6]

Idiom Ilene: En they'll scream blue murder'f y(h) d(h)o  
th(h)a(h) [t  
Idiom Mrs H: [hih hih Y(h)eh ah Well I've given ih  
up ez a bad job anyway.  
Laughter Ilene: [eh heh heh hih-n-hn- [n  
New Topic Mrs H: [You  
kno:w, .h But l:look ah I wz (0.2) I'm havin:g  
s:still. dah-a big pro:blem. with my sister's  
ba:ck.

In (16) Bond uses the idiom "down f'posterity" and Leslie responds with a second idiom; "No STATE secretes", this is followed by laughter and a move to close. In (17) Ilene uses the idiom "scream blue murder" and Mrs H responds with a second idiom; "given ih up ez a bad job", this is followed by laughter and the introduction of a new topic.

By responding with an idiom, the recipients of the first idiomatic expression are collaborating with the move to close the topic by not developing the topic; nor are they taking the opportunity to introduce a new topic at this stage. As will be explored further below, by producing a second idiom speakers may be seen as recycling the sequence.

One of the consequences of having a sequence, rather than just one utterance to change the topic, is that both speakers can collaborate in the activity of terminating a current topic and opening a next one. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) show that conversation closings consist of sequences in which the speakers collaborate in order to bring the conversation to a close. Patterns such as the following are particularly common. They form the end of sequences by which speakers bring conversations to a close through collaborative achievement.

A: O.K.  
B: O.K.  
A: Bye Bye.  
B: Bye.

Schegloff and Sacks conclude that such pairs of utterances are valuable for the following reasons:

"by an adjacently positioned second, a speaker can show that he understood what a prior aimed at, and that he is willing to go along with that. Also, by virtue of the occurrence of an adjacently produced second, the doer of a first can see that what he intended was indeed understood, and that it was accepted."  
(ibid. P.297)

Therefore, sequences such as this, and those which occur at topic changes, can be seen in terms of a negotiation whereby each speaker demonstrates that they understood the import of the previous turn and are collaborating with it. This relies on the recognition by one of the participants that a prior turn is pre-terminal. Schegloff and Sacks (ibid.) argue that utterances such as "okay", with particular intonation (i.e. upward at the end of the word), are recognisably pre-terminal. Thus, when a speaker hears such an object they know that a possible termination has been reached, and that they can either collaborate with it or continue the conversation by introducing a new matter.

Because of the strong association between idioms and topic termination and several of their features (described in section 5), I argue that idioms are also recognisably pre-terminal. Therefore, the production by one speaker of an idiom in certain sequential environments, may be treated by the recipient as "opening up the closing" of a prior topic. Having interpreted the idiom as a possible topic termination position the recipient has the choice of responding in such a way as to collaborate with the termination (for instance by producing an agreement token) or preventing the termination by initiating further talk on that topic.



Before continuing the examination of the sequence of idiomatic topic change, I shall present further evidence of the recognisably pre-terminal character of idioms. We have already seen that idioms frequently occur just prior to topic changes, and this, in itself, is evidence that speakers treat idioms as termination relevant. However, further evidence can be seen in the following extract, in which a speaker is about to complete a telling with a non-idiomatic utterance, but she self-corrects in favour of an idiom.<sup>4</sup>

(18)[Rahman:I:6]

Jenny: .ah .hhh An' it wz i (.) yihknow it wz a right good  
 m: mur-der-right good thrill-uh  
 Vera: [y- [y\_e : s . [m-  
 Jenny: [Mm::.]  
 Vera: [Oh go]o:d.  
 Jenny: [.hh Ye:s:. .h An' it ezzuh yihknow suht'v 'n:  
 e- it en:ded with a great big bahng eh  
 --> he[h hn I jum]ped outta the e seat I[jump'd  
 Vera: [Oh - huh::] [(seat),  
 (.)  
 --> Jenny: e[shot about thrrree feet]in the air ah think  
 Vera: [O h : : : : : .]  
 Jenny: he[h heh]  
 Vera: [y e s]:. .hh  
 Jenny: [.hhh  
 Vera: [Eh::m, we didn' go t'have ar haiuh done bah the wa:y,

Jenny begins to say "jump'd" but self-corrects in favour of the more idiomatic "shot about thrrree feet in the air". Here, then, Jenny chooses an idiomatic completion to her story in preference to a non-idiomatic one, and the topic is then rapidly brought to a close. Thus, this extract provides evidence that when bringing a topic to a close, speakers may select an idiomatic phrase in preference to a non-idiomatic one specifically to do that task. This may be because idioms are recognisably pre-terminal and, thus, more efficient at indicating

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<sup>4</sup> See also chapter one, section 2.

to a recipient that a possible termination has been reached.<sup>5</sup>

On the production of an idiom, a recipient has the choice of collaborating in the projected completion or continuing to talk on the topic. To collaborate in the termination of the topic, recipients can respond with the sort of utterances which we have been describing, i.e. agreement tokens, laughter or a second idiomatic utterance. If recipients fail to give an appropriate response then the topic may not be brought to a close. For instance, in the following extract Steven treats Leslie's response to the idiom as inappropriate, thus rather than continuing the termination, he prolongs the topic in order to correct what he believes to be Leslie's misunderstanding. In this case, then, Leslie tries to collaborate in the termination but Steven treats her response as misplaced and so continues the topic in order to correct her.

(19)[Holt:2:3:9]

(The speakers are talking about Robert Maxwell, Leslie is telling Steven that one of his son's is mentally disabled.)

Steven: .hhhh I heard'ee had seven children there're only six  
accounted for as far as we eve-r kne:w theh- there=  
Leslie: Ye:s.  
Leslie: =Yes.  
Steven: [wz always (0.2) that one thet's (.) u- a little bit  
odd yih know .h-hhh]  
Leslie: [Y e]:s.  
Steven: [So that's what it wa:s.=  
=I see:;  
Leslie: [Hm:. .tch! Hm.  
--> Steven: Ye-ah well there you are: nob'ddy has a (.) perfect=  
Leslie: [.TCH!  
--> Steven: =life so  
Leslie: [ehhh heh-heh .hh  
Steven: [.tch  
Steven: Well he didn't either 'ee had a bad start...

Steven treats Leslie's response to his idiomatic summary "nob'ddy has

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<sup>5</sup> For further evidence of this (evidence from a more formal setting) see chapter five.

a (.) perfect life" as inappropriate. Leslie's response consists of laughter and, therefore, appears to be treating Steven's idiom as ironic. Hence, instead of terminating the topic, Steven develops it by describing tragedies which occurred earlier in Robert Maxwell's life. This seems to be in order to demonstrate that he did not mean the idiom ironically because, although Robert Maxwell might be well off now, he could not be described as having had a perfect life. Here then, a response which is treated as inappropriate by the recipient leads to the abortion of the termination sequence: the termination sequence is recycled slightly further on (see extract [9]).

A similar occurrence can be traced in the following extract. Here, however, instead of demonstrating that the idiom should be taken seriously, the speaker recycles the sequence in order to collaborate with the humour.

(20)[NB:IV:9:3]

Emma: .hh Her hu- u-her father in la:w's in the ho:spit'l so  
 --> I don't know what the deal honey I've jis relea:sed  
 myself'v evrything I'm jis going along wih th'ti:de.  
 Margy: Yih-hih-huh? hh-.hhe:h[hhh  
 Emma: .hhh  
 Margy: [Well ('at's o-)]  
 --> Emma: [En the w i n d]blows'n ah'll go wih the wind  
blo:o:ows  
 Margy: ihhh hOkhha(h)a(h)y,  
 Emma: .hhh Ah'll be dow:n a few minutes?

Emma produces the idiom "going along wih th'ti:de" after a troubles-telling. The idiom is said in all seriousness, however, Margy responds to it with laughter. Emma then prolongs the termination just long enough to collaborate in the humour by producing a second, and very similar idiom, which she utters in a comical manner (she almost sings it). Thus, in this example, the topic is continued, but only long

enough to recycle the beginning of the termination sequence.<sup>6</sup>

Another reason that a topic may be extended is if the speakers are not fully aligned. In chapter two I suggested that during difficult topics, such as complaints and disagreements, speakers may use an idiom in an attempt to establish alignment between themselves and the recipient, and thus, bring the topic to a close in some accord. However, in such cases, recipients often fail to align and the topic is continued. The following extract is one such case: the speakers are discussing whether to suggest to a group they attend, that they arrange a particular event. The disagreement occurs when Clair says that if they do not receive enough interest then they should abandon the idea. Marylou argues that interest will grow.

(21)[SBL:3:1:3]

- 1 Clair: Mm hm̩ AN' AN' EH-A:SK how many: e-MIGHT BE intRESTED  
 2 duh come BEC'Z IF YEE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH THET'S  
 3 intRESTED W'L THEN (.) fooye ON IT YIHKNOW.  
 4 Marylou: [We:ll I  
 5 don't think it's a matter'v having t'be right no:w. I  
 6 think it's something that will snowba:ll.  
 7 (0.7)  
 8 Marylou: Yihkno: [w?  
 9 Clair: [Mm:: [h m . ]  
 10 Marylou: [I think i]t's somethin that (.)'ll haftih  
 11 be worked awup  
 12 (1.6)  
 13 Marylou: W[hich is alright en it kin be done et any ti:me en=  
 14 Clair: [ (Weh-)  
 15 Clair: = [M m h m ? ]  
 16 Marylou: [I don't care w]hether a: lot'v'm come'r not because  
 17 (0.7)  
 18 Marylou: uh: if they don't wan' to.  
 19 (0.7)  
 20 Marylou: But the thing i:s ah: the mo:re the better,  
 21 (0.3)  
 22 Marylou: Bu t they d on't [haftuh [(place order) in] the=  
 23 Clair: [ WE:LL YOU [KNOW EVERY [ O N E A' THE ]  
 24 Marylou: =club they c 'n [u-have their own  
 25 Clair: [ M[h

<sup>6</sup> Another example of this was discussed in chapter one, section 2: here we saw that in extract (22) the termination of the topic is prolonged because a speaker uses an inappropriate idiom.

26 Marylou: frie:nd[s. [(and uh)]  
 27 Clair: .h hh [Ever one a' those o:fficers yih know  
 28 darn well's gonna buy'm Marylou:..

In this extract Marylou uses two idioms in her attempts to end the non-alignment and so bring the argument to an end. However, both fail to generate an appropriate response so the topic is continued.

At the beginning of the extract Clair says that they should put their suggestion to the group but drop the idea if not enough people are interested: "AN' AN' EH-A:SK how many: e-MIGHT BE INTRESTED duh come BEC'Z IF YEE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH THET'S INTRESTED W'L THEN (.) fooy ON IT YIH KNOW". Marylou does not agree, instead she says that if they do not have to have enough people right away, numbers will "snowba:ll" (lines 5-6). This idiom suggests that there is a natural process by which numbers will increase. Thus she uses a persuasive idiom in the light of Clair's conflicting point of view.

Clair then has the opportunity to collaborate with Marylou's idiomatic utterance, but she fails to do so (line 7). After a pause and Marylou's "Yihkn:ow" she merely gives a non-committal acknowledgement token (line 9). Marylou then reaffirms her point of view with "I think it's somethin thet (.)'ll haftih be worked awup", to which Clair again does not respond. Marylou continues with "Which is alright en it kin be done et any ti:me", after which Clair gives another acknowledgement (line 15). After this Marylou's turn "I don't care whether a: lot'v'm come'r not " conflicts with Clair's earlier suggestion that if they do not have a large number of people interested they should abandon the idea. Again Clair fails to respond (lines 17 and 19). Marylou then produces a second idiomatic utterance: "But the thing i:s ah: the mo:re the better".

The first idiom expresses a point of view which directly contrasts with Marylou's stated view in the previous utterance. This second idiom, however, appears to be an attempt to generate alignment by saying something about which both speakers can agree. Through the idiom Marylou creates a contrast with her statement that she does not mind if not many turn up. The idiom can be seen to concur with Clair's earlier statement that the plan should be abandoned if not enough people are interested; in a similar way the idiom implies that it will be better if a large number express an interest. The preface "But the thing is:" presents this view as an objective fact. This utterance gives Clair the opportunity to align with Marylou without substantially altering her stated opinion. However, she does not align. Instead she argues that "Ever one a' those officers" will be interested, even though this appears to contradict her stance at the beginning of the extract. Hence she fails to align with Marylou and the topic is continued.

From this extract we are able to draw three conclusions. First, that the recipients seem to need to be aligned before a topic can be terminated. Second, that speakers will often use idioms in their attempts to generate agreement and bring the topic to a close. Third, that if the recipient fails to give an appropriate or affiliative response to an idiom, the speaker may find it difficult to bring the topic to a termination. Topic change needs to be negotiated and if one speaker fails to collaborate in the move to close then the topic termination is likely, at least in that instance, to be abandoned.

Having suggested a standard sequence for topic change and seen how the sequence can be extended or aborted, we shall now examine each element of the negotiation in more detail. All the utterances which constitute the sequence are important because each has a role in

bringing one topic to a close and introducing a next.<sup>7</sup> Thus, we shall analyse each to see what task it performs and what features enable it to do so. Obviously, however, our major concern will be with the idiomatic utterance.

## 5 THE TOPIC CHANGE SEQUENCE

### 5.1 Termination Relevant Utterances Prior to the Idiom

In a number of the extracts containing idiomatic topic changes the idiom is not the first termination relevant utterance. In other words, in some cases there is an utterance prior to the turn in which an idiom is employed which indicates that a possible termination has been reached. There is, however, rarely more than one termination relevant utterance prior to the idiom. In the model of a standard sequence, above, we took the idiom as the first step in the negotiation towards a close because that is generally the case. In only a minority of examples is the idiom preceded by a termination relevant utterance. And these utterances commonly have a number of characteristics which, as we shall see, are similar to those exhibited by the idioms.

#### 5.1.i Summaries

In a number of cases the closing-implicative utterance prior to the idiom is a summary of the preceding topic. The following is one such example.

(22)[Abbott]

M:           but I don't- mind another b- it seems terrible really

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<sup>7</sup> An analysis of the utterances which follow the idiom also demonstrates that the recipients interpret the idioms as close implicative. For a discussion of the importance of analysing subsequent turns see chapter one section 2.

--> to think [ you could be ] at work working full-time one=  
P: [W e l l : : : ]  
M: =week,  
(.)  
P: Yeah.  
--> M: an' in hospital with half your face gone the ne:xt  
P: Yeah. .hh[hh ]  
M: an' } that's how it goes isn't i[t  
P: [Y-oh yeah.  
John's in his bungalow now you know.

Prior to this extract M and P have been discussing M's brother's illness. One of the focuses has been how quickly the illness developed and how utterly disabling it has been. Just before this extract M has imagined how she would react to being forced to give up work and remain in bed all day. The summary, therefore, links back to all the talk about the nature of the disease, the way it has effected his life, and, by generalising, M's imagined reaction to contracting such an illness.

As we saw in the previous chapter, two integral aspects of summaries are linking back, not just to the prior utterance but to the topic or a segment of the topic as a whole, and relating to the topic in a general way. In many of the idiomatic and non-idiomatic summaries in this section we will see that besides linking to the topic in a general way, a large number generalise from the specific event in question to all similar events. Hence the summary in (22) generalises from M's brother to include everyone. This transition is effected mainly through M's use of the general term "you".

### 5.1.ii Repetition

In other cases the idiom is preceded by an utterance which rephrases or repeats an utterance from earlier in the topic. (7)

[Detail]

L: .hhh He was uhp uh ye:s indeed .hhh He was uh (0.1)  
a buyer for the ho- the ONLY HORSE HAIR factory left  
in England.



M: Good gracious,  
 --> L: Uh he was their buyer,  
 M: Ummm (mm)  
 L: So he had a good innings didn't he?  
 M: I should say so yes,  
 (0.5)  
 M: Marvellous,  
 L: .hh .tch Anyway we had a very good evening on Saturday.

In her utterance "Uh he was their buyer", L repeats that the man was "a buyer" for a horse hair factory which she mentioned in her previous utterance.

Repetition or rephrasing is also a common feature of terminal idioms. One of the ways in which repetition works to initiate the termination of a topic is that it fails to develop the topic further, thus facilitating its closure. Repetition may, therefore, be used to indicate that the speaker has nothing further to add. Failing to add anything new to the topic is, as we shall see, a general feature of utterances which occur during termination sequences.

### 5.1.iii Assessments

A third type of utterance which commonly occurs prior to idiomatic topic terminations consists of assessments.

(11)[Detail]

--> Emma: ((swallow)) I mean that's how bad the service  
 was. .h.hh (.) Its gahn duh pot.  
 Lottie: u-oh::: (.) e-Y e : : a h . Ye< ]  
 Emma: . [But its a be auti- ]ful  
 go:lf course.

Here, Emma assesses the service in the hotel in her utterance "that's how bad the service was". This, as we saw in chapter two, makes explicit a formulation already apparent in the preceding talk. Thus, pre-terminal assessments add little new information to the topic because they simply make explicit a formulation which has been implicit

in the telling.

In her analysis of topic changes involving talk in overlap, Jefferson (1981b) notes the association between assessments and topic termination. She demonstrates that assessments are so closely associated with topic closure that recipients wishing to prolong a topic will sometimes counteract the assessment by producing an overlapping utterance and, thus prevent a possible termination sequence from being initiated. (We will return to Jefferson's analysis when we explore idiomatic assessments in section 5:2 below.)

#### 5.1.iv Multiple Termination Relevant Utterances

In a small number of cases in the data, the idiom is preceded by a number of termination relevant utterances, such as those we have been describing. The following is a case in point.

(13)[NB:II:4:23]

1 Nancy: En apperently he jus' simply hezn't. been: (.)  
2 interestid in:  
3 Emma: [Mm:] hm:  
4 Nancy: doing (.) a lot'v dating en  
5 Emma: [hm hhhhhh hh  
6 Nancy: He said now I: might have a, a reason tuh:  
7 Emma: [hh hhoo::: hhoo::  
8 Emma: hhmhh-hhmhh  
9 Nancy: [Yihknow f-  
10 (0.2)  
11 Nancy: get do:wn th e r e. hhhhhh  
12 Emma: [G e e : : wouldn'th a'be ni:ce,  
13 Nancy: Ya:h he says they rilly treatche ril ni:ce:,  
14 (.)  
15 Emma: Wu:l gooU:-D.  
16 Nancy: [t at those place\_s  
17 Emma: [Oh:: I'm gla:d.  
18 Emma: .hhh19 Nancy: [SO THINGS ER LOOKING UP DEAR, hhh20 Emma: [THA:T'S  
21 GOO:-D.  
22 Nancy: [Y::AH.  
23 Emma: W'L LET ME SEE HOW the: the BAH:LL RO:LL:S HE:RE

This extract is taken from the end of a long sequence in which Nancy

has been talking about a man she met. She tells Emma that his wife died a few years ago and since then he has not been interested in dating. She also tells her that he is a member of an officers club (referred to as "there" in line 11 and "those places" in line 16) and that he offered to take Emma to the club with him.

In lines 6 and 11 Nancy produces a summary of the topic. Just prior to this she has been talking about his wife, but earlier, and for much of the preceding topic, she has been describing how he asked for her address so that when he visits the officer's club (which is near where Nancy lives) he can invite her to accompany him. Thus Nancy's utterance in lines 6 and 11 specifically link back to all this preceding detailing by recalling that he said now (having met Nancy) he might have a reason to visit the club. Besides connecting with all the previous talk about how well they got on and the possibilities of a future meeting, it specifically links back to where she began recalling what he said to her which was much earlier in the topic.

Following the summary the recipient does a number of assessments (in lines 12, 15, and 17). These also relate to the topic as a whole rather than just the previous utterance, and they fail to introduce anything new to the topic. They are similar to the kinds of pre-transitional assessments considered by Jefferson (1981b). She refers to them as "topically disengaged" because they are "thoroughly disattentive to the current state of the talk" (p.9). In other words Emma's assessment in line 15 "Wu:l gooU::D" is a response to the entire telling rather than simply to Nancy's previous utterance "he says they rilly treatche ril ni:ce:", such an upgraded assessment would not be entirely appropriate to this rather incidental aspect of the news.

Thus, prior to the idiomatic utterance, speakers can use

termination relevant utterances in the collaborative management of bringing a topic to a close. One feature of these utterances is that they do not continue talk by introducing new matters. Instead they tend to relate back to either the whole topic or a particular utterance, or to state a formulation already implicit in the telling.

It seems then, that even before the idiom, speakers can use termination relevant utterances in the negotiation of a close. The recipient then has a chance to collaborate in, or to reject, the move to close the topic. If the topic is not prolonged, then either speaker can produce an idiomatic utterance which is a further step towards topic termination.

## 5:2 Termination Relevant Features of the Idiom

In many cases the idiom is the first termination relevant utterance of a topic change. Idioms in this sequential position demonstrate similar characteristics to the pre-idiomatic utterances we examined in 5.1. In other words, the idioms also summarise, generalise, rephrase and assess aspects of the previous talk. In this section we will examine these features of the idioms.

### 5.2.i Summaries

Many of the idioms can be seen to summarise the previous topic.<sup>8</sup> Summaries, as we have already discovered, often encompass a number of characteristics. Most importantly they link back beyond the previous utterance to the whole topic, or an aspect of the topic. This occurs partly because the idioms tend to relate to the topic in a general way,

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<sup>8</sup> Gumperz and Tannen (1979) note that in Black rhetoric idioms are used as summaries.

that is, they generalise, either about the topic, or from the particular subject in question to all similar matters. In the following extract the idiom can be seen to be a general summary.

(7) [Detail]

- L: Uh he was the vicars' warden anyway he died suddenly  
an' he was still wo:rkng.  
(0.2)
- M: (Good gra:acious)
- L: He was seventy ni:ne.
- M: My wo:rd?  
(0.2)
- L: Yes h[re was um
- M: ( ) workers Down there.
- L: .hhh He was uhp uh ye:s indeed .hhh He was uh (0.1)  
a buyer for the ho- the ONLY HORSE HAIR factory left  
in England.
- M: Good gracious,
- L: Uh he was their buyer,
- M: Ummm (mm)
- > L: So he had a good innings didn't he?
- M: I should say so yes,  
(0.5)
- M: Marvellous,
- L: .hh .tch Anyway we had a very good evening on Saturday.

L and M are discussing someone who has recently died, L talks about his age and where he worked. This leads to a parenthetical remark about the horse hair factory. L has, therefore, moved away from discussing the deceased man to discussing the factory. However, following the repetition which we examined in 5.1.ii, she produces a summary which reintroduces talk about the man's death. The idiom "had a good innings", can be seen to relate to all of the previous talk in a general way. It refers to the fact that he has died, that he was old, and that he had a good life. Hence the idiom folds back over all the talk about his death, that he was seventy nine and that he was still working.

The idioms in the following extracts summarise the preceding talk in a similar fashion.

(8) [Detail]

Steven: Well he didn't either 'ee had a bad start (I mean)  
'ee had iz (0.3) .t.k.hh father shot by the Nazis  
'nd iz uh .hh mother died in: Auschvitz yih  
kno:w-so  
Leslie: [Oh really:?=  
Steven: =So eez had the: ( )-  
Leslie: [Oh 'z a Je:w is he Je:w?  
(.)  
Steven: Oh yeah.  
(.)  
Steven: He's had k- eez a Czechoslovakian Jew so-eez had k-  
Leslie: [Yes  
--> Steven: eez had quite a- checked career already=  
Leslie: =eh heh  
Steven: .hhhh-Yeah  
Leslie: [Ye:h.  
(0.2)  
Leslie: .h-hh Alri:ght. Well I:ll get my husband then: to get  
Steven: [TCH!  
Leslie: in touch with the address.

(13)[Detail]

Nancy: En apperently he jus' simply hezn't. been: (.)  
interestid[in::]  
Emma: [Mm: ]hm:  
Nancy: [doing (.) a lot'v [dating en  
Emma: [hm hhhhhh hh  
Nancy: He said now-I: might have a, a reason tuh:  
Emma: [hh hhoo::::: hhoo::  
Emma: hhmhh-hhmhh  
Nancy: [Yihknow f-  
(0.2)  
Nancy: g-et do:wn [the r e. [hhhhhh  
Emma: [G e e : : [wouldn'th [a'be ni:ce,  
Nancy: Ya:h he says they rilly treatche ril ni:ce:,  
(.)  
Emma: Wu:l gooU::D.  
Nancy: [t at those place[s  
Emma: [Oh:: I'm gla:d.  
Emma: .hhh-h< .  
--> Nancy: [SO THINGS ER LOOKING UP DEAR, hhh-h  
Emma: [THA:T'S  
GOO-D.  
Nancy: [Y::AH.  
Emma: W'L LET ME SEE HOW the: the BAH:LL RO:LL:S HE:RE

In these examples the idioms also fold back to elements of the previous topic. In (8) the idiom folds back to all the misfortunes in Robert Maxwell's life, which Steven and Leslie have discussed. These include

all the talk about his son (discussed just prior to this excerpt) and about his parents and his family background. Similarly, in (13), the idiom folds back beyond this excerpt to talk about how well she got on with the man, the possibility of their meeting again and what such a meeting may involve.

#### 5.2.ii Formulations and Assessments

Another noticeable feature about the idiom in (7) is that, besides summarising the topic, it formulates it in a particular way.

#### (7) [Detail]

- L: Uh he was the vicars' warden anyway he died suddenly  
an' he was still wo: rking.  
(0.2)
- M: (Good gra[ci]ous)
- L: He was seventy ni: ne.
- M: My wo: rd?  
(0.2)
- L: Yes h[er]e was um
- M: ( ) workers Down there.
- L: .hhh He was uhp uh ye: s indeed .hhh He was uh (0.1)  
a buyer for the ho- the ONLY HORSE HAIR factory left  
in England.
- M: Good gracious,
- L: Uh he was their buyer,
- M: Umm (mm)
- > L: So he had a good innings didn't he?
- M: I should say so yes,  
(0.5)
- M: Marvellous,
- L: .hh .tch Anyway we had a very good evening on Saturday.

The idiom "had a good innings" gives a positive formulation of the news about the man's death. Alternative formulations of such news could have highlighted the misfortune or sadness of his death. This positive treatment of the news is implicit in the telling: rather than talking about how he died or how he will be missed, L talks about his great age and the fact that he was still able to work. Thus the idiom formulates the upshot of the detailing; it is not bad news about the

man's death but good news about how long and how full a life he had.

Similarly, in (8), the idiom formulates the upshot of the details which precede it.

(8) [Detail]

Steven: Well he didn't either 'ee had a bad start (I mean)  
'ee had iz (0.3) .t.k.hh father shot by the Nazis  
'nd iz uh .hh mother died in: Auschvitz yih  
kno:w[-so  
Leslie: [-Oh really:?=  
Steven: =So eez[-had the: ( )-  
Leslie: [-Oh 'z a Je:w is he Je:w?  
(.)  
Steven: Oh yeah.  
(.)  
Steven: He's had k- eez a Czechoslovakian Jew so[-eez had k-  
Leslie: [-Yes  
--> Steven: eez had quite a- checked career already=  
Leslie: =eh heh  
Steven: .hhhh[-Yeah  
Leslie: [-Ye:h.  
(0.2)  
Leslie: .h[-hh Alri:ght. Well I'll get my husband then: to get  
Steven: [-.TCH!  
Leslie: in touch with the address.

Prior to the idiom, Steven details a number of unfortunate events in Robert Maxwell's past. Thus he demonstrates that while Maxwell may be successful now, he has also suffered a number of tragedies. The idiom makes this formulation of his life explicit by specifically describing it as a series of fortunate and unfortunate events.

Again, in (13), the idiom makes explicit an assessment of the events which has been implicit in the telling.

(13)[Detail]

Nancy: En apperently he jus' simply hezn't. been: (.)  
interestid[-in:]  
Emma: [-Mm: ]hm[-  
Nancy: [-doing (.) a lot'v[-dating en  
Emma: [-.hm hhhhhh hh  
Nancy: He said now[-I: might have a, a reason tuh:  
Emma: [-hh hhoo::::: hhoo::  
Emma: hhmhh[-hmhh  
Nancy: [-Yihknow f-



(0.2)

Nancy: g<sub>et</sub> do:wn the r e. hhhhhh  
 Emma: G e e : :wouldn'th<sub>a</sub>'be ni:ce,  
 Nancy: Ya:h he says they rilly treatche ril ni:ce:,  
 (.)  
 Emma: Wu:l gooU::D.  
 Nancy: .t at those place<sub>s</sub>  
 Emma: Oh:: I'm gla:d.  
 Emma: .hhh<sub>h</sub><  
 --> Nancy: SO THINGS ER LOOKING UP DEAR, hhh<sub>h</sub>  
 Emma: THA:T'S  
 GOO<sub>U</sub>:D.  
 Nancy: Y::AH.  
 Emma: W'L LET ME SEE HOW the: the BAH:LL RO:LL:S HE:RE

Implicit in the telling has been Nancy's pleasure at meeting the man and her hopes that they will meet again. The idiom formulates the upshot of these details by saying that her life has improved, and suggests that it will continue to do so.

These idiomatic formulations are very similar to "position taking" utterances, which Heritage and Greatbatch (1986) discovered during their analysis of political speeches. They found that recurrently

"the speaker first describes a state of affairs toward which he or she could be expected to take a strongly evaluative stance. The description contains little or no overt evaluation. At the end of it, the speaker overtly and unequivocally praises or condemns the state of affairs described." (P.131)

Idiomatic formulations are similar because, like the position taking utterances, they are preceded by the description of a state of affairs involving little overt evaluation, the speaker's reaction to the state of affairs is then made explicit in a separate object at the end of the telling.

Idiomatic formulations are similar to assessments, but the two can be distinguished for the following reason: whilst assessments are disattentive to the utterances which precede them, idiomatic formulations are not (Jefferson 1981b:9). As we have seen, Jefferson (ibid.) found that assessments in terminations are disattentive because

they respond to the topic as a whole and not to the previous utterance. Formulating idioms are not disattentive, but usually fit quite appropriately to the preceding utterance. However, they do have a disengaged quality which results from the fact that they are also general and respond to the whole of the previous talk, rather than just the preceding utterance. In extracts (7), (8) and (13) the idioms are general statements about the whole of the preceding topic, and it is this that results in their disengaged quality.

### 5.2.iii Generalisations

Both the summary and the formulating nature of idioms partly stem from the fact that they generalise. Whereas the majority of utterances in a topic are about one specific aspect of that topic, idioms often refer to the entire matter under discussion. Therefore, they embody a move from the specific to the general. This transition is facilitated by characteristics inherent within generalising idioms. These idioms often use generic terms such as "it", "things", "everything", "you", "everyone" and so on.

(10)[Detail]

Ann:        Nevuh mind it'll all come right in the end,

(11)[Detail]

Emma:       It's gahn duh pot

(13)[Detail]

Nancy:      SO THINGS ER LOOKING UP DEAR, hhhhh

(15)[Detail]

Fran:        We:ll that's th' way it goe:s.

Generic terms such as these enable the idioms to loosely refer to the topic in it's entirety. Further, they result in the idiom being

disengaged because they have no specific referent.

Another of their features is that by formulating the upshot of the detailing, idioms fold back to a number of aspects of the prior telling or detailing. This facilitates the production of a general summary of all these aspects. Indeed, some of the idioms generalise beyond the matter in question to other matters of a similar nature. The following extract is a case in point.

(23)[D.A.:2:17]

(Betty has informed Fanny of the death of a mutual friend)

Betty: Th[at's why I ca:lledju Fa-nny I thought thatchu would=  
Fanny: [ (And) ( )  
Betty: =want t'know.  
(.)  
Betty: [.hhhhhhhhh  
Fanny: [We:ll I em a:wflly sorry that's all I c'n  
sa:y.  
Betty: [u-Nothing e:lse.=  
Fanny: =Nothing else.  
Betty: [No:thing e:lse, b't I felt thetjoo wannid=  
Fanny: ( )  
Betty: =would want t'know that she wasn't anymo:re. So:  
uh::::: .hhh=  
Fanny: =Yeah,  
--> Betty: [i-Yihknow it's uh:eh it's a way'v li:fe it's just  
--> one a' those things we uh:::::, .hhhh uh d-un  
unfortunately in the interum thuh:: several of ar: dear  
friends uh y'know past away

Here, Betty uses two idioms, both of which generalise from the death of their friend to life and death in general. This enables her to then introduce talk about other people who have died. This feature of some idioms gives them a bivalent quality, that is, they can be seen to apply not only to the matter under discussion, but also to a wider category of events. We shall return to this characteristic of idioms in section 6.

#### 5.2.iv Repetition and Rephrases

Repetition and rephrasing are not restricted to termination relevant utterances prior to the idiom. Many of the idioms also repeat or rephrase an earlier utterance. However, there are differences; direct repeats (in other words instances where an idiomatic phrase is used twice) are usually produced by both speakers; one speaker produces an idiom and a second speaker repeats it. Also the idiom and the utterance which it rephrases are usually produced by the same speaker, and occur just prior to the idiom (although the recipient may respond in between). The idioms are often built as though they are adding new information -they are not built as simple repetitions- but instead, they add little new and partially rephrase a previous utterance. In the following examples, the utterance which the idiom rephrases is marked as (1), while the idiom is marked as (2).

(11)[Detail]

Emma:(1)-->I mean that's how bad the service was. .h.hh (.)  
(2)-->It's gahn duh pot.

(1) [Detail]

Lisa:(1)-->Yah ah I'll tell you  
(2)-->I'll give you chapter'n'verse

(18)[Detail]

Jenny:(1)-->..I jumped outta the e seat I jump'd  
Vera: (.),  
Jenny(2)-->e shot about threee feet in the air ah think

(24)[Holt:1:1:18]

(Richard has broken his leg)

Mum: Still turns iz foot in a little bit. but  
Leslie: [Oh: yes  
Mum:(1)--> only a few days since he's had the pla:ster off it'su  
Leslie: [Ye: s].  
Mum:(2)-->'T's early da:ys yet,

Leslie: Ye:s.  
 (0.8)  
 Mum: Hm:. Oka:y then love,

In all these cases the idioms partially rephrase the previous utterance. For instance, in (11), the idiom "gahn duh pot" is a partial rephrase of "that's how bad the service was" and, in (1), "I'll give you chapter'n'verse" is a partial rephrase of "I'll tell you". Thus while the idioms may add something to the discussion (for instance the idiom in (1) is an upgrade of "bad"), they are characteristically rephrases. As we have seen, one of the features of terminal idioms is that they fail to develop the topic. Rephrasing is a way of talking on the topic but without advancing it, and hence it is closing relevant.

So far we have been concerned with idioms that rephrase an utterance produced by the same speaker. However, in a small number of cases the repetition is performed by a recipient. In these, the rephrase is often far more similar to the first utterance. Therefore, many are instances of the same idiom being repeated or slightly rephrased by the recipient.

(25)[Rahman:II:4]

(Ida's husband, who is in the room with Ida, has hurt his back)

Jenny: (h) What's he sayeen in the bahckground  
 thea-h . heh heh heh  
 Ida: [H(h) e y(h)eh he h (h)e shih: she said What's he  
 say'n in the bahckgrroun thah .hh she sah- it's a:ll  
 the money eez had in iz back pocket thass  
 made-im (that bad)  
 Jenny: [ehh HEH HE:h .he h-h  
 Ida: [HA HA-ha h a : : :.  
 Jenny: [ (thet's makin' the-) .hh  
 (1)-->That'll teach i:m=  
 Jenny: =hheh he h-he  
 Ida:(2)--> [That will teach him-yes,  
 Jenny: [ .hhh he-eh .hh ay-you =  
 Ida: [Yeh  
 Jenny: =gn: .hh When uh you gettin yer: dining room suite.

(26)[Holt:Dec:86:A:357]

(L's phone has been cut off because she forgot to pay the bill)

N: (He di-) They didn't cut it off did they?  
L: Ye::s they were a bit quick off the ma:rk [Huh huh huh  
( ) : [((sneeze))  
N:(1)--> That'll teach you won't it?  
L:(2)--> Yes I know it has taught us a lesson.  
N: You were extending it too far.  
L: Huhhh  
N: (Uh),  
L: But we were sorry to hear that your mother had died..

In these examples the recipient of the idiom repeats or extends the same idiom in their subsequent turn. Once again, this characteristic seems to be linked to the fact that terminal idioms do not introduce new information to the topic, and that, a way to collaborate without generating further talk, is simply to repeat or rephrase what has already been said.

#### 5.2.v Distinctions of Idiomatic Language

The features we have been describing in this section result in there being obvious differences between the idiomatic expression and the talk which precedes it. While the preceding talk often consists of detailing, idioms are usually generalised and link back to the whole of the topic rather than just the immediately preceding utterance. And whereas the talk they follow often introduces new information or leads to further on-topic talk, idioms do not. Furthermore, idioms frequently summarise, formulate or assess the whole of the preceding topic, and they are commonly repeats or rephrases of previous utterances. Thus, idioms are highly distinctive in nature from the detailing of the topic.

However, there are often further respects in which the idiom is distinctive from the talk it follows. One of these is that whilst the

topic may have been a complaint or a troubles-telling, the idioms are commonly positive and optimistic. This distinction was mentioned in chapter two. A further, perhaps related, difference is that while the topic may have been serious, the idioms are often light-hearted and introduce an element of humour into the talk.

(14)[Detail]

Mum: Do I speak alright with my new di- teeth in:?=  
 Leslie: eh-hh!  
 (.)  
 Leslie: .hh Yes yer coming over loud an' clea\_r  
 Mum: [ ( ) good.  
 Leslie: hhh huh .uh-hh .hh  
 Mum: [ hu:h .uhh .uhh .uhh .uhh  
 Leslie: .hh-h  
 Mum: [ Okay love,

(16)[Detail]

(Leslie has told Bond that the telephone is being bugged for Kathrine's thesis)

Leslie: Kathrine's doing 'er thesis=  
 Leslie: =o:r or something on um  
 Bond: Oh that's right you told me she wz going to,  
 Leslie: speech.  
 Leslie: Yes.  
 Bond: Ye:s.  
 (0.2)  
 Bond: Oh we:ll  
 (.)  
 Bond: Down it's down f'posterity-hey  
 Leslie: [ No  
 STATE secretes,=  
 Bond: =-ha ha ha ha eh oh  
 Leslie: [hh heh heh heh .hh .hh Okay then,

In these cases, the idiom leads to laughter by both speakers. This marks a difference between the idioms and the previous talk because, up until this point, it has been relatively serious (although in (14) Leslie does make a noise like laughter just prior to the idiom, but Mum's question is serious) and the speakers have not laughed together.

These shifts in the kind of language used (for example from detailing to generalising, from seriousness to humor) will be explored

further, in the light of idioms in media language, in chapter five. But at present, we note that this is another feature that distinguishes idioms from the talk which precedes them.

Before moving on to the next utterance in the sequence, I shall demonstrate that the features of the idioms which have been outlined in this section, do, to a large extent, overlap. Some of the features seem inseparable; for instance linking back, generalising and to some extent formulating are all constituent properties of summaries. Though certain features, such as rephrases and summaries, rarely occur together. The idiom in the following extract exhibits a number of features.

(12)[Holt:Dec:86:B:391]

- L: The lead singer thre::w his plectrum into the:: audience  
you see. An' an- And Gorden was able to  
ho:ld it the next day 'cause somebody ((smile voice))  
he knew ((normal)) picked it up.  
(1.0)
- L: The plectrum is what they pluck their guitar strings  
with.
- M: Yes (.) ((smile voice)) my my h-uhhuh
- L: └So: he came home from -
- > college absolutely (.) tickled to bits huh hhuh
- M: Uhhhhhhuh hhuhh Uh Oh dear hhuh-hu
- L: └Anyway if  
you see Rachel tell her he went to see  
Big Country.

Although the talk before the idiom is not serious (and M laughs in the preceding turn) it is followed by both speakers laughing together. Thus, in a similar way to the idioms in the extracts above, the idiom is overtly humorous. The idiom is also a summary: it begins with the component "So:" which mark upshots, upshots being a type of summary. It refers to the topic in a general way, linking back beyond the previous utterance to the rest of the telling; Gordon was "tickled to bits" because of all of the previous events, hence, all the preceding detailing is necessary for an understanding of the idiom. Also, it



formulates the upshot of the telling: implicit in it has been how pleased Gordon was to be able to touch the plectrum, but this is not made explicit until the idiom gives a very positive evaluation of his reaction ("tickled to bits"). So, it displays a number of the features described in this section and illustrates that, although not all of the terminal idioms exhibit all of the features, a large number exhibit many of them.

### 5.3 Responses to the Idioms

So far then, we have explored the first turn in the standard sequence, i.e. the turn in which the idiom is produced. In this section we will focus on to the second turn in the sequence:

A:            Idiom  
--> B:         Minimal response/Acknowledgement  
A:            New Topic

In this section we will look at the response made by the recipient of the idiomatic utterance. In the previous section we identified the characteristics of idioms in topic change sequences. We saw that many summarise the previous topic and that they do so by folding back, generalising and so on. As a result, idioms are closing implicative. For this quality to be mobilized interactionally, however, the recipient has to collaborate in drawing the sequence to a close. In section 4 we examined a number of instances in which the recipient fails to collaborate appropriately and thus the topic is continued. In this section we will explore recipient's responses which collaborate with the move to close the topic.

Collaborative responses to the idiom are usually minimal and may consist of agreements or simple acknowledgements. The following are three cases in point.

(10)[Detail]

Ann: Nevuh mind it'll all come right in the end,  
--> Jenny: Yeh.  
Ann: Okay you go'n getta clean trousihs on

(24)[Detail]

Mum: 'T's early da:ys yet,  
--> Leslie: Ye:s.  
(0.8)  
Mum: Hm:. Oka:y then love,

(18)[Detail]

Jenny: .hh Ye:s:. .h An' it ezzuh yihknow suht'v 'n:  
e- it en:ded with a great big bahng eh  
Vera: heh hn I jum ped outta the e seat I jump'd  
[Oh - huh:: [ (seat),  
(.)  
Jenny: e shot about thhrree feet in the air ah think  
Vera: [ O h : : : : : : : : . ]  
Jenny: heh heh  
--> Vera: [ Y e s ]: . .hh  
Jenny: .hhhh  
Vera: Eh:.m, we didn' go t'have ar haiuh done bah the wa:y,

In (10) Jenny responds to the idiom with "Yah", in (24) Leslie replies with "Ye:s", and in (18) Vera responds with "Yes:". Thus in all these cases the recipients respond with minimal agreement tokens. Such responses fail to develop the topic, thereby collaborating in the termination.

In her analysis of topic changes, Jefferson (1981b) also notes that such minimal responses are a feature of these exchanges. She examines exchanges where a speaker produces a minimal acknowledgement token before introducing a new topic. She describes these responses as "interactionally disengaged" because they are nothing more than the "merest nod to the other's materials before/while launching one's own" (ibid. P.7). Although those in the second turn of the standard sequence are largely not preceded by the speaker's introduction of a new topic, they share the characteristically disengaged quality identified by

Jefferson.

Whilst many of the responses in our sequence may be described as minimal and disengaged, some are more elaborate. We can identify various reasons for these responses being more than the "merest nod to the other's materials". The following are three cases in point.

(7) [Detail]

L: So he had a good innings didn't he?  
--> M: I should say so yes,  
(0.5)  
--> M: Marvellous,  
L: .hh .tch Anyway we had a very good evening on Saturday.

(9) [Detail]

P: .hhh But I think it'll iron itself out.  
--> M: I sure hope so.  
P: I'll see you Tuesday.

(13)[Detail]

Nancy: SO THINGS ER LOOKING UP DEAR, hhh[h  
--> Emma: THA:T'S  
--> GOO[D.  
Nancy: Y:AH  
Emma: W'l LET ME SEE HOW tha: BAH:LL RO:LLS HE:RE

In all these extracts the recipient of the idiom produces an elaborate agreement such as "I should say so yes" in (7), a sympathetic affiliation such as "I sure hope so" in (9) or an assessment such as "Marvellous" in (7) and "THA:T'S GOO:D" in (13). These are more elaborate because, in (7) the idiomatic expression is a question which asks M to collaborate with L's assessment of the news; in (9) P is talking about a trouble and a minimal response would not have demonstrated the appropriate sympathetic affiliation; and in (13) Emma's appreciative assessment "THA:T's GOO:D" affiliates with Nancy's idiomatic assessment that her life is improving, again a minimal response would not have been as appropriate. Thus, some of the

responses to the idiom in topic changes such as these differ somewhat from those identified by Jefferson. But a comparison may be drawn between these responses, and the kinds of utterances which Schegloff and Sacks (1973) found occurring just prior to topic terminations. They describe the purpose of these turns in the following way:

"With them a speaker takes a turn whose business seems to be to 'pass' i.e. to indicate that he has not now anything more or new to say, and also to give a 'free' turn to a next, who, because such an utterance can be treated as having broken with any prior topic, can without violating topical coherence take the occasion to introduce a new topic." (P.304)

Thus one purpose of these turns is to indicate to the recipient that the speaker has nothing more to say on the topic, and to give him or her the opportunity to introduce a new topic in the next turn. In sequences where there are a number of such turns before the initiation of a new topic, it may be that neither speaker has a topic at hand, or is willing to see if the other speaker has a new topic.

#### 5.4 The Introduction of a New Topic

We have now explored the first and second turns in the standard sequence. The third turn, to which we shall now turn our attention, is the introduction of a new topic.

A:            Idiom  
B:            Minimal response/Acknowledgement  
--> A:        New topic

The initiation of a new topic is most commonly preceded by a disjunction, thus the utterance consists of a disjunction immediately followed by the introduction of a new topic. In the following extracts arrow (1) indicates the disjunction, and arrow (2) indicates the new topic.

(12)[Detail]

L:        (1)-->Anyway

(2)-->if you see Rachel tell her he went to see Big Country.

(13)[Detail]

Emma: (1)-->W'L  
(2)-->LET ME SEE HOW tha: BAH:LL RO:LL:S HE:RE

(26)[Detail]

L: (1)-->But  
(2)-->we were sorry to hear that your mother had died..

In a small number of instances the disjunction follows the initiation of the new topic. In these the disjunctions tend to be more elaborate as in the following instance.

(15) [Detail]

Vera:(2)-->Eh::m, we didn't go t'have ar haiuh done  
(1)-->bah the wa:y,

Here Vera follows the initiation of the new topic, "we didn't go t'have ar haiuh done", with the elaborate disjunct "bah the wa:y".

If introductions to new topics are not preceded or followed by an elaborate disjunction, then they often include a self-repair. Schegloff (1979) has shown that abrupt topic changes are often accompanied by self-repair in the first turn of the new topic.

(22)[Detail]

--> Jenny: .hhh he-eh .hh ay you gn: .hh When uh you gettin yer:  
dining room suite.

This would, perhaps, suggest that sequences such as these, involving the initiation of a new topic without a disjunction, are treated as problematic by the speaker, and further analysis may find them to be dispreferred.

In a small number of instances, the introduction of a new topic includes neither disjuncts nor self-repair. Such utterances are, however, always initiations of closings rather than the introduction to

a new topic.

(9) [Detail]

P: .hhh But I think it'll iron itself out.  
M: I sure hope<sub>[so]</sub>  
--> P: I'll see you Tuesday.

Here the new topic is a statement of when they will meet again, commonly associated with closings, sometimes even taking the place of utterances such as "goodbye" (see Schegloff and Sacks 1973).

In some cases the utterance in which a new topic is introduced is also preceded by an agreement token which relates to the previous topic. The utterances in the following extracts contain each of these three components; arrow (1) indicates the agreement token, arrow (2) the disjunction marker, and arrow (3) the new topic.

(8) [Detail]

Leslie:(1)-->.hhh Alri:ght.  
(2)-->Well  
(3)-->I:'ll get my husband then: to get in touch with the  
address.

(17)[Detail]

Mrs H: (1)-->You kno:w.h  
(2)-->But l:look  
(3)-->ah I wz (0.2) I'm having s:still, dah- a big  
pro:blem with my: sisters ba:ck.

Thus the speaker who introduces a new topic may, but need not, do a further agreement/acknowledgement in response to the prior speaker's minimal agreement.

## 5.5 Idiomatic Terminations and Problematic Sequences

Before progressing to an examination of a slightly different type of idiomatic topic change, I want to consider the sequential environment in which the above topic changes occur. At the beginning of

this chapter we saw that the most common type of topic change is a stepwise transition, in other words, a seamless transition over a large number of turns. Hence the question is raised, why do these relatively abrupt and exposed topic changes occur? A fully supported answer to the question is beyond the bounds of this analysis. However, I would like to offer a possible explanation. It is noticeable that a large number of the idioms follow talk about troubles, misfortunes or complaints.<sup>9</sup> Also, many of the new topics introduced after the idioms are initiations of closings, or pre-closing topics, such as making arrangements to meet, and so on. Sacks (1971) has identified a connection between difficult topics, such as troubles-tellings, and closings:

"And that is the character say, of 'embarrassing' topics and 'controversial' topics; that to get off of them one has to specifically do 'getting off of them'" (P.9)

Jefferson (1984) has developed this to show that out of troubles-tellings speakers frequently move into closings:

"It appears that a primary orientation to a troubles-telling is that from it, there is nowhere else to go: that getting off of a troubles-telling is tantamount to getting out of the conversation itself." (P.191)

What I am suggesting is that many of the topics which precede idiomatic topic changes are just the kinds of topics that one has to specifically "do" getting off of them. Thus such exchanges do not lead on to other topics, resulting in seamless transitions, but have to be collaboratively closed and a new topic introduced. Idiomatic topic changes are a way of "doing getting off of them". Furthermore, just as idiomatic topic changes are often associated with closings, troubles-

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<sup>9</sup> On the association between idioms and talk about troubles, misfortunes, and complaints see chapter two.

tellings are also often associated with closings. Therefore, after a troubles-telling speakers may enter into an idiomatic topic change because there is "nowhere else to go". In many cases this does lead to a closure and the conversation is ended. However, in other cases, having closed the troubles-telling idiomatically, the speakers are then able to introduce an unrelated topic. Thus there may be a special association between complaints, troubles-tellings and so on, idiomatic topic changes, and closings. Further analysis is needed on this issue.

## 6 PIVOTAL TOPIC CHANGES

In section 5.2.iii we saw that idioms often have a bivalent quality, that is, they generalise from the topic in question to other similar events or objects. This results in their sometimes occurring in another, less common, but nevertheless, systematic type of topic change. These pivotal topic changes are even more economical than those with which we have been concerned up until now. Because idioms generalise from the topic in hand, they make relevant talk about other related events, objects etc. In these cases a speaker then introduces one of these related matters. Thus a standard sequence for this type of topic change is:

A:            Idiom (which generalises from the topic in hand)  
 A/B:          New topic (made relevant by the idiom)

Therefore, the idiom forms a pivot between two topics. The following is a case in point.

(27)[PT:4-5]

Edna:        Becuz uh:: u-dz yer mom like t'shop ov'r 'n: look  
               arou:n' 'n th'stores  
 Margy:        └ngY e : : s. Qh: yes.She luv-u-She's up et  
               Larry's mo:m's no:w, she wen'up (.) Sundee.hhh-.hh  
               They came down f'r dinner:└en then uh: shil I'll go=  
 Edna:        └Mm:-hm:  
 Margy:        =get her tuhmorrow.



Edna: Oh.w'l that's wonderful.  
Margy: [En then uh,  
(.)  
Margy; to-e-she has en ol'frie:nd oh w'she's u:en ol'friend of  
uy a:ll'v us. You know. [ .h-.h-.h ]  
Edna: [ Mm h m, ]  
Margy: =But she's eh she:'s uh up in Lodi.hh  
Edna: O-h : : : .  
Margy: [ So she's gunnah come down.u-I:- I don'kno:w how long  
she'll be uhere. .hh  
Edna: [ whhh-hhh=  
Margy: =B' [ t uh  
--> Edna: [ n-Open House et the Fri-days. .hhhhhhh ]=  
Margy: [ hhhh hih-hih ]  
Margy: = [ .hhh  
Edna: [ Ma:rgy I-I: mar-vel atche rilly.eh you fascinate me,=  
[ hhh  
Margy: =hh=  
Edna: =I've never seen a ga:l li:ke you.  
Margy: [ hOh(h)o [ E(h)edn a,::: [ ah  
Edna [ I mean it.  
Margy: nNo-: n o : n o. ]  
Edna: [ .hhYou do evry ] thing so beautif'ly end yer table  
wz so byoo-I told Bud I said honestly. .hhhhh ih wz  
jis:t deli:ghtful t'come down there that day en  
mee[t these  
Margy: [ W e :ll

Here, Edna summarises the first topic through the idiomatic "Open House et the Fridays" (Friday being Margy's surname). The preceding topic has been about Margy having her mother to stay and an old friend to visit. The idiom formulates the upshot of all the detailing about the comings and goings of her house guests by saying she has an "Open House". This refers generally to Margy's hospitality, and hence makes relevant other aspects of her hospitality. In her next utterance Edna produces an elaborate compliment which connects with the idiom but leads into talk about a dinner party given by Margy. Hence, she re-introduces a topic which was the reason for her calling Margy; she rang to thank Margy for entertaining her and her husband.

The idiom in this instance has a bivalent quality because it applies not only to the detailing of the preceding topic, but is subsequently used to introduce the subject of hospitality in another

context (i.e. the earlier luncheon). Thus Edna uses it as a pivot between the talk about Margy's guests and re-introducing the subject of the dinner party.

A similar transition can be seen in the following extract.

(28)[NB:II:1:3]

Lottie: Iit rained abou:t uh ::: u-let'ssee: Thursdee=  
 Emma: [Ye:h.  
 Lottie: =morningreal ri:l ha:rd about five uh'clock down=  
 Emma: [ ( )  
 Lottie: =here.  
 Emma: Did it?  
 Lottie: Memorial Da::y.  
(0.4)  
 Emma: That wz the-( )  
 Lottie: [No: this: (.) this week.=  
 Emma: =Oh this week. That's ri' God'v lost track a'time=  
 Lottie: [Ye:ah.  
 Emma: =This's rilly been a wee:k hasn'tit.  
 --> Lottie: Oh: Go:d a lo:ng week. Yeah.  
 Emma: [Oh: my] God I'm (.) glad it's  
over I won't even turn the teevee o:n

Here, a bivalent idiom, again, forms a transition between two topics. At the beginning of the extract, the speakers are discussing the weather, Emma becomes confused, thinking that Lottie is referring to Thursday of the previous week rather than of the current week. To explain her confusion Emma produces the idiom "'v lost track a'time". This is followed by Emma's assessment of the week; "This's rilly been a wee:k hasn'tit", which is somewhat idiomatic and generalises to the week as a whole with all its various events. Lottie responds with "a lo:ng week" which is more idiomatic and also generalises to the week as a whole. The idiom and the turn that preceded it both imply that it has not been a good week. The main reason for this is that one of the events has been the funeral of Robert Kennedy. This topic is then introduced after the idiom. Thus, again, because the idiom is so generalised it makes relevant talk about related matters, one of which

is introduced after the idiom.

Pivotal topic changes such as these do not generally involve an exposed termination of one topic and an introduction of a next, as idiomatic topic changes do. Hence they are perhaps, more similar to stepwise transitions,<sup>10</sup> where each shift of focus is linked to the previous talk (although pivotal topic changes are briefer). In a similar way to stepwise transitions, in pivotal topic changes an utterance happens to make a new topic relevant, and this is then introduced and discussed. However, while this is true for many, in others the shifts in focus are more exposed and the transition seems engineered to terminate one topic so that a particular next topic can be introduced. Consider the differences between the next extract and those that follow it.

(3)[HG:34]

Hyla: .hhhhhhh 't's not a bad idea.hh hhhh heh  
Nancy: [Huh y-ea:h. No that's  
          hitt'n ho:me. You mi(h)ght You might try that.=  
Hyla: [Yhhheh hhhhuh huh  
Nancy: =.hhh hhh .h-h If all else-  
Hyla: [nNo- o r u sh]  
          (.)  
Hyla: .h-hh  
--> Nancy: [If all else faihhls,=  
Hyla: =hhhyeh .hhh=  
--> Nancy: =Dear Abby, hhmh  
          (.)  
Hyla: .hhhh-h  
Nancy: [ .hhh-hh  
Hyla: [No': I c'n Oh: , she said something mea:n  
          yesterday I didn' like her,

Here, Nancy uses the idiomatic expression "If all else faihhls" and follows it with cliché "Dear Abby". Abby is a well known agony aunt, and the topic has been about a personal/emotional problem, for which the speakers have been trying to come up with solutions. However, the

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<sup>10</sup> For an example of stepwise transition see (2).

talk which follows the idiom is about Abby and something she said: the idiom thus forms a pivot between the two topics.

In this instance, the idiom does not seem to be a deliberate attempt to move from one topic to a particular next. Certain features indicate that the change may be viewed as "accidental" rather than "engineered". Hyla precedes the introduction of the new topic with "Oh:" which indicates that it is touched off by the idiom.<sup>11</sup> She begins her utterance with what seems to be a continuation of the prior topic "No: I c'n" but then performs a self-repair in order to introduce a new matter touched off by the idiom. Further characteristics of this topic change which indicate that it was not "engineered" are that the new topic is not introduced immediately after the idiom; in examples where speakers seem keen to introduce a next topic, there is little, or no, gap between the two. And the new topic is introduced by the recipient of the idiom. Thus if the speaker of the idiom wished to introduce a particular new topic she fails to do so (and she had plenty of opportunity to do so after the idiom, before Hyla introduces a new topic).

In the following example the topic transition seems rather more engineered.

(29)[Rahman:B:2:JV(14):2]

(Jenny has been visited by Vera's guests)

Vera: I'm sorry yih hahd th'm all o'n you J e n n y]=  
Jenny: [ .hhh Oh don't ]=  
Vera: = [like that ]  
Jenny: [be sill]y No: thaht wz luvly it wz a nice

---

<sup>11</sup> See Heritage (1984b) on the role of the particle "oh" in signifying that the speaker has undergone some "change-of-state"; for example as a response to an informing the particle indicates that speakers state of knowledge has changed as a result of the informing.

Vera:                   surpri:ze  
                           [Yehs (     )  
                           [Ahn' they look so well.the chilreh theh  
 Jenny:                   go:hr̥g-iss ahrn't they  
                           [D'you know theh-  
 Vera:                   He wz- they w'rr ez good ez go:ld,  
 --> Vera:               (.)  
 Jenny:                   Yes:  
                           [Yihknow ah'v hehrd such bad repo:hrts. about them.  
 Vera:

Here, the topic change forms a transition between talk about Jenny's visit from the children and how well they look, to talk about the bad reports Vera has heard. The idiom forms a slight shift from talking about how well the children looked to how well they behaved. This enables Vera to construct a contrast between how well they behaved and the bad reports of their behaviour she has heard, which forms the next topic. What is noticeable about the idiom is that it involves a self-correction; "He wz-" to "they w'rr". Further on in the conversation it turns out that it is only one of the boys who behaves badly. Hence when Vera uses the idiom to praise their behaviour she may already be thinking about the reports of the bad behavior of one of the children, and the transition may be engineered specifically to lead on to this matter.

The following extract contains a second example of an engineered transition involving bivalent idioms, although in this case the idiom does not form the pivot between two very different topics; instead there are a number of idioms which initiate smaller transitions. The result is a more gradual transition over a larger number of turns.

(30)[NB:II:2:5]

(The first utterance follows talk about the assassination of Robert Kennedy which has recently taken place.)

--> Nancy:           .hhhhhh Yeah it's been a rough week ah everybuddy is  
                           (.) youknow  
                           (0.2)

Emma: Mm<sub>hm</sub>  
 Nancy: [ta:lkɪn abəʊt ɪ ɪn evərbʊdi: kɔ:rs I: dɒn't knəʊ  
 --> whether ɪt's θæt ɛr dʒst θæt w're dʒs:t (.) k'mplɪtli  
bo:ɡɪŋ daʊn ɛt wɜ:k,h .hhhhm  
 (.)  
 Nancy: E<sub>r</sub> wʰætə WIH: WITH ME: wɪθ mɪ fɪnəlz?hhhh  
 Emma: [Oh: well e v r y bʊdɪ's [sə:d. ]  
 Nancy: huh .uh: :  
 Emma: [Oh ho:w'd dʒɪ do wɪθ jɜr fɪnəlz.

The first utterance, involving the idiom "rough week", generalises from talk about Robert Kennedy's death to talk about the week as a whole, and everybody's reaction to it. Nancy then produces a contrast to explain why it feels like a rough week, she says she does not know whether it is the assassination (referred to as "that") or because everyone at work is "bo:ggng down". This is a second idiom and is part of the transition from talk about "everbuddy:", in the first idiomatic utterance, to those at work in the second, and finally to herself and her exams. The contrast has a third part, which suggests that her feeling of it having been a rough week may be due to her having taken her finals. At the beginning of this third part Emma produces a response to the first part of the contrast, but she ends up talking in overlap with Nancy who is producing the second part of the contrast. Nancy does not break off to allow her to continue and does not respond to this utterance. Thus it seems that Nancy did not introduce this as a possible next topic but purely as one step in a transition between topics. Emma then asks about her finals, and this becomes the next topic.

Therefore, in this extract we see bivalent idioms being used as pivots, not between two distinct topics, but between one topical focus and another. In this way the speakers create transitions between related matters until the topic at the end of the transitions is quite different from the topic at the beginning. This is similar to stepwise

transition, but in this case the mechanisms of the transition are more exposed and it occurs over a small number of turns.

### 6.i Contrasts

We have discovered that these bivalent idioms have similar characteristics to those in standard idiomatic topic changes: for example, we have seen that summarising and generalising are important features in bringing one topic to a close and enabling another to be introduced. Another characteristic which is a particularly common feature of pivotal idioms is that they often involve contrasts.<sup>12</sup> In (29) we saw that the idiom "good ez go:ld" forms the first part of a contrast between the children's good behaviour and the bad reports she has heard. (Note that the speaker even uses the opposite terms "good" and "bad"). Similarly in (30) Nancy gives three contrasting reasons as to why she has felt it to be a rough week, it could be that everyone is talking about the assassination, or that everyone at work is "bo:gging down", or that it is because she has had her finals. This three part contrast forms a gradual transition between the assassination and her finals.

In (29) the contrast is between opposites, in this instance good and bad, and this is often the case. In fact, in the following extract a pivotal idiom is followed by talk about an opposite, but the contrast between the two states is not articulated.

(31)[NB:IV:10:4]

Emma: .hh I'm d's TAKIN OFF my CLOZE yuh ah ownee ha:ve ONE  
berzeer'n pa:nty (.) GOD I HAVEN'T EATEN HO:ME I BEEN  
--> invited out ah this ih the (.) this is a' LI:FE down  
here.  
(0.2)

---

<sup>12</sup> On contrasts (in a more formal setting) see Atkinson (1984).

Emma: i↑h  
 Lottie: Did Buh u-ez Bud called-jih?  
 Emma: [ .hhh Yeah I k-ah  
 (0.2)  
 Emma: uh WE:LL I WON'T (.) ko intuh this bit uhhh

Here, Emma gives a very positive formulating idiom about the life she is leading, "this is a' LI:FE down here". Emma and her husband also have a house in the city, thus "down here" implicitly contrasts with up there (in the city). Lottie knows that Bud has returned to the city thus there is an implicit contrast between Lottie being "down here" and Bud being back in the city. Further, Lottie knows that Bud left because he and Emma fell out. Thus, in a similar way to the idiom in (29), the idiom (which suggests Emma is enjoying life) is against expectation: just as *Vera expected the children to behave badly* because of the reports she heard, Lottie may well have *expected Emma to be having a terrible time* (as in fact Emma seems to have been having at the time of their previous conversation). Therefore, when Emma uses the idiom to comment on something she is happy about, Lottie may be puzzled about her change in attitude and thus introduces the subject of trouble in order to find out if it has been resolved.

Here, then, although the idiom does not involve a contrast, the subject which it leads on to can be seen as an opposite state of affairs, and it is because the idiom is very positive that the opposite becomes relevant. In other words, it sets up a puzzle for Lottie: how can Emma be enjoying life when her husband has just left her? Thus, she introduces the subject of her husband by asking about any further developments.

We can conclude that contrasts are a common feature of pivotal utterances and that even when the two parts of a contrast are not articulated, an opposite state of affairs often becomes relevant as a



possible next topic.

## 7 IDIOMS IN TOPIC SHIFTS

So far we have seen idioms in two different types of topic change. First, we have analysed idioms in topic changes where there is an overt termination of one topic and an introduction of a next. Second, we have analysed idioms in a pivotal position between two topics. Finally, I want to demonstrate that idioms occur not only at transitions between topics, but also at transitions within topics. In this section I shall demonstrate that idioms are also associated with topic shifts. I am using the phrase "topic shift" to denote changes of focus within a topic, in other words, when the topic remains the same but the aspect in question is changed. Maynard (1980) also distinguishes between topic changes and topic shifts. He defines topic shifts as involving

"a move from one aspect of a topic to another in order to occasion a different set of mentionables" (P.271)

Idioms are sometimes used to initiate a move from one aspect of a topic to another. These topic shifts range from sequences which are almost indistinguishable from topic changes, to single utterance transitions where an idiom completes talk about one aspect and is followed by talk about another aspect.

In the following extract an idiom occurs just prior to a topic shift which is not dissimilar to a topic change.

(32)[Heritage:I:6:7]

Mrs H: en she's only here et week e:nd.  
Ilene: iYes that's a problem. .hh No:w u-theh ah:r eh I'm  
shohr theh mus'be people down the ah.  
(0.5)  
Mrs H: u-We:ll. You see I:ver is (.) she's the type. .hh thet  
(.) one hastuh take huh by the no:se.  
Ilene: Oh and ihh heh heh heh-heh-hn=  
Mrs H: And-

--> Mrs H: =I:'m I:'m the only puhrs'n available t'take huhr by  
 --> the n<sub>o</sub>:se.  
 Ilene: eeYup. Yup. .hhh Well now look e-Jeremy said he'd be  
back t'morrow morning actually,

Prior to this extract Mrs H has asked Ilene if her son, Jeremy, who is a physiotherapist, would see Mrs H's sister, Iver. Ilene begins explaining that this will be difficult because he has gone away. However, they then shift to identifying Iver and to the problem of her only being in the vicinity at the weekend. Ilene suggests she see a physiotherapist in her own area, but Mrs H says that her sister needs to be pushed into it and therefore she is trying to arrange a consultation for when she comes to stay. In saying this Mrs H uses the idiom "take huhr by the n<sub>o</sub>:se". After the idiom Ilene returns to talk about when Jeremy will be back. Thus, the idiom forms a shift between talk about Iver to talk about Jeremy. But both aspects can be seen to be on the same topic, if the overall topic is taken to be something like finding out when Mrs H's sister can see Jeremy.

In the first instance, then, it seems that what separates topic change from topic shift is only that what is talked about after the shift, can be seen as belonging to the same topic. Thus, if we were using a definition of topic entirely based on the structure of segments of conversation, rather than the matter under discussion, we would not have placed these in a separate section. Initially it was only because I was working with a notion of topic as, in part, what is being discussed, that these did not seem to merit being treated as full blown topic changes. However, it turned out that (as in [32]), while these transitions did include disjunctions (which might be seen as evidence for treating them in a similar way to topic changes), there were significant differences between topic shifts and topic changes. Thus,

it may be the case that speakers differentiate between a transition from one unrelated matter to another, and a transition from one related matter to another. Therefore, this section may be seen as containing evidence that speakers do orient to the subject under discussion in constructing talk into segments; and, if this is the case, there is some justification for the analyst who uses a notion of topic based on both the structure of talk, and the matter under discussion.

The idiom in (32) bears some of the characteristics of those analysed in previous sections, and the sequence in which it occurs is very similar to those in those usually associated with topic change. The idiom exhibits such features as repetition; it is repeated, and it does not lead to further talk on that subject. However, certain features are noticeably absent; these include summarising, linking back, formulating and so on. The utterances that follow the idiom are very similar to those in topic change sequences. The recipient produces two agreement tokens ("eeYup. Yup") and then returns to a previous aspect (when Jeremy will be free), preceded by a disjunction marker. The presence of the disjunction marker "Well now look" perhaps suggests that the speakers are treating the talk about when Jeremy will be free as a distinctive next matter, and are thus orienting to the structure rather than to what is being said. However, the substantial differences between this sequence and those associated with straightforward topic changes suggests that speakers distinguish between changes in topic and changes in aspects of the same topic, and, therefore, analysts are justified in distinguishing between topic changes and topic shifts.

Similar topic shifts can be seen in all of the following extracts.

(33)[NB:IV:10:44]

Emma: Can't say anything er .hh FEE:L anythi:ng er be true I  
--> c'n talk to'im? ennit's jis like talk'n to a wa::ll

someti:mes.  
 (.)  
 Emma: .h This is re(.)dicyuhluss:  
 (1.3)  
 Lottie: Yghe:ah  
 Emma: .hhhhh  
 (.)  
 Emma: Well eez a good gu:y,h he:'s a good gu:y he,hhh he's  
 got iz points.'n: he's tired'e told Barbr'ee siz I:'m  
 so ti:red .hh I never asked him duh mo:ve down  
 here'n commute fer God's s:A:KES:

(34)[Heritage:I:6:8]

Ilene: But I think it's just about the end'v a beautiful  
 friendship so ee was'n(h)t g(h)ont(h)uh st(h)ay  
 dow(h)n-ve(h)ry lo(h)n(h)g-hnh-hnh  
 Mrs H: [hhhh- hhhh- hhhh [hn-huh- huh  
 Mrs H: .hhh I see:. ((smile voice))  
 Ilene: .ehh heh-heh-hn-hn [ .hhh  
 Mrs H: [Ah hah.=  
 Ilene: =He said ee wz geina tay cuz she's been here all ovuh  
 Christmas,  
 Mrs H: Oh dear-ie me.  
 Ilene: [An' he:'s decided that it's not fuh hi:m.  
 sohrt'v thing?  
 (.)  
 Mrs H: Oh sensible bo:y.  
 --> Ilene: [e-u- So we had s'm rahthuh (.) floods  
 --> of teahrs 'n things ovuh Christmas which is alwiz all  
 a bit tryi-ng,  
 Mrs H: [Oh: n:no: :.  
 Ilene: [uh- Anyway: uh (.) u-he's ih took  
 huhr back ih mean ee had- that he had tih do, .hh  
 A-nd uh e-so he: said ee wz comin:g back t'morrow=  
 Mrs H: [(Right.)  
 Ilene: =morning.

(35)[Holt:88:B:32]

G: bu- (.) um he didn't (.) wan' >yuh know sor' of< hi:m  
 un Jehhne' un Alice down there, >cuz he'd already  
 invi'ed Alice.< .hhhh-hhh cuz uhhhh,  
 S: [Yes  
 S: Does he li:ke Alice?  
 (1.2)  
 --> G: urmm I think she's goh im tamed.  
 --> G: O-nna leash::, (0.4) so to speak .hhhhhh  
 S: [( )  
 S: Yes (0.4) Ho hum (.) .hhh Yes.  
 (2.2)  
 S: Slightly more advenferous (dresser than) Jenne' I must  
 admit.

In (33) the idiom marks the start of a sequence in which the topic is

shifted from Emma complaining about her husband to (briefly) praising him. In (34) the idiom marks a shift between talk about the break up of Jeremy's relationship, to when he will be back. In (35) the idiom marks a transition between talk about G's friend, who has taken Alice to the beach rather than his girlfriend Jenette, to talk about the fact that Alice is a more adventurous dresser than Jenette.

Again, in all of these instances the idioms, and the sequence in which they occur, bear some of the characteristics of topically terminal idioms; for instance the introduction of a next matter in (33) and (34) are preceded by disjunction markers. However, the sequences also differ from topic changes in some noticeable ways. Most importantly the idioms are all part of utterances which are topically engaged and are often followed by at least one unidiomatic component. Thus, in (33) the utterance in which the idiom occurs does not link back beyond the previous utterance to the topic as a whole. Also it is followed by the topically engaged assessment "This is re(.)dic yuhluss:". In (34) the idiom is itself a shift (from Jeremy's decision to Christmas), thus, although it states an upshot of the detailing, it does not fold back over each element as did the idioms in section 5. Furthermore, it is also followed by a topically engaged component. Finally, in (35), the idiom does not link back to previous talk but is an answer to the question which precedes it.

However, ignoring the unidiomatic components which follow the idioms, the sequences they precede are very similar to those in section 5. That is, they consist of agreement tokens, pauses and (except in [33]) the introduction of a new aspect preceded by a disjunction marker.

But the differences between topic shifts and topic changes (such as

the fact that idioms in topic shifts rarely link back and summarise, and are often followed by a topically engaged utterance) suggests that speakers orientate to shifts within a topic, and to complete topic changes differently. Thus, if analysts are to discover orientations to topic and topic change, one field of investigation (which we have barely touched on here) is the difference between topic changes and topic shifts. Further analysis of this may support my suggestion that speakers distinguish between changes from one distinct matter to a next, and changes between one related matter to a next. If this claim were to be substantiated then it would suggest that speakers' creation of distinct sequences in talk is based partly on what those sequences are about.

## 8 CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this chapter we saw that identifying topic in conversation is not straightforward: analysts are divided regarding a definition of what constitutes topic. Linguists, for instance, have argued that the topic is what a sentence is about, the propositional content of a sentence or utterance. Thus, they have imposed a version of what constitutes a topic: for each sentence or section they have found a "heading" which sums up what is being discussed. Conversation analysts, on the other hand, have tried to discover speakers' orientations to topic. For instance they have used topical coherence and topical disjunctions as an indication of what speakers treat as belonging to the same sequence and what they treat as warranting the creation of a separate sequence.

Idiomatic topic changes were found to involve disjunctions. Thus, by examining them we have been able to discover more about the ways in

which speakers create boundaries between sequences of talk. Idioms were also found to play an important part in the negotiation of a topic change. For instance it was discovered that they often summarise the previous topic by folding back to, and formulating the upshot of, the detailing. Thus the association between idioms and topic termination has been explored.

As a result of their analysis of topic terminations, Schegloff and Sacks (1973) argue

"that there are slots in conversation 'ripe' for the initiation of closings, such that utterances inserted there may be inspected for their closing relevance" (P.312)

Similarly, my analysis of idioms in termination sequences leads me to suggest that there are slots in topics that are "ripe" for the initiation of topic change, and that idioms help to create this "ripeness" and may thus be inspected for their closing relevance. In other words, idioms indicate to the recipient that this is a place where a topic change can be done, and we have identified a large number of features that lead to idioms being closing relevant.

To sum up, in this chapter we have explored the strong association between idioms and topic change. We have found that idiomatic transitions are usually brief, economical, and are so uniform that they can be described in terms of a standard sequence. The topic change frequently takes place over just three or four turns, consisting of an idiom, agreement tokens and sometimes laughter, and the introduction of a new turn preceded by a disjunction. Occasionally there is also a termination relevant utterance before the idiom, and these, as we saw, have very similar characteristics to the idiomatic utterances. The sequence can be viewed in terms of a negotiation whereby each speaker indicates that they have nothing more to say on the matter, that a

possible termination has been reached and that they are willing to go along with it.

The idioms that occur in this topically terminal sequential position share various characteristics which seem to account for their use in the negotiation of a topic change. We saw that these characteristics are closely intertwined, one often deriving from another. Thus, many are summaries, and this seems to result from the fact that they link back beyond the prior utterance to the entire topic. This in turn, is partly derived from the fact that they are generalised and can, therefore, relate to an entire topic. Also closely related, is the fact that many formulate the previous detailing in a particular way. But less closely related is the fact that some idioms repeat or rephrase a previous utterance, though this is obviously one way in which they can link back. Sometimes the idioms generalise, not only to the topic as a whole, but beyond it, to other similar matters.

We also found that a characteristic of all these features of idioms is that they add nothing novel to the topic, and thus demonstrate that the speaker has nothing new to add. If a recipient also fails to add anything new, then the topic is usually quickly brought to a close. A disjunction marks the initiation of a new topic, indicating that the coherence has been suspended and the following utterance should not be interpreted in terms of the last. We noted that many of the new topics are often closings, and that many of the previous topics are troubles-tellings or complaints. I suggested, therefore, that there might be an association between this kind of topic change and problematic topics.

Further, we saw that idioms can also occur in a different kind of topic change; pivotal transitions. Because of their bivalent character, idioms often make talk about other matters relevant, thus, speakers



have no need to terminate one topic and suspend the coherence in order to introduce another, instead they can link the new topic to the previous one. Such topic changes are similar to stepwise transitions, but they occur over a small number of turns, and transition between the topics is often more exposed.

Finally, we found that idioms are also associated with topic shifts. That is, they often precede shifts within a topic as well as changes between topics. Some of these shifts were found to resemble idiomatic topic changes, but there were significant differences between the idioms in these and the idioms in topic changes. Other idiomatic shifts were found to be more abrupt, with a shift in focus occurring straight after the idiom.

This analysis of one way in which speakers divide talk into segments will, hopefully, be useful in the wider analysis of topic in general. We have discovered more about the mechanisms of topic change, including how it is carried out and some of the reasons it may fail (for instance, because a recipient fails to give an appropriate response). Also, and perhaps most importantly for the debate, we have arrived at some tentative evidence to suggest that both the structure and the content are important in speaker's divisions of talk into topics. In section 7 we saw that changes between talk on closely related issues are not the same as changes between unrelated issues. In other words, topic shifts are treated differently than topic changes. Thus it was suggested that both the content of the talk and the way it is structured are important to any analysis of topic and topic transition.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PUNS, IDIOMS AND THEIR SYSTEMATIC OCCURRENCE IN CONVERSATION

#### 1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters we have explored the sequential position of idioms and their association with topic termination. However there is a feature of some of the idioms examined above that we have not touched on until now. We have explored extract (1) below, finding that it is standard example of topic termination following a summarising idiom. But a closer examination of the turn subsequent to the idiom reveals there to be something unusual about it; Leslie's turn after the idiom is a chuckle, and this seems inappropriate to the preceding talk. Steven and Leslie have been discussing Robert Maxwell's tragic past. Following the detailing Steven produces the idiomatic summary "eez had quite a-checked career". This relates back to the tragic incidents in his past, about which there is certainly nothing humorous or even light-hearted.

It is evident that L's laugh is a response to the (unintended) pun which happens to be constituted in the idiom, "eez had quite a-checked career already", the pun arising from the immediately prior repeat of Maxwell being a Czechoslovakian Jew.

(1) [Holt:2:3:9]

Steven: Well he didn't either 'ee had a bad start (I mean)  
'ee had iz (0.3) .t.k.hh father shot by the Nazis  
'nd iz uh .hh mother died in: Auschvitz yih  
kno:w<sub>-</sub>so  
Leslie: Oh really:?=  
Steven: =So eez had the: ( )-  
Leslie: Oh 'z a Je:w is he Je:w?  
(.)  
Steven: Oh yeah.  
(.)  
Steven: He's had k- eez a Czechoslovakian Jew so eez had  
Leslie: Yes  
--> Steven: k- eez had quite a- checkered career already=  
Leslie: =eh heh  
Steven: .hhhh-Yeah  
Leslie: Ye:h.  
(0.2)  
Leslie: .h hh Alri:ght. Well I:ll get my husband then: to  
Steven: .TCH!  
Leslie: get in touch with the address.

Here, "checkered" stands in a punning relationship with "Czechoslovakian". The first part, "check" (as it is spoken rather than written) has two meanings: as well as being part of the expression "checked career", it is the name for someone of Czechoslovakian nationality. Leslie's response to the idiom seems to indicate that she recognises the double meaning of "check" and is therefore aware of the pun. Steven does not join in with the laughter nor gives any other indication that he recognises the pun.

Thus, in extract (1) we can see that the idiom contains a pun.<sup>1</sup> Further, we can see that this pun is recognised by the recipient of the idiom. In the corpus there are a number of instances of idioms which contain puns. However, not all are recognised by either the speaker or the recipient. In this chapter I shall explore idioms which contain

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<sup>1</sup> The idiom can, perhaps, be seen to create a pun in a second way: in saying "eez had quite a- checkered career already" Steven (who is not Jewish) uses Jewish syntax. Earlier on in this extract Leslie asked Steven whether Maxwell is a Jew, and Steven replied that he is.

puns, and will make a case for these puns existing even if they are not recognised by the participants.

Based on an analysis of a particular data fragment, Sacks (1972a), noted that puns and idioms (or proverbials) might co-occur, in that "(sometimes) puns occur in 'proverbial' expressions" (p.137).<sup>2</sup> As evidence for the association between puns and proverbials, he presents the following extract, taken from a group therapy session. Ken is talking about his younger sister's attitude towards the Beatles.

(2) [From Sacks (1972a)]

Ken: W'-the -her whole room she's got it wall-papered.  
She just- she just got done rewallpapering it about  
a month ago-

Louise: -with the pictures of the Beatles.

Ken: No. A month ago Mom had it done in this grasscloth like  
junk yknow it looks like // Hawaiian.

Louise: Yeah I know we have it.

Ken: She came in there the other night with scotch tape an'  
every inch of the room. You couldnt- the roof I think  
she's got done in Beatle pictures and she lays in bed  
at night---

2

Roger: She's doing that cause all her friends are { // } the  
Beatles.

--> Louise: Well they need some kinda idol you know, something //  
--> to look up to-

Ken: Idol! They look like little kangaroos.

There is a punning connection between the idiom "something to look up to" and the story, which is about his sister taping pictures of the Beatles to her ceiling so she can look up at them while she is in bed. Thus, Sacks concludes, puns sometimes occur in idioms or proverbials.

Sacks' interest lies less in the puns themselves, and more in what their analysis might contribute to our overall knowledge of the

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<sup>2</sup> Sacks' (1972a) analysis is based on an investigation of proverbials. This is a slightly narrower category than my generic category of idioms. However, his observations on proverbials apply just as well to idioms: thus, for the purposes of this chapter, I treat the two terms as roughly equivalent.

sequential organisation of conversation. And just as Sacks uses his analysis of puns to arrive at some generic findings relating to the organisation of conversation, so too will this chapter be constituted by not only an analysis of puns, but it will generalise to make some broad observations about the sequential position of idioms. My aims are threefold, first, I shall explore the extent of the connection between idioms and puns, second, I shall examine some of the characteristics of puns and their relationship to idioms, and, finally, I shall use the resulting findings to say something about the organisation of conversation, building on Sacks' analysis.

## 2 THE CO-OCCURRENCE OF PUNS AND IDIOMS

When Sacks (1972a) observed that puns and proverbials often co-occur, his analysis was based mainly on a single case (extract (2) above). He did not make up a collection of punning proverbials to seek to discover whether they did common kinds of interactional work. However, the corpus of idioms in my data has enabled me to make a collection of such instances, which may facilitate expanding Sacks' analysis by applying it to a larger number of instances: I shall seek to discover whether the punning idioms in each instance are used to fulfil the same kinds of interactional task as those identified by Sacks.

The following are some of the instances on which my analysis is based. In each case there is an idiom which contains a pun. The first is one of the few other instances included in Sacks' analysis. Lee, who is married to Vi, has rung to ask Ellie for a date. At this point he is talking about the problems caused when he fell in love with another woman he had been taking out. The expression "stalemate" can be seen as

a pun on the subject of Lee's story.

(3) [Extract 2 from Sacks (1972a)]

- Lee: No I'm et the sta(h)ge right now frankly that ehh y'know of course Vi en I are getting along fine, but god damn it I think maybe I've just got some wild oats to sow- I've been---we hadda, well a, not a tragedy, well yeah it was a tragic death thet uh a very dear friend'v ours got killed en iz wife uh wz ar matron of honor at ar wedding.
- Ellie: Yeah,
- Lee: E:n I've been takin her out quite a bit y'know,
- Ellie: Yea//h,
- Lee: A:nd uh I think it's done me some good 'n then shit I thought- god damn it I thought I got in love with this broad y'know,
- Ellie: Yahm.
- Lee: So that shook the old (h)house(h)hold up fer a(h)whi(h)le heh=
- Ellie: Oh yes I c'n imagine.
- Lee: Y'know, a:nd uh I think Vi's --realized that hell maybe it's good f'me t'go ou:t. Y'know,--a:nd uh:: I'm not so sure it isn' either.
- Ellie: .hhh Well I think thet y'know s- a lot'v times these  
--> situations Lee cn very easily reach a stalemate. hhh

Here an alternative meaning of "mate" (i.e. to have sex) in "stalemate" connects with the details of Lee's story about the affair he had.

In (4) Emma is complaining about the service in a hotel. Her expression "teed o:ff:" can be seen as a pun on a detail of the story about her husband being in a hurry to go out and play golf.

(4) [NB:IV:10:35]

- Emma: W'l you know we were there in Ju:ne yihknow Bud played go:lf?h hhh En w'n the air c'nditioner went o::ff?h hhh En wir bout (.) th'oanee ones that ha:d'n air c'nditioned room the rest of'm were bro:ken. .hhh An'we went down duh brekfiss 'n there wz oanee abou' two people duh help fer brekfiss with all these guys goina pla:y go:lf. They w'r a:ll teed o:ff:.
- > Lottie: Ye-:ah?
- Emma: Becuz (.) uy Bud u-c'dn e:v'n eat iz brekfist. He o:rdered he waited forty five minutes'n he'a:dtuh be out there duh tee off so I gave it to Karen's liddle bo:y.

Here, Emma describes how she and a large number of other people, in a hurry to play golf, arrived at breakfast to find that there were only two people serving. This detailing is formulated by the idiom "tee off:" (an American colloquialism for "pissed off"). Following the idiom Emma states that the reason for this reaction was that they were in a hurry to "tee off" (to begin the game of golf): thus it forms a pun. An alternative meaning of the expression connects with the detail of the story regarding their hurry to begin the game of golf.

So, the idiom in this extract is a pun due to its relation to the detailing of the story: the details concern the fact that Emma's husband was in a hurry to go and play golf (or, as she refers to it following the idiom, to "tee off"). This extract is somewhat unusual because the detailing with which the idiom connects to create a pun precedes and follows the idiomatic expression. In the majority of instances the punning idiom follows the detailing.

In (5) Leslie has rung Court to tell him that he did not send a bill for the logs he delivered. Court tells Leslie that he has had a fall, which is how "the Mighty wz Fallen" forms a pun on the story.

(5) [Holt:2:7:2]

Leslie: .hh Yes cz you were in hospital I think  
 Court: Well that's right  
 everything is i:t's such a long time ago it's good'v  
 you to remahh(h)i(h)nd me. .hh=  
 Leslie: =We:l l.  
 Court: I I uh (.) thet's right I, (0.2) had a bad fa:ll.  
 Leslie: Didju: :?  
 Court: Ye:s I  
 Leslie: What didju do:.  
 Court: Oh I: feh- I: you know I specialize in climbing wo:rk  
 'n:  
 Leslie: Ye:s.  
 --> Court: .hh this is one'v these were uh (.) the Mighty wz  
 --> Fallen I'm afr(h)ai(h)-d .hhhh  
 Leslie: Oh: :::: An' di-dju bre-ak  
 Court: Ih w'z:  
 anythi:ng,

Court: Well I've got s'm stable f:ractures a'the vertebrae

In the following extract M is talking about her husband's hatred of driving at night, she claims that it "drives George ma:d".

(6) [Abbott:3]

- P: n-eh-Well this is it, it- .hh it's not so bad going  
in the daylight but it's coming back in the dark.
- M: Well that's what George says and now when you're gettin  
on a bit
- P: Well that's righ<sub>t</sub>
- M: <sub>t</sub>the blimmin lights up your back an'  
all the re<sub>s</sub>t of it
- P: <sub>t</sub>.hh Yeah. that's rig<sub>t</sub>
- M: <sub>t</sub>it gets on his nerves  
the way they drive so close to you<sub>t</sub> and come up<sub>t</sub> right=
- P: <sub>t</sub>Oh h y e s<sub>t</sub> I
- M: =in tight behind you<sub>t</sub>=
- P: <sub>t</sub>k n o w y e a h. <sub>t</sub>
- P: =I know
- > M: It drives George ma:d<sub>t</sub> you know<sub>t</sub> They don't dip their
- P: <sub>t</sub>Y e a h :<sub>t</sub>
- M: =lights,
- P: No: (.)<sub>t</sub>no
- M: <sub>t</sub>But if it's fine on Sunday we'll very likely go  
down this Sunday.

Here, a literal meaning of "drives" in the idiom forms a pun with a detail of the story, which is about driving at night.

In (7) L is telling M that a Chinese man, who her husband chatted to at a conference, turned out to be related. L says that the man had "pink skin" (i.e. unusually pink for a chinese person) emphasising his unusual colouring, then she uses the idiom "tickled Pink" to describe her husband's reaction.

(7) [Holt:2:2:3]

- L: His fa::ther is Godden of course und married a  
Chinese: girl  
(0.6)
- M: Oh:::
- L: Un this man is VERY chinky to look at
- M: Yes
- L: but has a Pink skin  
(0.4)
- M: Oh:::  
(0.6)
- > L: And cour::se they were tickled Pink (0.3) at the



wo:rks: to find out tha:h Hah hah hah

A literal meaning of the idiom connects with a detail of the story (that he had "Pink skin") to form a pun.

In the following extract L is discussing a talk she is going to give on accupunture.

(8) [Holt:Oct:88:A]

- B: ,tch Okay. Ah see: you tomorrow ni:ght (an')
- L: [Yes lovely=
- B: = (I'll) make sure you go e<sub>r</sub>arly
- L: [I hope its inte:resting  
tomorrow nigh'= I mean I hope (.) what I'll have to say  
will be inte:resting? .hhhhh I think it is peop-
- B: [Oh I'm<sub>m</sub>-sure
- L: [ .hhh
- > L: =People don't know the ins and outs of accupunture do  
they?
- B: No:::=
- B: =-Wul I don't
- L: [ .hhh >An I was going to try un geh hold of a needle  
buh then I< though' .hhhh We:ll I do:nt kn ow Perhaps  
I won't .hh (th-) (0.3) .hhhhhhh who do I know its been  
stuck in uh huh huh huh

The idiomatic expression "ins and outs" forms a pun on what accupunture is known to involve.

In all these cases an idiom is employed which happens to contain a pun in relation to what has just been talked about. Thus we are able to affirm Sacks' statement that "(sometimes) puns occur in 'proverbial' expressions" (ibid). From my data it seems that the co-occurrence of puns and idioms is not uncommon.<sup>3</sup>

Sacks (1972a) notices that a pun occurs within a proverbial, a co-occurrence which directs him to explore whether there is a specific sequential position of puns. One of his initial goals is to "distributionalize puns and relations between pun and punned-on"

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<sup>3</sup> In my corpus of about 400 idioms, there were roughly 20 punning idioms: that is, one punning idiom to every twenty non-punning idioms.

(p.137). That is, to discover the sequential positions at which puns and the word, utterance or segment, that the pun operates on, recur in conversation. Thus, using the observation that puns occur in idioms or proverbs, Sacks concludes:

"If we can at least partially distributionalize proverbs, in conversation sequential terms, we will, puns occurring systematically in proverbs, thereby distributionalize puns too in conversation sequential terms." (ibid. P.137)

He then points out that, in extract (2), the proverb occurs on story completion, and is uttered by a story recipient. This observation is informative, he claims, because from prior investigation, certain facts are known about the talk of a recipient on the completion of a story: story completion is:

"(1) a structural position in conversation; (2) a structural position that is part of a serially ordered set of positions involved in the organization of story telling in conversation; (3) a position that accommodates a variety of forms, many of which have their instances used to do a particular 'interactional job, i.e. 'exhibiting understanding' of the story they succeed, a job which story recipients do perform; (4) that job is one which proverbs are distinctly, and in some ways distinctively apt for, and; (5) furthermore, proverbs are commonly used at that position." (ibid. P.137-8)

Sacks has demonstrated that on story completion, recipients often display or exhibit their understanding of the story. However, such a task is complicated by the fact that story recipients should not tell their co-participants what they already know. The story teller obviously had an understanding of the import of the story in order to have told it. Thus, the recipient should demonstrate understanding without implying that the import of the story was unavailable to the teller, or telling the speaker what he or she already knows. Therefore, in demonstrating understanding, the recipient should indicate that "I understand, and already had that understanding before; and, furthermore I take it that you had that understanding too" (ibid. p.140). Sacks

claims that proverbials are ideal objects for fulfilling such a task because they are treated as "knowables" which everybody shares. To use one is simply to bring to bear some piece of abstract knowledge, which everyone already possesses. (See also Sacks (1971) unpublished lectures, Fall, lectures one to three.)

To be thought of as containing some abstract piece of knowledge, the idiom must be interpreted figuratively. Thus, it is only when "a stitch in time saves nine" is interpreted idiomatically that it can be seen to contain some abstract knowledge about performing a task quickly in order to prevent further problems later on. In chapter one we saw that Sacks argues that this amounts to a preference rule:

"Given the detection of a proverbial in a sentence, Prefer to use idiomatic over concrete understanding of it." (1972a P.138)

Thus, Sacks claims that when a proverbial is used on story completion, there is present both the concrete meaning and the preferred idiomatic meaning. Puns occur when there is a congruence between the concrete materials of the idiom and the concrete materials of the story it follows. Thus, in (1) there is a congruence between a literal meaning of "check" (as it sounds, and not as it is spelt) and an aspect of the story. Similarly in (2) there is a congruence between the literal meaning of looking up and an element of the story. A glance at all of the foregoing extracts will demonstrate that in every case there is a congruence between the literal meaning of the idiom and an aspect of the talk it follows.

Sacks uses this finding to develop a general rule that describes the link between puns which occur in proverbials on story completion, and the story which precedes them:

"A pun, occurring in a proverbial on story completion, will have its punned-on in the story the proverbial's utterance understands, the story which needs to be used to understand the

proverbial itself, on this occasion of its use." (ibid. P.140)

In other words, if a proverbial, containing a pun, occurs on story completion, part of the preceding story will both explain the meaning of the proverbial on this occasion, and be the element which the proverbial is being used to demonstrate understanding of. Furthermore, it is in this element of the story that whatever the pun puns on, will also be found. Hence in (2) to understand the idiom, on this occasion of its use, it is necessary to know that the story is about someone sticking pictures of the Beatles all over their ceiling. This is also the aspect of the story about which the proverbial shows understanding: in other words, the proverbial explains a sense of why someone would act in that way, thus, demonstrating understanding of the import of the story. Moreover, it is precisely this element of the story which the proverbial puns on. There is a congruence between the concrete meaning of the idiom and of this aspect of the story.

Below we shall return to Sacks' analysis and use some of the findings of this, and previous, chapters, to expand upon it. Just as Sacks distributionalized proverbiais in order to discover the sequential position of puns, so I shall use my findings about the distribution of idioms (described in chapters two and three) to uncover the sequential position of punning idioms. But first we will explore Sacks' observations about puns and add to them by analysing the punning idioms in the current corpus.

### 3 PECULIARITIES OF PUNS

One feature that puns and idioms share, and is not shared by any other aspect of language, is that both are frequently seen as

undesirable by both speakers in conversation, and authors on language.<sup>4</sup> However, while idioms are criticised for being unoriginal, stale, worn out etc, puns are criticised on different grounds. For instance Attridge (1988), considering principally puns in literature, gives the following reason:

"The pun remains an embarrassment to be marginalized or controlled by relegation to the realms of the infantile, the jocular, the literary. It survives, tenaciously, as freak or accident, hindering what is taken to be the function of language: the clean transmission of a pre-existing, self-sufficient, unequivocal meaning." (P.189)

Attridge goes on to note that we dislike puns because they undermine the assumption that, in language, there is a signifier for every signified, "the two existing in mutual interdependence like two sides of a sheet of paper" (p.189). Similarly McNeil, says about sexual puns:

"I suspect puns are rejected because it is neater and less threatening to believe that every word has a reliable signification, that it is not suddenly taking on a will of its own and attaching itself ad lib to other suppressed meanings. The high analogies of meaning seem tarnished by the low analogies of sound. Thus 'Freudian slips', a subgroup of sexual puns, endanger the speaker because they communicate more about his secret associations than he wants others to know."

But whatever the reason, speakers occasionally seem uncomfortable when they realise they have unintentionally made a pun. Phrases which explicitly recognise the pun, or mock groans, sometimes accompany such puns, their purpose seeming to be to distance the speaker from the pun. The most common of these is "no pun intended" or "excuse the pun". The following extracts illustrate this phenomena. The first two were heard in passing, the third is taken from a press address.

(9) [Field Note:1]

(Preceding talk is about people who play instruments and a particular college of music)

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<sup>4</sup> On the derision of idioms see chapter one, section 1.

A: Well they don't like to blow their own trumpet  
B: Hah-hah hah hah  
--> A: [No pun intended

(10)[Field Note:2]

(During a conversation about the milk race)

--> A: All you see is milky shots ((groan)) that's a pun.  
of riders zooming past the camera.

(11)[Press Address]

Lutz: ...Positivism is variously characterized as inadequate,  
repugnant, unfounded, untenable, and ignorant of  
humanness, although Russ Belk's (1987) charge that  
consumer researchers have wasted their time on the  
"dog-food level of things" (p.2) has something of the  
--> same flavor (no pun intended) in the substantive  
domain..."

Such phrases are, perhaps, comparable to the disclaimers that sometimes accompany idioms (such as "as they say" or "to use a cliché") which we noted in chapter one, and will explore further in chapter five. Certainly, phrases such as these seem to reflect a certain discomfort at having used either an idiom or a pun.

Puns can only be accompanied by utterances such as these if the pun is noticed by the speaker, and they are only likely to occur if the pun is unintentional. It seems, however, that in my corpus the majority of puns are unnoticed by both the speaker and the recipient. In only two of the instances above does the pun seem to be noticed by at least one of the speakers. In (1) Leslie's laughter, following the pun, indicates that she has noticed it, although Steven gives no indication that it was intentional or that he is aware of it; he does not join in with the laughter. In (5) the pun may have been used intentionally. There are a number of indications that this could be the case. First, the speaker describes his accident as a "bad fa:ll" which connects with "Fallen" in the idiom: what I am suggesting is, that if Court had the pun in mind

from the beginning, he may have chosen the word "fall" over other alternatives, in order to render the pun more explicit. Second, the idiom is not one that is obviously appropriate in this context. The idiom, which refers to someone as "Mighty", is generally not directed at oneself. Third, the idiom is followed by laughter; although the laughter could be because of the self-tease and not because of the pun. Finally, it sounds as though he has told the story before, using just this idiom; it sounds like part of his repertoire. Thus, although I can find no conclusive proof in the extract, it seems possible that the pun is deliberate. Leslie, however, gives no indication of having recognised the pun.<sup>5</sup>

Because puns are usually not oriented to by the speakers, they are distinct from the kinds of phenomena usually investigated by conversation analysts. There are three possibilities: first, the pun can be recognised by the speaker, second, it can be recognised by the recipient and, third, it can be recognised by neither. So, a question arises as to whether the puns in the data are really there, whether they are recognised by the participants, or whether they are "a clever assertion by somebody who looks at it" (Sacks: Unpublished Lecture: October 8, 1971). Sacks (1972a) argues that they really are there (as we shall see he believes a possibility for puns resides in a congruence between the concrete materials of the story, and the concrete meaning of the idiom) and suggests a reason to account for the failure of speakers to notice puns. As we saw above, he outlines a preference rule

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<sup>5</sup> However, even if Leslie does notice the pun she may feel that laughter is an inappropriate response to such a serious troubles-telling. Thus she may respond sympathetically to the telling even if she is aware of the pun.

for idioms; that they should be interpreted metaphorically. The pun is a result of a congruence between the story and the literal meaning of the idiom. Thus, if the idiom is being interpreted according to the preference rule, the pun will not be recognised.

In section 1 we found that puns are the result of a connection between a segment of talk and an idiom. In this section we have seen that the connection often appears not to be recognised. Thus, it may be that the connection is at a cognitive level. Obviously conversation analytic techniques cannot be used to investigate such an issue because it requires generalising from the data to make assumptions about the way the mind functions. However, I would like to suggest that such connections do occur, and that puns are only one instance of cognitive connections between words or utterances across sections of talk. I may not be able to probe this issue in detail, but I can present instances where such connections seems to occur.

The nature of the connection I have in mind is something like; that a particular word is chosen above other possible words because there is a link between it and either an aspect of the context or a previous word or words. The nature of the link is various and includes similarities of sound, contrast classes, words which belong to the same category, or words which have a similar meaning (even if it is not that particular meaning that is being employed). The latter two connections can both result in puns.

Sacks (Unpublished Lecture: March 11, 1971) tracks similarities of sound across a piece of data. He points out that words such as "because" can be pronounced in a number of ways, such as "because", "cuz", "cause" etc, and the way that it is pronounced in any particular instance may be because it coordinates with the sound of other words



which precede it. The following extract is a case in point.

(12)[Extract 1 from Sacks 1971]

Ben: You have to uh -- Hey this is the best herring you ever  
tasted I'll tell you that right now.  
Ethel: Bring some out // so that Max c'd have some too.  
Ben: Oh boy  
Max: I don' wan' any.  
--> Ben: They don't have this at Mayfair, but dis is delicious.  
Ethel: What's the name of it.  
Ben: It's the Lasko but there's herring snack bits and  
there's reasons why- the guy told me once before that  
it was the best. It's Nova Scotia Herring  
Bill: Why is it the best.  
--> Ben: Cause it comes from cold water. Cause cold water fish  
is always //

Sacks distinguishes a number of sound coordinations, perhaps most noticeable is the repetition of a 'k'- sound in Ben's final utterance. Also, earlier in the extract, a word is pronounced differently by the same speaker in the same utterance. In Ben's utterance "They don't have this at Mayfair, but dis is delicious", "this" becomes "dis" in the second instance of its use, and, thus, sound coordinates with "delicious".

Another kind of connection across or within utterances, is when speakers use words that can be seen as belonging to the same category. Many instances of this can be seen as puns. For example, in the following extract the idiomatic phrase "quick off the ma:rk" is followed by a second idiom "That'll teach you". If an alternative meaning of "mark" is taken into account, then "mark" and "teach" (and "lesson" in the following utterance) can be seen as belonging to the same category, of something like, things associated with school.

(13)[Holt:86:A:357]

(L's telephone was cut off because she forgot to pay the bill)

N: (He di-) They didn't cut it off did they?  
--> L: Ye::s they were a bit quick off the ma:rk [Huh huh huh  
( ) : ((sneeze))  
--> N: That'll teach you won't it?

L: Yes it has taught us a lesson.

Such connections are not uncommon. In the following instances words from different utterances can be seen to belong to the same category.

(14)[Heritage:I:6:6]

(The talk is about cutting dog's claws)

--> Ilene: You musn't cut onto the bla:ck becuz it's li:ke cutting into ar own quick.

Mrs H: Yes of course ih tis.

--> Ilene: En they'll scream blue murder'f  
y(h) d(h)o th(h)a(h)t

Here "bla:ck" and "blue" can be seen as belonging to the same category; colours (also, together they add up to form the idiom "black and blue", which is rather appropriate in this context). Perhaps more tenuously, a second meaning of "quick" is "alive" ("quick" is one side of a formulaic contrast "quick and the dead") and this meaning can be seen to connect with "murder".

(15)[NB:IV:10:48]

Emma: .hhh.huhh W'l Lottie? I tell you wut u-happ'ned. I:  
too:k a lo:ng wa:lk about two thirdy:.hh I:,hh (0.2)  
wz: w-I WATCHED Ez Th' Wor:l'Tur:n I: ca:me back I  
thought this is ridicyiss this beautiful day, .hh  
.hhhhhhh (.) SO:: I,hhh WENT'n:< (0.4) WA:LKED  
DOWN: th:E END the blo:ck'n< (0.2) cro:ss'ba:ck down  
--> by Meramar'n there's a quarter lying in the street.  
Lottie: mh he:h he:h heh -hu  
Emma: [S O I ]phh::icked it UP'n put't in  
mghy shoe .hh[hhhhh]  
Lottie: [Ye:a]h.  
--> Emma: I said maybe my luck's goanna cha:nge t'da-y m a y b]e  
Lottie: . [ (Tha:t) ]  
Emma: ah the Lo:rd take over'n I got Norman Vincent Peale  
book ou:t (.) en I'm .p.hhh TRYIN tuh FI:GHT obstacles  
thet I can't c'n(.)tro:l so I sid (0.5) TAKE over  
Lord,h

In this extract there is a categorial connection between "quarter" and "cha:nge", an alternative meaning of the latter being small amounts of money.

(16)[G.T.S. II2:12]

(The talk is about a drag race)

--> Roger: uEvrybody hear a big loud, n-noise like a cannon. .hh  
Here comes Voodoo windin end a'puffin up there, .hh We  
--> thought he ez dead fer sure- He doesn't shut off the  
engine. .hh He jus keeps going (.) one after another  
shuts down e:very car (offa) Valley. Superstock  
--> anything they had. .hh He didn't shut off iz engine  
.hh polished'em o:ff.=one after another,

In (16) Roger uses a number of words or phrases all to do with battles or killing, including "cannon", "dead" and "polished'em o:ff". So, in each of these extracts there is a connection between a word in the story and a word in the idiom, and the connection is that they belong to the same category.

Similar cognitive connections may be being made in the following extract where the same word is used twice with two different meanings.

(17)[NB:IV:10:25]

(Emma and her husband have had a disagreement)

Emma: .hnh .te::ahhh WELL EVERY TIME YIH HA:VE these pro:blums  
Lottie they get(.)chu fa:rther'n father a wa:y .hhh.hh  
.hh Et's so da:mn ridiculous in MY: sit(.)chuation  
--> yihkn:ow uh: uh: u course I shoot off my face  
(0.5)  
--> Emma: uL[et's fa:]ce it I: do: with him=  
Lottie: [Ye:ah?]  
Emma: =He c'n make me so da:mn mad I c'd  
(.)  
Emma: bop eem but

Here, Emma uses "face" twice, but with different meanings (note also the categorial connection between "shoot" and "bop").

What I am suggesting here is that, just as certain words might be chosen because they sound the same as a previous word, so also a word might be chosen because there is a categorial connection with a previous word, or it is the same word with a different meaning. Thus, a cognitive awareness of alternative meanings, categorial associations

and the sound of a previous word, may be a factor in the choice of a subsequent word over other alternatives. Therefore, because the speaker in (17) has already used the word "face", the expression "let's face it" may come to mind more readily than alternative expressions.

Unintentional puns may be a result of this cognitive process, and, are, thus, one type of object belonging to this more general phenomena. Further analysis is needed before any, less tentative conclusions can be reached, unfortunately this is beyond the scope of this exploration of idioms in conversation.

#### 4 CATEGORIES OF PUNS

My analysis of the punning idioms in the corpus revealed that the connection between the pun and punned-on generally falls into one of the following categories: it may be that it is the same word used twice with two different meanings; alternatively the words may belong to the same category; or the words may be members of a contrast class. In this section I will give instances of each of these types of pun. (For a more detailed and general analysis of the different types of puns, see Redfern 1984.)

The following instances are puns which result from the same word being used twice with alternative meanings. In extract (17), which we explored in section 3, "face" is used twice with two different meanings.<sup>6</sup>

(17)[Detail]

Emma: .hnh .te::ahhh WELL EVRY TIME YIH HA:VE these pro:blums  
 Lottie they get(.)chu fa:rther'n father a wa:y .hhh.hh  
 .hh Et's so da:mn rildiculous in MY: sit(.)chuation  
 --> yihkn:ow uh: uh:u course I shoot off my face

---

<sup>6</sup> Note also the punning categorial connection between "shoot off my face" and "I c'd (.) bop him".

(0.5)  
 --> Emma: uL[et's fa:ce it I: do: with him=  
 Lottie: [Ye:ah? ]  
 Emma: =He c'n make me so da:mn mad I c'd  
 (. )  
 Emma: bop eem but

In the first instance face is used as a synonym with mouth, in the idiom it is used figuratively to mean something like admit.

In the following instance "chip" is used twice with two different meanings.

(18)[Kamunsky:I:2-3]

Alan: You like onion di:p ri:ght,  
 (0.4)  
 Karen: khhh (kh)  
 Alan: khhh  
 Karen: (Here) it goes ag(h)a(h)in-huh go ahead,  
 Alan: [hnh [You make the  
 udjih di(h)p(h) and(h) bring(h) the onion(h) dip okay?=  
 Karen: =Mkay=  
 Alan: =.hhh And um  
 (0.3)  
 Alan: Between yyou and Sha:wn.  
 (0.3)  
 --> Alan: .pt you sh'be able to brin:g, s'm potato chips ('n)  
 --> corn chips. Tell Shawn'n he'll chip in with you,  
 y'come, you know. (.) what I'm saying?  
 (1.0)  
 Karen: You wan me t'bring onion dips and some potato chips ( )

In the first instance "chip" refers to potato chips, in the idiom it means to pay towards something. Analysts of puns (mainly in literature) refer to a word used twice with alternative meanings as a "homonym" (c.f. Culler 1988:5).

These are two of the most straightforward cases, however, in a number of cases there is a slight difference between the two words. For instance, in the following "Czech" is repeated with an alternative meaning, although in written form the spelling differs, which is unimportant in this context because it is spoken, not written. Also it becomes part of the word "checked". Similarly, in (5) "fa:ll" is

repeated as "Fallen". These instances are referred to as examples of "paronomasia" by analysts of puns. Paronomasia is where "similar words have dissimilar meanings" (Culler 1988:5, see also Redfern 1984:18).

(1) [Detail]

Leslie: Oh 'z a Je:w is he Je:w?  
 (.)  
 Steven: Oh yeah.  
 (.)  
 --> Steven: He's had k- eez a Czechoslovakian Jew so eez had k-  
 Leslie: Yes  
 --> Steven: eez had quite a- checkered career already=  
 Leslie: =eh heh

(5) [Detail]

--> Court: I I uh (.) thet's right I, (0.2) had a bad fa:ll.  
 Leslie: Didju: ??  
 Court: Ye:s I  
 Leslie: What didju do:.  
 Court: Oh I: feh- I: you know I specialize in climbing wo:rk  
'n:  
 Leslie: Ye: s.  
 Court: .hh this is one'v these were uh (.) the Mighty wz  
 --> Fallen I'm afr(h)ai(h) d .hhhh

In (1) the beginnings of the words describing the man's nationality and his career, sound the same but have two different meanings. In the first instance it is a literal description of the man's place of origin, whilst in the second it is a figurative description meaning a career characterised by both good and bad fortune. In (5) "fa:ll" is first used literally, it then becomes "Fallen" and is used metaphorically.

In other instances in the data, the connection between the pun and the punned-on is that the two words belong to the same category. Some of the clearest instances of this type were included in section 3. For instance, in the following extract we noted the categorial connection between "bla:ck" and "blue".

(14)[Heritage:I:6:6]

(The talk is about cutting dog's claws)

- > Ilene: You musn't cut onto the bla:ck becuz it's li:ke cutting into ar own quick.  
Mrs H: Yes of course ih ti:s.  
--> Ilene: y(h) d(h)o th(h)a(h)t [En they'll scream blue murder'f

Similarly, in (15) there is a categorial connection between "quarter" and "cha:nge".

(15)[NB:IV:10:48]

- Emma: .hhh.huhh W'l Lottie? I tell you wut u-happ'ned. I: too:k a lo:ng wa:lk about two thirdy:hh I:,hh (0.2) wz: w-I WATCHED Ez Th' Wor:l'Tur:n I: ca:me back I thought this is ridicyiss this beautiful day, .hh .hhhhhhh (.) SO:: I,hhh WENT'n:< (0.4) WA:LKED DOWN: th:E END the blo:ck'n< (0.2) cro:ss'ba:ck down by Meramar'n there's a quarter lying in the street.  
--> Lottie: mh he:h he: [h heh -hu]  
Emma: [S O I ]phh::icked it UP'n put't in mghy shoe .hh [hhhhh-]  
Lottie: [Ye:a]h.  
--> Emma: I said maybe my luck's goanna cha:nge t'da-y-m a y b-e [ (Tha:t) ]  
Lottie: ah the Lo:rd take over'n I got Norman Vincent Peale book ou:t (.) en I'm .p.hhh TRYIN tuh FI:GHT obstacles thet I can't c'n(.)tro:l so I sid (0.5) TAKE over Lord,h

Two other instances of a categorial connection between a pun and a punned-on can be seen in the following extracts.

(19)[Kamunsky:III]

(An acquaintance of the speakers has started "goin ou'" with a girl he used to dislike)

- Myrn: en'e goes uh:m dih you know ah'm goin ou'with Marcie.  
en I jis kinda went .hhh OH THAT'S ni:ce, [yih know ah  
Alan: mh-hm-hm  
--> Myrn: wz rilly glad for im en'e gives me this funny look like (0.4) Y'think that's ni:ce, e-yihkno:w, en I js kinda YAH sounds rilly good en'e goes Oh:,  
Alan: Ohhh(h)oh:, hn-good. (h)Yer the only one thet doe(h)s,  
Myrn: I kno:w u-whyhhhheh-heh-huh,  
Alan: .hhhh Well no. k-I-I jus think it's rilly kind'v (.)  
--> two faced,  
(0.3)  
Alan: fr'm what he yihknow, usetih say about'er.

(20)[Eva and Mrs H:29]

Eva: It's It's really hard to see. One thing that might help you is to think about the fact that he is in therapy now, (0.7) a:nd to try to believe, (0.3) that it's gonna work so that you can feel more relaxed. Think about the fact that they have the hundred percent success level with young children. (0.3) think about the fact that he's five years old and he has a very good, (0.5)uh potential. (.) for (0.7) getting over this.  
(0.4)

--> Eva: Try to keep that in your head and say, (0.2)  
Mrs H: ((clears throat))  
Eva: (will be ) It's like if your child's sick. You don't sit there and tear your hair because he's got a fever you say (.) he's gonna be better in a few days right? .phh so try to think positively. Try not to SUFFER so much over it.

In (19) there is a categorial connection between "funny look" and "two faced", both belonging to a category having to do with the face. The utterance including "funny look" is a literal description, whilst "two faced" is used figuratively. Thus, in a similar way to instances (14) and (15) above, the categorial connection is only available if the literal, as well as the figurative, meaning of the idiom is taken into account.

In (20) there is a categorial connection between "head" and "tear your hair", these can be seen as belonging to a category of, something like, things to do with the head. Similarly, the first is used literally and is part of the detailing of the previous talk, while the second is used figuratively. Again, the categorial connection is only discoverable if the literal meaning of the idiom is taken into account.

A final possible connection between the pun and the punned-on is that they are members of a contrast class: in the following "low" is the punned-on and it is also a member of the same contrast class as "up" in the idiom.



(21)[Gerber-Butler]

Doctor: Great. So how you doing today David.  
Patient: Not too good doc//or  
--> Doctor: Not too goodd. I see you kinda hangin' your head low there.  
Patient: Yeah.  
--> Doctor: Must be somethin' up (.) or down I should say. Are you feelin' down?  
Patient: Yeah  
Doctor: What are you feelin' down about  
(0.7)  
Patient: Stomach problems, back problems, side problems.

The idiom "must be somethin' up" puns on the doctors previous utterance "I see you kinda hangin' your head low". The words "low" and "up" are members of the a contrast class.

In the following extract the speakers are discussing the death of an acquaintance, when one of them uses the idiom "it's a way'v li:fe".

(22)[D.A.2:18]

Betty: No:thing e:l-se, b't I felt that joo wannid would want=  
Fanny: [ ( )  
--> Betty: =t'know that she wasn't anymo:re. So: uh::::: .hhh=  
Fanny: =Ye-ah,  
--> Betty: [i-yihknow it's uh:eh it's a way'v li:fe it's just one a' those things we uh:::::, .hhhh uh d-un unfornately in the interum thuh:: sevral of ar: dear friends uh y'know past away end uh:

The idiom "it's a way'v li:fe" forms a pun on the fact that they are discussing a death. Just before the idiom Betty uses a euphemism to refer to their friend's death: "she wasn't anymo:re". Thus, the punned-on refers to death while the idiom refers to life, thereby forming a contrast class.

In sum, in this section we have explored the relationship between the pun and the punned-on. We have analysed the three types of connection which describe most of the idioms in my collection. We have seen that, first, the connection may be between two words which sound the same but have alternative meanings. Second, the punning word and

the punned-on may belong to the same category. Finally, the pun and the punned-on may be members of a contrast class.

The nature of this link between the pun and the punned-on is between an aspect of the story and the literal meaning of the idiom. Hence Sherzer (1978), in his analysis based on Sacks (1972a), refers to punning idioms as "doubly anaphoric". That is, the idioms link back literally and metaphorically<sup>7</sup>. The idiom links back metaphorically to aspects of the previous talk because it is a summary of those aspects (for more on this see section 5). But the idiom also links back literally because the literal meaning of the idiom, or a word in the idiom, connects with the punned-on. To illustrate; in (1) there is a literal connection between "checkedred career" and "Czechoslovakian" because a literal meaning of the idiom results in there being a punning relationship between the two. But the idiom also links back metaphorically because it refers to all the detailing about the man's career. In other words, taken metaphorically, the idiom is a summary and, therefore, links back to all of the previous talk (for a fuller analysis of this, see chapter three).

Thus, punning idioms create two different connections across sections of talk. Taken literally they connect to the punned-on, and taken metaphorically they connect to the various aspects of the preceding story. The idioms become doubly anaphoric because an aspect of the story connects with an aspect of the idiom to create a pun. Hence, besides being a summary of the preceding story, the idiom links back to the punned-on. Attridge (1988) observes that words often have

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<sup>7</sup> In my collection also the punning idioms usually do link backwards rather than forwards. That is, the punned-on and the detailing to which the metaphorical meaning of the idiom relates almost always precedes the idiom.

more than one meaning, and that puns occur when the context renders more than one meaning appropriate. Thus the pun, and therefore a second link, is created when the context renders the literal meaning of the idiom appropriate. As we have seen Sacks (1972a) coalesces with this by pointing out that in most contexts only the metaphorical meaning of the idiom is appropriate, however, a congruence between part of the story and the literal meaning of the idiom can result in participants orienting to that literal meaning.

Thus, punning idioms create connections across sections of talk. They link back to the previous talk in order to summarise it. Also, because of a congruence between the literal meaning of the idiom and an aspect of the context, they create a link between the pun and the punned-on. But Sherzer (1978) points out that puns often form even more connections than the literal-metaphorical one. We have already analysed one example in my data where the pun results in some complex connections across the utterances.

(19)[Detail]

--> Myrn:       wz rilly glad for im en'e gives me this funny look like  
                   (0.4) Y'think that's ni:ce, e-yihkno:w, en I js kinda  
                   YAH sounds rilly good en'e goes Oh:,  
       Alan:       Ohhh(h)oh:, hn-good. (h)Yer the only one thet doe(h)s,  
       Myrn:       I kno:w u-whyhhheh-heh-huh,  
       Alan:       .hhhh Well no. k-I-I jus think it's rilly kind'v (.)  
 -->               two faced,  
                   (0.3)  
       Alan:       fr'm what he yihknow, usetih say about'er.

Here, the pun connects "funny look" and "two faced". Although the first expression is literal, it might also count as a (borderline) idiom. Both of these idioms are used to express the speakers' opposing points of view. Myrn expresses pleasure about Alan's relationship with Marcie, while Alan thinks he is being "two faced". The utterance in which Alan uses this expression connects to the previous talk on three different

levels. First, it forms an answer to Myrn's question in the preceding turn. Second, it relates metaphorically to Myrn's description of his attitude to Marcie; it creates a contrast to her description of his current attitude, indicating that, whilst he now likes her, he used to insult her. Third, it relates literally to "funny look" because of the punning relationship between them. So, the idiom not only forms the grounds on which Alan objects (i.e. that he is being "two faced"), but it also directly connects with Myrn's reason for thinking "thats nice". In other words, it suggests that his "funny look" should be seen in terms his "two faced" attitude; he is being dishonest because of the insults he used to direct at her. Alan's reason for having reservations is, therefore, strengthened by suggesting, both literally and metaphorically, that Myrn has only a limited view of the situation; she is forgetting the past.

Because of the links that punning idioms create across utterances, Sherzer argues that they play a role in discourse cohesion. He compares them to anaphors, such as "he", when the person to whom it refers has already been named. However, one major difference between this type of anaphor and punning idioms, is that, in the former case, the link between "he" and a name must be seen by the speakers in order for it to be understood. However, as we have discovered, puns are often unnoticed, thus, while the metaphorical link between the idiom and the previous talk will be seen by the speakers (c.f. chapter three), the pun may not be recognised. Hence, the literal link between the pun and the punned-on may go unnoticed by the speaker. Therefore, if, as I have suggested, many of the links are unnoticed by the speakers then the question arises: who is it cohesive for? For the link to add to the cohesion of the section it must be noticed by the speakers. As I

suggested in section 3, the link may exist only on a cognitive level and not in the conscious sequential organisation of the talk: so that it is difficult to see that such punning idioms create connections across sections of talk and thereby play a role in the cohesion of the talk.

## 5 PUNNING IDIOMS AND TOPIC COMPLETION

Having completed our brief exploration of punning idioms, we are now in a position to compare it to Sacks' (1972a) analysis. We have already found that his findings regarding the relationship between the punning idiom and the punned-on are true of the examples in our data. However, there is one apparent discrepancy between Sacks' analysis and the data on which this chapter is based. As stated above, Sacks found that proverbials tended to occur on story completion, and were used by the recipient to demonstrate understanding. A glance at the preceding data will show that this is not the case for the majority of extracts in this chapter. The majority of the idioms are not used by the recipient of a story. In cases where there is a distinguishable teller and recipient, the idioms tend to be used by the main speaker. Further, the idioms are not used to demonstrate understanding of a story. But a closer examination of these issues reveals that Sacks' analysis can be expanded to overcome this apparent discrepancy. To begin with I will explore the issue of which speaker produces the idiom.

In the many of the cases in the current corpus it is not possible to distinguish a teller and a recipient: rather than one participant doing the telling and the other doing mainly response tokens, both play a more or less equal role in the conversation. However, if it is possible to distinguish a teller and a recipient, the idiom is most

often used by the teller. In the first of the following extracts the punning idiom is employed by the teller. In the second, it is impossible to distinguish a teller and recipient, both participants seem to play a more or less equal part in the conversation.

(4) [Detail]

Emma: W'l you know we were there in Ju:ne yihknow  
 Bud played go:lf?h hhh En w'n the air c'nditioner went  
 o::ff?h hhh En wir bout (.) th'oanee ones that  
 ha:d'n air conditioned room the rest of'm were  
 bro:ken. .hhh An'we went down duh brekfiss 'n there  
 wz oannee abou' two people duh help fer brekfiss  
 with all these guys goina pla:y go:lf. They w'r  
 a:ll teed o:ff:.

--> Lottie: Ye:ah?  
 Emma: Becuz (.) uy Bud u-c'dn e:v'n eat iz brekfist.  
 He o:rdred he waited forty five minutes'n  
 he'a:dtuh be out there duh tee off so I gave it to  
 Karen's liddle bo:y.

(6) [Detail]

P: n-eh-Well this is it, it- .hh it's not so bad going  
 in the daylight but it's coming back in the dark.

M: Well that's what George says and now when you're gettin  
 on a bit

P: Well that's right

M: [the blimmin lights up your back an'  
 all the re-st of it

P: [hh Yeah. that's right

M: [it gets on his nerves  
 the way they drive so close to you and come up right=  
 O h y e s I

P: =in tight behind you=  
 M: [k n o w y e a h. ]

P: =I know

--> M: It drives George ma:d you know They don't dip their=  
 P: [Y e a h : ]

M: =lights, .

P: No: (.)no

M: [But if it's fine on Sunday we'll very likely go  
 down this Sunday.

In the first of these cases Emma produces the idiom, and is the main speaker in the preceding talk. In the second M produces the idiom but it is not possible to refer to her as either the teller or the recipient, because both speakers have taken turns in assuming the

speakership.

As we saw in section 2, if the idioms are not being used by recipients on story completion, then they will not be used to demonstrate understanding. Speakers can demonstrate understanding just by telling the story, and rarely tell stories about which the import is unknown (if they do so, the story is likely to be related in a different way; for instance it might be introduced with something like "Hey, a really strange thing happened to me yesterday"). Thus, it seems likely that the idioms have a different purpose than demonstrating understanding.

So, having concluded that the idioms in the data have a different sequential position and a different purpose from that identified by Sacks (1972a), we may attempt to discover what these are. Like Sacks, we shall begin by examining the sequential position of the punning idioms.

Although the idioms tend not to be used by recipients, many do occur on story completion. The following clearly illustrates this sequential position.

(1) [Detail]

Steven: Well he didn't either 'ee had a bad start (I mean)  
'ee had iz (0.3) .t.k.hh father shot by the Nazis  
'nd iz uh .hh mother died in: Auschvitz yih  
kno:w-so  
Leslie: Oh really:?=  
Steven: =So eez-had the: ( )-  
Leslie: Oh 'z a Je:w is he Je:w?  
(.)  
Steven: Oh yeah.  
(.)  
Steven: He's had k- eez a Czechoslovakian Jew so-eez had k-  
Leslie: Yes  
--> Steven: eez had quite a- checkered career already=  
Leslie: =eh heh  
Steven: .hhhh-Yeah  
Leslie: Ye:h.  
(0.2)  
Leslie: .h hh Alri:ght. Well I:ll get my husband then: to get

Steven: .TCH!  
Leslie: in touch with the address.

Here, as we saw in chapter three, the idiom occurs at the completion of a story about Robert Maxwell. It is used by the teller and forms one of the last utterances on that topic. It is followed by an agreement token by each speaker, but both are topically disengaged. Thus, the punning idiom can be seen to be topically terminal.

As to the purpose of the idiom, we can again draw from our findings in chapter three. We saw there, that idioms which occur on topic completion often summarise the previous talk. For instance, we found that in the extract above, the idiom links back to all of the previous talk: "checked career" is understood in the light of all the detailing regarding Maxwells' son, his parents, his nationality and so on. We also saw that the idiom summarises the upshot of the preceding detailing by formulating his career/life as a series of fortunate and unfortunate experiences. In relating backwards, the idiom also fails to introduce any new information.

Thus, rather than demonstrating understanding, the idiom seems to be closely associated with summarising and bringing the topic to a close. However, the idiom in (1) has similar analytic dimensions to the idioms on which Sacks based his analysis. For instance, Sacks observes that in his instances the idioms were used to demonstrate understanding of the point of the story. Similarly, the idiom in (1) can be seen as stating the point of the story. By formulating the upshot of the detailing, it acts like an explanation of the story. Thus, the reason for telling the details about Maxwell's life was to demonstrate that, although he is successful now, this has not always been the case. Also in chapter three, we saw that this was precisely the reason for the



preceding detailing. We saw that just prior to this extract, a bid to close the topic fails because the recipient appears to misunderstand or disagree with the idiom "nob'ddy has a (.) perfect life".

(1) [Holt:2:3:9]

Steven: .hhhh I heard'ee had seven children there're only six  
 accounted for as far as we eve-r kne:w theh- there=  
 Leslie: [Ye:s.  
 Leslie: =Yes.  
 Steven: [wz always (0.2) that one thet's (.) u- a little bit  
 odd yih know .h[hhh  
 Leslie: [Y e]:[s.  
 Steven: [So that's what it wa:s.=  
 =I see[:,  
 Leslie: [Hm:. .tch! Hm.  
 --> Steven: Ye[ah well there you are: nob'ddy has a (.) perfect=  
 Leslie: [TCH!  
 Steven: =life s-o  
 Leslie: [ehhh heh[heh .hh  
 Steven: [tch  
 Steven: Well he didn't eith<sup>er</sup> 'ee had a bad start...

Following the idiom, the recipient laughs. Steven treats this as an inappropriate response to the idiom. As a result of Leslie's inappropriate response, Steven further explains why it can be said of Maxwell that he has not had a perfect life. Therefore, he details the tragic occurrences of Maxwell's life. The punning idiom can thus be seen as an explanation of the detailing. In other words, the point Steven is trying to make by giving the details is that Maxwell has not always had good fortune, and this is exactly what the punning idioms refers to. The idiom can be seen as an explanation of the detailing in a similar way to the idioms in Sacks' data; but in this case the idiom is used by the teller rather than the recipient.

Therefore, in the current corpus the punning idioms generally occur on topic completion and are often used by the speaker to summarise the previous topic. In the data on which Sacks based his analysis the punning idioms occur on story completion and are used by a recipient to

display understanding. Both types of punning idioms can be seen to belong to the same, more general category. Hence if we say that punning idioms occur on topic completion, story completion is included, because, as extract (2) demonstrates, story completion is overwhelmingly also topic completion. Similarly, if we say that idioms are often used to state the point of the story, we include idioms used by both speakers and recipients, and those used in circumstances where both participants talk equally. Thus, rather than contradicting Sacks' findings, our analysis has verified and built upon them. They suggest that the position of punning idioms, described by Sacks, is part of a larger category which incorporates the sequential position of an overwhelming number of idioms.

## 6 CONCLUSION

To sum up, in this chapter we have seen that idioms sometimes contain puns. A possible reason for this association was drawn from Sacks' (1972a) analysis of puns. He found that puns occur when there is a congruence between the concrete materials of the story and a concrete meaning of the idiom. Thus, the association between puns and idioms resides in the fact that the preferred interpretation of idioms is metaphorical, but aspects of the context, such as the same word used previously, with an alternative meaning, can result in the idiom being interpreted literally. Consequently the idiom, or part of the idiom, has two alternative meanings made relevant by the context. Often the pun is not attended to by the speakers, which, as Sacks suggests, is because the preferred way of interpreting an idiom is metaphorically, thus, the literal meaning remains unnoticed.

Due to the fact that many puns remain unnoticed, I suggested that

their analysis may be supplemented by an exploration of cognitive processing. But because this would entail a method of analysis that goes beyond analysing conversation, I went only so far as to suggest that cognitive associations between words, in terms of sound, meaning or categorial associations, might lead to certain words or idioms being chosen over others. Thus unintended puns may be the result of associations between the meanings of words on a purely cognitive level.

Finally, the analysis of puns was used to broaden Sacks' (1972a) category relating to the sequential position of punning idioms. From chapter three we know that a common sequential position for idioms is on topic completion, and that many are employed to explain the detailing. Thus, Sacks' idioms can be seen as part of this wider category. In describing the sequential position of idioms Sacks was attempting to also describe the sequential position of puns. This is possible because of the association between the two. By enlarging upon the sequential position in which idioms and, thus, puns occur, we have built upon Sacks' findings. For instance, as we have seen, puns do indeed, result from a congruence between the concrete materials of the story and a concrete meaning of the idiom. Thus the word or phrase on which the pun operates will be found as a result of finding the detailing which can be used to explain the meaning of the idiom in this instance. In other words, the punned-on will be in the detailing which the idiom summarises.

Sacks uses his analysis of puns to formulate a general rule relating to the fact that speakers can use a variety of positioning techniques to connect an utterance to a prior one. These positioning techniques indicate to the hearer that the present utterance is to be understood in terms of a particular prior utterance or group of

utterances. Idioms, he says, are one example of this. Throughout this and the previous chapter, we have seen a variety of the ways in which idioms connect back to previous utterances. In chapter three we saw that they often summarise the previous detailing. In this chapter we have further explored the association between idioms and prior talk. We have discovered that the relationship is between the concrete and the metaphorical, and that puns often result from this relationship. Puns are, therefore, one of the consequences of the connection between idioms and the prior talk.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### IDIOMS AND FORMAL LANGUAGE:

#### AN EXPLORATION OF IDIOMS IN FORMAL SPEECH SETTINGS.

##### 1 INTRODUCTION

The idioms on which the analysis has, up to the present, been based are all drawn from informal conversation. That conversation has been used as a source for idioms is no surprise because it is informal, rather than formal, talk which is generally regarded as being idiomatic and colloquial. It is assumed that idioms belong to the realm of informal speech, and that they are largely avoided in more formal settings. Certainly a brief examination of formal talk does suggest that this assumption is generally true: idioms do seem to be more common in conversation. In this chapter I set out to discover whether idioms do occur in formal talk, how they are employed, and what characteristics they have in common with idioms in conversation.

But the division between formal and informal talk is not easy to define. As we shall see below, some authors use the type of setting as an indication of whether the talk will be formal or casual: hence formal settings are seen to result in formal talk. An alternative, and rather different method has been employed by Labov (1972). He sees informal talk as a casual style employed by speakers when they pay little attention to their talk. Formal talk, on the other hand, is a

style employed by speakers when they carefully monitor their speech. Labov found that when asked to repeat a phrase speakers pay greater attention to their talk. In his analysis of the voicing of R by sales assistants in three different stores in New York, he discovered that when giving directions to a department on the fourth floor, speakers in one store (the store frequented by people of a lower social class to the other stores) often failed to voice the R's when saying "fourth floor". But when asked to repeat what they had said, these speakers did pronounce the R's. So, in repeating the phrase these speakers paid more careful attention to their talk and thereby switched from a casual to a formal style.

A similar phenomenon may be seen in the following extract taken from the beginning of a telephone conversation.

(1) [Holt:X:2]

--> M:       Oh (0.2) um:: You know that chap I wuz telling  
                   you [-(about)  
       L:            [-I CAN'T HEAR YOU,  
 --> M:        You know that (0.5) ma:n I wuz telling you (     )  
                   came down from (     ) the one thut lost a son.  
       L:            Ye::s.

Here M uses the colloquial "chap", but when asked to repeat the utterance he changes to employ the non-colloquial "ma:n". Although this involves a lexical change rather than a sound change, the process seems not dissimilar to that identified by Labov. The first time M produces the utterance he employs a casual, colloquial style, but when asked to repeat it he uses a formal, unidiomatic style. Further on in this chapter I will be arguing that one way of doing formal talk is by avoiding idioms, thus M could be seen as switching from a casual to a somewhat more formal style. But I want to begin by looking at definitions of formality on a more general level.

By distinguishing formal and casual talk on the basis of a sound change, Labov puts forward a very specific view of formality. More commonly both analysts and members of society have a rather more general idea of what constitutes formal talk: it is seen as that which occurs in formal settings. Thus there is a taken-for-granted idea that talk which occurs in a classroom, a doctor's surgery, or a courtroom will be formal; whereas talk which occurs in the home, or between friends will be informal. But, as we shall see below, there are a number of difficulties with this definition of formality. In this section I shall highlight some of those difficulties. Having outlined some of the problems inherent in the concept of formal talk I shall then investigate the use of idioms in this speech setting. I will argue that the use of idioms is one way of beginning to identify differences between casual and formal talk. Thus I shall examine idioms in a formal context in order to compare and contrast their use in this and in informal settings.

One of the difficulties of using the setting in the definition of talk as formal or informal is that talk which seems to be "informal" can occur in "formal" settings, and vice versa. For instance during a doctor/patient consultation the participants may begin to discuss the previous night's football game. Thus talk which appears to be informal is being conducted in a formal setting. Because of such difficulties Schegloff (1987) rejects the idea that the setting should be used in distinguishing casual or formal talk:

"The set of ways of describing any setting is indefinitely expandable. Consequently the correctness of any particular characterization is by itself not adequate warrant for its use; some sort of "relevance rule" or "relevancing procedure" must be given to warrant a particular characterization." (P.218)

Instead, he argues, that the characterisation of the setting should be

demonstrably relevant to the participants. Hence the facets of the situation which the speakers treat as relevant should act as a constraint upon the analysts' characterisation of the setting.

"So, the fact that a conversation takes place in a hospital does not ipso facto make technically relevant a characterization of the setting, for a conversation there, as "in a hospital" (or "in the hospital"); it is the talk of the parties which reveals, in the first instance for them, whether or when the "setting in a/the hospital" is relevant (as compared to "at work", "on the east side", "out of town" etc.)" (ibid. P.219)

It is the talk itself which is of primary importance and not the analysts' definition of the setting in which the speech is taking place.

Therefore, if we take the view that the talk which occurs between a patient and doctor in a hospital will not necessarily be characterised by the fact that it is a medical consultation, then we can examine the talk in order to discover the aspects of the situation which the speakers treat as relevant. Taking such an approach Schegloff (1988/89) analyses a television interview between George Bush, who was then running for the Republican Presidential nomination, and Dan Rather, of the CBS Evening News. At the time, the event was widely viewed as an interview that turned into a confrontation. Through his analysis, Schegloff sets out to discover what features of the "interview" may have lead to this widespread assessment of it as having fragmented to become something more closely resembling a conversation, or perhaps more strictly an argument. He begins by pointing out that calling a speech setting a news interview does not necessarily guarantee that the speech event is one, and that what begins as an interview may not remain one. Thus he argues:

"...both the aspect of this event as an interview, and its aspect as a confrontation (if that is what it was), require explication as achievements, as outcomes of the practices of conduct in



interaction." (ibid. P.215)

As a result of his analysis Schegloff claims that the interaction begins as an achieved interview with Rather asking questions and Bush answering them. Hence at the beginning of the episode:

"...we see Bush and Rather orienting to the constitutive properties of "interview," and organizing their conduct to produce them. It is by virtue of such orientations and conduct that they collaborate here to produce an exchange, a potential statistical "case" if you will, in which one asks a question and another answers." (ibid. P.223)

However, further on in the interaction Schegloff finds that it changes from being an interview into a confrontation or argument. Here, instead of waiting for Rather to ask a question before answering, Bush begins talking in overlap<sup>1</sup> and thus the question/answer organisation breaks down. Furthermore, when the speakers find themselves talking in overlap neither attempts to resolve the situation. Instead they extend their talk in order to compete for the speakership. This contrasts with the majority of interviews where, as Clayman (1987) found, the interviewee (IE) does not begin talking until after the interviewer (IR) has finished producing a question, similarly IRs rarely talk in overlap with the IEs answer. Thus the sense of the talk as a confrontation is, in part, derived from the amount of overlap and the extended duration of the simultaneous talk. This phenomenon of stretching overlapping talk is a feature of ordinary conversation. Hence, the conversation is no longer an "interview" but has lapsed into a conversation or argument format.

Schegloff sums up his approach and that of analysts who focus not on the recurrent features of any setting but on the distinct features of an event in the following way:

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<sup>1</sup> On overlap in conversation see Jefferson (1986).

"When we examine the Bush/Rather episode, we can focus on what is special and/or unique about it--that it is the Vice President and the star Anchor for a major network, that it is a chapter in the story of the contest for the Presidency, that it is "performed" for a national television audience, etc. Or we can focus on aspects which this event has in common with others, ways in which it embodies and confronts us with more or less general features of talk-in-interaction--features such as the occurrence and resolution of overlap, or of features of such a specialized but nonetheless not uncommon genre as the news interview."(ibid. P.237)

Thus Schegloff argues for the importance of paying primary attention to recurrent features of the talk rather than distinctive features of the setting. By focusing on the similarities between events it has transpired that the occurrence of overlap in this setting is similar to overlap in ordinary conversation, and this underlies the widely held view that the interview became a confrontation.

If a definition of the setting is involved in the analysis of the talk, then it is very difficult to compare the talk in different environments. But when Schegloff's method is used, it is possible to see the similarities of talk in contrasting speech settings. For instance, Schegloff (ibid.) points out that research has revealed the organisation of repair to be much the same across a number of very different cultures. About this organisation he writes:

"This "micro-domain" shows extraordinary invariance across massive variations in social structure, cultural, and linguistic context, and relatively minor variations fitted to those variations in context." (ibid. P.213)

In concentrating on repair, rather than on the setting in which the talk occurs, Schegloff pays primary attention to a device in conversation. Such an approach is characteristic of conversation analysis. Rather than incorporating a definition of the setting into the analysis of the talk, conversation analysts concentrate on identifying the devices which recur in talk.



she implies that everyone is saying that long hair is passe."  
(P.623)

Similarly, but in a somewhat more formal setting, a member of the attendance office at a school cites a source when she rings up a child's parent to ask why the child is absent.

(2) [Medeiros:2]

Office: .hhhUh I was calling about Michelle she has a couple of  
a:bsences:s:ince o::h las:t Thu:rsday,  
(.)  
--> Office: .hh She's been reported absent (.) all day last  
Thursday,  
Mother: Uh huh well she hasn' been home i:ll.  
(0.5)  
Office: We:ll, (.) she was absent Thursday, Friday, (1.0) .hh  
an' again today.  
Mother: Are these all day absences? er are they (.) jus'  
certain periods.  
--> Office: Uh:::: hhhhh .hhhhh (0.8) Well let's see it looks like  
first second (.) third and fourth period for last  
Thursday 'n Friday, .hhh An here's sixth period an so  
it's- (.) we'd have to assume that it's an all day  
a:bsence, yes.

Here the attendance officer makes it very obvious that the information on the child's attendance is not part of her knowledge, but is being taken from the records. Therefore she cites the records as the source of her information. In saying "She's been reported absent" the officer implies that the information has come from elsewhere, then by making it obvious that she is referring to the records (through phrases such as "let's see") she demonstrates that the records are the source of her information.

Thus, a device (citing a source) which Pomerantz identified in conversation, has been found to be employed in more formal settings. Further, Clayman has identified the same device being employed in news interviews. He found that IRs frequently attribute hostile statements (i.e. those which maintain a position which is critical of a position already taken by, or expected to be taken by, the IE) to other sources.

By citing their sources in this way IRs can avoid indicating their own position on the issue and thereby maintain an appearance of neutrality. Clayman gives the following example in which the IR cites a number of sources of a particular point of view, and the IE collaborates in the IR's formal neutrality by treating the stated point of view as the IR's personal opinion.

--> IR:           But all thuh people around thuh world the Common Market foreign ministers today: thuh Secretary: uh General: of thuh forty seven member: uh British Commonweal:th uh members of the af- banned African National Congress, .hhhh our- our guest Doctor Motlana all say that- and the American statement we've just heard .hhh that thuh reason for thuh violence that thuh state of emergency: is designed to stop, thuh reason for that violence, is thuh policy of apartheid.

IE:               .hhhh Now if: that is being said 'n for the argument it's being accepted. .hh then: (0.3) uh- to do so: an to deal with it in any peceful manner. (0.4) you have to get away from thuh point of violence....

Clayman points out that in this extract the IR cites a large number of sources, including "all thuh people around thuh world", of the opinion that the reason for the violence is the policy of apartheid. But although the IR has emphasised the general acceptance of this point of view, he avoids stating his own opinion of the matter. Thus, the IE, in saying "if: that is being said..", treats the assertion anonymously. (Clayman:1989:33.)

Here, then, we see an example of a device -citing the source of an opinion that might offend, criticise, or disagree with the recipient- which has been identified in normal conversation but found to occur also in a more "formal" setting. Though some differences may be identified between the use of the device in the two speech settings, the basic structure and purpose is the same.

Other examples of devices which have been found to span various speech settings include contrasts and three part lists. These, as we

have seen in previous chapters, are common throughout normal conversation, but they have also been found to occur in courtroom interaction (c.f. Drew 1990), in political speeches, and in structuring advertisement slogans (c.f. Atkinson: 1984). Thus the devices in normal conversation have been found to occur in other, more formal speech settings. It seems to be the case, therefore, that speech devices are more fundamental than settings. In conversation analysis such devices are believed to transcend the setting in which they were first identified because they are not constrained by the boundaries between various speech settings.

But although the devices of conversation occur in other speech settings, conversation may be seen as the primary site for these devices. In other words, the devices which occur in conversation and are used in other speech settings are fundamentally associated with the former environment: their function and form is bound up with conversation. As Heritage (1989) observes:

"...the practices underlying the management of ordinary conversation are treated as primary and as collectively constituting a fundamental matrix through which social interaction is organised" (P.2)

Thus, even though a device may occur in a more formal speech setting, it is primarily a conversational device.

Consequently conversation analysis treats devices as being acontextual. They recognise that devices can occur in any setting. For instance complaining and three part lists have been found to occur in a very wide variety of settings. Therefore conversation analysts concentrate on devices rather than the distinguishing features of settings.

Having identified and examined a device in conversation, that of idioms, I shall now investigate the occurrence of this device in another setting. Idioms have their primary site in conversation, but not their only site, since they also occur in more formal settings. By examining idioms in what appears to be a more "formal" setting I hope to identify their characteristic properties which are independent of the setting in which they occur. Thus in this chapter I shall build a comparative case study.

The formal setting in which I shall investigate idioms is that of news interviews. News interviews have been chosen for a number of reasons. To begin with my choice was determined partly by pragmatic reasons: news interviews are easily obtainable. Over several days I recorded many hours of news on Radio 4 which included a large number of news interviews. Furthermore, there exists a large body of literature in conversation analysis on news interviews, for instance investigations into turn taking in interviews (Heritage 1989, Greatbatch 1988), formulations in interviews (Heritage and Watson 1980), neutrality (Clayman 1987), and agenda-shifting (Greatbatch 1986). This offers an opportunity to build on, and perhaps develop, these existing analyses.

Another reason for selecting news interviews is that interviews (though interviews in the course of linguistic experiments and not news interviews) have been identified by sociolinguistics as a formal setting. Labov (1972) bases his definition of formality on the attention a speaker pays to their speech and an absence of the vernacular. He writes:

"Any systematic observation of a speaker defines a formal context in which more than the minimum attention is paid to speech. In the main body of an interview, where information is requested and supplied, we would not expect to find the vernacular used. No

matter how casual or friendly the speaker may appear to us, we can always assume that he has a more casual speech, another style in which he jokes with his friends and argues with his wife" (P.209)

According to Labov in the context of interviews speakers pay more attention to speech and largely avoid the vernacular: hence the talk in interviews is formal. Paying little attention to speech and using the vernacular are indications that speech is informal. Because news interviews are a type of interview, it is possible that here too speakers pay greater attention to their speech and avoid the vernacular, in which case they would also be seen by linguists as formal speech settings.

For these three reasons then, I elected to study idioms in news interviews.

### 1.1 Activities in News Interviews

Although devices or activities can be seen as acontextual, certain activities do have a special relevance in particular settings. In news interviews one can identify characteristic activities. These activities are associated with political argument, and so include criticising, complaining, defending, and persuading. Much IE talk consists of complaining about a particular state of affairs, defending a point of view, and, partly as a consequence of these two activities, attempting to persuade listeners of the correctness of the speaker's point of view. Thus the activities of complaining, defending, and persuading have special relevance in interviews. Now, in previous chapters we have seen that idioms are also often associated with these activities, thus we might investigate whether idioms are used to perform these activities in interviews, as they are in conversation. Examination of



the following extracts reveals this to be the case. The interview in the first extract follows Norman Tebbit's failed attempt to prevent the government from giving a large number of passports to people living in Hong Kong. After this defeat Tebbit made statements to the media claiming that many immigrants do not become sufficiently integrated into British culture. The following extract is taken from an interview with a prospective Conservative candidate and an immigrant. In it the IE complains about, and criticises, Tebbit's statements to the media, and in doing so uses a number of idioms.

(3) [7:B]

- IR: .hhh *However much you disagree with what he said* the fact is that he is convinced un he said it because he's convinced, that if this bill is passed there may be a flood of immigrants from Hong Kong.
- IE: .hhh I don't think there's gonna be a-uh flood of immigrants from- from Hong Kong un indeed even if- if there are I like to think very proudly of the contribution (0.4) .hhh particularly to the economy (0.1) that the Ugandan Asians have made .hhhh the government has laid stringent criteria which they didn't lay down in the case of the Ugandan Asians .hhh far more stringent un .hhhh Norman Tebbit just seeks to (0.1) really to demean the entire issue u-uh-it's more sour grapes thun anything else=
- > IR: =Why why would he want to do that?
- IE: .hhh Wull because (0.2) u-uh he may have other motives but the fact of the matter is he lo:st (0.2) this so called rebellion he wuz heading (0.2) last night by u- u- ninety three points un to use a cricketing term .hhhhh he wuz knocked for si:x .hhhh un he can't take that so he turns to the old trump ca:rd .hhh race un really he ought to be ashamed of lowering himself to that level."

The IE uses the idioms "sour grapes", "knocked for si:x", and "old trump ca:rd" to characterise Tebbit's statements as reprehensible.

The second extract is taken from an interview with Paddy Ashdown, which took place just before a by-election: in it Ashdown is defending his prediction that the result will be a positive one for his party.

(4) [1:A:7]

IE:           Nationally I think it is important= We're clearly .hhhh  
going into it against a background that none of us  
would 'uv de::signed> let's put it that way, the last  
few months haven' been easy< .hhhh but I think (what)  
I can see is our people on the ground are carrying the  
message extremely well >un where the work's been done  
we'll do well< I:: believe that we:: will: come out of  
--> these .hhh (am) a position round about >level pegging  
--> with where we went in< un that's fine nationally we're  
we:ll placed for a springboard to do the things we need  
to do?

In characterising the positive result he expects, Ashdown uses the idioms "level pegging", and "springboard".

As a consequence of complaining about/attacking Tebbit's statements in (3), and defending the prediction of a good result in (4), each IE can be seen to be trying to persuade the listeners. In (3) the IE is trying to persuade the listeners that Tebbit is mistaken in his views on the integration of immigrants, in (4) Ashdown is trying to persuade the listeners that the result will be a positive one.

Therefore, we will examine news interviews because the activities they contain are the very activities which are most closely associated with idioms. Hence we will see whether idioms are used to perform these activities in a formal context (where idioms are far less frequent), and whether idioms in interviews have the same characteristic properties that they have in conversation.

## 2 IDIOMS IN FORMAL SPEECH SETTINGS

One of the fundamental differences between ordinary conversation and talk in news interviews is that in the latter there is a specialised speech exchange system. That is, IRs ask questions while IEs give an answer. Thus what the speakers do in their turns depends on their role, if the speaker is an IR he or she will ask questions,

whereas if the speaker is an IE he or she will answer them. Consequently the talk of each participant is very different. An IR's turn may consist of some evidence which contradicts the IE's version, and a question as to how he or she accounts for the discrepancy. An IE's turn may consist of an answer which details and justifies his or her opinion of the matter.

A second difference between interviews and conversation is that in the former the talk is treated as being produced for an overhearing audience rather than for just the participants. For instance IRs do not receipt the IEs answer with news receipt tokens such as "oh" (c.f. Heritage 1985 and Heritage and Greatbatch 1989). To do so would be to treat the talk as being produced purely for the benefit of the IR.

So, whilst speakers in conversation are free to use their turns to perform any number of activities, in interviews IRs are constrained to ask questions and IEs are constrained to give answers: were they to breach these constraints, and as Schegloff found for the occasion of the Bush-Rather "interview", the talk might no longer be seen as an interview. (C.f. Greatbatch 1988 and Heritage 1989)

Thus, when I suggested earlier that idioms are used in interview talk in order to complain, defend, and persuade, it was IE's and not IR's talk to which I referred. Throughout this chapter IR and IE talk will be analysed separately. We will begin by looking in a little more detail at idioms in IE talk, turning in section 2.2 to examine idioms in IR talk.

## 2.1 Idioms in Interviewee Talk

The first issue with which I shall be concerned in investigating idioms in IE talk is why in their answers they might use an idiomatic

rather than a literal version. In extract (4) above an IE uses two idioms, and through an examination of this extract we can identify some of the advantages of a figurative form. (The IR's question was not included in the extract which was broadcast.)

(4) [1:A:7]

IE:           Nationally I think it is important= We're clearly .hhh  
going into it against a background thut none of us  
would 'uv de::signed> let's put it that way, the last  
few months haven' been easy< .hhh but I think (what)  
I can see is our people on the ground are carrying the  
message extremely well >un where the work's been done  
we'll do well< I:: believe thut we:: will: come out of  
--> these .hhh (am) a position round about >level pegging  
with where we went in< un that's fine nationally we're  
--> we::ll placed for a springboard to do the things we need  
to do?

Here the IE choses the idiomatic "level pegging" over a literal alternative such as "the same position as we were at the outset of the campaign". The idiomatic version has advantages over the literal in formulating their position in a positive way. For instance, to reach level pegging is an achievement, and it suggests that the party has attained a position some way up the ladder ("the same position" could be at the bottom).

Towards the end of this extract the IE uses a second idiom; he describes their position as a "springboard". Again a figurative expression is used to give a positive formulation of the party's electoral position. By drawing a comparison between their current status and a springboard, the IE suggests that it will somehow form the basis for a much better position in the future. Also portraying their position as being on a springboard suggests that they will be going in an upward direction in the future: besides suggesting that they will go up in the polls, metaphorically up is seen as positive while down is seen as negative (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Thus here the IE expresses

the view that the results of the by-election will be good, even though they are unlikely to win, and are liable to get only the same proportion of the votes as they did last time. Therefore through referring to the predicted results as "level pegging" and by comparing their position to "a springboard", the IE formulates and endorses his view that the results should be seen as positive.

In other instances IE's endorse their own position by using metaphors or idioms in criticising someone, or in challenging a conflicting point of view. Extract (3) above is a case in point. As we have seen, in this extract the IE uses a number of idioms to criticise and to attempt to undermine someone with a conflicting position.

(3) [7:B]

- IR: .hhh However much you disagree with what he said the fact is that he is convinced un he said it because he's convinced, thut if this bill is passed there may be a flood of immigrants from Hong Kong.
- IE: .hhh I don't think there's gonna be a-uh flood of immigrants from- from Hong Kong un indeed even if- if there are I like to think very proudly of the contribution (0.4) .hhh particularly to the economy (0.1) thut the Ugandan Asians have made .hhhh the government has laid stringent criteria which they didn't lay down in the case of the Ugandan Asians .hhh far more stringent un .hhhh Norman Tebbit just seeks to (0.1) really to demean the entire issue u-uh-it's more sour grapes thun anything else=
- > IR: =Why why would he want to do that?
- IE: .hhh Wull because (0.2) u-uh he may have other motives but the fact of the matter is he lo:st (0.2) this so called rebellion he wuz heading (0.2) last night by u- u- ninety three points un to use a cricketing term
- > .hhhhh he wuz knocked for si:x .hhhh un he can't take
- > that so he turns to the old trump ca:rd .hhh race un really he ought to be ashamed of lowering himself to that level.

During the IE's first answer he criticises the comments made by Tebbit by referring to them as amounting to "sour grapes". Thus Tebbit's comments are portrayed as stemming from hurt pride rather than a genuine fear of such a large number of immigrants. Similarly, in his

second answer, the IE portrays him as turning to the "old trump ca:rd .hhh race" because he was "knocked for si:x" in his attempt to prevent the legislation from being passed. Hence, again, the IE criticises Tebbit's point of view by attributing it to ignoble motives.

The use of idioms to endorse a point of view by undermining a conflicting version is a common one in interviews. A further example can be found in the following extract. Here the IE, Neil Kinnock, gives an idiomatic formulation of Margaret Thatcher's intentions behind the cabinet reshuffle.

(5) [4:A:80:37]

Presenter:What did Mr Kinnock ma:ke of the prime minister's declaration of support for Mr Hurd?

(0.5)

IE: I don't know if uh the calculation in Downing street .hhhh is (.) about who's the most stupid uh Douglus Hurd to believe that or the general public to believe that= it's obvious .hhhh that the prime minister wants to dispose of Douglus Hurd?  
--> thought-uh of killing two birds with one sto:ne=  
=Geoffery Howe wouldn't play un she's had to come to  
(0.3) uh a rather messy compromise.

This interview follows Margaret Thatcher's decision to remove Geoffrey Howe from the foreign office and appoint him as home secretary in place of Douglas Hurd. Kinnock uses an idiom to formulate her actions in a way that she is unlikely to have used herself. He formulates her actions as an attempt at "killing two birds with one sto:ne", thus portraying her as wanting to demote or dismiss the two men (it is well fitted with "wants to dispose of Douglus Hurd?" and adds that she also wants to demote Geoffrey Howe). So while Thatcher would argue that the new positions do not represent a demotion, Kinnock argues that they are a way of solving two problems at once, and a way of "killing" or ridding herself of the two men.

Hence, in this extract, an idiom is employed to formulate another's

motives, in such a way as to directly criticise a third person. Now, in ordinary conversation (and as we saw in chapter two) idioms are often self-directed, for instance when making a complaint speakers use idioms to portray themselves as being victims while avoiding directly accusing or criticising anyone else involved. From this a difference emerges in the way in which idioms are used in conversation in comparison with their use in interviews. Although in conversation idioms tend to be self-directed (relating to the complainant's position), in interviews they tend to be other directed (overtly criticising someone).

In the following three instances we see IEs using other-directed idioms to criticise or undermine the opinion of another person (in (8) an editor of a tabloid newspaper is also present).

(3) [Detail]

IE: .hhh I don't think there's *gonna be a-uh flood of* immigrants from- from Hong Kong un indeed even if- if there are I like to think very proudly of the contribution (0.4) .hhh particularly to the economy (0.1) that the Ugandan Asians have made .hhhh the government has laid stringent criteria which they didn't lay down in the case of the Ugandan Asians .hhh far more stringent un .hhhh Norman Tebbit just seeks to (0.1) really to demean the entire issue u-uh-it's more sour grapes thun anything else=  
-->

(7) [10:A]

(From an interview with the chairman of the S.D.L.P. in Northern Ireland, about a visit by the Irish Prime Minister who talked to politicians about statements made by Jerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Fein)

IR: On the politics of the thi:ng ho:w much importance do you think we should attach to tonight's statement by Jerry Adams, that he would suspe:nd the terror campaign so long as no formal committment was required by the British authorities?  
--> IE: .hhh We:ll h-he really is trying to: (.) have his ca:ke and eat it isn't he:? (0.1) .hhh uh whenever he says that. .hhh I think you have to have a declairation be it formal or informal that in fact you're not going to persue violence as a means of achieving a political e:nd .hhhhh But could I say that (0.2) I think his statement is significant (0.1) in so far (0.1) as he is

speaking as the president of Sinn Fein .hhh he is speaking as someone who is intimately concerned with the armed struggle .hhhh And I believe that in fact (.) these are tentative steps on behalf of Sinn Fein and perhaps on behalf of the IRA to .hhh reach an accomodation whereby in fact they co:uld give up the campaign of violence.

(8) [8:B]

(From an interview with the editor of the Daily Telegraph, about criticisms he has made about the conduct of some members of the press)

IR: Mr Hastings first what is your evidence? .hhhh

IE: .hhh I think um (.) two events in the la:st week or two huv depressed me very much. ,hhhh one wa:s umm the story lead by the Daily Mirror un fold- followed up by all the other papers .hhh about Prince Edward's: (.) personal life. .hhhh which I think many of us in --> journalism um felt plumbed new depths. .hhh un I think mus' contribute to making newspapers even more unpopular >if that is possible< .hhh than they already were before, .hhhh the other wuz some of the extraordinary extravagances in the handling of .hhh um the: (.) siege at strangeways .hhhhh that every tabloid (.) seemed to baton on to the worst conceivable version of events .hhh un run it with the utmost prominence.

In each of these cases the three idioms, "sour grapes", "have his ca:ke and eat it", and "plumbed new depths" are all formulations of actions. In other words, instead of describing the effect of the trouble on themselves, the speakers formulate the actions of whoever they are complaining about in a negative light. Hence in all three cases the idioms are entirely other-directed.

Idioms in IE talk which are not complaints about the behaviour of someone else are often formulations of some circumstances as a situation to be remedied. The following extracts exemplify this type of IE formulation.

(9) [3:A]

(From an interview with Ken Megginus, the official unionist, about the Anglo Irish agreement)

IR: But the government can't the government cannot dictate to its own courts can it, the Irish government?



IE: .hhhhhhh u- The Irish government has the ability .hhhh  
to advise the people of Ireland und (.) the majority of  
the:m uhr resonable people, .hhhh to advise thum thut  
--> they are (0.4) uh- tied hand un foot .hhhhh by articles  
two un three of the consitution. .hhhhhh That article  
thut (0.3) turns the th- the- the clai:m to the  
territory of Northern Ireland .hhhh into a legal and  
constitutional imperative...

(10)[3:A]

(From an interview with a Conservative M.P., about the decision  
of an Irish court not to extradite a man accused of terrorism)

IR: Mr Gower's on the line now I hope .hhhhh can the  
agreement survive?

(0.5)

--> IE: This is a black day for justice: (0.1) it's absurd to  
describe the possession of fire arms as a political  
offence: .hhhh the refusal to extradite will dismay  
a:ll those who want to cleanse the island of Ireland  
.hhh of the evil of terrorism .hhhh it will give aid  
and comfort to the IRA. You've got to remember that the  
Anglo Irish agreement (0.1) pledged both governments:  
.hhhhhhhh to do a:ll in their power (.) to ri:d (.) the  
island (.) of terrorism.

In these cases the idiom is not a negative formulation of another  
person's actions, nor is it a formulation of the effect of the  
situation on the speaker. Instead it formulates some circumstances as  
needing to be remedied. In (9) "tied hand un foot" formulates articles  
two and three of the constitution as drastically constraining the Irish  
people, and thus, needing to be changed. In (10) "This is a black day"  
formulates the event as deplorable and therefore requiring remediation.

There is, therefore, an apparent difference of focus between  
complaining idioms in conversation and complaining idioms in formal  
talk. In conversation complaining idioms are usually self-directed,  
whilst in IE talk they are usually either other-directed, or formulate  
a situation as requiring remediation. Other-directed idioms may be  
mainly used where the IE is complaining about a person or the actions  
of that person. Idioms which portray the situation as requiring some

remediation may occur where a situation is less obviously the cause of any one person or any definable group of people.

Along with endorsing a point of view by defending, criticising and so on, idioms in IE talk may have the further purpose of being employed to explain something. Figurative phrases (particularly metaphors) are often seen as being able to clarify complex issues ideas and so on. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that, in our language, abstract and complex concepts are structured metaphorically by more basic or physical concepts. Thus, for example, the concept of consciousness is structured by an "orientational metaphor": up-down. So consciousness is up, thus we get "wake up", "get up" etc, while unconsciousness is down, so we get "he fell asleep", "he sank into a coma" etc.<sup>2</sup> It is suggested that metaphors and other figures of speech can succeed where words fail: as well as clarifying complex issues, they can bridge gaps in the lexicon. Lakoff and Johnson also argue that metaphors can be used to make sense of social changes and the development of new social concepts or situations. In these circumstances figurative phrases may have a clarifying, elucidatory function. A second role of idioms in IE talk seem to have just this purpose; they are used to explain, clarify, elucidate, and so on.

Whether idioms are employed to persuade, or to clarify, depends in part on the nature of the interview, which in turn depends on the function adopted by the IR. Heritage (1989) describes the two functions of IRs:

"...the IR essentially functions as a catalyst whose talk is (1) to provide a context in which IEs can communicate information and opinion and (2) to challenge or press IEs, where appropriate, on

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<sup>2</sup> For more on Lakoff and Johnson (1980) see chapter one, section 3.

the views expressed." (P.23)

Interviews in which the IR performs mainly the first activity are rather different in character from those in which the IR performs mainly the second activity. In the former the IR and IE cooperate, giving the IE the opportunity to communicate information, in the latter the IR actively challenges the IE's opinion, and these are more confrontational than cooperative.

The two kinds of idiom usage in IE talk are associated with these two kinds of interviews. In interviews where the IR takes the role of helping the IE communicate information or an opinion, it seems that idioms or metaphors are often used to describe or explain something which is rather complex. The following extract is a case in point. The speaker is criticising the government's introduction of the poll tax. However the speaker is a member of the Conservative party and he is careful to point out that he does not wish to criticise Chris Patten, the minister responsible for its supervision. Just before this extract the IE is describing how unpopular the poll tax is amongst the voters.

(11)[Branfield]

IR:           So you'd...well in that case do you understand why the government is being, proving so determined to go ahead with it, if you can see it as clearly and you say so many others can.

IE:           The government put it in the manifesto at the last minute, they have stuck to it, through thick and thin, I don't blame Chris Patten for this, he just happens to be the man holding the parcel when the music stops, if I can use that simile, but they are looking for a way out and that's why I've tried to offer a constructive and helpful one whereby if they transferred some of the expenditure from local to central government it needn't be inflationary, it needn't cost public money....

-->

The IE uses the idiom to convey that although Patten was given responsibility for the poll tax due to a ministerial shift around, the

IE does not blame him because he did not introduce the tax. There is no straightforward literal way of saying that he does not hold Patten responsible because any of them could have been given the job; Pattern was simply unfortunate. This idea is economically and clearly expressed by the idiom. Thus, in a similar way to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) examples given above, we see a metaphor being used to convey a complex idea. An event (a game of pass the parcel) is used to structure a more complex and abstract idea (someone being blameless and unfortunate in receiving a particular appointment). It results in an idea which cannot be easily expressed literally, being packaged in a rich form, and because of this richness, the metaphor is also very economical, indexing much more than it actually says. Thus here the idiom seems to have less to do with putting forward a strong case in the face of possible recipients non-affiliation, and more to do with phrasing a complex idea economically and rendering it easier to understand.

Similarly, in the following extract, the idiomatic metaphor succinctly expresses an idea for which a literal alternative is not immediately identifiable. The IE is the Conservative M.P. Patrick Cormack, and the interview focuses on the return of Hong Kong to the Chinese.

(12)[Radio 4:23/1/90]

- IR:           Should the government advance its' plans for greater democracy?
- IE:           What the foreign secretary made quite plain in the house last week was that we were going to have these elections in '91, there will be substantially more than the ten that were originally going to be directly elected to the council, ah he's also made it quite plain, I think, that he looks upon this as being an upward slope towards 1997 and beyond, and obviously the government does have to talk to the authority in China to ensure that the progress continues. It's very difficult talking with the people there at the moment, these old men, many of them will not be in power in '97 but who's to say whether their apparatus will still be

there, whether there'll be anarchy, who knows. But it is very important that we get as much democracy as possible in Hong Kong, without without upsetting the apple cart.

-->

IR: But you'll be aware as everyone else is that the Chinese have been making noises recently which the people in Hong Kong see as threatening...

Here the IE uses the metaphorical idiom "without upsetting the apple cart" as a way of expressing an idea economically and simply. The idiom is economic and effective partly because the particular referent is not specified, but is indefinitely specifiable: the listener can interpret "the apple cart" as referring to anyone who might be appropriate. It also suggests that there is a danger of "upsetting" these people and that if they do it will have serious consequences, which again are not specified. Thus some complex circumstances are rendered in a simplified form by using an economic and figurative idiom.

Because idioms are rich, economic, and can express a complex idea in a straightforward way, they are often used to state just exactly what an argument is about. In other words, the point of the argument is often dramatised by the idiom. In the following instance the point of the argument is both dramatised and summarised by the idiom. (The "she" referred to is Margaret Thatcher.)

(13)[4:A]

(From an interview with a tutor who teaches school governors, about government changes to the way school funds are to be administered)

IE: I think by the very simple fact applies in every walk of life, that if you have knowledge you have power .hhh un if you have the knowledge that governors are beginning to get .hhhh about the state of the schools, uh un we're talking about bills of thousands of pounds needing to be .hhhh paid on schools to get them fit. .hhhh fit for education. .hhhh I think by that very knowledge she has given (0.2) power to people who didn't have it before .hhh who are going to be very very angry .hhhh und I think there is no question that she could be making a rod for her own back.

-->

In this interview the IE argues that governors will use the new knowledge they have been given about the running of schools against the government. She details the kinds of knowledge now open to governors and how those facts demonstrate that the government has not been running schools effectively. But this is summarised and dramatised by the idiom "she could be making a rod for her own back": it does this by suggesting that the knowledge could be used to harm Thatcher/the government.

In a number of cases the expression used to dramatise the point of the argument is subsequently taken up and used by the recipient. In the following example the idiom employed by an IR is then repeated by the IE.

(14)[7:A]

(From an interview with an M.P. about the riot in Strangeways prison)

IR: Un yet can he allow the situation to continue in which  
--> seven inmates uhr .hhh uhr effectively (0.1) cocking a  
--> snook ut the entire prison department.  
--> IE: Well they're cocking a snook they've got  
the stage...

Here the IR uses an idiom to dramatise the argument that the prisoners should not be allowed to continue to resist being constrained and defying the prison department. That idiom is subsequently adopted by the IE in beginning his argument. Hence idioms used by one speaker can be adopted by another speaker as an effective way of displaying that they are directly answering the question, and agreeing with the point suggested by the IRs question. A similar process can be identified in the following extracts where we can see that it is the idioms which a speaker used that are subsequently quoted in the news programmes, in

newspapers, and so on<sup>3</sup>.

(15)[Newsnight]

IR: Wu-1-let's come on though Mr Higgins t-to the second of David Cossah's reports which dealt with the use of charge capping (0.2) Now next week uh (0.2) Mr Patten is going to announce uh councils uhr he intends to cap because they've set their poll taxes too high .hhhhhhh wha- what wuz alleged um-in-in David Co:sser's (0.1) report wuz that capping goes against the principle of local u-accountability and uz he put it .hhhh gives --> Whitehall the ultimate big stick over local government.

(16)[3:B:021]

(From a report about the contents of the day's newspapers)

Presenter:The Independent says Sir Geoffrey was dumb struck when he wuz told he would leave the foreign office. (0.8) An unnamed colleague is quoted as saying (0.7) it came like a bolt out of the blue. (1.1) On the question of Sir Geoffrey being offered the job of home secretary in place of Mr Douglas Hurd (0.5) the Independent comments that the standing of two of Mrs Thatcher's mos' senior ministers .hhhhh has been undermined by the inside story of the reshuffle. (1.2) The Daily Mail says Mrs Thatcher wuz prepared to ride rough shod over the home secretary...

Thus it seems that because idioms are particularly effective at dramatising and summarising the point of an argument they are often taken up by other speakers or quoted as a summary of a speaker's point of view. In this section we have identified some of the reasons as to why this is so. We have seen that idioms can create dramatic comparisons, are economical, and can imply a great deal more than they

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<sup>3</sup> In the following extracts from a newspaper article on drugging race horses it is the idioms which people have used that are subsequently quoted:

[The Independent, 24/9/90]

"Hopefully, with the combination of trainers' efforts and our efforts we will either catch them or knock this whole thing on the head,' David Pipe, the Jockey spokesman, said...'I knew there was something wrong with him as soon as I got on' said Michael Hills, the rider of Norwich yesterday. 'He was lifeless, and when he cantered down to the start he was as dead as a doornail.'"

state.

## 2.2 Idioms in Interviewer Talk

Having looked at some of the features of idioms in IE talk, I shall now briefly examine the use of idioms in the questions asked by IRs. Due to the fact that idioms in IR talk are used to perform a different range of activities than in IE utterances (i.e. asking a question rather than constructing an answer), the design and characteristics of the idioms differ. For instance, in IR turns many idioms are used to formulate<sup>4</sup> the matter about which the IE is being questioned. The idioms can be used to do so in such a way that the IE is likely to either agree or disagree with the formulation.

To illustrate this use of idioms I will explore an instance of each of the two types of IR formulation. The following example includes a formulation of the matter with which the IE is likely to disagree.

(17)[7:B]

(From an interview with an M.P. who contacted the Department of Trade and Industry because he was worried about changes in the specifications of an oil pipe being made by a British company for Iraq. The D.T.I denied that he had contacted them)

- IR: You say you have no criticism of the government but what about the D.T.I wh- who denied that these conversations had taken place un who are still I think querying the content of the conversations?
- IE: Wul: these are all uh: (0.2) u- th- typical spokespersons who remain .hhhh anonymous, they're not involved .hhh I: have written directly to the prime minister .hhhh un I'm perfectly satisfied the prime minister will deal with it on the basis of fact and will reply to me? I find (0.3) I have no reason to reply to anonymous briefings from the press .hhhhh
- IR: Surely though th- the secretary of state for d- the department of trade and industry has to take .hhhhh uh
- > t- (.) wu- the buck stops with him doesn't it, you can't just blame his officials,

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<sup>4</sup> On formulations in news interviews see Heritage and Watson (1980).



IE: .hhhh u- I've no idea: who asked the officials to give these briefings (0.2) it is not p:art of my purpose to inquire::. I don't think I need to: .hhhhh I knew I was telling the truth .hhhh I have sent all the facts to prime minister and I'm perfectly satisfied the (.) prime minister will find out.

Here there is clear sequential evidence prior to the IR's idiom that the IE is likely to disagree with the formulation it involves. The idiom "the buck stops with him" suggests that the secretary of state is to blame for denying that the IE contacted the D.T.I. But prior to this question the IE has already said that he does not blame the government, and he has placed the blame on "anonymous" "spokes-persons". Thus the IE is unlikely to agree with the IR's idiomatic formulation: and if we examine his answer we can see that he does disagree by claiming not to know who briefed the spokespersons.

In the following extract the IR again uses an idiomatic formulation although, in contrast to the previous extract, here there is sequential evidence available to the IR to suggest that the IE will agree with the formulation.

(18)[8:B]

(From an interview with a member of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, about possible variations to the poll tax and the cost of these changes)

IR: But we have heard some local authorities sa:y (0.1) half a million pounds or a million pounds, They have been accused of making political points by saying that (.) but it would be very expensive=

IE: =.hhh Oh it would be expensive. I think (.) just to rerun the bi:lls to some of the authorities that have been ca:pped in the last few weeks is gonna cost them half a million pounds .hhh-hh

--> IR: But will it be a bullet that will have to be bitten (0.3) by everybody concerned?

IE: Oh I think so.

The IR formulates the price of the changes as "a bullet that will have to be bitten". Already the IE has said that changes will be very

expensive but necessary, thus it is more than likely that she will agree with the formulation.

Heritage (1989) also identifies the use of formulations in news interviews; he loosely divides interviews into different kinds, and he argues that the type of formulations used will vary in each. He refers to "soft" news interviews which are "often of a 'human interest' variety" and where it is the task of the IR to elicit information from the IE for the audience. Second, he refers to "hard interviews" where IEs may try and withhold "newsworthy materials" and it is the job of the IR to "take on an 'investigative' character" (p.26). Heritage points out that in "soft interviews" formulations can be used to vary the question-answer format and to "exert fine-tuned control on the structuring of the preference for agreement and thus may enable the IR to exert some control over the course of the interview". The use of formulations to control the interview can be clearly seen in (18) where it forms a summary after which, following the IE's agreement, the interview is quickly brought to a close. In "hard" interviews formulations can be used by IRs as a kind of "entrapping" device. The upshot of the IE's answers are formulated in such a way that the IE is unlikely to agree with the stated upshot. (For further discussion of formulations in interviews see Heritage and Watson 1980).

In sum, one of the ways in which IRs use idioms is in formulating an aspect of the matter under discussion, or the IE's opinion. The IE may then be asked to agree or disagree with the formulation. IRs can use their knowledge of, or previous utterances by, the IE in order to construct a formulation which he or she is likely to either agree or disagree with. Further purposes of idioms in IR talk will be outlined in section 4. But before investigating the sequential position of

idioms in IR and IE talk, we will look at certain features of idiomatic language in interview talk as a whole.

### 3 SPEAKER'S ORIENTATION TO THE USE OF METAPHORICAL LANGUAGE IN FORMAL SPEECH SETTINGS

In the previous section we have seen that metaphors and idioms do occur in formal settings and we have identified various similarities between these and idioms in ordinary conversation. But at the beginning of this chapter I suggested that idioms are seen as belonging to the realm of the colloquial. This is perhaps evident in the way in which, although speakers do use idioms in formal settings, they orient to the fact that such expressions are not entirely appropriate for the setting. Thus idioms are treated rather differently in formal talk, and, by analysing this difference, we can identify a way in which talk in interviews is constructed as formal.

It will be noticed that in extracts (3) and (11) the metaphor is accompanied by a phrase that demonstrates awareness that the expression is somehow different from the rest of the talk:

(3) [Detail]

--> IE:           ...to use a cricketing term .hhhhh he wuz knocked for  
                  six...

(11)[Detail]

IE:           I don't blame Chris Patten for this, he just happens  
                  to be the man holding the parcel when the music stops,  
-->           if I can use that simile,

In (3) the IE prefaces the idiom with the phrase "to use a cricketing term" and in (11) the IE follows the idiom with the phrase "if I can use that simile". I follow Zimmer and Fillmore (see Tannen and Oztek 1982) in referring to these as "disclaimers", because they seem to be

used to introduce some distance between the speaker and the idiom. It is interesting to note that disclaimers are often themselves somewhat idiomatic, particularly such phrases as "to use a cliché" and "as they say".

In ordinary conversation disclaimers are very rare; in my data only two examples occur. The following is one of these instances, in it Jane uses the phrase "ez they say".

(19)[Heritage:III:1:14:1]

Edgerton: .h Edgert'n Stanton.  
Jane: .hhh Ah:. Hello:, ye<sub>s</sub>.  
Edgerton: <sub>L</sub>Yes.  
Jane: .hhh Uhm:: (0.2) .t.hh Tha:nk you fer ringing ah-u  
We just had u-this: comment made to 'ss this mohning  
by: u-Mister Michael Gannon actually .hhh ahnd u:m I  
wondered whetherr in fact it's uh: (h)t(h)rue ohr  
--> false ez they say.  
Edgerton: Well I was (.) eh it so hap'n thet I met him yestihday  
eveni:ng=  
Jane: =<sub>L</sub>Yes  
Edgerton: <sub>L</sub>uh: at'nothuh meeting en I mention::ed u-that uh .h  
(0.2) uh:: thet I wz a little suhpri:zed u to: to  
rea:d in fac' what I had said.

At first glance this may seem to be an ordinary conversation. However it transpires that although Edgerton and Jane know each other as friends, in this instance the talk has a certain evident formality. First, Edgerton is telephoning Jane at work in the newsroom of a local newspaper where she is employed as a journalist. What they are discussing is whether some comments that Edgerton (in his role as local councillor, and hence official capacity) is reported as having made, were actually made by him, and thus the talk is "official" rather than "friendly". Her use of the idiom "t(h)rue ohr false" specifically indexes the talk as "on the record" and thus open to being used by Jane in her capacity as a journalist. Hence the talk takes place on a formal level and is not, perhaps as ordinary conversation in any

straightforward sense.

This disclaimer, therefore, occurs in a "formal" setting. Edgerton and Jane are orienting to the situation as one in which an idiom is not entirely appropriate. Thus, partly through their use of the disclaimer they are constructing the talk (and hence the situation) as formal. What I hope to show in this section is that disclaimers are specifically bound up with speakers displaying an orientation to the talk as formal, and hence in which colloquial/idiomatic talk might be inappropriate.

Although disclaimers are very rare in ordinary conversation, they are much more common in the news interviews I have collected. Further instances which demonstrate the recurrence of such phrases in formal settings follow:

(20)[1:A:12]

IE:           ...Now there's a fair degree of optimism here in  
Dublin .hhhhhh that uh the white paper due out in the  
coming weeks uhmmm (0.1) from the British government  
will take on board several of the points made by Dublin  
-->           which .hhhhh if you like th-the-their emphasising the  
need for this n-new law to have teeth when it's put  
through uh parliament nex-next autumn.

(21)[2:B:277:30]

(Regarding a report that lifejackets on boats and aeroplanes are ineffective and about what action the unions of the people who work in such environments will take)

IE:           ...I don't think uh: anybody 'ull go: (0.6) y'know<  
-->           off the top board uz (yuh) might sa::y...

(22)[1:A:9]

IE:           ...but after the:uh car bomb wuz found at Beaderfelt  
yes'd'y the whole thing wuz turned up another notch:  
-->           uz it were::...

(23)[2:A]

IR:           .hhhhhh Also: I suggest to you the question of::  
Germany because both super power leaders seem to be

treading around this question of ho:w a united Germany  
will fit into the complex of future east west relations  
--> Is it wise to uz it were (.) put that .hhhhh on the  
si:de while other things uhr discussed?

Here we see a variety of disclaimers: "if you like", "uz (yuh) might sa::y" and "uz it were". In the main disclaimers occur in IE talk, but, as we see here in (23), IRs also occasionally use them. By accompanying idioms with a disclaimer speakers orient to them as distinct from other phrases and as not entirely appropriate. Many disclaimers refer to the fact that the metaphors are commonly used phrases: "if I may use that expression", "if I can use that simile", "uz (yuh) might sa::y". By referring to the cliched nature of idiomatic expressions, speakers introduce some distance between themselves and the phrase. Disclaimers imply that the speaker is aware that the expression is cliched, and is using it because it is a commonly accepted way of referring to the object in question. This also implies that speakers are treating idioms as not quite appropriate for the setting.

Due to the absence of disclaimers accompanying idioms in ordinary conversation, idioms are "unmarked" and hence treated as appropriate for that speech setting, but in interviews they can be "marked". Thus it seems that speakers regard idioms as properly belonging to the realm of conversation rather than formal talk. Disclaimers, therefore, display the speaker's awareness that, in using an idiom, he or she is employing a form whose proper place is informal talk, and that whilst using an idiom, the speaker is orientating to the talk as formal.

Hence, this is one aspect of speech style through which participants orient to the formality of the talk. It seems to be the case that metaphorical and idiomatic language are viewed as somewhat inappropriate for such settings. Thus one way of "doing" formal talk is

to avoid figurative language. But we have seen that idioms are extremely useful, for instance in IE talk they are employed because of their persuasiveness. Subsequently interview talk is not devoid of idioms: instead they are frequently accompanied by disclaimers.

But although speakers seem to orientate to idioms as somewhat inappropriate to formal talk, idioms are not invariably marked or accompanied by an explicit disclaimer. However, a close inspection of the idiomatic metaphors in a formal speech setting reveals a less explicit way in which speakers reveal their awareness of the inappropriateness of using these idiomatic expressions. In a majority of the instances, and in contrast to instances of idioms in ordinary conversation, the expressions in the corpus are preceded by speech perturbation. This includes self-repair, pauses, and hesitation particles such as "uh" and "um". The following are just a few of these instances. All are taken from radio news interviews.

(24)[2:B:108:24]

IE: ...Downing street was stressing this morning that it is  
by no means certain that he will depute .hhhh for  
the prime minister when she's away .hhhhhh or if for  
example she has a- .hhhh another detached rat-retina  
--> .hhhh uhw::w::e he's it's- no- it's by no means  
--> certain that he'll uh::::: step into the breach,

(25)[1:A:7]

--> IE: ..we're prepared to:uh to get tough uh::: if necessary  
--> in order to to: >keep our grip<

(9) [Detail]

IE: .hhhhhhh u- The Irish government has the ability .hhhh  
to advise the people of Ireland und (.) the majority of  
the:m uhr reasonable people, .hhhh to advise thum that  
--> they are (0.4) uh- tied hand un foot .hhhh by articles  
two un three of the constitution...

(5) [Detail]

IE: ..the prime minister wants to dispose of Douglas  
--> Hurd? thought-uh of killing two birds with one sto:ne..

(17)[Detail]

IR: Surely though th- the secretary of state for d- the  
--> department of trade and industry has to take .hhhh uh  
--> t- (.) wu- the buck stops with him doesn't it,...

In (24) the idiom "step into the breach" is preceded by "uh:::::"; in (25) the somewhat idiomatic "get tough" is preceded by "to:uh" and the idiomatic "keep our grip" is preceded by "to to:"; in (9) the idiom "tied hand un foot" is preceded by "(0.4) uh-"; in (5) the idiom "killing two birds with one sto:ne" is preceded by "thought-uh"; and in (17) the idiom "the buck stops with him" is preceded by "uh t- (.) wu-". Thus in each of these instances the idiom is immediately preceded by some form of speech perturbation, whether it be a hesitation token, self-repair, a pause, or some combination of these.

It may be that perturbation stems from a similar orientation to that which lies behind the use of disclaimers. That is, perturbation may also be a consequence of speakers' orientation to the inappropriateness of idioms in formal speech settings. It may occur as a result of speakers trying to think of a literal, more formal alternative. But whatever the cause, perturbation, like disclaimers, demonstrates the speakers' awareness of the inappropriateness of the expression.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, we have identified one of the ways in which speakers orient to talk as formal: that is, speakers orient to idioms as

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<sup>5</sup> My analysis differs from authors such as Kendon (1973) who believe that perturbation represents places at which speakers are planning their next utterance. I am suggesting that perturbation has some communicative value. (See chapter one, section 1.)



somewhat inappropriate. A way in which this orientation is manifested is by avoiding idiomatic phrases altogether, and indeed idioms do seem to be less common in formal talk. When idiomatic phrases are used speakers often display this orientation by accompanying it with a disclaimer, or speech perturbation.

#### 4 THE SEQUENTIAL POSITION OF IDIOMS IN FORMAL SPEECH SETTINGS

Throughout this analysis two areas of enquiry have been distinct, that is, the design of idioms, and their sequential position. So far in this chapter we have identified various similarities and differences between the design of idioms in ordinary and formal speech settings. We shall now turn to consider the sequential position of idioms in formal talk. As mentioned above, due to the different roles of IRs and IEs their utterances will be investigated separately: thus I will begin with an analysis of the sequential position of idioms in IR talk.

##### 4.1 The Sequential Position of Idioms in Interviewer Talk

One of the major findings of previous chapters is that idioms tend to recur in a limited number of sequential positions. We have seen that a large number of idioms are associated with terminal positions. In IR talk many of the idioms are also associated with terminal positions, but not often topic terminations as in ordinary conversation; instead these occur at the end of questions. The following are three cases in point.

(26)[2:B:277]

(From an interview about financial benefits for single parents.)

IR:           And the alternatives to in:come support would um (0.8)  
              be much more difficult to calculate exactly how much  
-->           they were gonna geh so it would be a bih of a shot in  
-->           the dark?

(0.2)  
IE: .hhhhhhh Yes it would...

(15)[Newsnight]

(From an interview about poll tax capping. The interview follows a report in which a reporter for the programme has interviewed various people on the issue of charge capping.)

IR: Wu-1-let's come on though Mr Higgins t-to the second of David Cossah's reports which dealt with the use of charge capping (0.2) Now next week uh (0.2) Mr Patten is going to announce uh councils uhr he intends to cap because they've set their poll taxes too high .hhhhhhh wha- what wuz alleged um-in-in David Co:sser's (0.1) report wuz that capping goes against the principle of local u-accountability and uz he put it .hhhh gives  
--> Whitehall the ultimut big stick over local government.  
IE: It puts the limit on it but of course below that limit there may be very big variations in the amount which is being charged by particular councils...

(14)[Detail]

(From an interview during the Strangeways prison riot about the decision of the governor not to use force.)

IR: Un yet can he allow the situation to continue in which  
--> seven inmates uhr .hhh uhr effectively (0.1) cocking a  
--> snook ut the entire prison department.  
IE: Well they're cocking a snook...

In each of these examples the IR's question is terminated with an idiom. In chapter two we saw that topically terminal idioms are overwhelmingly summaries. In (26) the idiom "so it would be a bih of a shot in the dark" states the upshot of the preceding detail "the alternatives to in:come support would um (0.8) be much more difficult to calculate exactly how much they were gonna geh" and, therefore, is a summary. But this example is unusual in that, unlike topically terminal idioms in conversation, idioms at the end of IR questions are not often summaries and have more varied uses. Thus in (14) and (15) the idioms are not summaries; instead they are formulations of the matter under discussion, which give the IE the chance to agree or disagree with that particular portrayal of the subject.

But there is one similarity between terminal idioms in conversation and in IR's questions. In chapter three I argued that idioms are used to indicate to a recipient that a termination has been reached. In IR's questions idioms may also be used to indicate that the termination of a question has been reached. Such an indication may be particularly important in interview talk where smooth transitions and an absence of pauses or overlapping talk is thought to be desirable.

Both Heritage (1989) and Clayman (1988) point out that interviewer questions generally consist of more than one component. For instance a question may consist of a preface, a statement, and a question.

(26)[2:A]

(From an interview with a critic of the politics of the Soviet Union, about the attitude of America and the Soviet Union to the reunification of Germany)

- IR:(1)--> .hhh Looking ut: the: relationship again from the Soviet point of view:  
(2)--> we've grown used to the idea of Mr Gorbachov .hhh being able to pull rabbits out of the ha:t un (.) from a very narrow negotiating base .hhhhh seem to wrong foot Western leaders,  
(3)--> how much bargaining power does he still retain given the fact as you pointed out earlier .hhhhh that the Soviet position in eastern and central Europe is so much weaker?  
IE: .hhhhh Wull he has (.) probably the weakest hand vis-a-vis the West uv any Soviet leader in the post war period...

The IR's utterance begins with the introduction ".hhh Looking ut: the: relationship again from the Soviet point of view:". This is followed by the statement "we've grown used to the idea of Mr Gorbachov .hhh being able to pull rabbits out of the ha:t un (.) from a very narrow negotiating base .hhhhh seem to wrong foot Western leaders,". The final component of the utterance is the question "how much bargaining power does he still retain given the fact as you pointed out earlier .hhhhh that the Soviet position in eastern and central Europe is so m u c h

weaker?".

Thus IR's turns are often extended and there are a number of possible termination points. Idioms can be used by IR's to indicate that a termination has been reached. The association between idioms and terminations can be seen in extract (15) above. Here the IR's utterance consists of an introduction and a statement: it does not include a question. However the statement is concluded with an idiom. Following the idiom the IE begins to answer, thus treating the question as complete.

The association between idioms and terminations is often used in IR talk. Looking at radio talk in general (rather than just interviews) we can see that idioms, when they do occur, are overwhelmingly in a terminal position. For instance they may occur at the end of a report, at the end of an interview or at the end of the introduction to a report. Thus in the following instances the idiom occurs at the end of a presenter's introduction which is followed by an edited excerpt from an interview.

(27)[1:A:4]

(Taken from an item on euthanasia, and preceding an excerpt from an interview with a doctor who has conducted a report into the subject)

Presenter: It's certain today's report won't end (.) but only stimulate the debate on the practise of euphansia .hhhhh but Doctor Jo:hn Dawson is confident the report will stand up to close scrutiny .hhhhh and act as a guide line tuh doctors who face decisions most of us would go to the ends of the ear:th to avoid.  
--> Doctor: I think we've given a very clear: (0.2) lead .hhh that we place:: (0.2) suPRE:me value .hhhhhh on the individual...

(28)[1b:B:121:22]

(Taken from a programme about people who marry late in life.)

Presenter: Sa:dly Paul un Sarah uh happily married .hhhhh are no:w estranged from Pa:ul's son .hhhhhh und keep wondering

what they've done wrong (0.5) .hhhhh But despite the  
problems .hhhhh Sarah passes this advice to other older  
--> couples trying to decide whether to take the plunge:  
IE: If you're sure: yourselves:: and you want the  
companionship go ahead (0.5) and try and make the  
family understand?...

(29)[2:B:322:31]

(Taken from a programme about a child care scheme set up by  
parents.)

Presenter: The local response has been enthusiastic and of course  
it's just the sort of self-help initiative which the  
government ought to applaud .hhhhh but that's no reason  
Janis Pegs believes why it should just watch from  
--> afar:: success still rests on a knife edge.  
IE: What I would like to see the government do is actually  
to support something of this kind...

In each of these instances a presenter is introducing a quotation from  
someone who has been interviewed, but the interview itself is not  
broadcast. In each of the extracts after the idiom the presenter's  
introduction is immediately followed by the broadcast of a section from  
the interview.

Second, idioms often occur in presenter talk at the end of a report  
or interview, just before moving on to the next item. The following are  
two cases in point.

(30)[6:A:281:14]

(This immediately follows a report about French hostages)

Presenter: .hhhh Unear Taherie on the line from Paris with some  
--> (0.2) .hhhh considerable food for thought. (0.4) .hhhh  
Poland's industrial crisis took a new turn this morning  
when (0.2) police moved in to end the occupation  
strike...

(31)[1b:A:12:19]

(This immediately follows an interview with a doctor who has  
identified two categories of gut disorder)

--> Presenter: Professor David Wingate (.) exploring gut feelings  
(0.8) On now to bowel disorder in which there are  
organic changes in the intestines as well as  
disturbances of function. (0.4) It's crohns disease...

Here, the idioms "food for thought" and "gut feelings" occur at the end of one report and immediately before the introduction of another. Once again their function may be that of summarising the prior report and clearly indicating to the audience that a transition point has been reached.

One of the major differences between presenter talk and ordinary conversation is that the presenters are involved in a monologue (except when they take on the role of IR). In normal conversation the turn taking system enables speakers to monitor whether their last utterance was understood by the recipient.<sup>6</sup> If a speaker fails to understand a previous utterance they are able to request a clarification or repair in the next turn. But most of the time, a recipient's next utterance displays understanding of the previous turn by continuing the discussion. However, in monologues such as presenter talk, recipients are not able to initiate repair. Therefore, the onus is on the script writers and the presenters to make introductions, links, etc, particularly clear.

In chapter three we saw that idioms are one way of indicating that a termination position has been reached. In presenter talk this association between idioms and terminations seems to be used in order to initiate clear transitions. Thus script writers may use idioms at the end of an introduction or a link because of the association between idioms and terminations. Similarly, in constructing a programme editors may cut after an idiom because it can be heard as a possible termination and creates an opportunity to end a section of talk.

Although idioms in presenter talk are almost always terminal,

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<sup>6</sup> On how the turn taking system allows for the correction of mistakes see Drew (1989).

idioms in IR talk occur in a wider range of sequential positions. Another common sequential positions of idioms in IR's questions is at the termination of a distinguishable component of an utterance. Idioms are particularly common at the end of a statement, before the question component (as seen above, Heritage 1989 and Clayman 1988 found that IR utterances are often divided into these two components). The following are three cases in point. In each the beginning of the statement, the idiom, and the beginning of the question are all arrowed.

(26)[Detail]

(From an interview with a critic of the politics of the Soviet Union, about the attitude of America and the Soviet Union to the reunification of Germany)

- IR:(1)--> .hhh Looking ut: the: relationship again from the Soviet point of view:  
we've grown used to the idea of Mr Gorbachov .hhh being  
(2)--> able to pull rabbits out of the ha:t un (.) from a very narrow negotiating base .hhhhh seem to wrong foot Western leaders,  
(3)--> how much bargaining power does he still retain given the fact as you pointed out earlier .hhhhh that the Soviet position in eastern and central Europe is so much weaker?  
IE: .hhhhh Wull he has (.) probably the weakest hand vis-a-vis the West uv any Soviet leader in the post war period...

(32)[2:B]

(From an interview with a member of the council for the welfare of immigrants, about the decision to give a certain number of British passports to people in Hong Kong)

- IR:(1)--> .hhhhh (0.5) Surely however there are many people in Hong Kong who will be in the majority who to put it bluntly (.) won't be surprised .hhh who'll say well w-u-I never really expected it .hhhhh it may be regrettable u-I-I may object to it b- but I'm not  
(2)--> surprised and will just make the best of- of things  
(3)--> .hhhhh Surely its not the case that there is going to be some vast uprising.  
IE: .hhhhhhhhh It- There (0.1) w-ill not be a vast uprising, what there w-ill be I would suspect is: (0.2) an increase in the feeling .hhh tha- of insecurity in Hong Kong...

(33)[2:A]

(From an interview with the former French president, about German reunification)

- IR:(1)--> .hhhhhhh Th- There is another aspect of this being discussed as well though an it- it goes (0.1) like this thut because Mr Ko:hl has .hhhhhh in his wa:y uh-
- (2)--> ruffled the feathers in equal parts of both Britain and France thut life is being breathed back into entente cordiale,
- (3)--> do you subscribe to that view?
- IE: Not on the ( form) because we must not go to the past (0.1) .hhhhhh but when we have to vo:te for instance .hhh uh the British and the French are one hundred and sixty two members of parliment so they can influence some decisions...

In each of these examples it is apparent that an idiom is used at the end of a statement and before a question component. The idiom precedes a shift from the background circumstances to the question itself. Once again the idioms are summaries of the background details given in preparation for the question.

One possible reason for the use of idioms at the end of a statement is as follows. The statement component in questions can contain a variety of utterance types. For instance it can consist of an opinion which may or may not be attributed to a third person, or it may be a formulation of the matter, with which the IE is asked to agree or disagree. But it is noticeable that although such components vary, many contain idioms (even though idioms are not a common feature of interviewer talk). Furthermore, the statement component often contains more than one idiom, or consists of little other than the idiom. In all three of the extracts above there is more than one idiom. In (26) there are two idioms; "pull rabbits out of the ha:t" and "wrong foot". In (32) the idiom "to put it bluntly" occurs near the beginning of the statement component and the idiomatic "make the best of- of things" occurs at the end. In the statement component of (33) the IR describes



an "aspect of this being discussed" using the idioms "ruffled the feathers" and "being breathed back".

In the following extracts the IR gives a formulation of the subject and asks the IE to agree or disagree with the formulation. In each case the formulation is done through the idiom and consists of little else but the idiom.

(14)[Detail]

IR: Un yet can he allow the situation to continue in which  
--> seven inmates uhr .hhh uhr effectively (0.1) cocking  
--> a snook ut the entire prison department.  
IE: Well they're cocking a snook they've got the stage...

(17)[Detail]

(From an interview with an M.P. who contacted the Department of Trade and Industry because he was worried about changes in the specifications of an oil pipe being made by a British company for Iraq. The D.T.I denied that he had contacted them)

IR: Surely though th- the secretary of state for d- the  
--> department of trade and industry has to take .hhhhh uh  
t- (.) wu- the buck stops with him doesn't it, you  
can't just blame his officials,  
IE: .hhhh u- I've no idea: who asked the officials to give  
these briefings...

(34)[6:A]

(From an interview with the Director General of the Office of the Electricity Regulation Offer)

IR: >Now the trade and industry secretary Nicholas Ridley<  
.hhhhh has made it clear that he thinks that regulators  
in (0.2) th- the gas industry and in British Telecom  
un other (.) privatised industries .hhhhh are a  
--> NE:ccessary E:vil (0.1) is that how you see yourself?  
IE: (.tch) Well I certainly see my u- organisation as being  
ne:ccessary bu- but not as evil...

In (14) the behaviour of the prisoners is formulated as "cocking a snook" at the prison department; in (17) the secretary of state is formulated as being the person to blame through the idiom "the buck stops with him"; and in (34) the secretary for trade and industry is

reported to have formulated regulators as "a NE:ccessary E:vil".

Gumperz and Blom (1972) argue that certain types of language become associated with certain contexts. Thus, a certain style has become associated with poetry, and when this style is used in other contexts it constitutes a metaphorical code switch.

"The context in which one of a set of alternatives is regularly used becomes part of its meaning, so that when this form is then employed in a context where it is not normal, it brings in some flavour of the original setting." (P.425)

Because, as I have argued, idioms are associated with conversation rather than formal talk, this use of idioms by IRs may be akin to a style-shift and more specifically a metaphorical code switch (on style switching see Labov 1972 and Milroy 1989). Thus the IR has switched from a style normally associated, and constituting, formal talk, to a style normally associated with ordinary conversation.

A reason for this style switch may be that it serves to introduce some distance between the IR and the formulation. In other words because the IR has shifted into a style which is not normally associated with IR talk, the formulation is less likely to be seen as his or her own opinion of the matter. This is clearly the case where the IR is quoting from a third person, as in extract (34). But where the formulation is not attributed to a particular non-present speaker, it's idiomatic form may result in it being seen as a commonly held opinion of the matter.

Evidence for this argument may be found by taking a more detailed look at extract (17).

(17)[Detail]

IR: Surely though th- the secretary of state for d- the  
--> department of trade and industry has to take .hhhhh uh  
t- (.) wu- the buck stops with him doesn't it, you  
can't just blame his officials,

In this extract the IR appears to begin to use a literal version and then self-corrects in favour of an idiomatic version. In saying "has to take" she appears to be about to say that the secretary of the D.T.I has to take the blame. However, after a period of syntactic discontinuity she repairs this and uses the idiomatic formulation "the buck stops with him". The two formulations have the same meaning, thus it seems that she has a reason for choosing an idiomatic rather than a literal version.<sup>7</sup> This may be because, in switching styles, she can be heard as stating a commonly accepted opinion, rather than her own opinion.

A comparison may be made between this use of idiomatic language and "footing". As was discussed above, Clayman (1988) shows that in order to maintain a neutral stance, IRs frequently attribute their statements to a third party. This third party might be a specific person or it might be as general and unspecific as "critics" or "people" (for examples see Clayman 1988:482-483). Thus IRs "have considerable latitude in terms of whom they may identify to take responsibility for what is said" (p.483).

Clayman found that footing shifts are particularly common where statements are not embedded in questions. As we have already seen, many of the examples of IRs switching to idiomatic language occur where there is a statement followed by a question component. Clayman refers to these as "question-preliminary statements" (p.482). Above, we saw that extracts (26), (32), and (33) all contain question-preliminary statements. This is also true of extract (34). Only extracts (14) and (17) contain statements embedded in questions.

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<sup>7</sup> On corrections from literal to idiomatic phrases see chapter one, section 2.

In extract (34) there is a formulation constituted by an idiom and attributed to a third party. Thus there is a footing shift similar to those described by Clayman (*ibid*), and involving an idiom. However, I suggest that in all these extracts the IRs are performing something akin to a footing shift. They are not overtly attributing the statement to a third party, but, by using language which is not seen as a normal part of IR talk, the opinion in the statement can be heard as not being their own. Further, because the expressions are commonly used and colloquial, they can be heard as being a generally held opinion. Thus, by switching to idiomatic language, IRs can initiate a kind of footing shift without overtly attributing the statement to a third party. By using a style that belongs to ordinary conversation, the opinion expressed by the idiom can be heard as not having originated from the speaker, i.e. the IR.

In sum, idioms in IR talk are relatively rare. When they do occur they tend to be restricted to two broad sequential positions. First, they are often terminal. In IR talk they are terminal in questions. In a wider category of presenter talk they are terminal in links, reports, introductions and so on. Second, they often occur during the question-preliminary statement of an IR's question. Idioms which occur in the statement component of a question are often terminal, thus indicating that the statement is complete and a shift to the question component is about to take place. But in many cases the statement consists of more than one idiom or is almost entirely taken up with the idiom. Hence, I suggested that such statements involve a style switch and I compared them with question-preliminary statements that involve a footing shift.

#### 4.2 The Sequential Position of Idioms in Interviewee Talk

Having explored the sequential position of idioms in IR talk, I will now examine the position of idioms in IE utterances. Again I analyse the two separately because of the specialised speech exchange system of interviews. IEs, in their utterances, embark upon quite different activities to IRs. IEs utterances are answers and therefore have an entirely different sequential position to IR's questions. It is for this reason that I explore the sequential position of idioms in IE utterances in a separate section.

Idioms in IE talk tend to occur in a wider range of sequential positions than in IR talk. To begin with, a number of idioms in IE talk occur at the beginning of an answer, that is, a number occur in turn initial position. The following are three cases in point.

(10)[3:A]

(From an interview with a Conservative M.P. about the decision of an Irish court not to extradite a man accused of terrorism. They begin by discussing the Anglo Irish agreement)

IR: Mr Gower's on the line now I hope .hhhhh can the agreement survive?

(0.5)

--> IE: This is a black day for justice: (0.1) it's absurd to describe the possession of fire arms as a political offence: .hhhh the refusal to extradite will dismay a:ll those who want to clense the island of Ireland .hhh of the evil of terrorism .hhhh it will give aid and comfort to the IRA. You've got to remember that the Anglo Irish agreement (0.1) pledged both governments: .hhhhhhh to do a:ll in their power (.) to ri:d (.) the island (.) of terrorism.

(35)[2:B]

(From an interview with the Secretary for State and Transport, about plans to build a private road between Birmingham and Manchester)

IR: So you could charge a thousand pounds to travel=

IE: =Well- you (w-)

IR: Un if people were da:ft enough to pay it that would be okay.

--> IE: Well of course yo- you've hit it right on the head,

there would be very few people daft enough to pay it .hhhh the discipline- on uh the people who've built the road is that there is an alternative .hhhh which is free and is being (.) upgraded and will be available.

(7)[10:A]

(From an interview with the chairman of the S.D.L.P. in Northern Ireland, about a visit by the Irish Prime Minister who talked to politicians about statements made by Jerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Fein)

IR: On the politics of the thing how much importance do you think we should attach to tonight's statement by Jerry Adams, that he would suspend the terror campaign so long as no formal commitment was required by the British authorities?

--> IE: .hhh We'll h-he really is trying to: (.) have his cake and eat it isn't he? (0.1) .hhh uh whenever he says that. .hhh I think you have to have a declaration be it formal or informal that in fact you're not going to pursue violence as a means of achieving a political end...

In each of these examples the idiom in turn initial position is a gloss which is then elaborated. For instance in (10) the IE begins the answer with the idiom "This is a black day for justice:", and then continues to give details as to why this is the case. This idiom is a crisp version which is then elaborated by the details which follow it.

Thus, there is a similarity between turn initial idioms in IE talk and some complaining idioms in ordinary conversation. In chapter two we saw that many idioms follow the detailing of complaints. But we also saw that a number precede the detailing. These were found to be glosses which were then elaborated on by the details they precede. Turn initial idioms in IE talk can be seen as bearing a similarity with these, because they are also glosses which are then elaborated by detailing.

In extracts (10), (35) and (7) the IE's answer can be seen to consist of two components; a gloss and an elaboration. This two part structure is common of a number of IE turns. In many cases there is a brief general answer to the question followed either by an elaboration

involving detailing, or by a slight shift in focus. In the three extracts above the first component is short and consists entirely of the idiom. In many cases the first component is longer, and there is often an idiom at the end of it; that is, immediately before a shift in focus, or into detailing. So, instead of having an idiomatic gloss which is then elaborated, there is a brief answer terminating in an idiom and followed by an elaboration or a shift. Hence a second sequential position for idioms in IE talk is at the end of a brief general answer to a question and before a shift into detailing, or a shift in focus. In the following extract an idiom occurs at the end of a first component and before a second.

(21)[2:B:277:30]

(The interview follows a report that the lifejackets on aeroplanes and boats are ineffectual. The IE is the chairman of a union for people who work such forms of transport)

IR: It really is quite a da:mning report: (0.5) thut  
>the equipmunt jus' does< no:t do the job it wuz  
intended to do:? (0.5) How d'you expect your members  
to react?  
(0.6)

IE: I think: there will be::: some considerable reaction  
I don't think uh: anybody 'ull go: (0.6) >y'know< off  
--> the top board uz (yuh) might sa::y (0.1)  
I would advise the members not necessarily to refuse to  
fly:: I think that would be unwise, u-uh-th-this time  
they must continue to wear the equipment uz provided as  
it is better than nothing what so ever? (.hhhhhhh)

In answer to the IR's question about the possible reaction of his members, the IE says that he thinks there will be "some considerable reaction" but that no one will "go:(0.6) >y'know< off the top board". Thus in answer to the IR's question the IE produces a contrast, the second part of which is idiomatic. But following this contrast the IE then begins giving advice to any members that might be listening, on how he thinks they should act. So from describing the possible reaction

of his members, he has shifted into advising them, and we can see a clear shift in activity after the contrast, and an idiom immediately preceding this shift.

The following instance is a further example.

(22)[1:A]

(The interview follows the bombing of a German army base. The IE is a reporter)

IR: What is happening:: now with the security arrangements for service m'n in West Germany.

IE:(1)--> tch .hhhhh It has been increased (.) uh-quite dramatically

(2)--> obviously all milit'ry bases here were: on a state of increased alert following the um terrorist attacks at the weekend:: .hhhhh but after the:uh car bomb wuz found at Bieldefeld yes'd'y the whole thing wuz turned up another notch: uz it were:: .hhhhh  
Und it's really had a dramatic impact there are now very long traffic jams outside pretty well all the bases at uh-various times of the day during the rush hours (.) and um (.) .hhhhhhh that's causing problems for service men and for their families.

Here, arrow one indicates a direct answer to the IRs question about the security arrangements, the IE answers that they have been increased. Arrow two indicates an elaboration of that answer, she says that the bases were on alert but that the discovery of the bomb has led to the arrangements being "turned up another notch:". After this metaphor there is a shift, the IE begins talking about how the security arrangements are affecting the soldiers and their families.

In sum, IE answers often consist of two components: a fairly brief, general or summary answer to the question, followed by either detailing or a shift to a related matter. In some instances the first component consists entirely of an idiom: it is an idiomatic gloss which is then elaborated. In other instances the first component is longer and contains an idiom at the end, just before the shift. Thus two sequential positions of idioms in IE talk are in turn initial position



and pre-shift position.

A third sequential position of idioms in IE talk is at the termination of an answer. At the end of the following extract the IE's turn ends with an idiom.

(13)[Detail]

(From an interview with a tutor who teaches school governors, about government changes to the way school funds are to be administered)

IE: I think by the very simple fact applies in every walk of life, that if you have knowledge you have power .hhh un if you have the knowledge that governors are beginning to get .hhhh about the state of the schools, uh un we're talking about bills of thousands of pounds needing to be .hhhh paid on schools to get them fit. .hhhh fit for education. .hhhh I think by that very knowledge she has given (0.2) power to people who didn't have it before .hhh who are going to be very angry .hhhh und I think there is no question that she could be making a rod for her own back.  
-->

IR: That was Val Pickford.

In this extract the IE produces a multi-component turn which ends with an idiom. The interview is cut after the idiom. It is possible that the IE continued and that the rest of her turn has been edited out, but even if this is the case it demonstrates that the editor orients to the idiom as an appropriate completion point.

In the following example an IE produces a multi-utterance turn which finishes on an idiom. It includes a number of possible termination points but the IR does not respond until after the IE's use of the idiom.<sup>8</sup>

(36)[ATV T:15.11.79]

(Taken from an interview with a man who was imprisoned for a crime which he claims not to have committed)

IR: Have you any sort of criminal connections or anything,

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<sup>8</sup> This extract is taken from Heritage (1981) pp.16-17.

--> IE:            =u: <sup>h</sup> [No] t at all.=  
                   =I- I was working for the Gas Board at the time as a  
 -->                   salesman,=  
                   =I had no: (0.2) emphatically no er: associates that  
 -->                   (wo(u)uld) had criminal records,=  
                   =or I did not associate with people with criminal  
 -->                   records. .hhhh I- I- I was living a life o- o- of a  
                   family man in Stockton-on-Tees,  
 -->                   .hhhh where I was a representative for the Gas Board,  
                   .hhhh and it was out the blue to me.  
 -->                   IR:            .hh Were you surprise:d when you: w- went to court, an-  
                   and unded went down,

As Heritage (1989) points out, the IE passes through a number of (arrowed) completion points. It is interesting, then, that the IR does not begin to speak until after the idiom.

Similarly, in the following extract, the IE's (SB's) utterance again includes a number of termination points, but the IR and another IE (PJ) do not begin to talk until after the idiom.

(37)[WAO:15.2.79] .

IR:            Do you think the implications of this document are a  
                   (.) tough budget.  
 SB:            .hhhh We:ll .hh again it is important how it's  
                   presented. I disagree with the idea .hhhhh that you have  
                   to punish workers for wage claims. .hhh I'm an opponent  
                   for corporal punishment .hhh of workers who get wage  
                   claims. .hh But what I do think the budget .hh e:r  
                   should do: .hhh is to make ve- very very clear .hhh  
                   that there is a limited amount of money. .hhh That  
                   people who get more .hh get it at the expense of other  
                   workers .hh Or at the expense of the unemployed. .hh  
                   And I don't think .hhh that if Healey were to be  
                   defeated in the Cabinet .hh and if the so-called  
                   expansionist ministers were to have their way .hhhhh  
                   I don't think we would get more growth or employment.  
                   .hhhh We would get both inflation .h and more  
                   unemployment. The most important thing is that Mister  
 -->                   Healey .h should stick to his gu:ns.=  
                   PJ:            =You s ]ee  
                   IR:            [Well I-]

In this extract SB's extended turn contains a number of possible completion points, however the IR and the other IE do not take the opportunity to begin talking following one of these possible

completions. But further on in his turn the IE produces an idiom, and after this idiom both the IR and the other IE, begin to speak.

Thus a third and final sequential position of idioms in IE talk is in a terminal position. In such a position IRs, other IEs, and editors can be seen to orient to the idiom as a completion point, and react to them as such in spite of the fact that there may have been previous possible completion points. Thus IRs or other IEs will begin talking after the speaker has produced an idiom and editors frequently cut the interview after the IE's use of an idiom.

Furthermore, IEs may specifically use the association between idioms and terminations in order to indicate that they have reached the end of their answer. This is clearly illustrated by the following extract where a speaker uses an idiomatic format involving an idiom. If the formula were constructed as it is normally employed the idiom would come at the start. But here the speaker reverses the format so that the idiom occurs in a terminal position.

(38)[1:A]

- IR: Wh- what's special about New York? becuz it keeps changing (w- un) yet it does seem to stay the sa:me .hh<sub>hh</sub>
- IE: [Oh th- the- the special thing about New York I think is the:: thuh vi:tality (0.3) of its people (0.2) You have to struggle uh bit (0.4) to survive in New Yo:rk its the pla:ce where the- thuh phrase when push comes to sho:ve wz invented uh: its not the pla:ce for the sup:ine (0.2) you'll go under (.) an' New York won't have a great deal of mercy on you if you go under .hhhhhhh so th- this is an exercise of vitality --> a:ll thuh ti:me whether it's the vitality to keep yourself alive .hhhh or it's the vitality jus' to get --> to the top of the pile=
- IE: You found it a very greedy place...

When idiomatic constructions occur, such as the "whether...or just.." formula at the end of this answer, it is the most basic attribute that would normally come second (i.e. "whether it's the vitality to get to

the top of the pile or it's the vitality just to keep yourself alive"). In this extract the speaker reverses the usual order. This may be because "top of the pile" is idiomatic, and so, because of the connection between idioms and terminal positions, the IE places the idiom last: thus indicating that he has reached the termination of his answer.

In sum, in this section we have explored the sequential positions of idioms in IE talk. Three sequential positions appear to be common. First, idioms may occur in answer initial position. Second, idioms may occur at the end of a brief, general answer and just before a shift to detailing or in the focus of the answer. Finally idioms may occur at the termination of an answer.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have seen that while idioms are not restricted to conversation, their primary site is in conversation. Many of the features and functions associated with idioms in conversation are also associated with idioms in news interview talk. For instance idioms can be used to endorse a point of view in both conversation and interviews (complaining idioms examined in chapter two were also found to be used in endorsing a point of view). However, one difference between the use of idioms to endorse a point of view in the two speech settings is that while in conversation critical idioms are self-directed, in interview talk they are usually other-directed.

Other similarities between idioms in conversation and in interview talk were revealed through an examination of the sequential position of the idioms. In chapter three we found that common sequential positions of idioms are at topic initiation, before a shift, and at topic

termination. In interview talk idioms were also found to recur in similar sequential positions. However, in interview talk topics are not constructed in quite the same way. But we did discover a certain regularity in many of the turns in interview talk. Turns are initiated, contain shifts, and are then brought to a close. Idioms frequently occur at the termination of each of these turn components. Thus, whereas in conversation idioms are associated with topic initiation, shifts in the focus of a topic, and topic closure, in interview talk idioms are associated with turn initiation, shifts in the focus of a turn, and turn termination. So, in interview talk the sequential positions of idioms are associated with turn construction rather than topic construction.

A major difference between idioms in interview talk and conversation was revealed to be the *occurrence of disclaimers and perturbation* in interview settings. In interviews idioms are often "marked": hence speakers are orienting to their inappropriateness in this formal speech environment. But rather than avoid them completely in formal settings, speakers use perturbation and disclaimers to demonstrate an awareness of the slight inappropriateness of the expression. Thus, while using a form that has its proper place in conversation, speakers orient to the talk as formal. And this, it was suggested, is one of the ways in which speakers construct formal talk.

Therefore, while revealing various similarities and differences between the use of idioms in a formal and an informal setting, the analysis has also arrived at some more generic findings about the interview setting as a whole. As well as revealing that one of the ways in which speakers orient to the setting as formal is through the use of disclaimers and perturbation, it has also shed light on certain

facts about the IR and IE turns. For instance it was discovered that forms of language which are treated as inappropriate to IR talk can be used by IRs to distance themselves from a statement, and thus are similar to footing shifts. Also it was discovered that IE answers often consist of two components; a brief general answer followed by an elaboration or a slight shift in focus.

Thus, by examining the conversational device of idioms in a non-conversational setting, we have discovered a number of facts about idioms and interview talk as an example of formal speech.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

In this chapter, and as a conclusion to this analysis, I want to review the difference between my approach and other approaches to the study of idioms. I want to show how my findings differ from the conclusions arrived at from more traditional forms of analysis. Thus I will give a brief summary of the results of my investigation, show how these contrast with the results of existing analyses, and reflect on the significance of my findings to our knowledge of figurative language as a whole.

The previous chapters have been an investigation of the use of idioms in (mainly) informal conversation. Various factors about the use of these idiomatic phrases, in a variety of sequential environments, have been identified. Broadly these can be summarised as three central themes. First, we have discovered that idioms recur in a particular sequential environment: in chapter two we found that idioms are especially recurrent in certain kinds of topics. These topics include complainings, troubles-tellings, talk about misfortunes, and so on. We grouped these topics under the generic term complaints. Thus it was discovered that idioms regularly occur in the environment of complaints.

Within this category of idioms in complaints two distinct patterns of usage became apparent. Some of the idioms in complaints contrast with the complaining by being optimistic, resigned, and so on, while others were found to formulate the egregious character of the complaint. These latter idioms were seen to be used to state exactly what the complaint is about. They are often summaries of the detailing of a complaint. Idioms which formulate and summarise the egregious nature of a complaint are often delivered in an environment of recipient non-affiliation. Either the stance taken in the idiom conflicts with a view previously expressed (or believed to be held) by the recipient, or the idiom is delivered in an environment where the recipient has failed to affiliate. Idioms which contrast with the complaint by being optimistic etc are, on the other hand, most frequently delivered in an environment of recipient affiliation.

A second central theme of the analysis is the discovery that not only are idioms associated with a particular sequential environment, they also recurrently occur in particular sequential positions. In chapter three we saw that idioms are regularly associated with the termination of topics. Furthermore, these terminations were found to be distinct in that they involve the disjunction of the coherence within a topic. Topic terminations involving the use of an idiom turned out to be surprisingly uniform. I proposed the following standard sequence to describe the way in which the majority of these idiomatic topic changes take place:

A: Idiom  
B: Acknowledgement/Agreement token  
A/B: New Topic

Our third major finding is closely linked to the association between idioms and terminations. It was discovered that one



of the reasons idioms often occur in termination sequences is that they act as summaries of the preceding topic. Idioms often link back to the whole of the previous topic. They constitute a formulation or assessment of the preceding detailing. Such summaries do not add anything new to the topic, and many are characterised by repetition.

Thus, central to this analysis has been three major findings. The first relates to the sequential environment in which idioms occur: they are recurrently used in the environment of complaints. The second relates to the sequential position of idioms in conversations: they are particularly common at the termination of topics. The third major finding relates to the interactional work which idioms perform: they regularly act as summaries of the previous topic.

Other major findings of the analysis relate to the connection between idioms and puns, and the use of idioms in formal settings. Idioms sometimes contain puns and that this is due to a congruence between the concrete materials of the story and the literal meaning of the idiom. Turning our attention to idioms in a more formal speech setting, that of news interviews, it was found that they are rather less commonly used in this context than in conversation. We also identified some differences between the way idioms are used in ordinary conversation, and the way they are used in news interviews. In news interviews idioms are often used to explain or persuade hearers of a particular point of view. Further, in formal contexts idioms are sometimes accompanied by disclaimers.

These kinds of findings differ substantially from the findings reported in the existing literature on idioms (summarised in chapter one). For instance psycholinguistic literature on idioms is often concerned with their recognition. Psycholinguists have attempted

to discover how idioms are recognised and processed by constructing experiments using idioms which have a clear literal and figurative meaning. Such experiments are constructed with the intention of discovering whether the literal or figurative meaning is retrieved first, or whether both meanings are retrieved together. So, for instance, Bobrow and Bell (1973) created experiments using ambiguous idioms and non-idiomatic sentences. Each of these was given a literal and a figurative paraphrase. Subjects were instructed to indicate which of the two meanings they saw first. Bobrow and Bell found that more subjects saw the literal meaning first.

Schweight and Moates (1987), on the other hand, constructed experiments involving the presentation of an idiom onto a screen. The idiom was used literally or figuratively, and either on its own or preceded by a short paragraph. The sentences were flashed onto a screen for 100 milli-seconds at a time until subjects were able to read the entire construction out loud. The time it took for subjects to perform the task was recorded. The authors found that "idiom-literal" sentences required more presentations than "idiom-figurative" and control sentences.

Other examples of the kind of analysis carried out by psycholinguistics can be found in the work of Swinney and Cutler (1979), Estill and Kemper (1982) and Gibbs (1980). But this brief summary of two examples of psycholinguistic analyses should be sufficient to give an insight into the kinds of issues which interest psycholinguists, the kinds of analysis they carry out, and the results they achieve.

It is not hard to see the difference between psycholinguistic analyses of idioms and my own investigation. I have

not been concerned with the recognition of idioms but with their use in ordinary conversation. I do not mean to suggest that the psycholinguistic approach to idioms is not valuable. Instead I hope to demonstrate that my analysis has begun to shed light on a vitally important area which has been overlooked in the past; that is, on instances of their actual use.

Other investigations of figurative language derive from philosophy, linguistics, and literary criticism (see for instance Kittay 1987). These focus on metaphor in general and are concerned with discovering its origin, structure, and functions. Such authors tend to use invented examples or instances taken from literature. Again this kind of analysis is valuable but arrives at very different kinds of results from the present investigation.

One particularly significant investigation of *metaphor* based on invented examples and concerned with general issues relating to metaphorical language and thought, is that of Lakoff and Johnson (1980). They show that metaphor is a pervasive part of our language, and our conceptual systems; that it is vital to the way we understand, think, and act in the world. Lakoff and Johnson base their analysis on metaphor in general, and specifically metaphor at the level at which it becomes literally realised. They demonstrate just how much of our language is metaphoric in origin.

Again their kind of approach differs substantially from mine in that, first, Lakoff and Johnson are concerned with metaphor on a rather more general abstract level, whereas I am concerned with specific instances of the use of idiomatic phrases; and second, my aim is to discover how they are actually used in naturally occurring language. So, whilst Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated the

importance of metaphor in language, I have shown how it actually works. I have shown how metaphorical phrases are used to explain, summarise, persuade, disagree and so on.

From Lakoff and Johnson's work we begin to get an idea of the power of metaphor, we begin to see that metaphor is an essential part of the way we understand and construct reality. By looking at the way examples of metaphors are used in communication, we see how the power of metaphor is manifested, and how speakers use that power in their daily interaction. Perhaps we have seen this most clearly in our examination of idioms in complaints and of idioms in formal speech settings. In the former context idioms are used to state the nature of the complaint. They are also used to justify the making of the complaint by, for example, portraying the speaker as an innocent victim. In chapter one we explored two instances of a witness using a number of metaphors during an enquiry in order to portray his actions as blameless. In the context of news interviews we saw metaphorical phrases being used by interviewees to explain or justify their point of view. We discovered how powerful metaphors are in presenting one point of view in opposition to another. Thus metaphors or idioms are one way in which speakers convey reality. Metaphors are able to portray some set of circumstances as justifying a complaint, or a particular point of view as the correct version. Further, idioms are essential to the way we understand the world. In chapter five we saw metaphors being used to explain complex issues or unusual circumstances; thus we see that metaphors are essential to the way we construct and make sense of reality.

We can begin, therefore, to get some idea of the interactional functions of metaphors, and to understand why it is that

speakers select idiomatic expressions over literal versions. Speakers select idioms in making a complaint because they can state the egregious character of a complaint, they can portray the complaint as justified, the speaker as innocent, and so on. Further, we can understand why it is that metaphors are used in IE talk although such figures of speech may be marked as inappropriate in formal contexts. Idioms in IE talk are selected because, for example, they can summarise a complex idea in a straightforward way, because they are hard to disagree with, and because they are highly economical.

In chapter one we saw that idioms are often derided by analysts and speakers alike (see for instance Zijderfeld 1979). Idioms are criticised as being meaningless, unoriginal, cliched, and so on. Such criticisms can be seen to be unfounded when one begins to look at the many uses and the subtlety of idioms in conversation. The derision of idioms stems from a lack of understanding of the functions they fulfil. This analysis demonstrates that idioms are uniquely equipped to perform a range of very difficult feats such as complaining, convincing, summarising, and bringing topics to a close. In fact, not only do idioms recur in very tricky subjects, such as complaints and troubles-tellings, but they are used to fulfil the difficult task of bringing these topics to a close. Idioms are uniquely equipped to carry out some of the most delicate operations in conversation.

In sum, this investigation differs rather radically from previous investigations of idioms. It has focused on the way idioms are used, and, as a consequence, we have identified a variety of functions which they perform. From this position we can now conclude that the general derision of idioms is unfounded. It seems to be a result of the fact that the actual occurrence and use of idioms has not, until now,

been investigated in any detailed and systematic way. But a detailed and systematic investigation of idioms is precisely what this analysis has set out to achieve, and it has demonstrated that, though much maligned, idioms are a fundamental, valuable, and an extremely rich constituent of our language.

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