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Figures of speech: Figurative expressions and the management of topic transition in conversation

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ABSTRACT

In conversation, speakers occasionally use figurative expressions such as "had a good innings," "take with a pinch of salt," or "come to the end of her tether." This article investigates WHERE in conversation such expressions are used, in terms of their sequential distribution. One clear distributional pattern is found: Figurative expressions occur regularly in topic transition sequences, and specifically in the turn where a topic is summarized, thereby initiating the closing of a topic. The paper discusses some of the distinctive features of the topic termination/transition sequences with which figurative closings are associated, particularly participants' orientation to their moving to new topics. Finally, the interactional use of figurative expressions is considered in the context of instances where their use fails to secure topical closure, manifesting some conflict (disaffiliation, etc.) between the participants. (Figurative expressions, idioms, conversation, topic)*

One feature of conversation that contributes to its colloquial character is that, from time to time, speakers use certain forms of idiomatic expressions which may be regarded as FIGURES OF SPEECH. The following fragment from a telephone conversation illustrates this kind of linguistic object, the use of which we shall examine in this article.

(1) [Field:X:(C):1:1:1:6]
    Lesley: .hh He wz a (.).p a buyer for the hoh– i– the only horse hair fact'ry left in England.
    Mum: Good gracious,
             (0.3)
    Lesley: And he wz their buyer,
             (.)

```
      Mum:      Hm:::
      Lesley:   .t
      Mum:      Hm:.
  →   Lesley:   So he had a good inni:ngs did[n't he.
      Mum:                                    [I should say so:
```

Just before this fragment, Lesley has told her mother about the death, at the age of 79, of a mutual acquaintance. Here, instead of describing this man's long and full life in some literal fashion, she chooses instead the figurative expression (arrowed turn) "he had a good innings" – an image derived from the game of cricket.

The matter of a speaker's selecting a figurative expression, in preference to a more literal way of saying or describing something, is particularly visible when the speaker changes what was going to be a literal or non-idiomatic form and replaces it with a figurative expression, as illustrated in the self-repairs (arrowed) in the following extracts.

```
(2) [US:20]
      Vic:   Dey took their business fuh three days en ney
  →          came back en, took care a' her dey gi– .hh
  →          showered her with, whatever kinda gifts they wanted.
             (0.7)
      Vic:   In her mi:nd stuck the showering of gifts.
```

(3) [Field:86A] (Lesley has called her husband, Skip, at work, to tell him that the police have been round to investigate the burglary of their home the previous night)

```
      Lesley:   An they said OH YOU'RE VERY PRECISE when I said what ti:me (.) I thought
                it was,
                (0.2)
      Lesley:   BU' FORTunately I'd had a peep at the clo:ck .hh
                (1.2)
      Skip:     Well I– I knew about what time it was I knew it was about
                (1.1)
      Skip:     Ten– about uh (ten– say) between ten and twenty pa::st.
                (0.2)
      Skip:     (Obviously knew      )
      Lesley:   .hhh Well I said it was about three twenty one I
  →             think because by the time we– (.) we– the penny
  →             had dropped an' we got up again that was three twenty fi::ve,
```

In 2, it looks as though Vic had been going to say that, as a way of "taking care of her," they "give" her (gifts). However, he cuts off "gi–(ve)" and replaces it with the figurative "showered her with ... gifts." In 3, Lesley alters what she had been going to say at "because by the time we–"; judging from the way she continues her turn, that projects either "by the time we realized ..." or "by the time we got up again." In any case, she changes it to "by the time ... the penny had dropped," thereby either replacing "realized" with "the penny had dropped" or inserting that expression into an otherwise non-idiomatic account. In each case, the speaker starts to produce a literal version of something, but then does a self-repair which substitutes that version (or possibly, in 3, adds to it) with a figurative description.

In such cases, a speaker's SELECTION of a figurative expression is particularly exposed in self-repairs involving the substitution of a figurative for a more literal

description. But it is generally the case that the use of figurative expressions in conversation is a property of the DESIGN of turns at talk. As with any other feature or component of turn design – lexical, syntactic, intonational, or prosodic – a figurative expression may be selected as part of the way in which a turn at talk is built up or constructed. Here we focus on the role that figurative expressions play in naturally occurring conversation, through an examination of the sequential properties of turns that have the selection of a figurative expression as one of their design features.[1]

Parenthetically, we should note that we are taking a somewhat different direction of inquiry than that followed by most research in this field. Very broadly, research into the whole range of idiomatic language (including not only figurative expressions but also proverbs, oxymora, "syntactic idioms" etc.) has been directed toward uncovering the following:

(a) The grammatical characteristics of, and structures underlying, idiomatic constructions (Chafe 1968, Weinreich 1969, Fillmore et al. 1988, Abeille 1995, Nicholas 1995, Schenk 1995).

(b) The semantic interpretative competencies and cognitive processing involved in their comprehension (Bobrow & Bell 1973, Gibbs 1980, Estill & Kemper 1982, Gibbs 1987, Popiel & McRae 1988, Schraw et al. 1988, Schweigert & Moates 1988, Gibbs & Kearney 1994).[2]

(c) The connections between syntactic properties of idioms and their interpretation (e.g. Gibbs & Nayak 1989).

Across all these fields of research in linguistics and (psycho)linguistics, the data or test materials are almost invariably instances of idioms abstracted from any actual dialogic context (indeed, much of the research, especially in the area of idiom comprehension, is experimental). In short, it appears that there has been little systematic investigation into the use of idioms in naturally occurring dialog, at least, in English.[3]

By contrast, we are inquiring here into the interactional role that figurative expressions play when they are used in conversation. Figurative expressions are a feature of the design of turns at talk: They are selected as part of the way turns are constructed so as to "fit" with, or play a coherent interactional role in, the sequences in which those turns are produced. Thus the components of a turn's construction, at whatever level of linguistic production,[4] are connected with the activity that the turn is being designed to perform in the unfolding interactional sequence of which it is a part, and to the further development of which it contributes. That is, the most proximate context in which a turn is produced, and in which it is recognizably coherent, is its SEQUENTIAL context. Hence we treat figurative expressions as one of those linguistic components of turn design through which speakers manage, collaboratively, certain sequentially embedded activities. We explore here whether an account can be given of the occasions when speakers employ figurative expressions, in terms of their SEQUENTIAL DISTRIBU-

TION or ENVIRONMENTS. Therefore, rather than seeking any kind of "cognitive processing" account for speakers' selections of figurative expressions in speech, we can regard using figurative expressions as a systematic, socially organized practice for producing certain kinds of (verbal) conduct – as, indeed, are all components of the design of turns at talk. Just what that organized practice, and what activities figurative expressions may be employed to perform in conversation, is the focus of this inquiry.

By "figurative expressions" we mean those conventionalized complex units that are full clauses, a feature which seems to distinguish them from other idioms that are phrasal (e.g. "stark naked," "by and large," "zero tolerance," "window of opportunity") or even lexical.[5] (For an overview, see the introduction to Everaert et al. 1995.) In common with these other idiomatic complex units, figures of speech are formulaic or relatively "fixed" in composition – syntactically, lexically, and sometimes intonationally.[6] Hence, like words, they may be learned separately as single units of the language (Fillmore et al. 1988; but for a different view, see Gibbs & Nayak 1989). Generally, they are semantically opaque; their meanings are not the same as, or cannot be found from, the meanings of their constituent words (Bolinger 1976, Weinreich 1969).[7] This creates the distinction between their literal and figurative meanings – a distinction which, of course, is the starting point of much of the research literature cited above on the recognition and comprehension of idioms. At any rate, the conveyed meanings of such expressions are not literal but metaphorical, as is illustrated by "had a good innings," "shower with gifts," and "the penny had dropped," in exx. 1, 2, and 3 respectively. The metaphorical character of figurative expressions is therefore another property that distinguishes them from some other routinized or relatively fixed expressions (including "automatic language," Van Lancker & Kempler 1987) which are part of the idiolect of a language.

Our primary data are a corpus of telephone calls recorded by a British family at intervals over a three-year period, consisting of approximately 15 hours of telephone conversations between family members, between members of the family and their friends, and occasionally with colleagues.[8] This corpus was supplemented by various other corpora of American and British telephone calls, amounting to about 20 hours of recorded and transcribed conversations (for the transcription conventions, see Atkinson & Heritage 1984). From these data a sample collection was made of approximately 200 instances of speakers using figurative expressions.

FIGURATIVE EXPRESSIONS IN TOPIC TERMINATION SEQUENCES

An initial and fundamental step toward identifying the patterns or organizations associated with a linguistic phenomenon is to see whether that phenomenon has any discernible distribution in talk. While the sense of, or basis for, "distribution-alizing a phenomenon" can vary according to one's analytic perspective, here we

mean determining whether the phenomenon has any regular or recurrent position in sequences of talk (following the sense of "distributionalize" used by Sacks 1992:2.422). When we adopted this analytic way of examining the collection of figurative expressions in our corpus, a very striking pattern emerged. In this pattern, following a turn in which a speaker produces a figurative expression, the co-participants briefly agree with one another, after which one or the other introduces a new topic of conversation.[9] Hence it appears that the use of a figurative expression is associated with topic termination and transition to a new/next topic.

To illustrate the principal features of this sequential pattern, we can look again at Lesley's use in ex. 1, in referring to the death of a mutual acquaintance, of the expression "had a good innings" – though now considering the turn in which that was produced in relation to more of the surrounding talk. Lesley and her mother had been talking, for some minutes before this extract, about the illnesses (and possibly "final" illnesses) of some elderly friends.

```
(4) [Field:X:(C):1:1:1:6]
   1   Lesley:   I don't know'f you remember Missiz Milbeck th't
   2             use to go to chu:rch.
   3             (0.8)
   4   Mum:      (Mi[ssiz)
   5   Lesley:      [Uh: uh– he wz the vicar's ward'n anyway he
   6             die:d suddenly this week .hhh and he wz still
   7             wo:rking.
   8             (0.3)
   9   Mum:      (   [   )
  10   Lesley:       [He was seventy ni:ne,
  11             (0.3)
  12   Mum:      My: wo:rd?
  13             (0.2)
  14   Lesley:   Y[e:s he: was um
  15   Mum:       [(You've got s'm rea:l) workers down the:re,
  16             heh
  17   Lesley:   .hhh He wz a p– uh: Ye:s. Indee:d .hh He wz a
  18             (0.2) .p a buyer for the hoh– i– the
  19             only horse hair fact'ry left in England.
  20   Mum:      Good gracious,
  21             (0.3)
  22   Lesley:   And he wz their buyer,
  23             (.)
  24   Mum:      Hm:::
  25   Lesley:   .t
  26   Mum:      Hm:.
  27   Lesley:   So he had a good inni:ngs did[n't he.
  28   Mum:                                   [I should say so:
  29             Ye:s.
  30             (0.2)
  31   Mum:      Marvellous,
  32   Lesley:   .tk.hhhh Anyway we had a very good evening o:n
  33             Saturda:y.
  34             (.)
  35   Mum:      Ye:s?
  36   Lesley:   We went to North Cadbury: an' Gordon came too ...
```

The kind of topic transition with which the production of a figurative expression is associated in our corpus occurs in 4:27–33. In response to Lesley's producing a figurative version of this acquaintance's having lived a long and full life (4:27), Mum assents very positively to that assessment, "I should say so: Ye:s. (0.2) Marvellous" (4:28–31). After this, Lesley introduces what is evidently a quite different topic: ".hhhh Anyway we had a very good evening on Saturda:y …"

Before considering in more detail some of the features of that topic transition sequence, and the role within it of the use of a figurative expression, we present further instances of this pattern of topic transition. To highlight the pattern we are identifying, the turn in which one speaker produces a figurative expression is marked by arrow 1; the turn(s) in which the recipient briefly agrees or concurs with the idiomatic assessment (sometimes followed by the speaker who produced that assessment) is shown as arrow 2; and then the turn in which one or the other speaker introduces a new topic is shown as arrow 3.

(5) [Field:J86:1:4:6]
```
          Gwen:    You know it wz: so lovely an' everything [y know
          Lesley:                                          [nYe:s.
          Gwen:    All character 'n (0.3) beautiful.
          Lesley:  Ye:s.
                   (0.7)
  1 →     Gwen:    B't I suppose she must 'v come t' the end of 'er (.) tether 'n just walked out
                   the [n.
  2 →     Lesley:      [Yes.
                   (0.8)
  2 →     Lesley:  Oh what a shame.
                   (.)
  2 →     Gwen:    Ye:s [it's a shame
  3 →     Lesley:       [Anywa:y e– so you don't know any mo:re th'n …
```
(6) [Field:2:3:9] (The "he" referred to is Robert Maxwell, a well-known British publisher and businessman)
```
          Steven:  Well he didn't either 'ee had a bad start (when) 'ee had iz (0.3) .t.k .hh father
                   shot by the Nazis 'nd iz uh uh .hh mother died in: Auschwitz yih know
                   [so
          Lesley:  [Oh really:?=
          Steven:  =So eez [had the: (     )
          Lesley:          [Oh'z a Je:w is he Je:w?
                   (.)
          Steven:  Oh yeah.
                   (.)
  1 →     Steven:  He's had k– eez a Czechoslovakian Jew so [eez
          Lesley:                                           [Yes
  1 →     Steven:  had quite a– checkered career already=
          Lesley:  =eh heh
  2 →     Steven:  .hhhh [Yeah
  2 →     Lesley:        [Ye:h.
                   (0.2)
  3 →     Lesley:  .hhh Alri:ght. Well I':ll get my husband then: to get in touch with the ad-
                   dress.=
          Steven:  =Thanks very much.
```

(7) [Kamunsky III:16] (Talking about a mutual friend's car)

    Myrn: O̲h. What c̲olor izzit.=
    Alan: =Oh it's (0.3) t̲hink of choc'late p̲udding.
             (1.0)
    Myrn: O̲ how gro[:ss,
    Alan: [That's the color 'v iz car,
    Myrn: He's (hanitel– h̲e p– uh bl–l–luh.) He colored it dark bro[:wn?
    Alan: [Well he w̲anted
             a burnt o̲range, en it c̲ame out s̲hit bro̲:wn.
             (0.3)
    Alan: ihhhhhhh [ih .hhh ih–hn–hn ihhee
    Myrn: [Ooo:::::::::::::::.
    Alan: it's r̲illy l:loo(h)oo heh it's nh– hnh–h̲u[hh it's–
    Myrn: [D̲'z it look ba:d̲?=

1 → Alan:=   Yeh̲eh– heh well it grows o(h)n yeh– heh
             [.hheh
2 → Myrn: [Ooo::[:oh::
    Alan: [I c̲all it 'iz pudding on whee:ls,
             (.)
3 → Alan: .hhh B't ahhhhnywhhay, . .((move to talk about who else will be at the party))

(8) [JGI(S):X15:4–5]

    P: but u– c̲ertain: (.) t̲hings wi:ll d̲o that you know they're re– ru–
             they're B̲O̲U̲N̲D̲ to [.hhh in c̲ertain i̲ndustry.
    M: [Yah.
             (0.2)
    M: Yah,
    P: Different t̲hings'll pick up when it– begins to be s̲pring of the yea:r and every-
             thi:̲ng,
    M: Yah.
1 → P: .hhh But I̲ think it'll i̲ron itself out,
2 → M: I̲ sure hope [so.
3 → P: [I'll s̲ee you T̲uesday.

(9) [Rah:(18):5–6] (Discussing difficulties cleaning double glazed windows)

    Jenny: An' the troub̲le is you see if you t̲ighten th'clips too much they sn̲ap.
    Ann: Ye̲s. Well that's what I̲ do. Brea̲kin'them.
    Jenny: Ye̲:s:[:,
    Ann: [I've been a bit more c̲areful this time but the troub̲le is I don't get th'm
             (   ) tih the w̲indows actually.
             (.)
1 → Ann: You c̲an't wi̲:n r̲eally.
2 → Jenny: No̲::.
             (.)
2 → Jenny: Oh no.
             (0.2)
2 → Ann: No.
             (0.3)
3 → Ann: Have you b̲een to sch̲oo̲l this morning.

(10) [Field:M88:1:5:11]

    Robbie: … but I spoze we d̲o learn 'n she hasn't been to other schools'n I̲'ve learned
             'n a̲wf'l lot 'n last three years.
    Lesley: Mm̲:.
             (0.2)
    Lesley: Mm.
1 → Robbie: B't take this with a dollop'v salt you kno::̲w I'm– I'm ba̲:sic'ly quite happy
             b't quite relieved it's the she̲er organiz̲ation 'n getting all, e̲verything d̲one
             in th' d̲a:y.

```
2 →   Lesley:    Yes: that's ri:ght,=
2 →   Robbie:    =Ye[s.
3 →   Lesley:         [Yes. Ye[h .tch .hhhhhh Wuh–
3 →   Robbie:             [O k a y, W'ddiyou wanna talk t' me
                     abou(h)[t
3 →   Lesley:             [Eh: WE:ll eh WHAT I RANG up about was ....
```

These cases illustrate clearly a sequential pattern in which a figurative expression is produced in a turn that results in the termination of a current topic. That termination is managed by the participants in a brief exchange of agreements, followed by a transition to a new/next topic. From this pattern it appears that figurative expressions are associated with an organization for closing a current topic of talk and moving on to a next topic. Several components of this organization for topic termination/transition will be examined here in closer detail: (i) the character of figurative expressions in this position as summaries of the current topic; (ii) the sequence through which topic transition is managed; and (iii) the ways in which speakers construct a next turn as introducing a "new" topic.

FIGURATIVE EXPRESSIONS AS SUMMARIES

At the point where each of extracts 4–10 begins, a speaker is telling the co-participant about something: about the death of a mutual friend in 4, the home of friends who have just separated in 5, the troubled life of Robert Maxwell in 6, the car of a friend in 7, and so forth. The speakers are reporting empirical facts or details; and in each case, the one doing the reporting is the speaker who produces the turn in which a figurative expression is used. Thus, just before ex. 6, Steven and Lesley have been talking about the famous (perhaps infamous) British publisher Robert Maxwell, touching among other things on the rumor that he has a son who is so severely disabled that he lives permanently in hospital, and on Maxwell's risky business dealings (data not shown). Here, at the beginning of the extract, Steven tells Lesley about the death of Maxwell's parents when he was young. He then produces a figurative summary of these tragic circumstances and allegedly nefarious dealings: "so eez had quite a– checkered career already–." The character of this as a summary is perhaps particularly evident, in that this is designed as an upshot of the prior detailing, signaled by "so ..." (see also 4:27). In 9, Ann has been telling Jenny about her difficulties cleaning her double-glazed windows, concluding her account of these difficulties with "you can't wi:n really." In each case, the empirical detailing or reporting is brought to a conclusion with a figurative expression which somehow summarizes what the speaker has been reporting.

Used in this way, these figurative expressions serve as summary assessments of what has been reported – assessments being generic forms of summaries (Jefferson 1984:211). They are "assessments" in that these expressions convey a certain positive or negative value to be attached to the circumstances that the speaker has been describing, including optimism ("it'll iron itself out") or resignation ("you can't win"). In producing figurative assessments, speakers move

away from, or step out of, their report of empirical details. In ex. 4, when Lesley uses the idiomatic assessment "he had a good innings," she is not now adding to the list of facts about the man that made his life, and death, notable. The figurative expressions do not themselves include further information about the person who died in 4, nor about the house of the friends who have separated in 5, Maxwell's early life in 6, the friend's car in 7, or the economic difficulties facing the P's industry in 8. In producing a figurative expression, the speakers are becoming empirically disengaged. They are not contributing further details but rather are assessing and summarizing the previously reported empirical information. Employing a figurative expression can be a device to summarize a topic, and thereby to draw it to a conclusion.

This disengagement from empirical details, managed through producing a figurative assessment, is highlighted by the way in which that assessment is not connected particularly or exclusively to its contiguously prior turn. Rather, the expression relates back over much of the prior talk/details, to assess aspects of the topic that have been talked about in earlier turns; indeed, the expression may refer back to and summarize or assess circumstances talked about over the whole of that topic. In ex. 4, when Lesley says that he "had a good innings," she is not merely summarizing the information in her immediately prior turns. The idiom plainly does not refer particularly to the immediately prior information that, when the friend died, he was a buyer for the only horse-hair factory in England. Instead, it refers back over the whole topic, including the details in each of Lesley's turns in the extract – that he was the vicar's warden, that he was still working when he died, and that he died aged 79. By connecting back beyond the adjacently prior turn/information, the expression "had a good innings" summarizes the information across the entire prior announcement/telling, and it thereby begins to detach the talk from an item-by-item sequential development of the topic.

Although the data are too extensive to explicate this in detail, this is also true of the other examples cited above. In ex. 5, Gwen and Lesley have been discussing the breakup of the marriage of people they know, in the course of which Gwen mentioned how lovely and full of character this couple's home was (see Gwen's first two turns). Again, "coming to the end of her tether" is a figurative summary not of the immediately prior information about the home, but of the whole topic of the separation (the wife having eventually left). In ex. 6, we have already mentioned that Lesley and Steven were previously discussing Maxwell's business dealings and the rumor concerning his disabled son; hence, when Steven says that Maxwell has had "quite a– c̲heckered career," he can be heard as referring back to and summarizing all those troubled circumstances, as well as the immediately prior information that both Maxwell's parents were killed by the Nazis. In 10, Robbie's figurative summary "take with a dollop of salt" refers back over much of the very lengthy prior topic, concerning her experiences teaching at a school at which Lesley has also taught. Thus a figurative summary can serve as

a device to close down a topic by connecting back beyond the immediately prior turn or information, often to the beginning of the topic. A figurative expression has the property of being able to summarize and assess more than whatever is referred to in its contiguous prior turn; in this way it can detach the talk from the progressive development of a "next item" of information relevant to an ongoing topic.

There are, of course, other means besides figurative assessments by which a current topic can be brought to a close; e.g., repetition is commonly associated with terminating a topic. Moreover, there are other kinds of assessments besides figurative expressions with which a speaker can summarize the talk thus far. Hence the account we are developing here is not a general account for the termination of topics: That would require an exploration of the range of techniques by which speakers can summarize and disengage from what they have been talking about (cf. Maynard 1980, Button 1990). Our focus here is to account for a systematic position in which speakers recurrently employ figurative expressions – namely, that they do so in summarizing a topic, and thereby draw it to a close.

It is worth noticing, however, that figurative expressions may have a special place among the techniques available for summarizing and concluding a topic. First, it is striking that they are commonly, indeed overwhelmingly, employed by speakers to summarize what they themselves have been telling/reporting, rather than what the other, their co-participant, has been telling. They are, then, "self-summaries": summaries of one's own talk/topic, and not of the other's talk.[10] Furthermore, their use as generic assessments detached from empirical particulars may give them a certain "power" in summarizing and closing topics – e.g., in contrast to the use of repetitions or other forms of assessment, which are more closely tied to prior empirical details (Pomerantz 1984a). A glimpse of this can be seen in 4:17–27, where Lesley initially repeats one of the details concerning the friend's career. After Mum's initial response to the details of this man's employment, and a pause (4:20–21), Lesley repeats that "he wz their buyer" (4:22); following this, there is something of a hiatus – a slight pause – before Mum does repeated ruminative acknowledgements. In outline, it appears very much as though the topic termination is imminent before Lesley's figurative summary in 4:27. It seems that Lesley is looking for a way to close the topic, tries with a repetition that does not quite succeed (in repeating "Hm:::," Mum doesn't find a way to move out of that topic and onto a next), and then tries again with a "stronger" closing move by producing the figurative summary in 4:27.[11] Here we see the possibility that speakers may produce a figurative summary when they fail in an initial attempt at topic closure, in ex. 4 through repetition. This suggests that figurative expressions may have greater "power" in drawing topics to a conclusion than other closing techniques such as repetition or (non-figurative) assessments; this represents a rather different approach to the "vividness" (Chafe 1968) or "intensity" (Labov 1984) of idiomatic and figurative expressions.

THE TOPIC TRANSITION SEQUENCE

We outlined in the previous section the properties that are associated with the summary status of figurative expressions, and which make them objects for concluding a topic. The key evidence for their terminal character, however, is that co-participants treat these figurative turns as terminal, as bringing the topics to an end. This is manifest in the brief turns that come after the figurative turn and before the introduction of the new topic. In these turns, the co-participants manifestly decline to develop the topic further. Consider, for example, the sequence in ex. 9, following Ann's figurative summary of the trouble she is having cleaning double-glazed windows.

```
(from 9)
    Ann:      You can't wi:n really.
    Jenny:    No::.
              (.)
    Jenny:    Oh no.
              (0.2)
    Ann:      No.
              (0.3)
    Ann:      Have you been to school this morning.
```

The recipient's (Jenny's) response to the summary "You can't wi:n really" is to agree: "No::. (.) Oh no." Ann, in turn, does a token reciprocal agreement or confirmation, "No", after which she introduces a new topic. The recipient had the opportunity, in the slot after the figurative turn, to continue talking about the topic of Ann's difficulties cleaning windows; she could have developed or elaborated that topic in a variety of ways. Instead, she produces a near-minimal unelaborated agreement; in doing so, the recipient declines the opportunity to develop that topic any further. Her response is topically fitted, but it does not offer any further resources to talk more about that topic. Hence she begins the disengagement from and closure of the current topic.

When in response Ann produces a (nearly) identical token, she likewise declines to take the opportunity in that slot to say any more about the previous topic. She thereby accepts or confirms the prior move by Jenny to disengage from the current topic; as a result, they are now collaboratively moving toward the closure of that topic. That closure is finally sealed by Ann's introduction of a next topic. Thus the production of a figurative summary, followed by each of the speakers declining to develop the topic further, and the subsequent introduction of a next topic, can be considered a "topic transition sequence." It is the sequence through which co-participants collaboratively disengage from a current topic and move to a next. Two further illustrations of that sequence follow.

```
(from 6)
  1 →   Steven:   He's had k– eez a Czechoslovakian Jew so [eez
        Lesley:                                            [Yes
  1 →   Steven:   had quite a– checkered career already=
```

```
        Lesley:    =eh heh
2 →     Steven:    .hhhh [Yeah
2 →     Lesley:          [Ye:h.
                   (0.2)
3 →     Lesley:    .hhh Alri:ght. Well I':ll get my husband then: to get in touch with the ad-
                   dress.=
```

(from 10)
```
1 →     Robbie:    B't take this with a dollop 'v salt you kno::w I'm– I'm ba:sic'ly quite happy
                   b't quite relieved it's the sheer organization 'n getting all, everything done in
                   th' da:y.
2 →     Lesley:    Yes: that's ri:ght,=
2 →     Robbie:    =Ye[s.
3 →     Lesley:       [Yes. Ye[h .tch .hhhhhh Wuh–
3 →     Robbie:              [O k a y, W'ddiyou wanna talk t' me abou(h)t
```

In each of these fragments, the turn in which one speaker produces a figurative summary (arrow 1) is followed by reciprocal and nearly identical "agreements" by both speakers (arrow 2);[12] after this, one of them introduces a new topic (arrow 3). "Agreement" is meant broadly, to include topically fitted or appropriate responses such as the sympathy tokens ("Oh what a shame") with which Lesley responds and Gwen reciprocates in 5, and the sympathetic or affiliative manner in which M responds to P's report of her troubles in 8. Agreement, sympathy, or affiliation may describe the particular response by a recipient to the figurative summary in question; in any case, contiguity or alignment between the co-participants is expressed in some way (i.e. through the minimal character of the agreements, typically "Yes" or some such object) so as to foreclose further talk about that topic and to enable the speakers to move on to a next topic.

Thus the topic transition sequence associated with figurative summaries (which may apply more generally to topic transitions following other forms of topical summary/closure) exhibits a kind of standard form, which can be represented schematically as:

```
1 →     Speaker A:      Figurative summary
2 →     Speaker B:      Agreement (or other expression of contiguity)
3 →     Speaker A:      Agreement/confirmation
4 →     Speaker A/B:    Introduces next topic
```

This can be considered a "standard sequence" for topical closure and transition to a next topic, after a topical summary – the production of a figurative expression being one of the available techniques for summarizing a current topic. One significant variation of this standard sequence is that, in some cases, step 3 is elided – e.g., instead of producing a further agreement/confirmation token in response to recipient's agreement, speaker A (the one who produced the figurative summary) moves straight to the introduction of a new topic, as in ex. 8.

(from 8)
```
1 →     P:     .hhh But I think it'll iron itself out,
2 →     M:     I sure hope [so.
4 →     P:                 [I'll see you Tuesday.
```

In other cases, speaker B (the recipient of the figurative summary) may produce a minimal agreement token and then open a new topic right away, without waiting for any further token from speaker A. In either case, the production of a figurative summary (arrow 1) is responded to by a minimal form of concurrence by the recipient (arrow 2), which is followed by the introduction of a new topic (arrow 4). This results in an attenuated form of the standard sequence, through the elision of step 3 in the schematic model above. This is evidence that the recipient's topically disengaged minimal concurrence with the prior speaker's production of the figurative summary is sufficient to give either speaker the opportunity to embark on a new topic.

The standard transition sequence that we have described represents the sequence in which co-participants collaborate to close one topic of conversation and begin a next topic. The significance of this sequence is that it reflects – or, more properly, is the product of – the fact that co-participants regularly and systematically orient to the summary and closing implications of the figurative expression in the prior turn. That orientation is displayed in the way that both speakers systematically withhold any further topical development or elaboration. By producing minimal agreements (or other contiguous actions), recipients display their recognition that the idiomatic turn is somehow sufficient to terminate that topic; their responses are therefore designed not to say any more about that topic, but rather to exit from it. Subsequently, speaker A collaborates in the closure, either through further minimal agreements (frequently repetitions of speaker B's response), or by eliding the sequence and going straight to a next topic. Speaker A thereby concurs with speaker B's understanding that the figurative turn was designed to conclude and terminate the prior topic.

Thus the standard topic transition sequence is evidence of a symmetry between speakers' production of figurative idioms and their interpretation by recipients – where "interpretation" refers not to what the expressions themselves "mean" (in the way that psycholinguists have investigated the "interpretation" of idioms), but to the conversational activity they perform (topical closing). This symmetry, or mutual orientation to the topically terminal implicativeness of a turn in which a figurative expression has been produced, is generally embedded in this topic transition sequence. It is particularly visible, however, in cases where the co-participants SIMULTANEOUSLY and INDEPENDENTLY move to step 4 of the sequence, the opening of a next topic. This happens in ex. 10. Recall that Robbie summarizes the difficulties she's been having at the school where she teaches, speaking figuratively: "B't take this with a dollop 'v salt you kno::w".[13] Lesley and then Robbie do the kind of minimal, topically disengaged agreements that are characteristic of the standard transition sequence, steps 2 and 3. After this, each of them simultaneously changes topic – at least, it appears that Lesley is about to, when she drops out in response to the overlapping, topically initial enquiry from Robbie. In her arrowed turn, Lesley does an emphatic inbreath (characteristic of

some disjunctive next move), followed by what is clearly recognizable as the beginning of "What" ("Wuh–"), which is almost certainly the start of "What I called about was …" But her move to that next topic coincides with Robbie (in her arrowed turn) simultaneously enquiring: "Okay, W'ddiyou wanna talk t' me abou-(h)t" (which also begins with increased amplitude). Hence, Lesley and Robbie simultaneously perform the same action: moving to a new next topic. As it happens, they are probably also both orienting to the relevance of not just any new topic, but specifically the matter of why Lesley has telephoned (this occurs about 15 minutes into the call); i.e., it appears that Lesley was about to announce why she called, at the same time as Robbie asks why she called. At any rate, they are simultaneously treating this as a place where it is relevant to introduce a new topic.

The significance of their simultaneous move to a new topic is that it provides evidence for the shared intersubjective "reality" of this position (to post the production of a figurative idiom) as a point where it is appropriate to change topic. Instances in which both participants embark on the same action simultaneously (in overlap) serve as particularly strong evidence that an observable pattern is the product of a shared understanding (which, of course, need not be conscious) – in this context, that figurative expressions can be used to summarize and close down topics, and thereby to occasion a move to next topics. For this reason, we might regard the use of figurative expressions as an intersubjectively available practice or device for topic termination.

TOPIC TRANSITION: INTRODUCING A NEW TOPIC

Recall that we are describing the components of the sequence in which the use of a figurative expression results in the termination of that topic and the transition to a new topic. We have discussed how idioms can work to summarize the preceding talk/topic; and we have outlined the transition sequence in which participants collaboratively disengage themselves from a prior topic. The final component – the introduction of a next/new topic – is of central importance: It is only when participants move to a new topic that what has been an incipient transition sequence, until that point, becomes fully realized or ratified as a termination of the prior topic and a transition to a next topic.

We have been relying until now on an intuitive, but nonetheless robust, sense of how one participant or the other introduces a next or new topic. For example, in 10, the topic that Robbie draws to a conclusion with the figurative expression "with a dollop 'v salt" has been her teaching experiences. As we have seen, she then changes the subject by inquiring what Lesley has telephoned her about – which, intuitively, is "obviously" a new topic. Similarly in 4, the figurative expression "had a good innings" concludes Lesley's telling her mother about the death of a mutual acquaintance. When Lesley subsequently announces "Anyway we had a very good evening on Saturda:y," that is rather clearly a change of topic. In each of exx. 4–10, the change of topic is similarly "obvious."

The difficulties associated with defining what constitutes a topic, and with specifying analytically the various referential and other linguistic means (shared reference, propositional content, pro-terming, anaphora and deixis, lexical repetition etc.) through which topical connections and hence discourse cohesion are managed, are well enough known not to need recapitulation here (but cf. Li 1976, Schank 1977, Maynard 1980, Brown & Yule 1983 chap. 3, Levinson 1983:312–16, Schegloff 1990). But note that one important respect in which the concept of topic may be difficult to apply to the analysis of natural discourse is the problem of identifying topical boundaries. Generally, one topic of conversation merges almost imperceptibly into the next, in a seamless "stepwise" progression (Jefferson 1984, Sacks 1992:2.291–302). Hence the precise points of topic shifts or changes, and how such shifts were managed, are often analytically opaque. Of course, if one cannot identify the boundaries of particular topics, then it is difficult to offer an account of the linguistic basis for topical coherence, either in principle or for actual topics.

The changes of topic that follow figurative summaries of the prior topic in exx. 4–10 are not, however, managed in a stepwise fashion. They are "obvious" changes, not only in the intuitive sense of their involving a dramatic change in reference or content, but more particularly because, in most cases, speakers mark that they are about to change the topic of conversation. They do so, generally, in the design of the prefatory (turn-initial) components/features of the turn in which they introduce the new topic (arrowed in the following fragments).

```
(from 4)
        Mum:     Marvellous,
   →    Lesley:  .tk.hhhh Anyway we had a very good evening on Saturda:y. …
(from #6)
        Steven:  .hhhh [Yeah
        Lesley:        [Ye:h.
                 (0.2)
   →    Lesley:  .hhh Alri:ght. Well I':ll get my husband then: to get in touch with the address.
(from 10)
        Lesley:  Yes: that's ri:ght,=
        Robbie:  =Ye[s.
   →    Lesley:     [Yes. Ye[h .tch .hhhhhh Wuh–
   →    Robbie:             [O k a y, W'ddiyou wanna talk t' me abou(h)t
(11) [Field:88U:1:9:11] (Simplified)
        Dana:    I can't really say hey Mum I've got prob['ms
        Gordon:                                          [hhh ehhh heh heh
        Dana:    She'd run[ a mi:le. ](0.3) [(    )
        Gordon:          [hhYhhhehhh]h [.hssssss
                 (0.5)
        Dana:    There you go:.
                 (0.9)
   →    Dana:    We↑:ll– (0.4) uh::m,hh I(h) can't think 'v anything else u– rea::lly exciting
                 to say?
```

When, for example, Lesley announces in 4 that she and her husband "had a very good evening on Saturda:y," she marks this as a change to a new topic by begin-

ning her turn with an audible inbreath; she then produces a prefatory discontinuity marker "Anyway," the beginning of which is produced with increased amplitude or stress. Such prefatory components as "Anyway", "Alright" (6), "Well" (11), "Okay" (10), either alone or in combination ("But anyway" in 7, "Alright well" in 6), are disjunctive in that they work to disengage the forthcoming turn from being tied or connected to, or coherent with, its prior turn; i.e., such components are produced to disengage this next turn, topically, from its prior. Hence, by producing such components – often in conjunction with some combination of audible inbreaths and raised amplitude – the speakers in such cases signal that what they are about to say will be unconnected with what they have previously been discussing, and hence that they are about to introduce a new topic.

This is clear evidence that participants themselves treat what they are doing as disengaging from the prior topic, and as introducing a new and quite different topic. In most instances in our collection of topical transitions following the use of a figurative idiom, the introduction of the new topic is signaled by (some combination of) increased amplitude, raised pitch/amplitude, and self-editing or hesitancy (including inbreath) – and, most importantly, by those prefatory discontinuity markers that suspend the relevance of the prior topic. (That is, they instruct the co-participant not to try to look for any connection between what the two of them have just been speaking about, and what is about to be said.) Again, this serves as evidence that the production of a figurative expression, along with the sequence of brief agreements that a figurative turn generates, constitutes a shared practice for closing down a topic and moving on to a next topic: a practice to which participants mutually or intersubjectively orient in conversation.

FAILURE TO ACHIEVE TOPICAL CLOSURE

Some cases in our collection of figurative expressions did not run off in such a straightforward or tightly organized topic-termination/transition sequence. The topic being talked about did not end after, or in the close vicinity of, the production of a figurative summary. In particular, we have two types of cases in which a speaker's attempt to close a topic with a figurative expression did not result in closing that topic – instances that nevertheless relate to the topic termination pattern we have been describing. The first type involves instances where the expression itself happens to occasion further topically connected talk. The second type involves failure by the recipient to agree with the position summarized in the prior speaker's figurative idiom.

Touched-off topical developments

Devices or practices in conversation do not work in an automatic or mechanistic fashion: The practices evident in conversational patterns are RESOURCES that enable speakers to engage, recurrently, in certain activities, using means by which those activities will be coherent, recognizable, and meaningful to co-participants. But the use of those resources DOES NOT DETERMINE the course of the interaction.

At any point in an interaction, participants may orient to the possibilities that a conversational practice occasions; nevertheless, they are not obliged or constrained to follow the sequential track implicated in those possibilities. In short, they may choose to take a different direction – to suspend the sequential track implicated in an object and instead take a different track. So it is with figurative expressions and the topically terminal possibility their use occasions. In the first set of cases in which the use of a figurative summary does not result in topic termination and transition, it appears that one speaker finds something further connected to or touched off by the figurative expression – so that the talk moves along from it in a more "stepwise" fashion, characteristic of topical development in conversation.

(12) [Field:X(C):2:1:2:7]
     Joan: We 'aven't even bought a Chr<u>i</u>stmas tree–: we've dr<u>a</u>gged an <u>old</u> one
           down that Kenneth use to 'ave in iz b<u>e</u>droom.[.hh
     Lesley: [ihYe[:s:.
     Joan: [An o:ld (0.3)
        sorta m<u>a</u>ke
        believe one. You[know, .hh[An' m<u>a</u>de do with=
     Lesley: [Ye:s,   [yes.
1 →   Joan: =th<u>a</u>:t. We're 'affing to r<u>ea</u>lly (.) t<u>i</u>ghten our
1 →   (0.7) belts.
2 & 3 → Lesley: ihYes <u>we</u>ll (0.3) <u>so</u> are <u>we</u>:. Because uh (.) it seems to me everybody
        else seems t' be doing <u>so</u> <u>we</u>::ll ..((Continues about her husband's
        doing badly because "nobody's buying anything for agriculture"))

Prior to this extract, Joan has been telling Lesley about the financial difficulties her family faces because of her husband's reduced income, and the economies they are having to make as a consequence – economies which she details, then summarizes figuratively (arrow 1). Lesley responds to this figurative summary, first by doing a minimal acknowledgment (arrow 2), and then (arrow 3) by continuing and developing the topic of reduced income. She shifts from talking about Joan's husband's income to her own family's difficulties in this respect: "<u>well</u> (0.3) <u>so</u> are <u>we</u>:" (i.e., "having to tighten our belts"). Thus there is something of a topical shift (in reference or focus) following Joan's figurative summary, but not the kind of clear and marked topic change characteristic of the sequences described earlier. Lesley's continuation works as a stepwise topical development, in which the figurative expression is PIVOTAL: It is used to summarize the topic-thus-far, but it serves to touch off further related matters (see also Jefferson 1984:203).[14]

  In such instances, the figurative expression might have terminated the topic about which the participants had been speaking. Recipients produce minimal agreement tokens to these summaries, and at this point they are potentially disengaged from that topic. However, one of them then finds in the figurative turn the opportunity to continue somewhat "on topic." Hence the figurative expressions in such cases bring the participants to a point at which they COULD HAVE disengaged from a previous topic and introduced a new topic; however, they DECLINE to do so, pulling back from disengagement and opting instead to con-

tinue the topic (albeit in a stepwise move). This, then, is the first way in which the standard sequence for closure and change of topic is not realized, because one participant chooses to exploit the topical opportunities that happen to be touched off by the figurative expression.

Disagreement, disaffiliation, and multiple figurative idioms

The second type of case in which the production of a figurative summary does not result in topic termination and transition involves some manifest lack of accord, affiliation, or agreement between the participants. Recall that the standard sequence described above is characterized by agreement or a measure of accord between them. In exx. 1 and 4–11, the recipient of the turn in which a figurative expression has been produced (speaker B in the schematic model) concurs with speaker A's figurative summary assessment. These agreements may take quite minimal forms (e.g. "Yes"; or "No" where appropriate, as in 9, see Jefferson 1994); or they may consist of appropriate expressions of sympathy (ex. 5), affiliation (exx. 8 and 10), etc. Whatever form of agreement or accord is used by the recipient, that speaker is in effect not only agreeing to the prior speaker's summary assessment: He or she is also implicitly accepting or confirming the prior speaker's move to close down the previous topic, by declining to take the opportunity in that slot to add anything or say anything more substantive about the matter being discussed. In other words, substantive agreement to the prior speaker's assessment also conveys a kind of "procedural" agreement, to draw that topic to an end. The recipient, in producing in this slot a minimal agreement (etc.), simultaneously concurs both with the prior speaker's assessment and with his or her move to close that topic (through the figurative summary). In this fashion, topics can be closed with agreement between the participants, through the relatively brief sequence outlined schematically above.[15]

   To begin with, there are cases that seem to be a variant of the "standard" topic transition sequence.

```
(13)  [Heritage:1:6:5–6] (Talking about clipping Mrs H's dog's claws)
          Mrs. H:   En that's botherin' me yo[u know I=
          Ilene:                            [Ye:s
          Mrs. H:   =get worried in case I've hurt them.
          Ilene:    Well that's it because you've o:nly just got to cut the tips off.
          Mrs. H:   Mm::.
                    (.)
          Ilene:    You know you– you musn't cut it very far down,
          Mrs. H:   Yes.
          Ilene:    You musn't cut it onto the bla:ck because it's li:ke cutting into our own
                    quick.
          Mrs. H:   Yes of course it ti[s.
  1 →    Ilene:                        [En they'll scream blue
                    murder if you d(h)o th(h)a(h)[t
```

2 →　Mrs. H:　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　[hih hih Y(h)eh ah
　　　　　　Well I've given it up as a bad job anywa[y.
　　　Ilene:　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　[eh heh heh hih
4 →　Mrs. H:　You kno:w, .h But l:look ah I wz (0.2) I'm havin:g sti:ll a big pro:blem with
　　　　　　my: sister's ba:ck …

Just prior to this extract, Mrs. H. has been explaining to Ilene – who evidently breeds dogs, and whom Mrs. H. treats as something of an expert – that she has been having difficulties clipping her dog's claws. She has asked Ilene if she can recommend a reliable vet in the neighborhood who would do it for her. In broad terms, the extract resembles earlier cases: Speaker A (Ilene) produces a figurative summary (arrow 1, "they'll scream blue murder"), in response to which Mrs H. produces a minimal agreement form (arrow 2) and subsequently opens a new topic (arrow 4) – which happens to be her primary reason for calling, to ask Ilene's son, a physiotherapist, to treat her sister's back.

But in one respect, at least, this differs from earlier cases. Mrs. H's response to Ilene's production of a figurative expression is not restricted to concurring with Ilene's prior turn. Instead, she continues by adding to her agreement – done with a slight chuckle, reciprocating the chuckling laughter in Ilene's prior turn – a figure of speech of her own: "Well I've given it up as a bad job anyway." Certainly this does not extend the termination sequence very far; nevertheless, it results in a termination sequence which is not quite so attenuated as the "standard" sequence described above.

There is perhaps some slight difference between the positions of the co-participants at this point; the difference just surfaces when Mrs. H says, "I've given it up as a bad job anyway." At the beginning of this extract, Ilene has been asked to recommend a vet who might clip the dog's claws, and she is warning about the dangers of trying to clip them oneself – a danger she graphically summarizes figuratively. However, it appears that Mrs. H is displaying that she does not need to be advised not to attempt to clip them herself: She has already decided it's too difficult for her. Hence she is asking Ilene to recommend a vet (data not shown), and this is made explicit in her figurative summary. To a degree, then, Mrs. H RESISTS the advice implicit in Ilene's warning. (On the sensitivities of giving and receiving advice, and resistance to advice more generally, see Jefferson & Lee 1992, Heritage & Sefi 1992.) When Mrs. H adds that she has "given it up as a bad job anyway," she conveys that the warning, and the advice it implies, are redundant.

This kind of case, in which the recipient responds to her co-participant's figurative summary with one of her own, is fairly benign, in the sense that the difference in the positions expressed figuratively is perhaps only incipient; the difference does not approach overt disagreement or conflict (in this respect, note both Mrs. H's initial minimal agreement and her reciprocal chuckling). Significantly, the co-participants then move successfully to open a new topic.

In other instances, however, the differences between participants become more manifest at the interactional surface of the talk. Although one speaker may at-

tempt to close the topic by producing a figurative summary, this is not accepted by the recipient. The recipient withholds the kinds of minimal agreement associated with the standard topic transition sequence, with the result that the co-participants do not achieve a topic termination and transition to next topic. Instead, the topic becomes protracted until further attempts are made to get the other's agreement, often through additional figurative summaries.

```
(14) [SBL:3:1:3–4] (Talking about asking the committee of a women's organization, of which
         Marylou and Claire are members, about showing some giftware at an event)
     1   Marylou:   Maybe we sh' do tha:t.
     2   Claire:    Mm hmg AN' AN' EH– A:SK how many: MIGHT BE
     3              inTRESTED duh come BEC'Z IF YEE DON'T HAVE
     4              ENOUGH THET'S INTERESTED W'L THEN (.) fooey
     5              ON IT YIH [KNOW.
     6   Marylou:            [We:ll I don't think it's a matter 'v it
     7              having t' be right no:w. I think it's something
     8              thet will snowba:ll.
     9              (0.7)
    10   Marylou:   Yihkno:[w?
    11   Claire            [Mm::[h m .
    12   Marylou:                [I think it's somethin' thet (.)
    13              'll haftih be worked up
    14              (1.6)
    15   Marylou:   W[hich is alright en it can be done at
    16   Claire      [(Weh–)
    17   Marylou:   any ti:me en [I don't care whether a: lot 'v 'm
    18   Claire:                 [M m h m ?
    19   Marylou:   come 'r not because
    20              (0.7)
    21   Marylou:   uh: if they don't wan' to.
    22              (0.7)
    23   Marylou:   But the thing i:s ah: the more the better,
    24              (0.3)
    25   Marylou:   Bu[t they don't haftuh (place order) in the club=
    26   Claire:      [WE:LL YOU KNOW EVERY O N E A' T H E
    27   Marylou:   =they c['n u–have their own frie:nd[s (and uh)
    28   Claire:              [Mh                  [.hhh Ever' one
    29              a' those o:fficers yih know darn well's gonna
    30              buy'm Marylou::.
```

For several minutes before this, they have been talking about Marylou's wanting to show some giftware, which people might purchase, at an event being organized by a women's committee; but she's not sure of the propriety of suggesting it to them. Claire, another member of the committee, has been encouraging Marylou to ask them if they'd like a showing. The extract begins at the point where Marylou concludes (14:1) that "maybe we should" ask the committee about showing the giftware, with which Claire agrees. In a general sense, Claire is affiliating with Marylou; she is encouraging Marylou to go ahead and ask (the committee) "how many might be interested to come" to a sale of the giftware, on the grounds that she can be sure it will sell well (14:26, 28–30). There is, however, a difference between them at another level. Claire agrees that Marylou should ask the

committee, in order to judge the likely interest in such a sale – her point evidently being that if there is insufficient interest, then "fooey ON IT" (14:3–5), presumably conveying that that would be the end of it. Marylou does not assent to this position, taking instead the position: "We:ll I don't think it's a matter 'v it having t' be right no:w." (lines 6–7). The difference between them is that, for Claire, it would be useful to get an indication of whether there is sufficient interest; but Marylou's position is that she could broach it with the committee in the hope that interest will build over time.

Marylou summarizes her position figuratively in 14:7–8, "I think it's something thet will snowba:ll." This does not elicit from Claire any form of agreement/concurrence; instead there is a pause (14:9), following which Marylou further solicits Claire's agreement, in response to which Claire produces only the non-committal token "Mm::hm." (14:11) – which manifestly withholds agreement. (Cf. Pomerantz 1984a; and for a further account of the difference between various response tokens, including "Mm hm", and their interactional and sequential implicativeness, see Gardner 1997.) This absence or withholding of agreement on the part of Claire to Marylou's proposed figurative summary results in the continuation of the topic. Specifically, Marylou pursues her case for believing that it does not matter if few are interested to begin with, because it's something that will gather momentum; in the course of this, Claire continues to withhold agreement (in 14:14, 18, 20, and possibly 22). Then (14:23) Marylou attempts another idiomatic summary, "But the thing i:s ah: the more the better." (For an account of such formal idioms, employing a general syntactic pattern – here, "the X-er the Y-er" – see Fillmore et al. 1988.) In continuing to explain the case for her position, Marylou can be seen to be pursuing Claire's agreement (Pomerantz 1984b), culminating in her producing a second idiomatic summary.[16] This also fails to elicit Claire's agreement, and the matter remains unresolved, at least in this extract.

Earlier we noted that, in the standard topic transition sequence, there is a conjunction between (a) the recipient's agreement or concurrence with the prior speaker's figurative summary assessment, and (b) the recipient's accepting the opportunity to terminate that topic and move to a next. Recipients' minimal agreements in response to the figurative summaries (sympathy tokens, etc.) conjoin those substantive and procedural agreements. Ex. 14 begins to illustrate the force of that conjunction, along with the circumstances in which the production of a figurative expression does not result in topical closure and transition. Quite simply, the ABSENCE of topic closure is associated with a difference or disaffiliation between speakers – in effect, with a form of incipient disagreement. Such disagreement is not overtly expressed; rather, it is implicit in the absence of agreement in the recipient's response to the figurative summary. The prior speaker (the one who produced that summary) treats that absence as a withholding of agreement by the recipient, as Marylou does in 14; this results in a continuation of the topic and a pursuit of some resolution,

perhaps through subsequent attempts to secure agreement. At any rate, when the production of a figurative summary of a topic fails to lead to the termination of that topic and the transition to a next, then the failure and its attendant topic continuation are associated with a lack of accord, and perhaps with incipient disagreement, between the participants.

A final instance rather dramatically illustrates this association between (a) the failure of a figurative summary to achieve topic closure, and (b) disaffiliation between speakers. It appears, from what has been said immediately before this extract, that Ilene's son is interested in buying a house which Raybee is selling. The estate agents (realtors) acting on Raybee's behalf have claimed that they introduced Ilene's son to the property, through their having sent him details of the house (the documents referred to here) – a claim Ilene disputes. What hangs on this is whether Ilene's son is free to negotiate a price directly with Raybee, or whether he should instead negotiate with the agents ("Moss and Company").

```
(15)  [Heritage:OI:1:2–3]
      1   Raybee:  Well as far as I'm con:cer:ned i:t's: that um I'll
      2            haf to acce:pt Moss 'n Company's a:rgument that (0.3)
      3            your son was introduced to the property via them.=
      4   Ilene:   =Ye:s well no:w .h obviously one's going to have
      5            to do that but I can assu:re you: .hh that he was
      6            not.
      7            (.)
      8   Ilene:   .hhh We've checked now on all the papers 'e has an'
      9            Moss 'n Comp'ny said they were sent through the
     10            post we have had n:nothing from Moss 'n Comp'ny
     11            through the post.
     12            (0.3)
     13   Ilene:   Anyway, (.) Tha:t's th– uh you know you can't (.)
     14            argue ih it's like (.) uh:[m
     15   Raybee:                             [Well
     16            (.)
     17   Ilene:   banging yer head against a [brick wa:ll.
     18   Raybee:                             [E z far as I'm
     19            concerned on this situa:tion, all private
     20            negotiations between us must cea:se.
     21            (0.2)
     22   Raybee:  .hh
     23   Ilene:   M m [hm
     24   Raybee:      [Ah:nd (.) any negotiation:s you: wish to
     25            enter in on the property you have to go via Moss 'n
     26            Co.
     27   Ilene:   Mm:.
     28   Raybee:  .hh I been on t' th' solicitor (he thought that)
     29            yihknow give me s'm: legal gui:dan[ce
     30   Ilene:                                     [Yeah:.
     31            Yah.
     32   Raybee:  A::nd I'm really left between th' devil 'n deep
     33            blue sea: I have no option BU:T.h (0.2) to revert
     34            to that.
     35            (.)
```

```
36   Raybee:   Uh:[: because of the c– the cost invo:lved an:d
37   Ilene:         [Mm
38   Ilene:    Ye[ah.
39   Raybee:      [w'n it beek– ended up in an ar:gument,
40   Ilene:    Ye:s well it (.) we've just hadda terrific
41             argument wi:th Mistuh Michael.
42             (0.5)
43   Raybee:   Oh:
44   Ilene:    Uh::m anywa::y uh:m, (0.2) Now he re:ckons thez
45             been another offer put i:n,
46   Ilene:    I don't know whethuh that's true or not,
```

At the point where this extract begins, Raybee informs Ilene that she (Raybee) "has to" accept her agents' version, that they did send the necessary details to Ilene's son. While recognizing that Raybee is constrained to do this (15:4–5), Ilene very directly contests the agents' version (lines 5–11). She then summarizes figuratively the position in which she finds herself: "like banging yer head against a brick wa:ll" (15:14, 17). There is plainly no expression of concurrence or agreement by Raybee, who instead continues (in overlap, 15:17–18) to set out her position (15:18–29), which she then summarizes as being "left between th'devil'n deep blue sea:" (15:32–33). Although Ilene's response to that is initially a minimal token of concurrence, "Yeah" (15:38), Raybee happens to complete her summary turn in a fashion which Ilene treats as an opportunity to continue discussing the dispute between her and Raybee's agents. Neither of the figurative expressions with which each summarizes her position elicits the other's agreement or concurrence, and hence neither results in topical closure. The lack of affiliation between participants is quite manifest in the way that neither accedes to or concurs with the other's figurative summary of her position.

Parenthetically, we can discern from this a rather different account for the phenomenon of multiple idioms from that provided particularly by writers in stylistics. Noting that idioms often occur in flurries, and true to their dismissal of idioms as belonging to the unoriginal and therefore degraded forms of language (e.g. Black 1972:169), they have explained the occurrence of multiple idioms as a kind of "contamination" effect: Once one speaker uses an idiom, this infects the other, who follows suit, and suddenly there is a bunch of them. Far from any such "contamination," we can see in these cases that multiple (figurative) idioms may instead be associated with the pursuit by each speaker of her position – one with which her co-participant is reluctant to agree or concur. Hence one or the other may subsequently produce another (alternative) figurative summary of her position, possibly in an attempt to close the topic with some minimal agreement between them.

Such instances as these in exx. 13–15 illustrate the other major type of cases in our corpus, in which the production of a figurative assessment does not result in disengagement from and closure of a topic, with the introduction of a new topic. This occurs when there is some conflict or non-alignment between participants,

manifest in part through the recipient's unwillingness to agree to – or perhaps more aptly, in 14–15, to concede to – the prior speaker's figurative assessment.

CONCLUSION

We should make it clear what we have not meant to claim in this account of the association between speakers' use of figurative expressions and topic termination/transition in conversation. First, we do not suggest that this is a general account of where or why figurative expressions are used; this was simply the most striking and recurrent pattern or organization evident in our corpus. Undoubtedly, there are other organizations that may be discovered through further research, and that may reveal other discourse or pragmatic functions of figures of speech. Second, we are even further from offering a general account of the way that speakers in conversation close one topic and move on to a next. It is clear that there are other devices or methods that speakers can use to summarize and bring a topic to a close, including repetition and other summary objects (some of which have been discussed in the literature; cf. Maynard 1980, Jefferson 1984, and Button 1990). In neither of these respects, then, are we proposing general accounts, if "general" is taken to mean that this is the only way that figurative expressions are used in conversation, or the only way that participants manage topical closure in conversation. It is, however, a general account in a different sense: It is an account which cuts across the other kinds of discourse variables with which it is thought figurative idioms are associated (in the very sparse research literature that is relevant here), such as their uses in narratives and stories, in talking about third parties (rather than about self or co-participant, Strassler 1982), or in complaining (Drew & Holt 1988).

The "logic" of our investigation has been to treat a linguistic object, with whatever syntactic and other linguistic properties such objects may possess, as an interactional device. That is, the properties of figurative expressions, particularly their non-empirical or "general" applicability, are a resource for managing certain interactional tasks in conversation. One of those tasks has been identified here, namely summarizing and drawing a topic to a close. The sequential pattern associated with the occurrence of figurative expressions is the product of the kind of resource that figures of speech constitute, and of the recurrence of the need to manage the interactional task for which they are a solution. Hence the sequential distribution of a linguistic object (here, figurative expressions), along with its distribution in topic termination and transition sequences, gives us access to the interactional functions of that object, i.e. to the kinds of interactional "problems" for which participants need to have solutions, and the way that this object is fitted to managing that task. Focusing on the sequential distribution of a linguistic object helps us, then, to appreciate its social interactional function(s).

Important questions about language processing and the cognitive correlates of such processing may need to be addressed through experimental studies of, e.g.,

the speed of recognition of the literal or figurative meaning of certain idiomatic expressions. But there are equally important questions concerning why speakers of a natural language use figurative idioms at all. We have suggested that we should investigate WHERE they are used, to determine the orderliness of their being used FROM TIME TO TIME (recalling our opening sentence). From this orderliness we can detect the social functions (rather than cognitive aspects) of the use of figures of speech in interaction. Finally, we have shown, through certain details of the topic termination and transition sequence, that participants themselves orient to these properties and functions of figurative expressions, even in instances where the production of a figurative expression fails to result in topical closure.

NOTES

* We have presented versions of this paper, over several years, to conferences and groups in many countries. We wish to thank all those, too numerous to list here, who have commented on this research, and who have made suggestions, observations etc. that have helped us clarify and refine or analysis. We are particularly indebted to Auli Hakulinen and Joerg Bergmann for their incisive and helpful comments.

[1] In some cases shown in this paper, the turn in which a figurative expression occurs consists just of that expression, in a single unit turn, as here in ex. 1. However, in other cases, a figurative expression occurs with other surrounding material, in a multi-unit turn.

[2] A very significant subset of this research effort focuses on linguistic competence and the appropriate comprehension of idioms – or rather, on the "deficient processing of proverbs and related nonliteral expressions" (Van Lancker 1990), either by those whose competencies are not fully developed, especially children (Gibbs 1987), or by those who are impaired, such as aphasics and those with certain neurological abnormalities (Van Lancker & Kempler 1987, Van Lancker 1990, 1991).

[3] There are some exceptions, notably Strassler 1982 and McCarthy 1998. These studies explore idioms in naturally occurring spoken English; however, their focus on the pragmatics of idiom usage concerns broader patterns of association or correlations of idiom usage, e.g. between idioms and talk about a third person, rather than about self (Strassler 1982:103). Nevertheless, some of McCarthy's findings (1998, ch. 4), particularly concerning the "shifting from the event line to the evaluation line …, with idioms clustering in the evaluative segments," appear to converge with some of our observations.

[4] On grammar as a feature or property of turn design, and thereby sequentially bounded, see Ochs et al. 1996.

[5] However, it should be noted that many seemingly "lexical" idioms have their origins in standardized collocations and are really quasi-lexical, e.g."pushover" (meaning "very easy").

[6] But on issues concerning the modification or syntactic flexibility of idioms, see Green 1975 and Nicolas 1995. Ex. 10, below, illustrates the kind of lexical flexibility that some idioms may allow: Here a "dollop" of salt is a recognizable and orderly version of the standard idiom "take with a pinch (or grain) of salt" – orderly, in that "dollop" plainly conveys an upgraded sense of skepticism.

[7] In this respect, the kind of expressions we are investigating probably correspond to those which Fillmore et al. (1988:504–5) call "decoding idioms".

[8] We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Field family and their friends in allowing us to record their conversations; and of Gail Jefferson, who transcribed all these data.

[9] By "new," we mean a next topic, different from that which has been concluded following the production of a figurative expression. Hence, speakers may return to a topic previously talked about in the conversation, e.g. in exx. 5–6. The point is, though, that they CHANGE topic.

[10] This is only a broad generalization, which does not apply to all cases – particularly since, in many instances where co-participants have been talking about some third party, they may have contributed equally to the "tellings" that make up the topic. (Nevertheless, at the points where figurative

expressions are used, the one who is the principal teller/speaker at that point tends to be the one who uses the figurative expression.)

Furthermore, there may be a kind of bias operating here, in that many cases involve complaints or troubles of some kind (Drew & Holt 1988). Thus one participant may be telling the other about some complainable matter or trouble; and the interactional delicacies associated with closing the topic of a personal trouble suggest that resources to exit from the troubles-topic may be available to the troubles-teller, and not so easily available to the other person (Jefferson 1984).

[11] It is also possible, in ex. 5, that Gwen makes an initial move toward closing when she produces a non-figurative assessment of how lovely the couple's home was (Gwen's first two turns in the extract).

(5) [Field:J86:1:4:6]
    Gwen: You know it wz: so lovely an' everything [y know
    Lesley: [nYe:s.
    Gwen: All character 'n (0.3) beautiful.
    Lesley: Ye:s.
             (0.7)
    Gwen: B't I suppose she must 'v come t' the end of 'er (.) tether 'n just walked out then.

The pause following Lesley's minimal agreement/acknowledgement suggests a slight hiatus, associated with the fact that her previous assessment was insufficient to close the topic. Again, her production of a figurative summary may be a move to bring about the topic closure that was attempted or imminent in the turns before.

[12] Lesley initially responds in 6 with a low, brief chuckle, in which she seems to recognize the pun in Steven's figurative summary. Only then does she do the kind of agreement, "Ye:h.," which is more in line with the kind of agreement/understanding object she might otherwise have produced in her prior response slot. Her doing so simultaneously with Steven's "Yeah" indicates, of course, that it was independent of, and unprompted by, Steven's turn. (On the possible relations between puns and summaries/story endings, see Sacks 1992:2.419–30.)

[13] The imperative mood here, "take this with a dollop 'v salt", suggests that Robbie is telling Lesley that she (Lesley) should not take all her (Robbie's) previous complaints too seriously – that she's not too disheartened by teaching at the school.

There are other idiomatic aspects of Robbie's summary turn, particularly her use of the idiomatic (but not, perhaps, figurative) "getting everything done in the day."

(from 10)
    Robbie: B't take this with a dollop 'v salt you kno::w I'm– I'm ba:sic'ly quite happy b't quite
             relieved it's the sheer organization 'n getting all, everything done in th' da:y.
    Lesley: Yes: that's ri:ght,=

Note that her self-repair – she began with "getting all," after which "all" appears to be replaced with "everything" – may be akin to the instances illustrated in exx. 2–4: self-repairs in which speakers begin with a non-idiomatic version, but subsequently change it to an idiomatic formulation.

[14] This shift in the focus of the topic (again, not marked as a change to a new topic) exploits the opportunity afforded by the figurative expression to develop the topic in a stepwise fashion. We use "exploit" here to draw attention to the possibility that speakers may use (whether intentionally or deliberately is not in point here) the opportunities that figurative idioms afford, not only to summarize and exit from a prior topic, but also to lead them, in an apparently topically connected fashion, to a "next" topic, something they wish to talk about. In such cases, the figurative expression has a bivalent character, summarizing a prior topic and simultaneously pointing forward to another matter. A case in which the pivotal work of the figurative expression seems especially to result from the speaker exploiting its bivalent property is the following.

[NB:II:2:5] (Speakers have been talking about the assassination of Robert Kennedy a few days before, to which Nancy refers when she says "everybody is talking about it")
    Nancy: Yeah it's been a rough week an everbuddy is (.) you know
             (0.2)
    Emma: Mm hm

Nancy   ta:lking about it en everbuddy: course I: don't know whether it's that or just that we're
              js:t (.) completely bo:gging down at work,h .hhhhmh
              (.)
Nancy: E[r whatta WIH: WITH ME: with my finals? hhhh
Emma: [Oh: well e v r y buddy's sa::d
Nancy: hhuh uh:[::
Emma: [Oh ho:w'd you do with yer finals.

Nancy manages what is really a two-stage idiomatic exit from the topic of the assassination. Initially, she summarizes it as having been a "rough week" (which is idiomatic, if not quite figurative). Then she offers, as a possible reason for it having been "rough" for "everybody" (this is left incomplete), that "we're js:t (.) completely bo:gging down at work". (Note that the transition from her first reference to "everybody," through a next "everybody," and then to "we," seems to enable Nancy to disengage from talking about "the population at large/in the city," and to move to focus instead on her colleagues at work, "we".) The figurative "bogged down" at work is then pivotal, by allowing her the opportunity to suggest another factor that has contributed to its having been a rough week – a factor associated with another kind of "work", namely the finals examination she has taken for a course at a local university. This touches off (as it might well have been designed to do) an enquiry from Emma about how she has done in her finals. So this idiomatic utterance, and in particular the figurative "bogged down" at work, has been pivotal in the transition from talking about the assassination to talking about Nancy's course and the examination. In this way, the bivalent properties of figurative summaries may perhaps be exploited as a device for managing, rather smoothly, the move to a next topic (and perhaps even a particularly favored topic).

[15] The matter of securing the other's agreement, affiliation, or sympathy may be of some interactional moment, since figurative idioms are used so recurrently in complaint sequences, where a complainant can have some interest in whether or not his/her recipient will affiliate with him/her (see Drew & Holt 1988).

[16] Note that this last figurative expression conveys a position which perhaps draws closer to Claire's, since *the more the better* has elements of Claire's suggestion that going ahead with the show and sale might depend on a sufficient number of people being interested – while nevertheless allowing that the thing may "snowball."

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