
Why people say where they are during mobile phone calls

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Received October 1999; in revised form March 2000

Abstract. An often-noticed feature of mobile phone calls is some form of ‘geographical’ locating after a greeting has been made. The author uses some singular instances of mobile phone conversations to provide an answer as to why this geolinguistic feature has emerged. In an examination of two real cases and a vignette, some light is shed on a more classical spatial topic, that of mobility. During the opening and closing statements of the paper a short critique is put forward of the ‘professionalisation’ of cultural studies and cultural geography and their ways of theorising ordinary activities. It is argued that a concern with theory construction effectively distances such workers from everyday affairs where ordinary actors understand in practical terms and account competently for what is going on in their worlds. This practical understanding is inherent in the intricacies of a conversational ‘ordering’, which is at one and the same time also an ordering of the times and spaces of these worlds. By means of an indifferent approach to the ‘grand theories’ of culture, some detailed understandings of social practices are offered via the alternatives of ethnomethodological and conversational investigations.

Introduction

You’re sitting on a train, you’re tired and irritable after a long journey. Someone else’s mobile phone rings. You hear it get louder as they fish it out of their bag. “Hi” they say. There’s a pause. “I’m on the train. About half an hour away from London”. “Why”, you sigh, “why do they always do that?”

In this paper I will examine a feature of mobile phone conversations that I anticipate is familiar to most people who live amongst mobile phones: the giving of a geographical formulation as part of the opening sequence of a phone call. It is a feature which no longer seems as novel as it did even a mere five years ago, now that mobile phones trill (often musically) for attention nearly everywhere where telephones were neither seen nor heard previously. As Katz (1999) puts it, “wireless communications shall cause frayed tempers and rude looks until there is social convergence about how to handle such situations” (page 16). Despite its familiarity, one might say taken-for-grantedness, we still notice when people say “I’m on the train”, “I’m in a restaurant”, often in spite of our desire to ignore the ‘overhearability’ (and ‘over-here-ability’) of the conversation. Such a familiar feature of language may be taken by many readers of a journal like *Society and Space* to be a dull, banal, irrelevant, and, of course, irritating phrase not worth spending any longer on than this introductory paragraph. *And yet*, it is precisely in such mundane and familiar geographical talk that we can find out how the world is socially and spatially organised (Schegloff, 1972a).

In what follows although I will be taking a ‘theoretical’ attitude, I will not proceed as you might have observed others to do as I will not be ‘doing theorising’ as it tends to be ‘done’ in cultural geography, sociology, and cultural and media studies (Sharrock and Coleman, 1999). So I will *not* be drawing together, sketching out, or building a new and discrete theory from parts of the rich corpus offered by the social sciences; nor will I be using ethnographic material to complicate, fine-tune, or build afresh a

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theory (such as a theory of ‘the nomad’, or ‘the postmodern’, or ‘the public sphere’). Relatedly, in handling my ‘empirical material’ that follows, I will *not* be ‘coding’ or ‘decoding’ transcripts of in-depth interviews or focus groups carried out with members of some particular social or cultural group(s) identified by terms such as ‘working class’ or ‘gatekeepers’ (Crabtree, 1999). Not because terms such as working class are inappropriate or ill founded, but because of more epistemic problems with the activity of ‘coding’ (Suchman and Jordan, 1990). As a result I will *not* be interpreting and analysing those codes and their related segments of text toward a previously worked out theoretical framework. And I will *not* be proposing an alternative or more complex theory to substitute any other social theory. My “disagreement is not based on an alternative theoretical basis but on methodological grounds” (Crabtree et al, 1998, page 6). In the shortest possible terms: I am interested in describing methods, in particular formulations of place (Schegloff, 1972a) used by people who competently make and receive calls on their mobile phones day in, day out, as an ordinary, everyday (and sometimes annoying to bystanders) achievement. In what follows I will *not* be seeking to displace *their* methods and competencies in favour of the methods and competencies, briefly described above, of doing what could be called theory-driven ethnography.⁽¹⁾ There may be times during this paper where it may seem that I am paying an excessive attention to detail, yet you will have been offered an answer as to why people say where they are when called on their mobile phone that is versed through actual instances. Along the way we may also be able to observe some problems and topics which are often dealt with abstractly as problems for a theory to solve—critique or remedy being handled as routine practical difficulties by a group of actors whose everyday business is dealing with such affairs (Sacks, 1972b).

Of further interest to readers of *Society and Space* who may be having (productive) trouble with cultural studies and its related researches (and I would include myself here) there will be an indirect critique of the growing professionalisation of cultural studies running through this paper; a professionalisation wherein the lexicon of cultural studies claims have a kind of mastery of ordinary practices, and in particular ordinary language, and to be able to provide theoretical explanations for the orderliness of the world (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970). Members in and of particular places are all too often treated as ‘cultural dopes’, either by being shown to be victims of ideology or, in more celebratory terms, as being clever at resisting power or as performing (partially) the orderliness of whichever explanatory theory. Either way, the locally accountable activities of members are subsumed in an often binary manner to the practices of theorising culture(s).⁽²⁾

The danger posed by the professionalisation of any field of social and spatial investigation is that the requirements of the performances of, for instance, ‘doing competent cultural geography’, miss the ‘what’, or *haecceity*, of sociocultural practices which researchers attend (to) places to find out about (Garfinkel and Wieder, 1992). By disciplinary standards, it is wiser for a doctoral student with an interest in car-based tourism and ‘nomadic subjects’ in the USA to read Baudrillard’s (1995) *America* and write an aridly amusing chapter on the European myth of the highway, with some refinements to the concept of ‘the nomad’⁽³⁾, than it is to consider travelling along with

⁽¹⁾ What Thrift (1999) might more elegantly specify as ‘grand theory’ (see page 297).

⁽²⁾ This is not exactly news, and is part of a long-running circular critique on a par with structure–agency, and is given an amusing and insightful treatment (Morris, 1988).

⁽³⁾ The constant proliferation of nouns prefaced by ‘the’ (frequently pronounced ‘thee’) such as ‘thee nomad’, ‘thee body’, ‘thee real’, ‘thee rural’, etc is an example of the replacement of everyday language circumstances, topics, and resource by ‘theorisations’ from cultural geography’s professional abstraction of these terms. An early critique of this ‘boom’ tendency and its movement toward banality in cultural studies can be found in Morris (1988).

some French-speaking car-based tourists as they actually go about touring particular sites. Yet my case is still more strongly (ethno)methodological than that which requires that students of social and spatial organisation should ‘get out more’ to learn how it is that their locals go about doing things.⁽⁴⁾ Human geographers, sociologists, and cultural theorists would do well to stop substituting their professional methods for other members’ methods if they wish to learn *from* and not solely *about* their topics of interest—such as tourism and travel or, as in the case of this paper, technology, mobility, and conversation.

By formulating professional methods as discrete from the methods of the settings researchers are interested in, we then proceed as if there were a set of constantly improvable standards for them, and simultaneously construct a technical vocabulary which applies and supplies to the profession its concerns and explanations.⁽⁵⁾ Standards and vocabulary which appear to exist independently of what happens during any investigation and can then be called upon for a priori judgments (Coulter, 1983a) of whether such an investigation is, for instance, competent cultural geography. A policy of ‘indifference’ toward the social sciences *as* profession means replacing their qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methodologies “amongst a vast field of practical activities in which methods are generated and used” (Lynch, 1993, page 142). Further, a general indifference to any social or cultural analysis which claims mastery, overarching critique, or transcendence of social and cultural worlds means, as Lynch puts it for sociology in particular,

“there can be no intelligible theoretical position ‘outside’ the fields of practical action studied in sociology. Although this is an easy phrase to memorize and repeat, it expresses a lesson that is exceedingly difficult to take heart. Indeed, the lesson is continually subverted by one after another move into transcendental analysis” (1993, page 149).

Such an approach and such a critique of subjects that seek explanatory power over social life are not new by any means: indeed, they are well, and better, rehearsed by ethnomethodologists and conversational analysts who have directed them at mainstream critical theory, psychology, sociology, and linguistics for over three decades (Bogen, 1999; Button, 1991; Coulter, 1983b; Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage and Atkinson, 1984; Schegloff, 1987; Schegloff, 1992). Though it is a very worthy effort to present an ethnomethodological respecification of the tasks and policies of, for instance, social and cultural geography, it could easily occupy the space of an entire journal let alone one paper.⁽⁶⁾ Instead, I would like to investigate some actual talk-in-interaction, similar to the scenario briefly described at the beginning of this paper, in an attempt at an ethnomethodological and conversation-analytic treatment of a ‘setting’ and its ‘members’. By the explication of a setting and its members it is my aim to learn something about a classic social and spatial “*thing* that they are up against and that they (the setting and its members) can be brought to teach the analyst what he [sic] needs to learn and to know from them, with which, by learning from them, to teach *them* what their affairs consist of as locally produced, locally occasioned, and locally ordered, locally described, locally questionable, counted, recorded, observable *phenomena of*

⁽⁴⁾ I use the term ‘native’ as (Lynch, 1993) has drawn upon it from ethnomethodological approaches, to offer a quasi-anthropological sense of a member of a community or group and to make this term distinct from the term ‘primitive’.

⁽⁵⁾ Consider the multitude of increasingly arcane books on ethnographic research.

⁽⁶⁾ A respecification of human geography in praxiological terms, which is highly sympathetic to the policies of Garfinkel, Wittgenstein, and Sacks, can be found in Thrift’s (1996; 1999) ongoing critique of grand theory and representation (on Wittgenstein see also Schatzki (1996) and, from a more artefact and learning perspective, Engestrom (1990), Wenger (1998).

*order**, in and as of their in vivo accountable doable coherent and cogent detail for each another next first time” (Garfinkel, 1992, page 186).⁽⁷⁾ One thing that I and other sociospatial researchers have been up against for several years (at least) is ‘mobility*’ and how it is that nomadic groups of various kinds go about organising their lives across a multitude of places (Chambers, 1993; Clifford, 1992; Cresswell, 1993; Gilroy, 1993; Guattari, 1992; Hastrup and Olwig, 1997; Kaplan, 1996; Massey, 1994; Thrift, 1996; also see the computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) collection (Dix and Beale, 1996). There are all kinds of troublesome contingencies encountered in travelling while coordinating and organising actions that are not geographically proximate (Luff and Heath, 1998; Suchman, 1987). This is not to say that what is ‘immediate’ to a mobile human should be taken to be that which is within a simplistically described Euclidean space, but rather such immediate people, devices, things, and other stuff which are specific to the topology of that space (Mol and Law, 1994). Which might seem a little abstract until we consider the case we are dealing with: someone speaking on a mobile phone. The overhearer of such a phone call is less immediate to the activity of the phone call than either the caller or the called. To use a suggestive phrase, the two parties to the call are ‘in touch’ whereas the ‘third party’ (overhearer) is not.

To begin to offer an answer to the question as to why people say where they are, we need to shift the focus away from how an overhearer in everyday life responds to the hearable halves of a mobile phone conversation. We need to set aside *that way* of overhearing: suspend the ‘practical attitude’ of everyday life with its practical concerns in order to follow with a ‘theoretical attitude’ the unfolding of the telephone conversation as a social action which is organising mobility*, and one that is available to us as a recognisably standard line of action (Lynch, 1997, page 9). The materials that I am going to work with are mainly transcripts of conversations where at least one party to the conversation is on the move, but there are also related descriptions of a more variegated production within which the conversations were situated.⁽⁸⁾ What I will attempt to show is how the talk that is occurring is a form of social action, that it has to deal with ‘real-time’ contingencies, that it is not explained by reference to an overarching cultural theoretical context, and that relatedly its sequentiality is key to its actions being carried out as happy and unhappy encounters which coproduce an orderly time and space as part of their work (Boden, 1994; Drew and Heritage, 1992; Thrift, 1999, see especially pages 300–302).

An everyday geographical problem solved everyday

Schegloff (1972a) produced the direct precursor to the work on ‘locatings’ that I am going to investigate: he collected forms of analysis which speakers use to accomplish the timing and spacing of events through everyday language. In his work he termed these analyses ‘locational formulations’ (Schegloff, 1972a, page 79) and was building on earlier work by Sacks (1972a) on *membership categories* which was related to the identification of persons by the use of membership categorisations. In conversation analysis (CA), the work of categorising is an ongoing activity which can be

⁽⁷⁾ Abridged explanation of that provided on page 202 of (Garfinkel, 1992) for the use of ‘order*’: “Spelled with an asterisk, order* is a collector and a proxy for any and every topic of logic, meaning, reason and order. ... Do not think, however, that ethnomethodology [EM] seeks out these creatures in order to settle them with them as topics of order*. Nothing of the sort. Rather, EM seeks to respecify them as locally produced, naturally accountable phenomena of order*.”

⁽⁸⁾ Another way of describing the shift away in method from strictly transcript-based conversation analysis is to call what follows ‘ethnographically analysed transcripts’ (Moerman, 1988). However, I prefer to hold with the position of Lynch (1997) on the margins of conversation analysis, where whilst not recognising myself as a conversation analyst I am certainly interested and sympathetic to its approach.

made visible in strips of transcribed talk, though in Sacks's earlier work the work of categorising is not restricted to talk. In a moment I will use the commonplace scene of a ringing mobile phone to draw out the distinctive way in which such categorising was dealt with by Sacks. In so doing I will be rehearsing an argument made by Sacks (1974) on providing *recognisable descriptions* and the categorisations that tie actions and members together.⁽⁹⁾ However, I will be adapting this argument in a slightly Latourian way to consider the characterisation of 'things' and the aforementioned sequentiality of activities that brings 'things' and 'people' into play (Latour, 1992). A further adaptation I make is that instead of focusing solely on the text used by Sacks—"The baby cried. The mommy picked it up."—as the basis for examining membership categorisation, I will replay his succeeding observations on the preinterpretative intelligibility of seeing and hearing. In so doing I will be turning to Sacks's elucidation of what Lynch (1993, page 226) calls "an immense grammatical 'cathedral' built up from a heterogeneous collection of simple devices".⁽¹⁰⁾

The familiar scene that I wish you to imagine is that you and I are sitting in a restaurant. All around us are diners whom we have never encountered before. There is a ringing noise. I hear it as a mobile phone and I suppose that you hear it as the same thing. "That's a first pair of observations" (Sacks, 1974, page 224).⁽¹¹⁾ After we hear the ringing noise in the restaurant, someone picks up a mobile phone. From what I have heard and what I saw: a mobile phone rang and its owner picked it up. And as before, I suppose that you heard and saw the same things. "That's a second pair of observations" (Sacks, 1974, page 224).

Beginning with our first paired observation of a mobile phone ringing, it might be that the ringing was not the ringing of a mobile phone at all but that of a fire alarm—but that is not the case. This much appears obvious, and it is the 'obviousness' that is important since hearing a ringing *as* a phone ringing is one of those *actions* that we do straightaway (or 'at a glance' as it is put in visual terms). Phones are available to us in that way, we do not have to ask one another 'what is that ringing noise?'⁽¹²⁾ It is worth adding, as Sacks might have, that there are other possible characterisations of the mobile phone as 'a designer plastic box with buttons', or 'a battery-operated machine', or a 'a rental agreement between Orange and a customer', and Latour (1997) might offer these as a reminder of how the complex, relatively stable, accomplishment that is 'a mobile phone' is frequently forgotten by its users. On hearing what we have heard

⁽⁹⁾ Also known as 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up'.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Cathedrals, as alluded to in this quote, of the most complex forms were assembled via predrawn plans but only in a very restricted sense as they were elaborated and reflexively tied to the bricolage of compasses, rulers, and string, and the thinking with their hands carried out by teams of builders and masons.

⁽¹¹⁾ Sacks's comments on pairs of observations referred to hearing a baby crying, and then seeing that it is its mother who picks it up. Practitioners of CA would refer to this as a membership-categorisation device (MCD) called a standard relational pair, for example, mother-child, doctor-patient. For reasons stated earlier about the use of a marked distinction between professional 'technical' accounts and ordinary practical accomplishments, I would avoid substituting a professional understanding for a member's in the search for and mechanisation of features of practical reasoning (Button, 1994).

⁽¹²⁾ Although, on the whole, we immediately hear mobile phones as mobile phones as we have all gradually acquired competence in the hearing of mobile phones, when they first appeared this was not the case, and there were then often amusing moments when a ringing could be heard but hearers of the ringing (often including the answerer) were at a loss as to what the ringing meant (in terms of what they should orientate themselves toward). When one or the other of the parties figured out it was a phone then there would be some desperate fumbling in an attache case or handbag for the telephone and some degree of embarrassment from the person who was supposed to be responsible for recognising and answering an electronic summons for their response.

I think we would *not* say that ‘a designer plastic box with buttons rang’ if we could hear that ‘a mobile phone rang’, unless we wished to accomplish something else by saying ‘a designer plastic box with buttons rang’. The point to be made here is about the relations between the *definition* of a setting, *actions* within that setting, and the *identification* of who is acting (that is, ‘the phone rings’) by ordinary observations. Latour’s version of such a scene would be likely to require the introduction of a telecommunications engineer to warrant an unusually detailed description of the agreements and heterogeneous engineering nesting in the space that we as ordinary observers would hear economically and consistently as a mobile phone.

Let us move on to the second pair of observations: when a telephone rings the person whose phone is ringing ought to pick it up (for the moment ignoring the all important possibilities of call-screening, people deliberately switching their mobile phones off, and the slight differences between mobile phones and ‘landlines’, etc). *Incumbent* on the person categorised as the owner of the mobile phone (qua telephone) is the duty to pick it up. If cultural theory focuses on this ordinary understanding (it is incumbent upon those members who have a phone to answer it) as an issue of perhaps the technological imposition of a philosophical condition [(‘being on call’). In the latter case, appropriately enough, the answerer happens to be the philosopher Martin Heidegger and when he picks up his call it is the Nazi party on the other end of the line (Ronell, 1989)], or if it argues for technologically deterministic ends that: “one higher order consequence of wireless communication is that it makes us more responsible, for both our own actions and those of people for whom we have assumed responsibility. In effect, we become more subject to social control” (Katz, 1999, page 17). If so, then cultural theory draws selectively upon any competent members’ commonsense knowledge of telephones to create a sense of their theory being ‘real worldly’ (Lynch, 1993), rather than displaying the organisation of the social world which is the everyday problem of any competent owner or/and answerer of a telephone.

In his researches on the orderly features of telephony, Sacks avoids constructing theories which make any claims to the ‘mastery’ of ordinary language whilst retaining a theoretical attitude by stepping back and bracketing the ‘live action’ to explicate the rules to which people orientate, or the simple devices which are used to build ‘bigger’ chains. Drawing on Wittgenstein’s investigations of rule following, he, and subsequent ethnomethodologists, have retained an imminent critique of the rules as celibate entities: if there are rules then they are not found elsewhere than in their action and elaboration. Thus, for a simple device such as *sequential orderliness*, one must detail just how it is put to use for those who are in *that* place, at *that* time: the two of us hearing a mobile phone ring and then its owner picking it up. What we have is a recognisable pair of observations: that a thing does something and that someone whose business it is to respond to that thing does so. As Psathas puts it:

“1.) If a member sees a category-bound activity being done, then, if one can see it as being done by a member of a category to which the activity is bound, then: see it that way.” ...

2.) If one sees a pair of actions which can be related via the operation of a norm that provides for the second given the first, where the doers can be seen as members of the categories the norm provides is proper for the pair then:

a.) see that doers are such members and

b.) see the second as done in conformity with the norm” (1999, page 145).

Neither you nor I sitting in the restaurant feels the need to ask the person answering the mobile phone whether they are entitled to do so and whether it is not someone else’s mobile phone that they are answering, nor to ask each other what that person is doing, though of course we might want to express our irritation by saying something

which included the phrase “the invasion of technology into everyday life”. A highly tuned, logically coherent, and critical theory of power is not brought to bear in and on this *situation as it happens*, nor does it sit as arbiter or guarantor on the telephone being picked up and our seeing the normality of such a sequence of actions. We might attribute the orderliness of what is going on as an example of mundane reason, but if, and only if, this were not to suggest that it does not require scientific or theoretical validation (Lynch and Bogen, 1996, page 272). The ‘correctness’ of what has happened is observable and describable in the actual occasions of its activity.⁽¹³⁾

Such standards of correctness in seeing what happens in a setting as it is seen by a competent member are used by conversation analysts to hear and analyse (or, from transcripts, read and analyse) strips of talk. They offer the possibility via detailed analysis of recovering or perhaps ‘excavating’, a machinery that organises everyday interactional events. The existence of this machinery is suggested by the “prereflective way in which members hear utterances and act in accord with the ‘heard’ order of events in a conversation” (Lynch, 1993, page 227).⁽¹⁴⁾

So far I have only dealt with the ringing and picking up of a mobile phone, which was mainly in order to advance an investigation into the accomplished orderliness of a setting, whereas my main concern was with people saying where they are during mobile phonecalls. One can easily imagine that such a statement might come next, and the question is why? Answering it requires, as I claimed in the paragraph above, situating it in the ‘heard’ order of events. At this point I would like to return to Schegloff’s (1972a) early and still-unequaled work on formulating place in which he hoped “to derive some gains from some reflections on location-formulation selection divorced from conversational context” (page 80). His preamble is revealing as he continues:

“As I am proceeding here in explicit divorce from conversational context, I shall occasionally take a liberty not otherwise to be condoned of relying at various points on data easily enough recalled to have happened but not recorded and out of conversational context, or invented for the occasion.”

This statement says much about what data are considered legitimate for conversation analysis and the reliance on audio-recording equipment to produce reliable data which are agreed upon for the purposes of CA investigations. Yet, just as soon as he has divorced it from conversational context for the benefits of seeing the finally ordered work of everyday language on its surface, Schegloff invites a more generous sense of setting back into its analysis. This is not because language has to ‘refer to’ or ‘signify’ a ‘place’ (as in a ‘restaurant’ as a signifier represents a real place as a signified—so Schegloff would have to return to a context to check what the conversations are referring to); it is rather because they are *mutually elaborative* (or in terms closer to Schegloff’s, a ‘topic is constituted by its formulation’).⁽¹⁵⁾ Schegloff’s problem is not one of exposing either the hidden ideological interests in how a place is represented, or of providing an essentialist and explanatory grammar: it is of a more logical-empiricist nature.⁽¹⁶⁾

⁽¹³⁾ Goffman (1956) and Sacks (1972a; 1972b) frequently demonstrate how this correctness can be ‘incorrect’ when it is exploited by fraudsters, conartists, and so on: it does not change the recognisability of what is going on and the possible description of such an event.

⁽¹⁴⁾ It is not my aim in this paper to articulate the careful critique made by Lynch of the professionalisation of conversation analysis and its misconception of what a natural science might consist of, yet I should state that his and other ethnomethodologists’ critique of certain versions of CA has shaped my approach to describing the fine order and remarkable accomplishments of talk.

⁽¹⁵⁾ In Hinchliffe’s (1996) meditation on technology, a similar point is made about ‘technological’ objects, in that they exist as they are constituted and there is no sovereign object which exists without constitution in some event, in Hinchliffe’s case, as in this one, a documentary event.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Schegloff has written several powerful critiques of grammar as used in a non-Wittgensteinian sense by linguists such as Searle and Chomsky (see, for example, Ochs et al, 1997).

“How is it that on particular occasions of use some term from the set (of possible place formulations) is selected and other terms are rejected?” (Schegloff, 1972a, page 81). I will leave aside further presentation of Schegloff’s analysis until the section in which the data are presented, below. In sharp contrast to Schegloff, I will leave my data ‘married’ to their contexts—in the setting which was mutually elaborated and extended via the acts of conversation. My reason for doing so is not only that my transcribed conversations were gathered during an ethnography so that I have additional data that I would like to use; it is more significantly because, although a lot of what members do is accomplished through talk, that is not all they do and the accomplishment of their conversations is frequently reliant on and interwoven with other practical accomplishments (such as being able to recognise the ringing tone of their mobile phone and to differentiate it from someone else’s).

Nomadic workers saying where they are during mobile phone conversations

As part of an ESRC research project, I tracked down half a dozen people whose everyday business required them to organise their lives while being mobile.⁽¹⁷⁾ They were for the most part service-industry employees, who normally spent between 3 and 5 days travelling from client to client in their company car and who used a mobile phone with varying degrees of frequency. I spent at least a week travelling around the highways and byways of various regions and territories, and generally hanging around in an unmotivated manner with each of these mobile workers. My method of learning about the organisation of their work is similar to the training given to new staff in their sectors who ride around with experienced staff before taking on responsibility for the job themselves. During these short passenger-seat ethnographies I gathered, amongst other materials, some ‘specimens’ (Alasuutari, 1995; Have, 1998) of these workers saying where they were.⁽¹⁸⁾ An obvious weakness in my account of organising work over the phone from an ethnomethodological perspective is that I could not pass as a *competent* member of the staff of those organisations I studied, and thus I am not competent in instructing others in how such a job might be done.⁽¹⁹⁾ However, my ambitions for my

⁽¹⁷⁾ Mobile workers are frequently referred to at the time of writing as ‘road warriors’, though during the research period I never heard this term used as a description. And I am not fully sure what I make of the term, apart from that employees of companies that go ‘on the road’ are involved in some kind of ‘Mad Max’ struggle to survive which does offer a certain kind of romantic, if dystopian, imagery to their working environment.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Sacks, at the outset of conversation analysis, suggested that it was primitive natural science, in that like early kinds of geology, biology, or astronomy it could be verified by an observer going out into the field and redoing the observation or finding and examining an equivalent ‘specimen’ in Alasuurti’s terminology (see Sacks, 1992a, pages 81–91) (Lynch and Bogen, 1994). Given Lynch’s (1993) critique of Sacks’s version of natural science, I am wary of making such a claim, and would alert the reader to the equipment and training necessary to redo my collecting and remark that equally it is not characteristic of natural scientists actually to replicate experiments in the way suggested by Sacks. Nevertheless, I value the sense in which specimen collecting as a primitive method for social researchers reunites it with natural science practices—even if it is to some extent inevitably *reductive* it also allows for *amplification* (Latour, 1999) and, in a more prosaic sense, it is a way of delivering some ‘news’ to other researchers (Lynch, 1993).

⁽¹⁹⁾ Though I am highly sympathetic and consistently impressed by the investigations of conversation analysts, I am also wary of claiming that I have achieved adequate descriptions of what is happening in the following transcripts on the basis of having audio tapes of a conversation that I can relisten to or share with other researchers because as (Crabtree, 2000) puts it, “That machinery (CA procedures) is a construction of the professional analyst’s work, not ordinary members’ work. It is only available to the professional analyst (which is a rather serious state of affairs for persons said to be concerned with naturally occurring social interaction, not least because if the machinery did exist then members must, as matter of course, be fully familiar with it and its workings).”

project here are not so much to describe their work as part of some (large) *institutions in action* (Boden, 1994; Psathas, 1999) as to pick out and make visible an orderly feature of their talk which occurs in many settings which involve mobile phones.

My first specimen involves Penelope Barley, who is a personnel officer for a substantial and expanding transportation company which has offices across the United Kingdom, talking with Sharon, her personal assistant (PA). Penelope and Sharon have to work 'closely' together despite the fact that Penelope spends most days of the week visiting the local offices of their company, which are spread across the South of England. Sharon, on the other hand, stays permanently in 'Penelope's office' at the company headquarters answering and screening calls for her, dealing with incoming mail, filing, and other tasks.

Specimen 1: the relevance of Avonmouth

((Penelope Barley (P) dialing her PA Sharon (S) from mobile/car phone with audible bleeps, then waiting to speak 'hands-free' while driving along dual-carriageway))

S: >Penelope Barley's<office. Good morning.

P: Good morning, Sharon. It's Penny ((said in a slightly higher voice, almost joking)).

S: Hello ((happily))

→P: ((continues joking voice)) I'm heading to Brisle ((Bristol)) ((returns to 'normal' voice)) to Bristol, that's where I live, back to Avonmouth.

S: (s-pause) Oh are you ((still happily))

P: And then I'm gonna go up to Berries, yes so::: uhm::

S: = Oh right, okay (see) Steve Appleton wants a word with you

P: Yeah, I'll give him a ring when I get to Avonmouth,
[he's left me a note].

+

S: [That's a'right]>I didn't know whether he left a message or not<. He's in Borchester all day.

P: Yes he left one last night he left one [this morning] ((sounds irritated))

+

S: [Oh dear] and Paul Barber was after you as well.

P: °Oh, that's all right (then)°. Uhm:::

S: = about the letter

P: °Yeauh° I'll do that when I get to Avonmouth

S: Luvly.

Watching Penelope dial, I was struck by the fact that she only had to look for a moment when reaching out to dial. Once her hand had found the keyboard of the phone she was digitally accomplished in that place, in that she kept her eyes on the road in the way that a practiced classical pianist can keep her eyes on the music sheet rather than the keyboard (Sudnow, 1978).⁽²⁰⁾ Leaving these observations aside for the moment, if we follow the transcript of the ensuing conversation, then, it has by the fourth utterance turned up an instance of the feature I am interested in:

⁽²⁰⁾ In Sudnow's remarkable investigation of jazz piano playing, he frequently uses the more everyday example of driving a car to assist non-jazz-piano-playing readers to grasp what it is to be a competent jazz pianist.

“I’m heading to ...”⁽²¹⁾. It is an example of what Schegloff (1972a) calls a ‘locational formulation’ and it begins the task of trying to coordinate successfully the work of Penelope Barley, who is driving her car, with Sharon, who is staffing Penelope’s immobile office. For Penelope and Sharon to coordinate their affairs, some sense of shared context has to be accomplished by them, and this was more apparent to me precisely because mobile telephony rendered it difficult for them to interact with one another.

As Tolmie et al (1998) put it:

“The sense each party to the interaction has, then, of there being some locatable set of relevances which they share, is not something simply taken for granted and put to one side. Instead it turns out to be something that they have to work at recurrently throughout the conversation. A good deal of this work is informal, light-hearted in character, and redolent with personal details. Work of this order has been characterised elsewhere as ‘demeanour work’ (King and Randall, 1994; Randall and Hughes, 1994).”

Returning to the transcript, we can see that the greeting offered by Sharon is of a particular kind: it makes available several things. First, that the call has successfully been picked up at the other end by someone who the caller may or may not be trying to ‘reach’. Second, that this answerer is indicating they are answering for, and thus enacting, an institution (Boden, 1994), as instead of using the highly standardised ‘hello’ greeting on the phone, she says “Penelope Barley’s office. Good morning”. Third, that they are doing some further locating within this institution by identifying the particular office and name of the person for whom they are acting as the answerer, in this somewhat unusual case they are the *answerer* for the *caller*. Penelope’s greeting in return identifies her to her PA. The saying of her name rather than just ‘hi’ (or a similar greeting) we could take as indicating that she is not risking playing the ‘voice-recognition game’ with her PA, whereby the sound of her voice should be sufficient to identify Penelope to Sharon (Sacks, 1992b, page 161). However, with the benefit of additional field observations of the audibility problems of hands-free mobile phones which are not available from the transcript, I would suggest that it is also a function of the poor signal quality on mobile phones: voices are often highly distorted, and the game of identifying someone purely by their voice might be played as a test of the ability to pick signal out of noise rather than a known caller from an unknown caller. Once Penelope has identified herself to Sharon, then Sharon redoes her greeting with a warm recognition. In this way, by juxtaposing her warm, if brief, “hello” with the more institutional greeting that she initially offers an unknown caller, she is doing ‘demeanour work’:

One of the other properties of telephone calls which has been extensively commented on by Sacks (see 1992b, lectures 1 and 2) amongst others (Hopper, 1991; Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1991; Psathas, 1991) is the distinction between *caller* and *called*.

⁽²¹⁾ However, I am not suggesting that this instance be pulled out of the flow of conduct that it occurred within to be used in a representational manner, such as, for a comparison with several dozen other representative instances, interesting though such a comparison may be (see, for example Schegloff, 1972b; 1979). Indeed the ‘plucking’ (or ‘cutting’ as De Certeau, 1984, puts it) of the brightest feathers (which the fourth utterance would hardly qualify for) from transcripts is part of the method of ‘coding’ used by numerous ‘qualitative’ researchers (see me doing it: Laurier et al, 1999; and for another example Huberman and Miles, 1998). It is a method institutionalised in such social science software packages as NUDist, nVivo, ATLAS, and Winmax (see Richards and Richards, 1998). It is a method which is ideal for the doing of, for instance, ‘professionalised cultural studies’, as one of its next instructions would be to seek ways of generalising from this instance in an analytic search for its relation to a semiotic structure, cultural formation, or other abstractive or systematising theory, and if not that, then perhaps the catch-all explanation ‘context’.

There are a collection of understandings affiliated with this distinction, one of the most significant being that it is the caller (unless they are ‘calling back’) who has some kind of ‘first topic’ to raise. They have a *reason for calling*, which at some point has to be brought up and might be expected to be the next action in a sequence after a greeting has been done. How greetings are finished is an interesting issue in itself, but not one that I will cover here (but see Schegloff, 1972b). When Sharon redoes her greeting she does not set the first move for any kind of next action, which, for example, she could have done by saying: “Hi Steve Appleton called for you” (though she does raise that matter later). The next utterance, the locating turn, involves a mistake from Penelope and then its immediate repair: she is not going to Bristol, she is going ‘back’ to Avonmouth. Building on Schegloff’s (1972a) locational formulations, the point that I will try to develop is that the selection by Penelope of ‘Avonmouth’ (or various other locations given during mobile phone calls) are relevant locatings that lead on from earlier events and work toward ordering what will happen next.

Given that Penelope calls Sharon at ‘Penelope’s extension’ every morning as she sets off to her first destination in her car, unless she is actually going to ‘the office’ to join her there, they have this temporal ordering available to them already. To clarify the difference this makes, we need only consider what happens when someone who you have not heard from for a long time calls you. When this person calls you, you can guess that they are not just going to tell you the mundane news of their day, as they might to some friend they telephoned on a more regular basis. They may announce they are phoning ‘just to catch up’ or ‘or to see how you were’ and if they do not do this, or even if they do, you will expect there to be some more significant topic like an arrangement to come visit, some piece of ‘big news’ they are offering (for example, a birth, death, new job, new house, etc) as a *reason for calling* (Sacks, 1992b). Although Sharon is the *called* she does not have to wait to hear Penelope’s reason for calling (as the caller): they are speaking to one another because they do this day in, day out, to coordinate the activities of their day. Apart from making this temporal ordering available to them it thus also *blurs* the *caller – called* distinction. So, with a temporal ordering available to them, what remains to be organised are their spatial relations. In the sequence of hearing, both Penelope and her PA have available to them already that the PA is in Penelope’s office answering the phone. In fact the PA’s location is potentially available to Penelope from an even earlier nonverbal action, which I will examine later in this paper. In contrast, Penelope’s work is not sedentary: she is generally in her car at the time in the morning of the call but sometimes she is at a branch office, and sometimes she is at home: thus, further locating is required. It is also worth noting that Sharon keeps Penelope’s diary and so does already have access to a textual indication of where Penelope should be. Nevertheless, Penelope’s immediate plans can be changed to respond to various requests from her company at very short notice, and equally she has the discretionary power to cancel appointments and rearrange her agenda overnight. And of course, for people travelling by car for extended periods, there are all kinds of other contingencies such as flat tyres, traffic jams, diversions, getting lost, etc. By saying that she is on her way back to ‘Avonmouth’ Penelope is confirming that she is following her diary and she is formulating a location, which she further shapes by adding her next destination. The organisation of mobility* that ‘Avonmouth’ is doing is not yet sufficiently described as Avonmouth, even though apparently what Schegloff (1972a) would classify as a ‘G term’ (meaning geographical), is further known to both Penelope and Sharon as one of the major regional depots of their company. Once more this may seem trivial, until we consider how it is made relevant: it is part of the category of company branch offices or what Schegloff would classify as an ‘ R_m term’ (relation to members). There are a variety of

spatial formulations that Penelope could have used, such as a G term like ‘the County of Avon’, or an R_m term like ‘Bob Smith’s office’, or an ‘ R_1 term’ (between places) such as ‘I’m travelling north on the M5’ (see Schegloff, 1972a, pages 97–99). Some of these locations might require clarification for Sharon; for example, if Penelope were travelling on the M5 had she been to ‘Avonmouth’ already or did she have to change her diary appointments for the day. Other references would begin to do other kinds of work because if Penelope said she were going to Bob Smith’s office she would be suggesting that there may be one specific purpose (‘Bob Smith’) for her going to their regional office to which attention should be paid (that is, by being mentioned Bob Smith had been made relevant). The wider possibilities of what can be done at ‘Avonmouth’ (as opposed to in Bob Smith’s office) become clearer in the actions that are proposed in the subsequent utterances, as Sharon passes over the names of two people with associated problems and Penelope says that she will deal with them when she gets to ‘Avonmouth’. The name of this small town in the southwest of England is thus *knowable* to these two coworkers in a certain way, which is not to imply that the job of cultural studies or cultural geography is to provide a ‘contextualisation’ that when Sharon and Penelope say ‘Avonmouth’ what they really mean is ‘some other employees that Penelope has to see and also a telephone, desk, and computer at the regional office in the dockyards about 15 minutes by car from Penelope’s present position’ (and this substitution of cultural longhand for ordinary shorthand could get bigger). This kind of remedying of an *indexical* term which produces a more proper interpretation of ‘Avonmouth’ is the all-too-frequent activity of cultural geography, and is indeed potentially an infinite one (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970). In their use of ‘Avonmouth’ (or other locatings even more indexical such as ‘here’ or ‘there’), parties to a conversation are using terms that have an orderliness to them (which does not need to be—retrospectively—interpreted for them) and the establishment of these orders” is an ongoing, practical accomplishment of every actual occasion of commonplace speech and conduct”. (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970, page 341; see also Bittner, 1977). Nor do they need what they are talking about ‘theoretically’ to be explained back to them as they ‘know’ what they are talking about for the practical purposes on which they are engaged.⁽²²⁾

Specimen 2: ‘where are you today?’

In the next excerpt both the parties to the call are mobile workers and we can see in a relatively obvious way, given the earlier investigation of the call between Penelope and Sharon, how a spatiotemporal context is being mutually accomplished. What is significant in what follows is that not one but both parties to the call are nomadic workers using mobile phones:

((Sylvia dials up Ernie’s number on her mobile keyboard, it makes audible bleeps, then a ringing tone beings))

E: (Hello it’s Ernie)

S: = Hi Ernie, it’s Sylvia.

E: Hi Sylvia, how ya doin

→S: I’m all right. Where are you today

E: Ehm I’m in London at some point once the trains start running properly

S: (s-pause) Have you got problems on trains↑

⁽²²⁾ Ethnomethodology sits, spiked, on the horns of this dilemma as it is frequently accused by the groups it studies such as lawyers, astronomers, bankers, and piano players, of offering back to them exactly what they already knew. And is accused from the social and cultural studies side by audiences used to either ‘explanations’ or ‘theory construction’ as offering mere (and very lengthy) descriptions of phenomena that are obvious.

E: Big time problems (s-pause) Ehm uh there's track lines down at Stevenage an::d Welwyn Garden City so we've been standing her for about Christ knows how long [jus' waitin' on a train] into London.

+

S: [Aww].

E: So all fun and games. >How where are you today<↑[.hhh]

+

→S: [Well] I'm gonna be in London for a short while today.

E: [aw right]

+

S: [I've] got a whole load of stuff I've just picked up from Kingswood for you > I was gonna work in Kingswood today < but I've decided to go and I wanna see Marc and do a couple of things for tomorrow

In this second excerpt we can see a lengthier locational formulation, as Ernie depicts his current, and by the close of the excerpt, *relevant*, troubles with trains. Indeed this may be just the kind of account that many of us, are very likely to have overheard, even if we have not uttered it ourselves on a mobile phone. Also, neither Ernie nor Sylvia have each other's locations preestablished as not only are they both known to each other as nomadic workers and thus lacking "base places" (Schegloff, 1972a, page 98), neither are they in possession of a shared space-time text (that is, diary) as were Penelope and her PA. Yet Ernie and Sylvia were part of the same work team, which had its regions spread across the United Kingdom, so they were in frequent contact with one another to coordinate a variety of activities. The 'closeness' of the collaboration was not normally of the same degree as that between Penelope and her PA, as Ernie dealt with the southwest of England whereas Sylvia dealt with the southeast. However, Ernie was soon to be taking over Sylvia's region, and the phone call took place during a period when Sylvia was 'handing over' her region to Ernie and thus they were attempting to meet face-to-face as often as they could.

The features picked out with the arrows are where London is mentioned, amongst another local geography of 'known' locations of their institution ('Kingswood'—a regional office). Ernie brings up 'London' in the fifty utterance of the sequence, though in this instance as a second-pair part (that is, the response part of: question/response) to Sylvia's question, "where are you today?" Much like the use of a local order such as place names within a company, the term 'today' does not mean literally 19 September 1998, nor the 24 hours that lie within that calendar date. 'Today' is used for the possible local relevancies that Sylvia and Ernie can produce (see also Sacks, 1992b, lecture 1, page 172). So Sylvia would be surprised if Ernie were to begin with his intention to go to sleep at 10pm, or equally to ask Sylvia, what did she mean by 'today'? If he did either of those things as a response to her question we might figure that he was trying out a joke, being evasive, or possibly suffering some form of mental illness. 'London' is a recognisable name for a location because the main office of *their* multinational company is there and Sylvia and Ernie have met there several times already to organise their 'handover'. London is thus heard by both as the name of their office, and not a general name for the whole greater London area, and it is by using such locational formulations that Sylvia and Ernie display their membership of the company. As Schegloff puts it:

"It is by reference to the adequate recognizability of detail, including place names, that one is in this sense a member, and those who do not share such recognitions are 'strangers'" (1972a, page 93).

Once he has begun formulating London as the place which his mobility is in relation to, he works out the contingencies attached to his arriving there “at some point” and attributes this contingency to ‘the trains’. In her next turn Sylvia asks another question, one that is clearly a ‘response’ to Ernie’s previous response, which whilst asking a question is also showing that she has taken note of Ernie’s problem. In other words, the conversational ‘chaining effect’ running from utterance to utterance includes the asking of a question even if we might want to treat that question as a sovereign statement—it has to make sense of and make sense in its *sequenced setting* of use. In this way, questions as they are asked in everyday life can seem apposite, tactical, amusing, unsolicited, inappropriate, hostile, rhetorical, or even superfluous (‘need you ask why?’ and most importantly rely for their sense on their location in an unfolding conversation where the response will retrofit the earlier ‘question’ (Schegloff, 1978; Button, 1994). As we can see in Sylvia’s turn “Have you got problems on trains”, her question has, in a sense, been elicited by Ernie’s “... at some point once the trains start running properly”. Ernie’s initial statement is thereby providing for Sylvia’s question and tailoring the (re)turn after her question for Ernie to provide a somewhat lengthy account of why he might not be able to say when he and Sylvia can meet up.

What happens next is intriguing, as Ernie now produces what we might take to be a very noticeable complaint or piece of trouble talk: he says “Christ knows how long”, which in its audible state is hearable as somewhat resigned. Sylvia chimes in sympathetically with her overlapping “aw” and thereby shows that she is both accepting and ‘sympathetic’ to Ernie’s troubles (she is, after all, a ‘fellow traveller’). Ernie is giving in one sense a straightforward piece of relevant information to Sylvia as to what is causing him to be delayed. This *relaying* is done in an elegantly delivered form, and rightly so, as if it is elegant enough in its delivery as ‘railway transport trouble’ then Sylvia may well retell it later. Ernie handles his ‘transport-trouble story’ with expertise, invoking the double trouble of railway track being inoperative in two different places and the commonly known and categorically negative experience of standing waiting endlessly for a train that never arrives. To understand why Ernie might attempt to turn his troubles into a tellable event requires us to consider the consequent institutional problems that nomadic workers frequently face. Because if Ernie’s trains do, ultimately, deliver him late to London, and he then misses or delays a meeting with someone else at the multinational, by his not turning up on time he is risking being included in the class of people at work known for ‘being late’.⁽²³⁾ This is a ‘big time’ contingency in doing mobility* because, as noted above, travellers constantly face traffic jams, possible flat tyres, delayed trains, etc and so each actual occasion of lateness requires careful accounting for in terms of these recognisable explanations, lest the person becomes known as someone who is ‘always late’. The mechanism for someone becoming known as a tardy individual occurs in part through such actual moments as when one of his colleagues says to the other ‘Ernie’s late for this meeting’, and they say ‘Ernie’s always late’, and no one defends Ernie’s *reputation*; indeed colleagues can go away from the meeting with a ‘choice piece’ of work gossip to tell other people at the office (Sacks, 1992b, page 44). After only a few such occasions Ernie’s reputation as an untimely person can be passed on as part of his ‘personality’ for the purposes of the multinational

⁽²³⁾ Sacks (1992b) in Lecture 4 (pages 52–55) provides a remarkable analysis of how specific cases of interrupting can be transformed into the class ‘being rude’, and how people with an interest in maintaining a good biography will attempt to avoid being categorised by anyone else as being rude, and that this provides for an enforcement system for turn taking in conversation and much else besides. In a parallel way I am attempting to show why a singular case of missing a meeting can, if not worked upon by Ernie, end up in his biography suffering, as it is passed around by his colleagues at the multinational.

and he may well have to work very hard to change this memorable aspect of his office personality as whenever people at the multinational have to meet him they will tend to look for confirmation of his lateness. To offer a mild disaster story over the phone to Sylvia with some details about “track lines” and place names, a tone of resignation and irony (“all fun and games”) is to offer a neatly packaged account to someone who will be at headquarters with Ernie’s colleagues when Ernie’s lateness is remarked on, and thus be able to give an account on the basis of this memorable defence of Ernie-at-a-distance, to prevent someone else saying without contention that ‘Ernie is always late. For Sylvia to give such a substantiated defence is in her interest as well because, as a nomadic worker, she does indeed face the same problems of timing as does Ernie, and her giving an account of his lateness also makes the constant problems of travel a ‘commonly known thing’ amongst the ‘nonnomads’ at headquarters. Sylvia is thus, as a by-product, safeguarding the general reputation of a class of people at her workplace who are doing mobility* and may be known as ‘people in the field’, ‘the salesforce’, etc.

After Ernie has finished locating himself, he hands over the floor for Sylvia to do the same. What you may or may not have noticed is that if we were now to ask ourselves could we or Sylvia have driven our car to find Ernie, the answer is ‘no’. We know a number of things relevant to trying to meet him in London later in the day, but as to where he is, as of that moment, he is as he says, “standing here”. Unless he needs to be collected, or some further immediate assistance, ‘here’ is an economical and appropriate solution. For the overhearers standing beside him they know very well what situation he is referring to.

Where we began

I’m having lunch outdoors on a terrace cafe during a break while writing this paper, someone’s mobile phone rings. It’s a long-haired woman at the next table. She picks it up and after it beeps she says “hello”. There’s a pause and then she says happily, “I’m sitting having lunch on a sunny day in Edinburgh”.

Even in this vignette it seems reasonable to suggest that the answerer’s locational formulation is setting up some kind of mutual sense of her ‘context’ and of what may be relevant to her as an answerer in such a context. My earlier specimens concerned ‘work’ calls, and yet one of the tricky aspects of context that often has to be established during a mobile phone call is whether the answerer is, for the purposes of the caller, at work or not. Landline phone numbers are listed as work numbers and home numbers; when a caller dials a number, one available ordering in the ‘prebeginning’ to the call, is generally whether they are dialing the called’s *work* number or their *home* number.⁽²⁴⁾ This simple division has all kinds of implications about who the caller can expect to be overhearing the call at the other end, how long the call can be, what it might be interrupted by. When Penelope calls her PA at her office number, for instance, she knows the *place* she is calling as an organised space where numerous institutional resources are stored, and can ask for a file to be pulled out of the filing cabinet and its contents read to her over the phone.

A mobile phone, apart from its possibilities of being picked up in all manner of situations by its answerer, also often lacks definition as to whether its answerer consider himself or herself to be ‘at work’ or not (see also Katz, 1999). When the woman in the vignette picks up her phone and says where she is, one of the clues she

⁽²⁴⁾ There are numerous home workers whose home phone number and work number will be the same, and who will therefore have to manage just such issues as: whether they will have to formulate at the outset of the conversation their availability for either personal calls or work-related calls.

may be giving her caller is that she is as available as we would judge someone having lunch on holiday to be.

In Schegloff's (1972a) description of locational formulation of the 'X type', such as significantly 'the office' or 'my home', he suggests they have a special character in that not only are they understood as 'belonging to' someone (for example, Penelope Barley's office): equally 'such a place is for a member "where he or she belongs" (that is, one can reasonably call there without having to account for why one is looking for them there). In practical terms, when making a phone call, a stranger to the caller can still respond with a phrase such as 'she's out right now' or 'you must have a wrong number' by knowledge of the people who are related to the place which is being connected to by telephony. What mobile phones bring is a loss of the tie between place and member, which perhaps goes some way to revealing why it is that one member seldom answers another's mobile phone, as the caller is likely not to be calling a place but a person, and an answerer will have to account for why they are picking up the phone without recourse to a phrase such as 'she's not here right now'. Since the 'here' no longer provides an exact location to either party.

Conclusion

Context, in the form of 'social context', or 'cultural context', or 'economic context', and so on, is often used as an explanation for why an event occurs or why actors do certain things. Claims to provide contextual explanation supply their disciplinary expertise as either 'cause' or 'container' ['container' is what Drew and Heritage (1992) amusingly term the "bucket" theory of context]. When the term 'context' is used by conversation analysts and ethnomethodologists it is not to refer to theorisable preexisting *zeitgeist*, but rather a setting reflexively tied to unfolding action, or equally lines of action tied reflexively to an unfolding setting. As Zimmerman (1992) puts it,

"Since context functions to foreground and activate pertinent knowledge and skills and to provide the situated sense and relevance of these activities, it must in some sense be 'available' to participants in these activities, then and there. The availability of context is found precisely in the ways in which the participants make locally observable and accountable for one another such features of their current activities" (page 36).

In a brief examination of requesting a mobile phone number from someone, Katz (1999) points out that this can be an emotional issue as, depending on whether it is obtained or not, its proffering can be an assessment of mutual worth and a potential moment of embarrassment. I would certainly agree that obtaining someone's phone number is a moment of careful negotiation, and more so with a mobile phone because it no longer carries a member's categorisation such as 'the office'. In relation to the quote from Zimmerman above, its status as a mobile number is important to the person who is going to use it because it needs to be *recognised* as such—thus it often has 'mobile' or 'm' written beside it—and is further recognisable by its numeric arrangement (for example, in the United Kingdom it does not being '01' or '02'). Knowing at the outset whether one is calling a mobile phone or not, as I hope this paper has made clear, is not just to do with a caller's concern with the call charge rates they may be incurring when connected via a mobile network, but also because it shapes the character of ordinary geographical work that will need to be done both by caller and by called. The act of finding a mobile phone number as a mobile number forms a context for what will and might happen next.

Although I seemed to promise an explanation as to why people say where they are during mobile phone calls, I hope it has become apparent that there is not *one* answer, and that there are good reasons for being wary of social and cultural theories that

claim to provide an explanation. Although one may suggest that there are one or more answers, in the form of displays of the grammar of everyday life, as to why, or perhaps *how*, people say where they are, it is still possible and important to turn to a 'classic theme' from human geography, cultural studies, and cultural geography in order "to break out of the academic literature" (Lynch, 1993, page 300). In my research, the particular topic of the current situation of academic inquiry which fed my own project was mobility*, and so I went in search of a setting in which it played a prominent 'vernacular role' (Lynch, 1993).

In learning from the practical achievements of nomadic workers I left the classic theme of mobility* as an unexplicated term for social phenomena which are investigatable in their actual local productions of order (Garfinkel, 1992). Postanalytic ethnomethodology has been called a 'postgraduate' form of study for researchers by Lynch (1993) as it still requires a basic familiarity with the 'classic themes' in human geography, cultural studies, sociology, politics, science studies, or any other discipline. It offers a post-Enlightenment path for continuing such investigations by remixing their professional concerns with the ordinary practices which they seek to master.⁽²⁵⁾ Part of what such investigations offer is a praxiological turn, which may well be a refreshing twist away from a textual foundationalism that can inadvertently accompany a literary or cultural turn.

As I noted at the outset, this paper could have consisted of a lengthy depiction of what I think, for instance, cultural studies consists of *as* a set of literatures and approaches and so on, and then an equally lengthy depiction of what my picture of conversation analysis or ethnomethodology are. Instead of such an approach, I have tried to do some respecifying in an ethnomethodological mode whilst also 'doing' some investigation of a feature of ordinary practices which most readers will have noticed. This is a way of explicating pursued by Sacks in his lectures on conversation (from which I have borrowed heavily for my description of what is going on during the two strips of talk transcribed in this article) and also by Wittgenstein (1953; 1958) in all of his later works. Schegloff (1972a) carried out the most exhaustive and encyclopaedic analysis of 'locational formulations' in conversation, and I have struggled to show the difference that mobile phones make to his analysis and, moreover, to replace the technical concerns of his profession with ordinary members. Both Sacks and Wittgenstein (1953; 1958), by slightly different means, were pursuing the description of language in use as a way of displacing the 'big-time problems' of high theory into the 'big-time problems' of ordinary practices.

"The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a result of investigation: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty.—We have got on to a slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!"

Wittgenstein (1953, page 46, number 108)

Acknowledgements. I would like to recognise the remarkable responsiveness and critical attentiveness of Professor Chris Philo on our sociospatial and technical research project on cars and mobile phones, the analysis of which this paper is part. The project was undertaken with funding from the ESRC (Grant No. R000222071). The ideas and views expressed in the article are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the funding body. A greater-than-usual debt is owed to the coparticipants in these two research projects, most notably 'Sylvia' and 'Penelope', from whom I have learnt a great deal about mobility* and hospitality. For her enthusiasm, engagement, and

⁽²⁵⁾ An exemplary study is Sudnow's (1978) study of jazz piano playing through jazz piano playing, tutoring, and the documentation of the haecceity of this embodied doing.

willingness to listen to very long descriptions of how to recognise a phone ringing I must thank Gillian Rose (who also provided a lovely ‘three-body’ anecdote). For their practical concerns with window ledges, sleep, and rodents: Spunky and Lola.

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