

## **WHAT'S NEXT?: THE SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT OF MEETINGS**

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### **1. Introduction**

Meetings, both face to face, and phone meetings, are an important speech event in our culture, and represent one of the most common ways in which collaborative work is accomplished. This paper explores one important aspect of the way meetings are constructed by participants: the resources available to participants to constitute the topics of their agenda, achieve coordination on topics and to move from one topic to the next. This framework is currently being applied to the question of understanding the differences between agenda management in different technological conditions: face to face, phone, and with enhanced communications software.

The question of how agendas are managed is important because it allows us to make a bridge between the larger level speech event of the meeting, and the micro-level details of the exchange of turns within this speech event. That is, the business meeting is a recognizable speech event for middle class Americans; the participants, as well as other members of the culture could easily describe these stretches of speech as meetings. (See (Hymes, 1962), (Hymes, 1964), (Hymes, 1972), (Hymes, 1974), (Duranti,

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1985) for discussions of the notion of the speech event.) But this leaves open the question of precisely how speakers go about producing an instance of such a speech event, how they build it up from its succession of utterances. This is particularly an issue for speech events like the informal meetings described in this study, where the order of turns and the topics to be discussed is not prearranged. This study will show how these two levels are linked.

As part of members' ethno-theory of the speech event of meetings, there are normative accounts of how a good meeting should be run, which focus on formal meetings with a chair, an agenda, etc., including the very influential Roberts' Rules of Order. Indeed, it is the presence of such features which defines what is understood to be a formal meeting. According to the definition of types of formality given in (Irvine, 1979), this is formality of the social situation, defined as a situation with a tone of seriousness, politeness and respect, which invokes positional and public rather than personal identities. (Duranti, 1984) gives an example of an extremely formal meeting type in Samoan society, which has fixed spatial boundaries, temporal boundaries, participants, speech register, physical posture of the participants, and order of turn-taking. For formal meetings in American settings, there is very little research on how such meetings are actually conducted, what makes meetings effective, and the relations between informal and formal meetings. (Turnage, 1990) discusses the need for such research in understanding the design and effect of new workplace technology. (Boden, 1984) shows how the findings of conversation analysis apply to the context of formal bureaucratic meetings.

## **2. Agenda Management**

Of the many aspects of meeting structure, this paper will consider agenda management: how participants accomplish the transition from one major topic to another. At the micro-level, this issue can be viewed as one type of turn management, specifically the management of the movement from topic to topic. But it is also constitutive of the macrostructure of meetings, since it is perhaps

the most important mechanism for assuring that meetings flow smoothly.

We will not consider the issue of movement from topic to topic within an agenda item, since this poses the extremely difficult problem of defining topic. Topics in conversation are difficult to define because they are not structural units with definite boundaries. While we, as members of the culture have a sense that a conversation is made up of several topics, we will often have difficulty in agreeing exactly how many topics there are, or where the boundaries are. Topics appear to drift into one another by a process which (Sacks, 1972) has termed "step-wise topic transition".

A general feature for topical organization in conversation is movement from topic to topic, not by a topic-close followed by a topic beginning, but by a stepwise move, which involves linking up whatever is being introduced to what has just been talked about, such that, as far as anybody knows, a new topic has not been started, though we're far from where we began. (Lecture 5, Spring 1972, pp. 15 - 16)

This paper discusses the management of the topics of the agendas of a two-person graphics design firm, whose social structure is described below. This allows us to avoid the difficulty of providing a general definition of the notion of topic by taking advantage of the particular structure of meetings for the firm under investigation. These meetings have a macrostructure which is formed by separate discussions of individual projects. We will therefore consider the work of achieving transition from discussion of one project to the next, ignoring topic structure within project. This offers a good overview of agenda management, and can provide suggestions for the later study of topic management within projects.

Note that this analytic strategy of looking at projects as the top level of topic management in fact mirrors the members' own categories: in general they organize their agenda by project. This is not the only way it could be organized: an alternate organizational principle would be business function. For example: the first topic of the meeting could be the discussion of all current relations with

printing shops. Although there are a few examples of this kind of organization, the vast majority of this firm's meeting time is organized by project.

### **3. The Data**

This paper is based on a case study of videotapes of GG, a small design firm, in one face to face meeting of 2 hours, 30 minutes, and three phone meetings totalling one hour and thirty five minutes. These data were gathered as part of a project studying the effects of the introduction of new communications technology on work practices, and the possible roles which ethnographic study of work practice can have in the design process of such technologies. The technology includes the capacity for computer-based fax, and in a later version of the design, file transfer, remote screen sharing, and real-time interactive messages (called "chat" or "talk" in various communications systems already on the market).

The two partners of the design firm are two women who have worked together for three years. Initially, they lived within walking distance of one another, so that face to face meetings were easy to arrange. Two years ago, one partner moved 50 miles away, which necessitated more elaborate phone meetings, and arrangements to fax or send documents by mail, messengers, etc. Indeed, difficulties in exchanging documents formed one reason why they welcomed the chance to participate in this project, since the project donated to them the software which would allow them to continue using the system after the end of the study.

This firm was chosen for study for a number of reasons. One is that the social structure is primarily non-hierarchical. The two members are equal partners in the business, and there are no other employees. Further, there is no specialization: each participates in every aspect of the business, including soliciting business, actual design, design critique, meetings with clients, business record-keeping and maintenance, etc. On small jobs, the partner who brought in the business may do most or all of the design work, but on larger jobs, both participate in the design work. (The social

structure of this business is sketched here, because it is a common sense view that meetings are generally run by a designated chair, or by the highest ranking member present. Conversation analysis would, quite properly, attempt to make this general assumption problematic. In this case, since the business is not structured to have a leader, the common sense assumption that the leader runs meetings is irrelevant, and can not apply.)

Another important work practice of this firm is that the partners do not have a explicit joint agenda or to-do list for meetings. In some of their phone meetings, one participant may have a list of topics, but this list is not shared, either in writing or orally with her partner. That is, a topic list could be distributed before the meeting, or announced at the beginning of the meeting. Neither of these strategies are used. However, we know that the participants have prepared for these meetings, including projecting topics for discussion, since they bring to phone and face to face meetings folders containing work on the projects they expect will be discussed. In separate interviews on their work practices, the participants each said that they did not prepare a specific agenda because they worked on few enough jobs that they could keep track of all of them, and knew which needed to be discussed.

These work practices make these data particularly valuable for the study of agenda management, since they combine to require explicit work by participants during the meeting to constitute the agenda.

#### **4. Resources for Accomplishing Topic Change**

Let us begin our investigation of agenda management by considering the physical and social resources available to speakers for accomplishing topic change of all kinds, particularly movement from one agenda item to another. As we shall see, agenda management is a negotiation between meeting participants about whether a previous topic is concluded, whether the introduction of a new topic is appropriate, and what that topic shall be.

#### 4a. Resources for Topic Closure

First, we must consider not only how a new topic is introduced, but also how the previous topic is closed. Resources for accomplishing topic change include preclosing markers, and explicit topic closings.

Preclosings are indications of the possibility of the appropriateness of ending the current topic. These include discourse markers like *well*, *OK*, *So*, etc, offered as the speaker's entire turn. As (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) describe the function of these markers:

With them, a speaker takes a turn whose business seems to be to 'pass.' i.e. to indicate that he has not now anything more or new to say and also to give a 'free' turn to a next, who, because such an utterance can be treated as having broken with any prior topic, can without violating topical coherence take the occasion to introduce a new topic. (p 304)

Such preclosing markers tend to come in pairs:

1.        *OK. OK.*
2.        *Well (pause), Well (pause)*

These indicate that both participants have passed on the chance to continue the current topic.

Another form of preclosing is an evaluation of the prior discussion. Rather than continuing the topic, the speaker steps back from it to give an indication of what it means, what its value is, etc.<sup>1</sup> Such evaluations may be simple statements like

3.        *Well that's OK.*
4.        *Good for you. I'm glad that that worked well.*

They may involve the use of proverbs, aphorisms, etc. Or they may be elaborate and detailed evaluations of the entire topic. For example,

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<sup>1</sup>. All of the examples which follow are taken from video recordings of GG's work sessions.

in discussing a client's desire to repeat his name on every page, the two designers have agreed that three repetitions is enough. Then the participant who is not the designer of this project provides the following evaluation, a summary of the preceding discussion which serves as a preclosing:

5. In fact, I think you sort of shoot yourself in the foot, if you are too obvious.

In the context of a work meeting, another very common form of preclosing is for the speaker to refer to work which she will do outside the meeting, or suggestions for future actions by the other participant. This functions as a preclosing, since it suggests that it is not currently productive to continue discussing the topic until the proposed work is completed. For example:

6. Right. Well what I was going to do is finish these up as this round of the variations on the theme as best I could and send them off to you. And then you could [pause] look at them, fiddle with them while I am gone.

This strategy for preclosing thus ties the current topic not only to the agenda of the current meeting, but to future actions as well.

In a face to face meeting, there is also the possibility of using physical movements to serve as preclosing indications. These may be as subtle as postural shifts forward or backward in a chair, or as obvious as looking at one's watch, or taking out and playing with car keys. In the work meetings studied here, physical indications are readily available to the participants, and play an important role in topic management, since their work consists of design projects, which they bring to meetings to show to one another. Therefore, one obvious method to indicate the possible closing of a topic is to close the folder containing the work which that topic discusses. A more subtle indication is to vary the pace of moving through the individual papers in a folder: fast shuffling through a pile indicating that the rest of the pile is not very important and so the topic may be seen to be coming to a close.

It might be argued that closing a folder is part of the efficient organization of the actual work being performed, and that it is an overinterpretation to view it as a communicational move. However, when we compare how the participants manage folders in face to face meetings and phone meetings, we find that in phone meetings, folders often are left open after their corresponding topic is closed, and are closed either at the end of the meeting, or during the discussion of some unrelated topic. This argues strongly that folder management in face to face meetings is in fact, used as a resource for communication. This resource management is elegant, but should not not be surprising, since research at every linguistic level, from phonology to discourse, indicates that any difference that can be distinguished by speakers will be used to communicate some linguistic or social meaning.

In addition to preclosings, there are also explicit markers of topic closing, which almost always follow the negotiation process of preclosings. Farewells are examples of explicit closings:

7. OK. Bye bye. Bye.

Within a meeting, we also find explicit closings of a particular topic:

8. OK, That's all I have to say about O.

In these data, explicit topic closings are quite rare: 2 of 34 topics. It is interesting to note that both of these are offered by the owner of the agenda item.

#### **4b. Resources for Topic Introduction**

Either at the beginning of a conversation, meeting, etc, or after the previous topic has reached a point of possible conclusion, participants may introduce a new topic. They have a variety of resources for this including explicit agenda calls, explicit topic proposals, physical introductions of a topic, and introduction of a



topic without explicit marker of its novelty. Topics may also be introduced by other agents outside the current meeting. Let us consider these in turn.

First are explicit agenda calls (also called topic elicitors by (Button & Casey, 1984)). These are explicit requests by a current speaker for the introduction of a topic by other participants. Examples are:

- 9.           What's next?
- 10.          OK, what else, what else do we have to worry about?
- 11.          So anything else? Are we missing anything else?

If the other participant does not immediately propose a topic, the speaker issuing the agenda call may then introduce one. In more complex cases, the agenda call may propose a number of topics, thus projecting future topics for at least part of the conversation.

- 12. B: Let's see. I don't know whether we should talk about – Q is gonna be our toughest one. Shall we just leave that for last and go through this other stuff first?
- A: Fine
- B: Well let's, I , I don't know. This is not easy either. If we leave – This is O's stuff. These are all sort of chaotic at the moment. Well OK. This is E S's

Next are explicit topic proposals, which differ from agenda calls. While agenda calls request a next topic, topic proposals explicitly indicate that what follows is a new topic. Examples are:

- 13.          **On** to Q.
- 14.          So I'll show you my stuff here because this all kinda,       that's nothing. This is all kinda straightforward.
- 15.          And this is Mr. X (name of client)

16.           You want to see the IR bid?

Such topic proposals may be either accepted, postponed or rejected. (See (Linde, 1988) for a discussion of the relation of the linguistic form of the proposal to topic success and failure in the domain of aviation accidents.)

There are also physical topic proposals — in these data, getting a folder, opening a folder, touching a folder, etc. In general, we find that when there is a physical topical proposal, it tends to precede its corresponding linguistic topic proposal. (This is entirely consonant with the research on gestures, which finds in general that gestures tend to precede their accompanying linguistic material. (Moerman, 1989), (Schegloff, 1984), (McNeill, 1979)) That is, we argue that the physical manipulation of folders is communicative as well as instrumental.

Another means for the introduction of a new topic is the introduction of a new participant, in this case, either by phone or by the physical entry of client. Such a new participant may either introduce a new topic, or may become a new topic. For example, if one participant leaves the conversation to answer the phone, on her return to the conversation, she may introduce a new topic by reporting on the content of the call, particularly if it is related to their business. Such physical introductions from outside the meeting require no work of closing or opening; their mode of introduction is specifically an interruption of ongoing business rather than a part of it. Note that it is part of the work practice of this firm, as it is of most workplaces, that ringing phones and doorbells preempt most ongoing interaction. (In this situation, it is an issue for the person not on the phone whether to indicate polite disattention, or to attend to the conversation, if it appears to be appropriate.)

#### 4c. Participant Structure of Agenda Negotiation

We have shown that the management of the agenda is a negotiation between the participants. We may now ask about the participant structure: whether the participants have equal rights and function in the same ways. We find that it is not possible to focus on one participant as accomplishing the entire topic change, since there is a joint negotiation to establish that a prior topic is closed and that the introduction of a new topic is appropriate. However, in this situation we can distinguish project owners, and there are certain rights to the topic which only the project owner has. One is the physical ownership of folders and documents. While these are shown to the other participant, control always remains with the owner. We have no instances of a participant opening, closing, or removing documents from a folder owned by the other, except in the case where the document's owner has already offered it for viewing. In terms of agenda management, this means that the project owner uniquely has the resource of physically signalling a topic closing or opening. Also, with few exceptions, it is the project owner who introduces a project as a topic. It might appear that this is entirely obvious, since it is the project owner who knows what state the project is in, and whether it constitutes a topic. However, in conversation, it is a sign of intimacy to know one's interlocutor well enough to ask about some scheduled event or problem: How did your doctor's appointment go? In the case of GG, where there are relatively few projects at any given time, this type of topic introduction would be feasible, but in fact, we find only one case, in which the non-project owner asks about the state of a project only after a long sequence of preclosings which appear to be closing the entire telephone meeting.

17. B: Thanks, sweetie. It's good // to talk to you.

A: Yeah. Be in touch.

B: Thanks for getting all that T U stuff to me.

A: Oh, well, uh, it's uh, it was not uh, it was just a matter of, as usual, these continual changes.

B: Changes. Yeah.

A: Other than that, it was (Pause) // straightforward.

B: Oh, listen, did we ever get copies of the print shop?

A: No, I wrote to him, I, yeah, wrote to him when I sent him his last uh invoice, and asked for copies. So, I'm sure we'll hear from him.

Finally, while both participants introduce preclosings, it is only the project owner who introduces formal topic closings.

A further aspect of participant structure is determined by the assignment of tasks to be done before the next meeting. The following is the one case in these data in which the non-project owner reopens the topic once it has been formally closed, in order to check on what it was she agreed to do.

18. B: I don't think I need to. I mean it's, I've already, I've already spent so much time on it that it's kind of, I mean, I don't mind doing it, I'm glad to help her out, but. OK, what else, what else do we have to worry about? Oh.

A: Well, I, just to get back to Q for, //for a minute.

B: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought we were done with them.

A: Well, I just uh, wanna get s:traight here, what I'm, what I'm doing.

## 5. GG's Agenda Management

Although the members of GG have no formal prior agenda, and no specified chair for the meetings, agenda management appears to be successful, although this might not be the common sense prediction.

That is, topic change is relatively smooth, agreement is achieved on what topics to discuss, and few topics are proposed and rejected, or not taken up.

There is one striking exception of a failed topic proposal: a bid for a general policy discussion on how the firm should handle pro bono work, free work as a public service. The potential recipient of this topic makes a joke of it, and the proposer moves on to the next real job. It is not surprising that a general discussion of policy fails to become a topic, in the face of urgent project deadlines. This phenomenon is frequently observed in small businesses; the immediate press of work makes it very difficult to identify the appropriate time to discuss long-term plans or policy issues.

19. B: (Holding brochure) You know, we had to switch,  
(Pause) I had to switch typefaces **three** times.  
In the middle of all this. I, this has been  
problematic. You know, one of the things I was  
gonna talk about is really pro bono work.

A: Mm-hmm.

B: I can't believe how much, in fact, I gave uh, L,  
an estimate. Because they needed it for their  
campaign records. We have already done [pause]  
over nine hundred dollars worth of pro bono work  
for them.

A: [Nods, laughs] **You** have already done, [Both  
laugh] **I** have not already done.

B: Alright so back to this [picks up color sample]

A: You don't even have a kid in the school system,  
B. (Unclear)

B: (Unclear) Boy, that's too bright

In this example, B suggests as a topic pro bono work, that is, work without pay for various good causes. This topic is suggested after a long session with the campaign manager of a candidate for the local school board, for whom election materials have been designed for free. B details how much time has already been spent on this project: A, her partner makes a joke about the work B has already

done, rather than picking up the proposed topic of a possible policy on pro bono work. B does not pursue her proposed topic, but returns to a previous topic, which is a design for a paying customer. A continues her joke about B's pro bono work, and B then continues her return to the previous topic of the customer's design, which A accepts. Nowhere in this session do they return to the question of a policy for pro bono work.

However, this example is an exception. In general, we find that participants are careful to negotiate closings which are agreed to by both parties and are not abrupt. Preclosings are extensive, which assures that both participants have had their say, before a current topic is concluded. Similarly, the introduction of new topics is negotiated, rather than unilaterally announced or begun.

We may also compare the two main types of meeting which these participants use: face to face and phone, to determine if there are differences in the types of agenda management they accomplish. In the face to face meetings, we find that speakers make use of the available resource of the modality of sight and the organization of their projects by folders to use folders as a signalling device for proposed topic change. However this serves as an additional channel, augmenting rather than supplanting linguistic indications of topic closing and opening.

We also find that agenda management can be more complex in face to face situations than on the telephone: for example, we find verbal agreement on topic change not entirely synchronized with on-going actions. That is, participants may agree on what the next topic is to be, but continue with the previous topic, since they can see that they are physically moving towards closing that topic. In the following example, after the participants have agreed to break for lunch, they continue to discuss the current topic, but their tidying of papers into folders indicates that they have not abandoned the topic of lunch, but are preparing for it.

20. B: You know what's funny? Different printers have problems with different colors. I don't know if it's their presses. I don't know if it's some heat process or some technique that they're using. Um. Well it's not in there. I must have it on my desk somewhere.
- B looks through papers and sorts them into piles. A looks at papers and hands them to B.
- A: Just the original (UNCLEAR) (B: Yeah. Alright). And this and this
- B puts her pile of papers into folder, picks up paper from pile in front of A.
- B: That is, that's his, that's his original negative, which is, um, which is just a straight, a straight negative. This is the half tone.
- A: I'm going to make myself another cup of coffee.
- B picks up an envelope, looks at the documents in it.
- B: Yeah. Oh C, would you like another cup of tea? (Talking to researcher)
- C: That sounds great.
- B: Oh would you guys like a sandwich? Would you like, like a piece of, I don't know what I've got. I've got apples, I've got cheese, crackers and apples. Does everybody want some? Shall we break for lunch
- B takes out documents from envelope, flips through them. Puts papers back in envelope.
- A: (Sounds OK.)
- B: before we go on to the next thing? I'm getting hungry. // (UNCLEAR)
- A: (UNCLEAR) since he didn't,
- B: What?

- A: I said I wish he had chosen differently, but since he didn't, I think it, I think it look-
- A brings over color book and puts it on B's pile of papers. B moves one large sheet away from the pile off camera.
- B: I guess it's like, he has a, it's, it's like Mr Whathisname with the newsletter. When somebody has something **fixed** in their minds when they think about the project and they think about how they want it to be, um, it's very hard to budge them loose, it's very hard to tell them, Hey there's really a better design out there for you. I had a better design for this brochure that they wouldn't go with. It had more white space. And they woulda had to cut some of their, some of their uh, some of their print. And you try to tell them, nobody's going to read it, people **will** not, there are, there are studies on this, people don't sit down and read them, there are a few, there are a few voters who are going to sit down and read it. Most people look at it, get an image, an impression, and that's it. I mean, think, what do you do with your junk mail.
- A: (Laughs) What junk mail? Is (it) junk mail?
- B walks into kitchen. A stands turned towards kitchen.
- A walks into kitchen.

In telephone meetings, agenda management is similar to face to face meetings. Although the physical resources for joint agenda management are not present, participants make a similar use of linguistic resources to achieve the same negotiated topic changes. The one difference that we do find is a greater use of agenda calls in phone meetings: OK what's next, etc. That is, participants go to a meta-level, making specific reference to the conduct of the meeting.



Although the number of cases is too small to yield significant results, the difference is in the expected direction: absence of the physical resource for negotiation requires a more explicit use of the available linguistic resources. However, we do not find a greater use of preclosings or explicit closings in phone meetings.

These findings on the relative similarity of face to face and phone meetings represent a quite general phenomenon: it is not technological factors as much as social factors which structure speech events. Communications technologies which are incorporated into general use must be capable of becoming transparent: that is, the mechanics of their use must be assimilable to the rules of conversation, in order not to impede the communications which they are intended to facilitate. The telephone has certainly become almost entirely transparent at this point. That is, telephone use is usually not problematic for its users, and except in case of equipment problems or failure, or the introduction of new technical features, the technology of the telephone itself rarely becomes a topic for speakers. This transparency is the result of familiarity and the development of conventions, and was certainly not the case when the telephone was first commercially introduced. The earliest phone companies gave users instruction circulars and sponsored magazine articles about how to speak into the receiver, how to use the earpiece, etc. as well as suggesting uses for why one might want to use the telephone. (Aronson, 1981)

We have in these data an interesting case for comparison: We can see the process of adaptation of the participants to the new technology for computer-based fax which we have introduced. For telephone meetings using the communications technology, it might appear that participants have the element of physical introduction and manipulation previously present only in face to face meetings. However, participants can not project exactly how the reception of a message will be timed with the ongoing interaction, since an entirely successful attempt to send something can take at least two minutes. Therefore, participants can not use the fax functionality in the same way that they would pass papers to one another across the table, even though they originally predicted that this was exactly

the value that the technology would have for them, allowing them to work on a design jointly in real time, without a face to face meeting. We have also found the beginning of the process of the development of transparency. In early sessions, subjects attempting to use the communications device found that it was sufficiently difficult that it became the topic, preempting whatever topic it was intended to facilitate. However, in later sessions, we observe that use of the new technology is becoming routine.

## **6. Agenda Management in Other Settings**

It might be argued that the situation presented here is idiosyncratic in a number of ways which make the findings irrelevant for other social groups. Certainly, this research is continuing in a variety of other types of work settings. However, many aspects of the current investigation generalize to a wide variety of settings.

This particular organization has a work style which is physically organized: their work is design, which involves actual physical pieces of paper, folders, etc. This makes folder manipulation available to them as a signal for agenda management. It could be argued that other kinds of work groups do not have this resource. However, if we consider other meetings, we see that body movement, adjustments of objects, etc. are always present, and available as a resource for social negotiation: paper straightening, physical movements in chairs, standing up, taking out keys, putting away pens, etc. The virtue of the present site is that this kind of physical resource is on a rather large scale, which makes it easier to study. The results can then be tested in situations where the physical signals are smaller scale, less explicit, and hence, perhaps, more difficult to see.

This group is also somewhat unusual in that it has a social structure which is egalitarian and fluid, and in which members have very similar expertise. There is no one who is always in charge; control changes from project to project, and from minute to minute, within a given meeting. It might be argued that agenda management is a much simpler matter in meetings which have a specified chair and

and a pre-announced agenda. But even in such situations, other participants may modify or change the agenda, indicate that they are coming to completion with a particular topic, signal impatience with the length of the meeting, etc. One interesting limiting case has been presented by (Beckman & Frankel, 1984) in a study of agenda management in American medical meetings. They found that doctors control the agenda of consultations to a degree which may preclude patients from introducing material relevant to the diagnosis process. That is, they show a situation whose social constitution comes close to blocking the possibility of agenda negotiation.

Additionally, it probably is the case that certain aspects of agenda management are specific to this situation. For example, evaluation of a project functions as a possible preclosing marker. This is particularly appropriate for a work group whose work is the production of designs — the work may not be considered to be complete, and hence the topic may not be closed, until there is agreement that the quality of the work is at least acceptable. Evaluation need not always function in this way, and in other kinds of meetings, may be an opening rather than a closing. Similarly, mention of what actions the speaker plans to take in the next days or weeks functions here as a possible preclosing marker. In a meeting whose focus is scheduling, this may be the main topic, rather than a preclosing marker. It is important to note that it is exactly this kind of situation-specific detail which interacts with the very general principles of conversation to constitute specific speech events.

In conclusion, once we have understood the process of agenda negotiation in a situation in which it is overt, and part of the legitimate work practices of the group, it will be easier to understand it in situations in which it is less explicit. Furthermore, there is no organization which proceeds only by formal meetings. Informal meetings — someone dropping into someone else's office, discussions over lunch, etc. occur everywhere, and probably most actual collaborative work is transacted at such meetings. Therefore, making the link between the linguistic structure and the social structure of such meetings is an important beginning for

understanding how this speech event is constituted by participants, and why it works.

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