Conversational concerns: Issues

Article *in* Journal of Pragmatics · February 1983

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CONVERSATIONAL CONCERNS: ISSUES *

Dinah MURRAY

Contributing to the common interest entails repairing perceived gaps in mutual knowledge. All discourse between members of a community of interest depends on their having a shared background of relevant knowledge. Gaps arise from ignorance or uncertainty relative to some common interest. In any given discourse a particular range of mutual knowledge will be relevant; its identification crucially depends on identifying current interests, since relevant background is what has made a difference to the outcome of the common interests at a given moment (the outcome of an interest may be its own changed state). Even the general background of shared vocabulary depends on membership in a language community with a history of like interests.

Issues are a species of interest to which more conversation is addressed than at first appears. I illustrate this with two samples of actual discourse. Questions and answers impose the obligation to contribute *new* information. If a question has been answered, or an issue resolved, further information (new or not) relevant only to that question or issue cannot be relevantly stated. Having been answered or resolved the question or issue ceases to be of common interest. Hence the preferences for "the new" and for "minimization" that have been noted by divers writers.

"Contribute to the common interest or concern", is clearly a precept with very wide application. I will show some of the ways in which it applies in conversation, below. The precept automatically allows for non-informative discourse: parties may tell jokes, tall stories, whisper sweet nothings, share recollections, etc., and still conform to that rule [1]. Here, I am particularly concerned with those situations in which parties contribute to the common interest by aiming to increase relevant mutual knowledge. In my terms, an utterance is relevant if it *arouses, expresses,* or *makes a difference to the outcome* of a common interest or concern. Among these three, the third, strictest, species of relevance will be the focus of this paper. Any change in relevant

[1] For discussion of this point, see chap. 2 of my (uncompleted) thesis (in which much of the present paper appears as chap. 3). Parallels between my central precept and Grice's "Cooperative Principle" (1975: 45) are also brought out there.

mutual knowledge is *ipso facto* a difference in the outcome of a common interest.

Contributions to the common interest are necessarily relative to a community; before any conversational rules can apply, there must be at least two people prepared to converse with each other. As Schegloff puts it, "a person who seeks to engage in an activity that requires the collaborative work of two parties must first establish, via some interactional procedure, that another party is available to collaborate" (1968: 1089). People thus embarking on a discourse enter into an active *community of interest*; in doing so they undertake to contribute to the common interest. Such 'communities' may vary from a pair of transient strangers, at one extreme, to members of the same family, at the other. Two strangers are normally bound only by a transient interest; once the interest ceases, their community also ceases. These short-lived exchanges most often consists of requests for information, "where the obligation to respond is constant and general" (Labov and Fanshel 1977:89). Requests to be told the time or the way are of this sort; Labov and Fanshel (1977) quote Erving Goffman's term "free goods". Everyone has the obligation to pass on available free goods to anyone who has expressed a want of them, once willingness to cooperate has been signalled. One can dodge the obligation only by dodging the inquiring stranger's gaze. It is, however, a strictly limited range of interests which strangers are thus obliged to treat as common. Faced with questions on any number of other interests, a stranger will be entitled to deny community of interest: "It's none of your business", "That's *my* concern", will be legitimate retorts.

One has no right to ask a stranger questions one has every right to ask, say, a spouse. (Absolute intimacy would consist in wholesale participation in each other's interests, and entail the right to ask anything and the obligation to tell all.) Most communities of interest in which we are active fall somewhere between the two extremes. Each of us belongs to a multitude of distinct, overlapping or concentric communities of interest; some last a lifetime, some an instant. It is not my business here to catalogue their variety, nor to discuss how members can manipulate membership allegiances (see, e.g., Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1967, 1971). What is relevant is that a community of interest lasts just as long as there is at least one common interest to bind it. Fellow members are obliged to contribute information relevant to any 'binding' interest, on request. If B has information which A has expressed a want of, B can only deny it to A on the grounds that it is information privy to some community of interest in which A is not included.

The obligation to pass on relevant information may obtain even when no question has been expressed. For example, except in war, perceived danger imposes the duty to issue a warning to any threatened other (cf. "free goods"). In closer, long-term, communities of interest, non-physical threats to one's fellows' interests also impose that obligation. If A and B are friends, partners,

kin, etc., and *B* knows of a threat to *A*'s interests, failure to inform *A* of it may justly be construed as a betrayal of their community of interest. Failure to warn may be inexcusable; omitting to pass on other relevant information may also merit reproach. Faced with such a reproach, one may either offer an apology or, once again, deny community of interest.

In all these cases, a perceived inequity in mutual relevant knowledge creates an obligation to repair it, within a given community of interest. And, in all cases, collaboration between members of a community of interest depends on their having a background of relevant mutually reliable knowledge. What picks out the background in any given discourse is its relevance to a current common concern. In my terms, the relevant background is what has (at any previous moment) made a difference to whatever the current common concern or concerns may be. Contributing to the common interest in the ways I have been describing involves increasing the stock of mutually reliable knowledge.

Supplying information is not the only way of contributing to the common interest in such a way as to increase the mutually reliable relevant background. Obviously, the mutually reliable will always include the *certain*, what is known for sure. In practice, it will also include a good deal that, though taken for granted in *this* community, might be treated as arguable by outsiders. Something is arguable (an issue) just as long as there are alternative outcomes; and as long as there are possible alternatives, no one possibility can be relied upon. Hence it is always in the common interest to exclude alternatives, resolve issues, when they arise. Detailed analysis reveals that a surprising amount of discourse is devoted to this end [2].

Assertions modified by "I think", "I would say", "it seems to me", etc., are expressly put forward as opinion, suggestion, rather than as 'hard fact'. As such, the proposition within the intensional scope is explicitly open to argument. But, of course, speakers are not obliged to signal the disputability of what they say, and may not even acknowledge it. For the analyst, the best evidence of disputability is subsequent argument, either pro or con a given assertion. If an assertion is evidently true to all concerned, then it requires no supplementary support. If it receives such support, that implies that the truth of the assertion was not self-evident; just as the provision of counter-examples implies that [3].

Some issues, such as whether or not a door is locked, can be unambiguously

[2] Keenan and Schieffelin (1976) and Reichman (1978) both make issues central to the analysis of conversation. But the notions of issue they work with differ, I think, both from each other and from mine. Similarly, some of Schank's work in artificial intelligence has given "interestingness" a central place (1977; esp. 1978). While his focus is on facts or events, and he uses interestingness as a value marker, for me an interest is something which is pursued by a person or persons, and has its own inherent – though not fixed – value.
[3] Bosley (1975) has a very interesting discussion of "the art of forcing conclusions" (see especially chap. 1).

resolved at once. But some can never be resolved absolutely, placed beyond doubt for all time: all 'value judgements' are of this sort. And some issues, such as any suggestions about the future, can only be resolved after some time has passed, not in the here-and-now of a current discourse. The point of argument is (or ought to be) to bring round, make of one mind, agree. Then what is agreed, the common judgement, can be treated as given in any further exchanges between members of that community of interest, even when it cannot be counted on in other communities.

An issue may be voiced as a disputable assertion or question, or it may never be explicitly expressed at-all. Evidence for the existence of such an unspoken issue will be that remarks are addressed to resolving it. For example, take the following imagined case. A husband comes home, immediately brushes crumbs off the table, empties all the ash-trays, then goes to the fridge and says, "Oh, you didn't get me any beer". The wife responds with, "I'm awfully sorry, I just couldn't manage the extra load. I did wash all your undershirts, though". The relevance of her response and its internal coherence depend on her having heard his remark as a criticism, not only of her failure to get beer, but of her adequacy as a wife. Her remarks are addressed to that issue, as she has taken his remark (and other actions) to be. Both parties are putting into public space information relevant to the outcome of that issue, to what is (in this sexist little community of interest) the proper judgement of her adequacy as wife: his contribution argues for one conclusion, hers for another.

Issues like that of the wife's adequacy are, I think, clear cases of what Labov and Fanshel call "propositions". These are often, but not always, explicitly stated, they are "persistent potential reference points in the interaction between speakers" (1977: 122fn.). Remarks will tend to be taken as supporting or not supporting "general propositions known to both [speakers] though not necessarily believed by both of them" (1977:122). This is one of Labov and Fanshel's many insights into the nature of actual discourse that have assisted my own conversational analyses, below.

Example 1(a) [4]
1. *A*: Hello
2. *B*: Hello
   That'll be £9.31 pence
4. *A*: Sorry, I've no small change
5. *B*: Not to worry, no problem
6. *A*: I saw the article in the News & Echo
7. (*B*: silent acknowledgement)

[4] This was written down very soon after it occurred; it was sufficiently striking to be easily memorable. Regrettably, there was no recording equipment on the spot, so if there are errors in my recollection, we will never know them. But I am morally certain that any inaccuracies there may be do not affect the interest-structure of the discourse, which is what chiefly concerns me here.

A is a regular customer at a supermarket in which *B* works on a till, at which the conversation takes place. Beyond their occasional encounters in this setting, they do not know each other at all. In the normal course of events, the conversation would have closed with an exchange of farewells immediately after 5, during which their transaction is coming to a satisfactory conclusion. But this time, *A* introduces a 'new' concern – (6) "the article in the News & Echo" – and secures uptake from her interlocutor. She thus changes the basis of their community of interest: the dreary, predictable task of paying for the shopping is succeeded by a concern of quite a different order. Line 6 (on its surface, anyway) is a statement about an event in *A*'s life. As such, according to Labov and Fanshel, it "requires only an acknowledgement of a minimal kind" (1977: 101). The sequence from 6–7 bears out this informal rule. Here is what follows it:

Example 1 (b)
8. *A*: cried all the way through
9. *B*: Yesterday a woman was angry with me .
10. *A*: ANGRY with you?
11. *B*: Because it made her cry
12. *A*: Angry with YOU? She seems to have it wrong: it's not YOU she should be angry with ...

A has learned from the article in the paper that *B* came from a large Hungarian Jewish family, of which she was the only survivor; that she had been abused and humiliated not only by the invading Nazis but by eager Hungarian anti-semites; that she had spent years in a concentration camp, and had stayed there for $2\frac{1}{2}$ years after the war, because she had nowhere else to go. So, in telling *B* that she has read the article she is telling her that she knows those tragic facts. By telling her that, by introducing a concern to which those facts are background, *A* obliges herself to say more. Some comment is called for, and *B* awaits it.

The comment *A* produces, "cried all the way through" (8) is meant to convey to *B* her opinion of the content of the article. If one person weeps for another, we generally take the tears to express sympathy, shared concern, for the other's distress: *A* is meaning to communicate sympathy to *B* by telling her she cried. But, as the ensuing dialogue reveals, the inference from such tears to sympathy does not hold universally: it cannot be relied on in every context, and in particular cannot be relied on in this one. By disclosing that "a woman was angry ... because it made her cry" (9 and 11), *B* makes the proper attitude towards the article (and her life) an issue. Sympathy and anger should be mutually exclusive attitudes to the same object. So, 9 and 11 provide a counterexample to the generalization on which *A* has relied in 8.

On its own, line 9 is puzzling: How could anger be a possible attitude

toward *B* on the basis of the article? *A* stresses "angry" in line 10, siting it in a context of contrasting possibilities, as the most economical way of putting the question I have just given in full. After pausing to let *A* express her interest, *B* goes on as though she knew the question was in the air already: 9 and 11 make a perfectly coherent whole. With 11, she 'explains' 9, answers 10, and puts *A*'s attitude in question. On the face of it, *B*'s 9 and 11 are just information about an event in her life. As such, they should invite only a minimal response; but, as we have seen, they also raise an issue.

A's "Angry with YOU?" (12) shifts the focus of the syntactically identical question at 10. This time the appropriateness of anger is not in question, rather, the object at which it should be directed is at issue. Anger is taken for granted (given, presupposed); the question now is not, Why anger? but, Why *B*?, with the implication that there are relevant others at whom the anger might rightly be directed. She underscores that implication with her next remark – "she seems to have it wrong, it's not YOU she should be angry with" – at the same time producing an evaluation of the woman's anger as wrong. *A* is taking pains to make it quite clear that, if there is a question as to the right attitude towards that article, she is on the same side as *B*. She is firmly nipping the possible alternative in the bud; in terminating that possibility, *A* also terminates the issue of her opinion, first raised by line 6. Ceasing to be an issue, its outcome passes into the background of relevant knowledge that *A* and *B* can mutually rely upon. *B* can count on *A*'s sympathy, and *A* can count on her doing so.

Example 1 (c)
13. *B*: And that was just the beginning ...
14. (*A*:silent query)
15. *B*: There was more, far more. Worse; I couldn't tell it, I can't even think of it
16. *A*: I'm sure, I'm sure. Some things one can't, they're too terrible
17. *B*: (sighs) Well, thank you for your kind words
18. (*A*:silent acknowledgement)
19. *B*: Well, bye-bye.
20. *A*: Bye-bye.

With line 13, *B* is not indicating to *A* that there is more to be learned about the incident of the angry woman. Rather, she means to tell *A* that there are more tragic facts to know than those revealed in the article. Though she has aroused *A*'s interest, put her into a state of felt ignorance, she has no intention of supplying the want. *A* is to learn only that there was "worse". Although she is excluding *A* from any community of interest which might be privy to those terrible facts, she at the same time excuses herself for doing so. She would draw nobody into it with her, she herself is its sole, reluctant, member. Many

authors have remarked that a negative seems to imply that someone might have expected the opposite (see, e.g., Labov and Fanshel 1977:104; Bosley 1975:6; and Givón 1978). In this case, *B*'s "I couldn't tell it, I can't even think of it" might be expanded as follows. "Given your sympathy, given our community of interest (which I have just acknowledged) you might reasonably expect to be told these relevant facts by me, but I can tell them to no-one, even myself."

Like (9) and (11), lines 13 and 15, though ostensibly about speaker events, raise an issue, and *A* is invited to take sides. Once again she sides with *B*. (16) "I'm sure" makes it certain between them that *B* is absolved of the obligation to tell, "some things one can't" universalizes the absolution, and "they're too terrible" specifies its basis. With (17), *B* rewards *A*'s sympathy with thanks for her "kind words", and initiates a "pre-closing sequence" (see Schegloff and Sacks 1973; and Sacks et al. 1974). So, with no issues left unresolved, their discourse comes to a satisfactory conclusion.

Most accounts of conversation, like this one, bring in some such notion as mutual knowledge. "Mutual knowledge" is a debatable designation, for some of the argument see Sperber and Wilson (1980), and Prince (1981). For more general discussion of the topic – under various designations – see Schiffer (1972), Lewis (1969), Clark and Marshall (1980), Tyler (1978), and especially Rommetveit (1974). Whatever one chooses to call it, it is the essential background to all communication. In any given discourse, the question arises of how parties 'have access' to the relevant background, of how they pick it out from among their sum total of mutual knowledge. In practice, talkers rarely have difficulty in taking into account what others do or do not know. How they succeed in this is a problem for the analyst, not for the participants. I shall examine that question in the light of example 1.

The relevant background knowledge to lines 1–5 is given by the nature of the transaction which is taking place. It can be nicely handled by a 'frame' type analysis (see, e.g., Minsky 1975). The analyst's problems begin with line 6, "I saw the article in the *News & Echo*". There is no single *News & Echo*, it is a weekly paper, and more than a week has elapsed since the relevant issue. And, of course, in any given issue there are many articles. Since they had had no previous discourse about anything except shopping, there is no prior referent to account for either *the* in (6). Yet *A*'s reference to *the* article in *the News & Echo* secures uptake. It is justified, and successful, simply because its referent concerns *B*.

In disclosing that she has "seen" the article, *A* is letting *B* know that she has read it, that she knows what's in it. But can they now speak on the basis that *all* the information in the article is now mutual knowledge between them? Admitting at last that I was '*A*', if *B* had relied on my having effective access to all the facts in that article, she would have been wrong. We assume selective

recollection in each other, and we are right. So *B* cannot rely on *A* being privy to all that information, only some of it; what can she rely on as mutual knowledge on the basis of (6)? Certain facts in the article will have struck anyone as more salient than others, namely those I retailed above. They are such facts as to arouse the concern of any fellow human being. Had there been any doubt in *B*'s mind about which facts were responsible for *A*'s interest, they would have been resolved by (8) "cried all the way through". The concern which *A* is putting into public space is at least partly made up of distress. It is the distressing facts and events of *B*'s life that provide the background of mutual knowledge.

As well as unambiguously circumscribing the relevant background, *A*'s line 8 is also meant to let *B* know of her sympathy. But instead of immediately being taken for granted by *B*, until line 12 it is an issue. Both parties know this, and each knows the other knows; so, for the time being, their mutual relevant knowledge is of this issue against the background of tragic facts already given. It is also true that a fact about some woman was added to their store of mutual knowledge with (9 and 11); but the woman herself is of no interest, she is a mere counterexample. *B*'s next line confirms this interpretation, "And that was just the beginning" (13, primary but not emphatic stress on *that*) does not continue from the incident of the angry woman. It connects instead with the background in which *A*'s sympathy – now presupposed – is grounded; the knowledge imparted in (9 and 11) ceases to be relevant. Although neither party has voiced or directly referred to the distressing facts which constitute the background, *B*'s "And that ..." is intelligible. That is so because both parties know what they're talking about, it is neither the woman nor the article that is "just the beginning". Rather, it is what *A* has learned selectively from the article, namely the horrors revealed therein.

No sooner has she told *A* that there is more to be known, than *B* is telling her that she will never know it. The rule that, if you put someone in a position of felt ignorance you will be expected to fulfil the want if possible, is a special case of the obligation to contribute to the common concern, discussed above. That the rule is part of their mutual knowledge (even children know it, breaking it is a favourite childhood tease) is manifest in *B*'s excusing herself for not fulfilling it, and *A*'s accepting the excuse. Although she leaves *A* none the wiser as to further particulars of her life, *A* knows that *B* judges them to be "worse", untellable. In her next turn she lets *B* know that she believes the judgement without further substantiation, and accepts the excuse. And *B*'s pre-closing, "Well, thank you ..." lets *A* know that her by now indisputably sympathetic concern is appreciated. As well as events, the objects of mutual knowledge include conversational rules, interests and concerns, issues and attitudes.

Throughout the conversation, 'access' to the relevant background has depended on knowing the current mutual interest. In the first part that

knowledge was given in the situation; the transaction could have taken place in silence. But, from line 6, understanding the common concern crucially depends on understanding a common tongue. Parties can take mutual intelligibility for granted only insofar as they can rely on mutual knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. I wish to argue, however, that mutual knowledge of vocabulary itself depends on a background of common interests. I have already shown that understanding phrases like "the article" (6) and "and that" (13) requires a grasp of the interest that motivates them, in context. It is not such context-determining interests that I have in mind here. Rather, it is those interests (with their attendant knowledge) that we can assume any fellow member of our language community will have been engaged in at one time or another.

To support the claim that common vocabulary depends on common interests, I now briefly discuss lexical comprehension by children of the conversation in example 1. I examined three children, aged 6:5, 4:6, 2:8, on the intelligibility of the vocabulary items in it. The eldest child, who is numerate, literate, and gets pocket money, had difficulty only with the reference of *News & Echo*, whilst taking it for granted that it was a newspaper. The middle child, though highly articulate, with a vocabulary fit to express his every interest, is neither literate nor fully numerate, nor practised at spending money. His difficulties arose with lines 3, 4, and 6: *£9.31 pence, small change*, and *the article in the News & Echo.*

Although he knows what money is, and knows what it is used for (coins and purchases have both engaged his interest), the difference between one sum and another has never concerned him. Until knowing about money affects his interests (becomes relevant), he will remain ignorant of just what £9.31 might amount to. *Small change* presents a parallel, though not identical, case. Relative size being a recurrent concern in his life, *small* is a problem only as a modifier of *change* – wherein the real difficulty lies. He has *change* in his vocabulary in the sense of *make or become different*, as in "We'd better change your trousers", or as a noun in "That makes a nice change". But the question of what *small change* means in its monetary sense had not so far arisen in his life. Finally, *article* is a word which is entirely absent from his vocabulary. The explanation for this absence is, once again, the absence of any interest or concern with the thing in question.

The youngest child had all those problems, plus *yesterday* in line 9. And he has not pursued interests which would yield the knowledge relevant to understanding even that "£9.31 pence" stands for a sum of money. As for *yesterday*, if he understands it at all, it is as a way of making clear that an event is past and over, rather than as a way of *locating* an event in past time. His concerns are predominantly with the now and its immediate past and future; what difference does it make to him whether it was yesterday, a week ago, or six months ago that such and such a memorable event occurred?

Someone might want to argue that the differences in vocabulary between

the three children are a result of exposure, or experience. It is easy to argue the case against exposure as the determining factor. Take *small change* again. The middle child has been 'exposed' to both notes and coins, and is aware that both are money; and he has been 'exposed' to many discussions which have involved talk of "small change" in this sense. That is, he has been present at many exchanges like (and including) that in example 1, 1–5; and he has frequently been there when discussions of "whether there is enough small change for his big brother's lunch or pocket money", have taken place.

The case against experience is nicely put the philosopher David Hamlyn: "It is certainly not enough ... if a person is to acquire a given concept, that he should be presented with a wide range of relevant experiences, unless he is in a position to see them as relevant" (1978: 121). The presence of the four-year-old when small change is talked about has so far been as observer, not participant. Whether or not there is "small change" has never been his concern, even though whether or not there are available small coins (for counting, for example) has sometimes been of interest. Having never participated in a community of interest in which *small change* is being used as an expression for low value coins, he had never been concerned to understand or use the phrase. Once he is taking part in transactions with money he will be functioning as a member of such a community. Alternatively, he could himself create such a community by asking what the expression means. In fact, my question brought the phrase to his notice, aroused his interest, and he did ask me what it meant. His prior interest in money as a physical object, and in observing shopping transactions, gave him sufficient relevant knowledge to understand the answer.

For adult members of a language community, the meaning of its basic vocabulary is not in question, is taken for granted. It is mutual knowledge we rely on in conversations with any fellow adult speaker of British-English. Some long-term communities of interest develop specialized vocabularies, such as slangs and jargons, available only to their members, which reflect their special interests and knowledge. Most proper names also are available only within communities of interest narrower than the language community. On hearing "News & Echo" (especially in the context of line 6), most fellow members of our language community will take it to be a newspaper, but only members of a much more restricted community of interest will know *which* newspaper. Just as, if I say, "Tony is a stage-hand these days", only members of a highly restricted community of interest will know who (which Tony) I mean, though any English speaker will take it that he's a male person. At the most intimate extreme (e.g. loving couples), there is the most idiosyncratic range of mutual knowledge, including always general knowledge available in virtue of membership in broader communities. The richer the background of mutual interests and knowledge, the richer the "meaning potential" of a vocabulary [5].

[5] This useful phrase was coined by Halliday (1975, 1978).

Identifying membership of a community of interest is a prerequisite of mutual understanding – a prevailing concern in all conversations, and it is an efficient way of identifying realms of mutual knowledge.

The discussion so far has ignored two complicating factors. One is the possibility of a remark being addressed to *several* interests at once. The other is the fact that information to which all parties are privy may have been recognized *as relevant* only by one party. Both these factors play a role in the following snatch of discourse.

Example 2 [6]
1. *A*: There wasn't anything with his secretary?
2. *B*: No, no.
3. 　　– Driving too fast
4. 　　– and getting up at 5.30 in the morning to look after the sheep.

Unlike example 1, this is not a complete discourse. It is a fragment of a much longer conversation, in which three parties *A*, *B* and *C* (who know each other intimately) are taking part. I'm sorry to frustrate the reader by not publishing the whole discourse: it was so private and scurrilous a conversation that the parties to it are understandably reluctant to have it all in print (partly because they agree with my analysis). *C*, silent here, is *B*'s brother. *T* is their cousin, and *A* is married to *C*. They have met with the express purpose of helping *B* decide whether or not to make a trip to her and *C*'s home town, where *T* still lives. This issue dominates the whole conversation, and example 1 is addressed to it too, via a number of other issues. *B*'s response to *A*'s question is a skilful attempt to lay all those issues to rest simultaneously, in such a way as to make the trip look pointless. She is busy looking for reasons why she doesn't have to go.

As guidance in the analysis that follows, I give here a sketch of the issues involved, illustrated by certain assertions that *B* has made earlier in the conversation.

Issue i: Should *B* make the trip?
　　"I don't particularly want to spend any time to go home"
　　"Sounds like a fun weekend if I go home ... hmnn, shit"
Issue ii: Could *B*, by going, forestall the threatened collapse of *T*'s marriage?
　　If so, all parties agree, it would be worth her going. (→ i)
　　"I don't think it'll make any difference if I go"
Issue iii: Is *T*'s marriage already beyond repair? If so, then repairing it (ii) can
　　be no reason for making the trip (→ i).

[6] This is part of a 90-minute conversation which I recorded (with the parties' knowledge) and transcribed in full.

Issue iv: Is it true that *T* and his wife have had no sex for years? If so, then the marriage is likely to be beyond repair (→ iii → ii → i), and *either* (a) *T* is likely to be demented from sexual frustration *or* (b) has sought a sexual outlet elsewhere.

"Why *T* was going out of his head is because as far as I can see they hadn't slept together for over two years";

Issue v: Is it true that *T* is demented, irrational? If so, he is not susceptible to argument, therefore there is no point in *B* trying to argue with him, therefore she is unlikely to be able to help repair the marriage (→ ii → i).

"*T* was going out of his head"

"I can't get through to *T*, it's impossible"

"You can't talk to him"

Issue vi: Is it true that *T* has manifest irrational behaviour? If so, it would provide evidence that he is suffering from sexual frustration (iva), in which case it is likely that the marriage has collapsed beyond repair (→ iva → iii → ii → i)

A's question, "There wasn't anything with his secretary?" (1) concerns the possibility that *T* has an alternative sexual outlet (ivb). When *B* said, "Why *T* was going out of his head is because as far as I can see they hadn't slept together for over two years", her uses of the past subtly suggested that *T* was already "out of his head" and that no possibility remained of his having sex with his wife. Although she is attempting to treat *T*'s incipient nuttiness as a given, she knows that it is in fact debatable, and that both *A* and *C* doubt it. If it is agreed that sexual frustration is likely to lead to dementia (no one in this discourse chooses to dispute it), then if *B* could show that *T* had had no sex life for years, it would lend support to her claim. Whereas, if the contrary were the case, and *T* had in fact been enjoying some sexual activity, then her claim would be undermined. Hence, *A*'s question is relevant to *T*'s mental health as well as to his sex life (v → ii → i).

Even if *T* has had no affair with his secretary, the possibility is still open that he has in fact had sex with his wife (no one in this discourse is in a position to have a confident opinion on this). *B* follows her denial that *T* has had an affair with his secretary (2) with, "Driving too fast, and getting up at 5.30 to look after the sheep". In doing so, she is, in part, addressing the possibility that all is well, after all, with *T*'s marital sex life. Reckless driving is a notorious form of sexual sublimation; it is also irrational. Given that *T* is really a lawyer and the sheep just lose money, his pre-dawn sheep-tending – though implausible as sublimation – is certainly irrational. These are two instances of *T*'s unreasonableness, and as such lend support to all *B*'s contentions (vi → iva → iii → i and v → ii → i). This is the background which confers coherence on lines 2–4.

When *B* puts those cases of *T*'s irrational behaviour into public space, she is not telling *A* and *C* anything new. Knowing *T*, they both know his habits:

the sheep and the driving are long-standing concerns. What *B* is doing is making *A* and *C* aware that those facts should make a difference to the outcome of the issues current here. Several researchers have argued that conversationalists display a preference for conveying new information [7]. But, as far as I know, only Sperber and Wilson (MSb: Chs. 1–2) have attempted a fully explicit account of newness, in particular of relevant new information. In their terms, an utterance will provide new relevant information if and only if it combines with a 'background set of assumptions' to yield implications given in neither the utterance nor the background. By being relative to a restricted background, their definition accommodates cases like this, in which informa- tion is seen as newly relevant. In my terms, their relevant utterances are those which make a difference to the outcome of a common interest. In order for some fact or event to make a difference to a current interest, it cannot previously have been taken as relevant to *that* interest, or there would be no difference still to make.

Issues and questions, because they require to be resolved or answered, impose the particular obligation to make a *new* difference to the outcome. Addressing a debatable issue involves putting forward facts or events which will support or count against one outcome or another. An issue is only resolved when every alternative but one has been ruled out, but it may be settled by agreeing *pro tem.* on a likeliest outcome. Once enough has been said to settle an issue, there is no more to say. Similarly, once a question has been answered, it ceases to be a question, hence ceases to be a current interest. Grice's " Be no more informative than required" (1975), Sacks and Schegloff's "preference for minimization" (1979; see also Schegloff 1972), and Sperber and Wilson's equivalent specification (1980) all follow from the nature of issues and ques- tions.

A problem for any analysis of actual talk is, as Sperber and Wilson put it, "how does the hearer know which background assumptions, out of the enormous range which could in principle be part of the intended context, are the ones the speaker intended him to use?" (1980: 5). This is the same problem as that of access to relevant mutual knowledge, discussed above. Identifying the relevant background is a prerequisite of comprehension, both for par- ticipants and observers. I have been arguing that doing so crucially depends on identifying the interest or interests which are being addressed. A fact or event may be relevantly stated as long as it has made or would make a difference to the outcome of a current common interest. If the only interest to which it was relevant is now dead, then it cannot be relevant to state that fact or event now.

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[7] Goodwin (1979) makes a detailed analysis of shifts of gaze in the light of what is new to whom. He remarks that Sacks had noted a preference for the new. Labov and Fanshel find that assertions about events known to all parties tend to produce a minimal response (1977: 101). See also Schank on "interestingness" (1978).

But where there is felt ignorance or doubt, contributing to the common interest will entail putting into public space any information that will repair it.

As we have seen, much more of conversation is devoted to the pursuit of issues than at first appears. When that is the case, both the preferences for the new and for minimization assume the force of rules. Doubt and ignorance are also responsible for changes and increase in mutual knowledge. For the outcome of a now dead issue or question will pass into the realm of the reliable, where it may be relevant to any number of further concerns.

I have been using conversation to illustrate some of the consequences of obeying the general social rule: Contribute to the common concern. Being in a position to do so depends on knowing the common concern, with its relevant background. It is always in the common interest to have the same differences shape the common concerns. The existence of a community of interest depends on its members having at least one common interest. But, because an interest in fact resides in an individual, for perfect community the same differences must be made to each member's interests. Two people's interests will be the same just to the extent that they have made the same judgements. Common knowledge and common interest are interdependent characteristics of all human discourse [8].

All this, of course, raises the question: What is an interest? That is a highly debatable issue, and I shall not attempt to resolve it here.

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[8] That Reinhart finds "aboutness" and "old information" as recurrent, apparently distinct uses of "topic" is not surprising. It is a case of the context-defining interest (aboutness) and its taken-for-granted background displaying their inherent reciprocity.

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