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Mobile telephony, new interaction rituals?

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Abstract

The nature of conversation and the organisation required to undertake conversation has long been understood (Schegloff, 1968, 1972,1973,1974,1978,1979; Goffman, 1959) and the nature of the negotiations required to undertake such a complex yet workaday task have been clearly set out. The aim of this paper is to suggest ways in which the introduction of the mobile telephone with complexities of its own have changed the nature of communication and the norms which accompany the interactions. The paper also discusses the nature of public and private space and the ways in which mobile telephony is changing the use of the public arena.

Mobile telephony, new interaction rituals?

Mobile telephony has become an ever present part of our daily lives but how much has really changed in terms of the way the telephone has been used as a communication medium? This short paper suggests ways in which the mobile telephone has changed the nature of communication and conversation and has also changed the ways in which we approach the nature of personal and private space and how that space is mediated and used.

As ever the norms which we have all come to know and trust are challenged by the introduction and adoption of new technology. The revolution which was the postal service showed that the idea of communication could be brought to the masses at a price which was acceptable and accessible. We saw that within towns at least the mail provided the route to speedy and personal communication with letters sent early in the morning often receiving a reply by lunch and a further response back by close of the day. This speed of communication challenged the pre existing formality of correspondence and opened up the potential for pseudo conversation although the potential for ignoring exchanges was advanced.

Correspondence sent through the Royal Mail was, and is, assured for security purposes. Anybody intercepting the Royal Mail could find themselves not only incurring the wrath of countless citizens but also attract the attention of the law. The value of the communication was thus in speed and security.

Just as use of the mail was restricted further developments in speedy communication were limited by cost. The telephone at inception required staff all along the line to make the physical connection between caller and recipient. The technology reduced though the potential for the recipient to ignore the summons of the communication, although we might consider that since the early technology was expensive to own a further 'filter' might be invoked to manage the summons of the conversation (a servant for instance).

While letters provide at least a hint of the identity of the sender in their presentation the summons to a telephone conversation, the ringing bell, provides no such information producing as it does the same call to action regardless of the person instigating the call. Despite this obvious failing the ability to maintain a filter on incoming communication was possible for as long as a servant was available to act in this capacity and the quantity of communications remained low. Speed of communication had been increased but at the cost of the reduction in the ability of the recipient to ignore the demands of the technology.

We all spend some time in communication and we all spend some time in ignoring the advances made on our time and personal space by those who seek to engage us in communication by whatever means. The delivery, now in the UK once daily rather than the rapid and frequent delivery of the past, of a plain looking envelope may bring the attention of the recipient but the excitement of the opening may be jarred by the revelation of the contents – another advertisement for double glazing. The extent to which inattention to such delivery is possible is limited since we are unlikely to wish to ignore a written communication although our previous knowledge of the contents of certain styles of envelopes may provide a clue and dampen our excitement about the contents and we may deploy civil inattention to a new sphere of communication as we pass the brown envelope towards the recycling bin.

Walking down the street offers similar opportunity for intervention into our communication space and there are often frequent demands on us to engage in exchanges. The extent to which we are able and willing to attend to such requests for engagement vary by mood, demands on our time and much more but the event of inattention is difficult to engineer and if inappropriately executed can lead to embarrassment.

The eyes are a powerful channel for intimate connection and exchange between people. Not only does the "look" suggest consciousness and intention of its own, (Sartre, 1956) but it also works as a device for people to commonly establish their "openness" to communication (Kendon, 1990; Argyle, 1976; Goffman 1963).

Meeting a person's gaze is an important step but does not, of itself, grant permission for a conversation. Goffman refers to "civil inattention" as a fundamental social behaviour of people, even unacquainted people, that happen to come into each other's proximity without ever having any intentions to converse:

„One gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design.”

(Goffman, 1963: 84)

If your initial glance and orientation towards the other person was not met by and return of interest, your behaviour passes as a "civil inattention" ritual and you are saved the embarrassment of requesting a conversation with an unwilling other (Goffman, 1963; Cary, 1978; Kendon, 1990).

An acknowledgement of your attention, perhaps a short smile, a return of gaze, a second glance or a simple inclination of the head, is enough to institute a conversation – you have been granted 'permission to proceed' and the opening is available to you. An initial exchange is sufficient regardless of physical distance and the permission to proceed is valid until such time as the distance reduces sufficiently for a close exchange and the true beginning of conversation can begin with initial exchange, moving into the turn taking which is inherent in conversation (Schegloff, 1974).

As the telephone became an accessible means of communication and with the removal of the intermediary the potential for civil inattention became less, almost zero, since the summons of the telephone provided no clue as to the identity of the caller. The insistent bell was one which could not be ignored since the value of the intended conversation could not be judged in advance

With the further development of the technology intermediate screening of calls became possible. The introduction of first telephone answering machines and then, with the development of digital exchanges, the use of caller number identification. Screening of calls in this way allowed the recipient of a call the opportunity to invoke civil inattention within the conversation but without the potential for the imposition of embarrassment if a beginning was ignored.

The increased and now dominant use of mobile telephony has allowed the further development of conversation and especially the beginning of telephone conversations. The introduction of mobile telephones has changed the nature of conversation but has also changed the nature of the public and private sphere in which conversation can take place.

Imagine the situation in a supermarket, a public sphere, in which there are seemingly strict rules about where and with whom conversation is allowed. It is normally not permitted to comment on the content of another shoppers basket of goods, nor is it permitted that talk takes place between strangers except in certain areas. You may see people chatting about the quality of the fresh fruit but rarely about the contents of the baked beans, they chat in the queue for the deli counter but not for the frozen fish fingers. This is a public sphere in which strict rules of permitted conversation are evoked.

Consider now the situation in which a mobile telephone rings – a conversation ensues in which all the members of the public sphere are excluded and a private domain is created – no comment is permitted by those outside the conversation even though they are able to hear 50% of the interaction. The conversation contin-

ues through that most intimate part of the shopping ritual, the checkout, the place in which we exchange our banking details or at least our currency, and the call is still dominant, the primary cause of presence in the public sphere, the purchase of goods, becomes secondary to the private.

The summons which is the ring of a mobile phone, is different from the summons of a, conventional, land-line, telephone since, it always offers the chance for the summons to be ignored, for civil inattention to be invoked and yet so strong is the desire for the introduction of a private sphere that the call is dominant and urgency in attaining this private sphere is all embracing. A call to a mobile phone is an event which is seen as being above all other interaction.

Students at a UK University were asked via a short questionnaire how they used their mobile telephones. More than 90% of students indicated that their mobile telephone was never switched off and was now their primary means of communication. The survey also showed that of the remaining 10% 50% of students turned the telephone on as their first act of the day so that during the day 95% of telephones were continually available for incoming calls.

So important is the mobile telephone to users that even when asked, instructed or required, to turn off their mobile telephones users ignored the instruction in most cases. In the student survey 80% of students said that their mobile telephone was switched on during lectures although 45% of those indicated that it was switched to 'silent mode'. This is not an uncommon event since calls to mobile telephones have recently disrupted sporting events, even where spectators have been warned that they would be evicted from the stadium if an incoming call was heard. In this case eviction from a sporting event could incur a substantial cash penalty since the entry fee would not be refunded emphasising the value of access to a private sphere of communication to the user which is above and beyond the public sphere in which they also wish to be a participant.

While the mobile telephone can be seen to mirror the landline telephone in terms of functionality it has the important feature that it always identifies the nature of an incoming call. This offers the opportunity for civil inattention, 60% of students stated that they routinely ignored calls from numbers which they, or their phone books, did not identify as known callers. This further development of call screening allows a transfer of power within the conversation to the recipient from the caller with the recipient maintaining the right to permit the call after review of any message which has been placed on the mobile mailbox.

With a conversation Schegloff has identified a clear set of rules relating to turn taking – a simple systematic for turn taking in conversation (Schegloff, 1974) and we can see that in evidence in everyday conversation as well as on the telephone (both landline and mobile). We can also see the potential for turn taking in the early days of the postal service in major cities in the UK where an exchange of 'turns' could take place in written form.

The mobile telephone has offered the chance to develop turn taking to a more advanced degree by integrating the written word into an arena which has hitherto been the sole domain of verbal communication. The development of text messaging services which are an inherent part of mobile telephony has allowed not only the development of a new language (text speak) but also a new mode of exchange which limits the interaction and yet which still requires turn taking.

While call screening allows the transfer of control at the point of summons from the caller to the recipient a text message allows continual review of the conversation at all points by either party and the nature of embarrassment in not maintaining the conversation is removed. At each turn within the communication the recipient of the message can choose to reject the summons, since each turn becomes a new interaction, and to end the interaction at that point. It is difficult, if not impossible, for the caller to invoke any sanction on the recipient as they might in a face to face or other verbal interaction.

The summons of a text message is not to be seen as of lesser import than that of a verbal summons. Within the survey 70% of students said that they would wish to view an incoming text message immediately upon receipt and, if accepted as an initial turn, would feel obligated to reply immediately. This immediacy of reply would be undertaken regardless of their physical status in either a private or public sphere regardless of the public sphere. The only requirement which would deny an immediate reply was not content of the message but that they knew the sender and that they, therefore, acknowledged and acted upon the summons.

So is a text message a conversation or a written communication? The text message includes the essential beginnings of a conversation, the summons/answer sequence which we see in, especially telephone, conversations. The length of a text message tends to be short and the intent is to be interactive. The requirement that in the case of a pause the last person to speak is required to continue the conversation appears to hold true in most text message interactions 'did u get my last msg' would be a reasonable turn if no reply were received quickly although in the highly abbreviated world of text messaging 'err???' might be a more likely turn! The interaction is synchronous and both parties to an interaction are available to the interaction at the same time rather than being asynchronous in the case of modern day postal or even email interactions.

Why then if you have a technology which permits verbal communication with all the additionality that verbal communication offers would a user opt for a text message? The text message offers the chance for rejection of a turn at any point, it introduces additional summons sequences into the interaction and permits both parties to the interaction additional control which would otherwise be denied. It offers the chance for increased personal control of the public sphere and the introduction of personal and private space into the public where the private can be dominant even above the dominant role assigned to verbal exchanges by mobile phone.

As mobile telephony reduces in cost and as user numbers grow the nature of the public/private split will decrease further with increased domination of the public by the private. Verbal interaction will, it seems, continue to decline in importance with increasing numbers of text message interactions but they will remain essentially turns within a conversation although the nature of the turn will change over time as the dominance of this mode of conversation increases.

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