Still on Holidays Hank?
-- 'Doing Business' by 'Having a Chat'

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There’s something of an unspoken tendency in the field of conversation analysis to conflate the notion of ‘conversation’ with that of ‘all forms of talk’. Hence the very positive efforts in the field to try to find the mechanisms behind what people do when they talk together, whenever they talk together, whoever they may happen to be, whatever the topic, whatever the type of talk. To stress: this is absolutely admirable and a great advance on, to name a few, social semiotics, speech-act theory and formal pragmatics. But is it possible that the various types of talk that we can find inside single conversations may be interesting and significant, not just for analysts but also for those who, as we hope to show, manifestly orient to generic changes within the conversations they are co-constructing?

One way of opening up this possibility is to try to contrast conversation with chat. Obviously some conversations can be all chat, and some not. Less obviously, some conversations might involve no chat whatsoever (because they have only 'business' to conduct). But for the most part, and this is our point, even the least 'chatty' conversations seem to be capable of switching into that genre. Our question is: what is occurring at such boundaries and, more importantly, how -- that is, as an effect of what possible general conversational mechanisms?

Here, we’re taking ‘chat’ in its most widely accepted sense: as talk which is specifically informal and relaxed; the kind of talk that pretty much any co-conversationalists can do, even in the midst of the most serious ‘business’. We’re even sufficiently happy (at least as an initial approximation) with dictionary definitions of ‘chat’. For example:

vi to talk easily or familiarly. -- vt (often with up) to talk informally and often flirtatiously in order to gain something, eg to cajole or seduce. ("Chat")

Naturally (though fans and exponents of the transitive verb), we are professionally interested in the intransitive definition. That is, we are not contrasting conversation with chatting (up) someone, rather we are contrasting it with the type of talk that chat is, as such. And one of our initial warrants for chat being a members’ (rather than just an analysts’) category is the fact that the term, ‘chat’ can be used ironically/euphemistically, thereby trading on its ubiquitous sense of informality. Hence, in police dramas like Wildside, Bill might suggest, ironically, to a suspect ‘we’ll go down to the station for a chat then’, both meaning ‘I’m going to interrogate the shit out of you’ and clearly implying the rough-hewn violence common to that particular show. And, as it turns out, we can discover such euphemistic and/or ironical (if milder) usages in actual data. In the following fragment of psychological-assessment talk, for example, we can hear the assessor using ‘chat’ as a place-holder for the formal business of testing itself²:
What follows is an actual instance of 'formal' talk alternating into and out of chat. This fragment is, by contrast, from a call to a software helpdesk.

1 C: ( ) "Searching for installed components" (5,0) "Click OK to remove ((name of software)) components" "OK" "Are you sure you want to remove?" Yes

2 H: Yes please

3 C: 's got up "Uninstalling components". "Processing". (6,0) I'll go back to control panel and check that again, the properties on the C drive (26,0)

4 H: That's ticking over is it?

5 C: Yes Paul, it's just going through it — oh I'm off on to "Direct show" now

6 H: Good (2,0)

7 H: Still on holidays Hank?

8 C: Well I've just had about four or five days off just to do a few things, I'm going to take some (1,0) longer leave in February but er I thought while I'm off I'll try and attack this Internet business but it's been an absolute bloody nightmare.

9 H: We'll get you up and running

We take it that any reader/analyst can hear the very distinct change of conversational genre the participants themselves orient to after the pause (between lines 6 and 7) when Paul asks 'still on holidays Hank?' And we take it that what can be heard is a 'switch of gears', as it were, from the formal business of the technical telephone conversation (formulated later as 'attack[ing] this Internet business') to informality, to the kind of chat that more or less any interlocutors can have. Our hypothesis, here, is that what chat can do inside formal talk (and though it may also do many other things besides) is to maintain the parties as being in a state of talk while, as far as the formal business is concerned, they mutually know they have 'nothing to talk about' -- for now, but must later.

In this case, we (and they) can hear the impending arrival of a state of 'nothing to talk about' as the computer screen (at Hank's end) goes into a long sub-routine of disinstalling large amounts of software. The gap of 26 seconds is, by any conversational standards -- and particularly on the phone -- an astronomically long time. (If in doubt, try pausing this long in a conversation without the possibility of its coming to completion.) The consultant (Paul) then actually has to formulate the pause with 'that's ticking over is it?'. Both parties, that is, can discoverably hear that they're in for a long wait before the official business of the call can be returned to. Then, once the 'Direct show' message comes on, both know that the wait will be extremely long. However, this is the state (computer-wise)
that both want to achieve, must achieve, and have oriented the conversation towards so far. Hence: 'Good' and a short pause from the Helpdesk consultant (Paul). Now the question is: what to do? Paul has already sat out a 26 second pause -- accountably audible as Hank's pause since he says he'll check something out (the 'Properties' on the C drive) but has not come back to him on the results of that check. Indeed, Hank's accountability is displayed as such by Paul's 'innocent' enquiry about the computer's state at turn #4. Can another such thing be tolerated without cessation of the call -- and at such a critical point for the business of the call? It's then a brilliant display of conversational aesthetics (not to mention timing) on Paul's part to go into 'still on holidays Hank?' -- thereby initiating a chat sequence as such, and knowing, as conversationalists do, that such matters (the weather, the state of one's life, how things are with one, etc.) are, as Sacks put it, inexhaustible, ultra-rich topics (Lectures 601-4). In this way, the chat sequence can be extended as long as it may happen to take for the business to be resumed -- for example, when the machine's sub-routine is over, and the work of fixing this 'Internet business' can be resumed. Note, for now, how elegantly the computer sub-routine synchronises with the conversational sub-routine: this is computer-mediated-conversation at its cutest.

But note at the same time that Hank is manifestly concerned that the business of the call could be endangered by a segue into 'mere' chat -- after all, he's paying for the call. His task is now: how to keep the chat going until his computer is back up for the next stage, without losing the business talk? So, in turn 8, he starts to re-segue the chat towards business talk: I'm on holiday, but it's a chance to get my own computer work done (he being a professional who routinely calls the helpline on behalf of others -- and known to the Helpdesk as a 'legend'). This is extremely neat as a way of handling both (a) topics (holidays and computers) and (b) talk-genres (formal helpline talk and chat). The line that runs 'I thought while I'm off I'll try and attack this Internet business' is particularly sweet as a way of managing this, as it were, interface.

So then, while the term 'chat' may, conventionally, gloss some kind of disengagement from businesslike conversation, while it may seem to be 'small talk', of no weight, irrelevant even, it might rather be (as inspection of some actual materials shows) that it's in fact ultra-critical to keeping the 'serious' stuff happening. 'Chat' -- the pursuit of 'irrelevant' topics (holidays and so on) -- can, organisationally, be absolutely relevant to the doing of whatever serious business is in hand. Chat, rather than being trivial, may then be central to the organisational work of everyday serious talk. While computers can facilitate (a form of) chat -- as in Internet 'chat lines' -- the reverse is also true: chat can make Internet computing (and, perhaps, many other forms of supposedly formal conversation, like psychological testing) possible as such.

References


Footnotes

1. For further information on CA and related disciplines, see the following Websites:
   Ethno/CA News
   Sociological Research Online
   British Sociological Association, Sociology of Language Study Group
2. In this fragment, 'A' is the assessor and 'C' is the client in a psychological testing situation.
3. Here, 'C' is the caller and 'H' is the helpdesk operator. The caller's out-loud readings of his computer screen are shown in double quotation marks. The transcript is from an ongoing project on calls to a computer helpline. Our thanks to the project team, Carolyn Baker, Mike Emmison and Alan Firth, for their permission to use it.
4. Pauses of such a length are, of course, routinely deployed by counsellors and therapists of a self-avowedly 'non-directive' stripe, trading precisely on the discomfort that they can engender in their interlocutor.

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