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THE WAY IT WAS:
TOPICAL ORGANIZATION IN ELDERLY CONVERSATION

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Age has long been a relevant category of social organisation, as well as a major explanation of social process (Riley, 1972). Whether as everyday attribute or explanatory variable, age is, however, generally taken as given—a person simply is a particular age, generation or cohort. Yet among researchers who study aging there is also acknowledgement that age is a perceived as well as chronological issue, that 'one is only as old as one feels'. More rigorously, age can be seen as a matter of developmental, psychological and social processes as well as chronological fact (Fozard, 1971). Research in anthropology and, more recently, in social psychology and sociolinguistics suggests that age may also be understood in terms of cultural definition and interactional accomplishment (Helfrich, 1979; Widmer, 1983; Boden and Bielby, 1983). Indeed, as life expectancy increases and healthful aging extends, the social accomplishment of age may diverge considerably from actual age and provide a useful analytic focus for researchers of language and social interaction.

Talk, topic and the elderly

This paper addresses one way in which age, as a socially accomplished category, may be understood in terms of the organisation of conversational communication among the elderly. Research in aging has generally demonstrated a paucity of interest in the role of communication in the everyday lives and well-being of the aged (Lubinski, 1978; Obler and Albert, 1980). We will suggest that research on naturally-occurring interaction—i.e. studies that are unmediated by analysts' constructs and the problems inherent in retrospective accounts (Cicourel, 1964; Sacks, 1972; Featherman, 1980)—is an important enterprise in understanding the experience of older persons.

Our focus will be on one specific aspect of everyday talk, namely the organisation of topic and, in particular, features of topic management and development which exemplify and illuminate elderly interaction. We treat topic selection and formulation as a matter of practical accomplishment, that is of collaborative activity that involves such routine conversational procedures as taking turns, telling stories, laughing and so on. We propose here that it is through focussing on different stages and facets of a given conversational object that members jointly produce topical talk, in formal and orderly ways. Seemingly 'freeflowing' conversation is an organised affair. There are regular ways for developing, sustaining, intertwining, linking and abandoning topics.

Our concern in this paper will be to identify procedures that are prominent in topical talk among the elderly. We are particularly interested in sequential organisation. Each phase of topical development is heavily dependent on preceding talk and, at the same time, projects a range of possible next turns. This is not to say simply that one topic follows another,

but rather that each is sequentially implicated (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). Stated differently, topical talk at any given point in time is shaped by what has been said and has consequences for subsequent talk.

Topic as narrative

'Topic', in the realm of everyday, naturally-occurring conservation, as well as in the broader arena of discourse analysis, has become a focus of considerable recent research (e.g. Tannen, 1981). Topic is the interactional stuff of conversation, verbal material that provides participants with a sense of meaning and cohesiveness in interaction (e.g. Erickson, 1982; Keenan and Schieffelin, 1976; Maynard, 1980; Maynard and Zimmerman, 1984; Button and Casey, 1984). We were drawn to an interest in the general role of topic selection and management in elderly interaction in earlier examination of the spontaneous production of conversational life histories (Bielby and Boden, 1981) and the apparent age-specific ways in which older conversationalists invoke the past as a resource for accomplishing meaning in the present (Boden and Bielby, 1983; see also Cohler, 1982; Kohli, in press). In this paper, we wish to demonstrate, in a stage-by-stage manner, the sequential aspects of topic management by the elderly using a more detailed conversation analytic and linguistically-grounded approach. By examining talk not only on a topic-by-topic but additionally in terms of each utterance and turn component, it will be seen that healthy elderly people construct intricate topical matrices which constitute effective and communicative interaction. This finegrained orientation, we will also suggest, would greatly aid researchers engaged in studying institutionalized and impaired elderly interactants (e.g. Hutchinson and Jensen, 1980).

Researchers in the study of the life course and its relation to aging, as well as linguists interested in the role of narrative in discourse, have increasingly noted the function of life stories, personal narratives and, in a more diffuse sense, the impact of history on personal biography (Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Bertaux, 1981; Gergen and Gergen, 1983). Seen as communicative constructs at the level of everyday conversation, personal narratives provide interactant and analyst alike with important insights into human experience. Past life events become a kind of 'template' or frame through which present meanings are both shared and collaboratively produced.

In conversation, narrative may be accomplished through the telling of stories or, more typically, through constituting topical talk in reciprocal formulations of events that parties have shared by virtue of being 'contemporaries' (Schutz, 1962; cf. Maynard and Zimmerman, 1984). This is proposedly true for any conversationalists; what interests us about conversation among elderly persons is the management of topical talk that interweaves the distant past with the present in an effective and highly collaborative manner. Our analyses are preliminary; in highlighting this phenomenon we hope to open fruitful avenues of age-related and age-relevant conversational research.

Talk as data

Data for this exploratory study came from several sources, and are used comparatively. Our primary source is a set of audio and video recordings of unstructured conversations between dyads of previously unacquainted, noninstitutionalised and unimpaired old people over the age of 62, who were recruited from community and recreational organisations in a small southern California town. These are the same data used in our earlier study, now analysed in a more detailed manner. They consist of four cross-sex dyads, totalling

25 min of talk each. The recordings were made in a university small groups laboratory and subsequently transcribed in considerable detail (see Appendix). The quasi-experimental format was based on the work of West (1978), in which the first 12 min of conversation are encouraged as a 'get acquainted' period followed by a further 12–15 min discussion of a designated general topic. The examples that follow are drawn from this small set of reasonably matched dyads. Earlier (Boden and Bielby, 1983), we compared these dyads with fifteen similarly composed cross-sex student dyads from the West corpus. We reported a high degree of similarity between these two groups in terms of conversational structure and turn-taking coordination; topical organisation, however, appears consistently different for our older group. It is this detailed aspect of conversational structure which we report here.

In addition to the two laboratory studies, used previously, a further source of data is a collection of recent audio-recordings of similar subjects, both acquainted and unacquainted, from natural settings. These settings were two 'Senior Centres', one in west London (U.K.), the other in the San Francisco Bay area (U.S.). These latter materials consist of complex multi-party talk in natural, as opposed to laboratory, settings. They are part of a separate study and have been used in this discussion merely to verify the conclusions suggested here. That is to say that the general patterns of topical organisation and turn-by-turn management we will present are consistent in these new materials, but examples presented here are from our original data.

The structure of topic in elderly conversation

In the examples that follow, it will be seen that elderly interactants employ shared historical life-event, time periods and social experiences as topic-organizing units. These long-past slices-of-life are frequently used interactively to contrast 'the way it was' with 'the way it is'. The emergent conversation is a 'collaborative unfolding of interpretive resources' (Heritage and Watson, 1979, p. 137). Topic vehicles, in our data, include shared public events such as the First World War and the Great Depression, or times when sauerkraut was called 'liberty cabbage' or 'you didn't have much smog' in Los Angeles, or when horse-and-buggy was the only way to go to town, or when wages of 'eleven shillings a week' or 'a dollar an hour' were common. When, where and how elderly participants select, introduce, expand and elaborate past experience and events into conversation are not, however simply a matter of having something to say about past experiences and events but are matters of precise sequential placement. That is, they are inherently organisational problems in talk.

In the interests of space, a limited number of fragments or topical talk will be presented and discussed. These examples are clearly chosen for their inherent interest but we would also suggest they are both representative and typical of our data. While all elderly conversations, in both our primary and secondary data, feature extensive use of the past as both resource and topic (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1970), dyads vary as to frequency, distribution and duration of sustained discussion of the past, as well as in the relative frequency with which past and present are actively combined. Close analysis of these distributional factors will enhance our general research agenda, but, for now, remain outside the current discussion.

Naming names

As noted, the very notion of topic is a diffuse and multi-layered affair so that the brief examples that follow artificially isolate moments which are, in fact, elaborately woven

through the unfolding interaction. Technically, the organisation of topic depends on a mutually accomplished 'co-selection of features' of talk which, in effect, *constitute* the topic (Schegloff, 1972, pp. 80–81). Take, for example, this opening exchange between Bill and Martha, two strangers paired together for the purpose of our research and left to get acquainted (for transcription details, see Appendix).

Example 1

```
001    Bill      : I'm commonly known as Bi:ll.
002    Martha : Bill? An' I'm Matha Buckley.
003                       (0.8)
004    Bill      : O::h, tha'name sou:nds fami:/iar
005                       (0.9)
006               Buckley?
007    Martha : Ye::s. Well, ther're a lot of Buckleys
008               arou:nd but I'm not rela:ted to any of them =
009    Bill      : Uh-huh   .h::
                          [           ]
010    Martha :             Uh-huh
011    Bill      : Cuz f'r- I- I've uh PET aversion t- d-
012               to Ja- WILLIAM Buck   ley
                                     [        ]
013    Martha :                       Y'don'  t t li:ke Bi:ll
014               Buckley eh?    Huh-huh-heh-heh
                          [    ]
015    Bill      :        NO
```

Maynard and Zimmerman (1984) have explored ways in which unacquainted interactants manage their emergent relationship as a procedural matter, initially through pre-topical sequences and topicalisers (see also Button and Casey, 1984). Here, reciprocal introductions constitute not only a bare exchange of names but also occasion an exhibit of personal style and a topical excursion into American politics—all in the span of less than 30 s. That is, Bill's self-introduction offers a sense of casualness, with no surname offered, while Martha, in producing her full name, responds with more apparent formality. Bill then topicalises her name to develop further talk and the name itself becomes what Sacks (1968, p. 3) characterises as a 'topic carrier'. In other words, Bill's utterance invites Martha to pursue further talk regarding her surname (lines 4–6). While Martha discounts the possibility of being related to other Buckleys that Bill might have met, he furthers the topic by referring to a prominent, and often controversial, political figure and journalist of the American right. Notice that, while Bill selects the formal first name of William in referring to Buckley, Martha employs the more familiar form. Since 'Bill' is the research subject's actual name (i.e. not substituted, although 'Martha' is a pseudonym), the opening introduction and topical exchange takes on a further dimension, which involves the turn-by-turn enactment of identity—both in terms of address terms and in relation to a possible divergence in political affiliation. Indeed, with Bill's emphatic 'NO' (line 15) this exploration of potentially opposite political views closes down the topic of Buckley for the time being, although Bill and Martha return to partisan politics some 20 min into the conversation and cheerfully explore their differing orientations.

Example 2

```
001    Martha : You're not a suppo:rt of Pres'dent
002               Rea::gan? then,
003                       (0.2)
004        Bill : No:: (.) ca:n't say that I q::m,
005    Martha : We:ll, I'm a Repu:blican (0.1) myse:lf?
006        Bill : Ya:h, well, they don't do e::v'rything
007               (heh) wro(h)ng!
```

Interactants can thus achieve a sense of identity either in terms of likeness or dissimilarity. That is to say that conversational 'affiliation' (Maynard and Zimmerman, 1984) can be seen as an ongoing construction of situated identities, rather than simply an exchange of names or recognition of fixed social roles.

Places in time

Place names provide interactants with a still wider range of possible topic co-selection and have been proposed, again by Sacks (1968, p. 4), as prominent mechanisms of 'topic control'. Talk may thus be sequentially staged along a topical path bound by aspects of place or location—*controlled*, in effect, by the tying mechanism of topic itself (cf. Heritage, 1984a). For the elderly, perhaps more than any other age period, places are full of memory and, as conversationalists, the places of personal narratives can achieve immediate interactional currency through related memories of public people or events. In the next examples, Erma has been telling Ben of 52 years spent living in west Los Angeles.

Example 3

```
001   Erma  : . . . that was our shopping center and- and
002           our- our uh- a:ctivities-
003   Ben   : That (.) was also where they made
004           mo:vies? Or they had STU:DIOS? =
005   Erma  :                              = Ye:s
006           OH ye  :s
                   [   ]
007   Ben   :       Yeh    cuz I 'me:mber =
008   Erma  : MGM STU:dio was the:re =
009   Ben   :                        = when   I was-
                                        [        ]
010   Erma  :                          I::s st    ill
011           there and u:h-
                   [        ]
012   Ben   :      (    )   MGM?   Tha's Judy Ga:rland?
013           a:n'  Mi- MICKEY ROO   NEY? 'n All those peo:ple
                 [    ]                [                        ]
014   Ema   :      YES                Yes, yes they were a:ll
015           there
016   Ben   : .h:: Clark GA:Ble? 1 thi::nk a:n' =
017   Erma  :                              = that- the
018           STU:dio was only about eight blocks from
019           our home
020                  (0.6)
021   Ben   : My go::sh
022   Erma  : Hmmhmm we saw a lo:t of the people
023           (.) coming and going   yes.
                 [               ]
024   Ben   :     We:ll, 'cou:rse-
```

Ben, at line 3, expands Erma's residential reminiscences into a more easily shared discussion of movie studios, using 'also' to build his topic development onto her turn. This is a primary example of the sequentially-managed nature of talk, since both talk and topic must be precisely fitted to previous conversational material while projecting upcoming direction. His move, indeed, elicits her confirmation that: 'MGM STU:dio was the:re' which she updates by noting that it: 'I::s st*ill* there' (lines 10–11). Ben proposes to retain a topical focus on the past, however, by pursuing his own movie nostalgia: 'MGM? Tha's Judy Ga:rland? a:n' Mi- MICKEY ROONEY? 'n ALL those peop:ple', drawing Erma back to a shared past: 'YES Yes, yes they were a:ll there' (lines 14–15). Note the closely organised interplay of overlapping turns at lines 12–14 as Erma projects understanding of both the immediate turn and the familiar era he is characterising. This kind of precision-placement

of talk is contrary to much of the extant experimental and clinical research into elderly communication which recurrently focusses on the diminished linguistic skills of older persons (e.g. Obler and Albert, 1980). Erma (above) then expands their topic further with a description of how close her house had been to the studios and how often she had seen studio stars in the area.

Thus, Erma's topic of living in west Los Angeles is developed in terms of Ben's movie memories and, later, back to a discussion of the pleasures of living in Culver City. The past is, as it were *retrieved* into the present, and vice versa, interactionally generating both topic and talk as a whole. While the achievement of topic is always highly collaborative, based on an interactional as well as linguistic cohesion (cf. Halliday and Hasan, 1976; Jefferson, 1984), for these older conversationalists, the intermingling of past with present provides an overarching topical framework. Topics are not merely produced serially, one at a time. Rather, they are generated at multiple levels and in relation to a variety of interpersonal and institutional agendas (e.g. Boden, 1984).

A further aspect of topic generation, and one that again appears particularly prevalent among elderly conversationalists (Boden and Bielby, 1983), is the juxtaposition of *place* with *past and present*—the sequential and complementary alignment of 'the way it was' with 'the way it is'. Sacks (1968) has suggested that a general feature of topical organisation is the way in which interactants move gradually or 'stepwise' through conversational themes (cf. Coulthard, 1977). This characterisation is suggested as a progression, however incremental, which effectively creates shifts in topics without interactants noticing. 'Stepwise transition' (Jefferson, 1984) is not, however, simply a matter of topic stages in some technical sense related to the local organisation of talk. It involves a multi-dimensional layering of topics by interactants; for the elderly, a process frequently achieved through topical talk about places or events in past experience as a means of elaborating present experience. In the next example, two interactants with shared residence in a small Southern California city discuss their impressions of change in the area.

Example 4

```
001    Ron    : You lived in Sanna Clara very lo::ng?
002                        (0.5)
003    Madge  : Tch! (.) Se:venteen yea   rs
                                       [   ]
004    Ron    :                     Oh you've
005             been here qui   ta while havenchu?
                              [        ]
006    Madge  :               Hm: hmm        Yeah,
007             but no:t fifty! Heh heh
                                [        ]
008    Ron    :                  Yea:h,
009    Madge  : Hm-hmm
010                        (1.5)
011    Ron    : I've seen quita few cha::nges in Sanna
012             Clara m-
                     [   ]
013    Madge  :      Mm I have TOO::, I don'-I don'
014             li::ke it = as = well as I did when I
                                    [        ]
015    Ron    :                   Ye::s
016    Madge  : =ca: me he         re =
                  [           ]
017    Ron    :     No, well      = it was a sma::ller to::wn
018             then =        no'so    bu:sy
                     [                 ]
019    Madge  :     = Mm :: Yeah
```

Ron has lived in 'Sanna Clara' for 50 years and has seen: 'quita few *cha::nges'*, as has Marge: 'Mm I have *TOO::*, I don'- I don' *li::ke* it = as = well as I did when I ca:me here'. This leads Ron to produce an agreement in overlap (line 15), at an early projectable point of her complaint, followed by his own assessment: 'No, well it was a sm::ller to:wn then no'so bu:sy', which gains Madge's accord at line 19: 'mm:: Yeah'. Note, in this exchange, the close fit of turns and topic as Ron and Madge overlap each other at the earliest projectable points in turns (lines 4–6 again at lines 13–17). At line 6, Madge pinpoints Ron's assessment in mid-stream, an achievement that involves not only syntactic but also interactional projection of his turn, which is acknowleged again by her terminal 'Yeah'. Again, our point is to emphasise that this *close-ordered organisation of topical talk* suggests fluid and flexible conversational skills rather than the uneven exchanges reported, for example, by researchers who 'make talk' with the elderly in institutional settings (e.g. Hutchinson and Jensen, 1980). Note that, at line 15, Ron successfully anticipates both linguistic structure ('as well as') and interactional import, and adds to his collaboration by overlapping again at line 17 mid-word, providing his own assessment of the town. Close-fitted turns appear to demonstrate verbal affiliation, here based on these interactants' mutual long-time residence, with precision monitoring marking strong agreement and empathy, as well as ready understanding.

Indeed, their coordinated assessment of 'the way it was' provides for a long topical development of changes in the community, constructed in terms of their local 'Sanna Clara' identities.

Example 5

```
001   Ron     : Mm = yeah = we::ll (.) I 'member when the
002             bowlin' club had- y'me:mber?  that section
003             at McCo::nnell's Pa:rk?
004   Madge   : Yea:h,
005   Ron     : It was a smoo::th green- thuh te:xture?
006             I mean,
007   Madge   : Uhhuh
008                                              (0.3)
009   Ron     : Well it's no:t like tha::t anymo:re
010   Madge   : NO.
```

These exchanges highlight a quality of interpersonal identity which, at least in our earlier comparsion of these materials with student interactants (Boden and Bielby, 1983), is distinct in elderly conversation, namely that situated conversational identities are achieved through reference to, and relevance of, the past: 'I am what I am now because of what I was/did/experienced'.

Times I've had

Thus, for the elderly, telling 'how it was' is a routine activity, and can be overtly marked as such:

Example 6

```
001   Bill    : Well, you've not ha:d the exci:ting times
002             I::'ve had
003   Martha  : What have- what is your back ground?
                                          [       ]
004   Bill    :                          .h:::      Huh-huh
005             Well (.) I gue::ss: . . .
```

Here Bill uses this topic initiation to build contrastively off Martha's description of life as a bookkeeper (not shown) into a lively account of his whole life, encapsulated in economic

conversational packages that describe a childhood in England and later career in the United States (cf. Boden and Bielby, 1983).

Example 7

```
001    Bill      : They gave me'leven shillings a week?
002               if that (heh) me(h)ans anythin' t'you.
003               But uh- barely enough t'live
004               on, y'know
                     [        ]
005    Martha :   Ye::s, Uh    huh
006    Bill      : So::: (0.1) then they sent me to
007                             (0.8)
008               U:hm::
009                          (1.0)
010               aba::sket shop (.) in London =
011    Martha :                              = Hmhmm =
012    Bill      :                                       = Abou:'
013               o:h, half hour's wa:lk fr'm where I lived
014               so: (0.2) I went through my:
015                                    (1.2)
016               three years of as an apprentice and
017               learnt the trade and =
018    Martha :                        = hm hmm
019    Bill      : = and THE::N . . .
```

Bill's narrative is progressively monitored and evaluated by Martha, in an extended demonstration of achieved relevance (Drew, 1978). That is to say that the relevance of one stretch of talk on another is itself a matter of interpersonal collaboration and, for this pair, Martha provides the conversational support that makes Bill's long personal narrative flow (Fishman, 1978). Note, in Example 7, that her turns consist entirely of monitoring responses:

```
005            Ye::s, Uhhuh
011            = Hmhmm =
018            = hm hmm
```

These 'continuers' (Schegloff, 1981) are the interactional solvent of successful story-telling and contribute to sustaining topical relevance and direction. In the next example, taken from later in the same exchange, Bill is still producing his oral autobiography. Conversationally, thirty years have passed and Bill is, again marking stages of life in terms of relative wage structure.

Example 8

```
001    Bill      : Ɔ:h, I wo:rked in the li::ghthouse down in
002               Miami for a while
                        [           ]
003    Martha :        Uh huh, uh    huh
004    Bill      : An'- at a do:llar an hour in nineteen
005               fifty (.) one or two
                          [            ]
006    Martha :          Well     a do:llar an'hour
007               was alright the::n. Heh. heh-heh-heh
008    Bill      : Huh-HUH I don' know. It- w- we ma:naged
009               with it =
010    Martha :            = Sure!
011    Bill      : .h U:h-
012    Martha :   Did you marry?
013    Bill      : OH YE:S an' then she walked ou:t on me . . .
```

Levels of pay, prices and value for money provide effective temporal benchmarks for older interactants, and Bill weaves such relevant items through his narrative. He is producing his complex life history through a series of stories, building sections of one story off related topical orientations of the immediately preceding story (Ryave, 1978). Stages of the life story can be additionally shared through age-relevant markers which achieve a cohesive, sequential unfolding of 'self-across-time' (Mead, 1932). Stories are therefore occasioned by the topical.flow of talk and are one way in which conversationalists invoke the sequential structure of conversation to achieve interpersonal goals. Again, Martha provides the interactional support-work at lines 3, 6–7 and 10. Notice her collaborative assessment that 'a do:llar an'hour was alright the::n', with it's emphasis on 'the::n', and the added laughter invitation (Jefferson, 1979) which Bill accepts (line 8). Her contribution both acknowledges and confirms the direction of his narrative, verbally and nonverbally (i.e. paralinquistically through laughter). Telling a story, however fragmented, is itself a coproductive affair and members mark their stories by typical bridges that clearly display the fact that each progressive stage or shading is motivated by a preceding utterance and thereby occasioned by it (Ryave, 1978, p. 122). In Example 8 above, note Bill's introduction of the pronoun 'we', in a self-corrected turn that assesses the level of pay: "It- w- we *man*aged with it = ' (lines 8–9). This is new information in his narrative which produces an almost immediate topicaliser from Martha. Picking up on the pronoun, she inquires: 'Did you *mar*ry?', inviting Bill to move to a new life stage, namely marriage, which he does, continuing his life story into present times.

Telling it like it was

In our final examples, the incremental accomplishment of stories and self-narratives built out of the structure of turn-by-turn talk becomes more elaborate.

Example 9

```
001    Ben     : No- no, I'm from WISCONSIN- I'm from the Middle
002            West
003    Erma    : Well I was bo:rn in I:owa =
004    Ben     :                           = Were you    I-
                                             [    ]
005    Erma    :                                    in- in
006            CLINton Iowa =
007    Ben     :               = O::H I know right across the river
008    Erma    : Ye::s Hmhmm
009    Ben     : I remember cuz I HITCH-hi:ked out t'the- out to
010            CLINton (.) Chica::go . . .
```

Erma and Ben are beginning to discuss their shared origins in the MidWest. Erma offers the news that she was born in Clinton, Iowa, a place referrent which immediately produces a story from. Ben who had hitched a freight train there as a teenager. Stories, as noted, are locally-occasioned events in conversation and they articulate the context in which they occur (Jefferson, 1978; Maynard, 1980). They are also a way in which the topical structure of turn-by-turn talk is routinely used by interactants to achieve personal conversational moves. Thus Erma's *birthplace* becomes Ben's *story*, invoking a past, both shared and unique, to achieve greater situated intimacy. The intimacy, we suggest, revolves round a theme of the past *integrated* into the present, an integration which is both structural at the level of turn-by-turn talk *and* interpersonal in the sense that it is achieved through

conversational procedures which are interactionally managed. Erma, for example, wants to return to her own narrative and, some nine turns (not shown) later, she again ties her autobiographical account to Ben's story, building off a shared formulation of the proximity of Clinton to Chicago.

Example 10

```
001    Erma    : Clinton was uh- is just about a hundred an'
002            fifty miles .hh we:st of ChiCAGO
003    Ben     : Yeah
004    Erma    : But uh- I didn't get to CHICago until I was
005            middle aged heh-heh huh becuz I left
                            [                    ]
006    Ben     :             My go:sh
007    Erma    : = Clinton uh- in nineteen uh (.) SEVEN
008            and went to uh- to live in Texas, north
                [                    ]
009    Ben     : OH MY go:sh
010    Erma    : TExas =
011    Ben     :             = Oh. What part?
```

Note the fluidity with which an account of shared origins in the MidWest becomes a personal story about Texas. It does so through and with the structural procedures of topic management, conversational resources available to all members of society, the most experienced of whom are, in many senses, the elderly. Erma's account of moving to Texas is produced with a surprising revelation (line 4), dutifully monitored and assessed by Ben at lines 6, 9 and 11, marking his escalating surprise at each highlight; that is at 'middle aged' ('My go:sh'), 'nineteen uh SEVEN' ('OH MY go:sh'), and 'north TExas' ('Oh. What part,'). Ben topicalises her story of a *past* in North-East Texas with his brother's *current* whereabouts in Sweetwater, a joint formulation which engages both in considerable locational analysis (Schegloff, 1972). Digging into their past, each interactant searches, as it were, mental maps of Texas locations.

Example 10 (continued)

```
012    Erma    : Uh w- well le's see what'll I say (.) north ea-
013            north EAST Texas
014                        (1.0)
015    Ben     : North Ea:st    .hh:        Anywhere?
                            [    ]    [        ]
016    Erma    :        Just over the Oklahoma line
017    Ben     : O:h- (Oh I see) I have a brother who lives in
018            Sweetwater which is near A:bilene    I thi::nk
                                    [            ]
019    Erma    :                    YE::S tha t's
020            WEST, that's more west than I was-
                            [        ]
021    Ben     :                    Yes Uh-huh? Uh-huh =
022    Erma    : Iwas u:h-
023    Ben     : I 'member uh town name' Dalhart Texas =
024    Erma    :                        = Yes
025            well that's west too
                [            ]
026    Ben     : I rode on thee::-        I think it was the (.)
027            Denver Rio-Grande railroad I think I rode
028    Erma    : Hm hmm
```

Again, topical progression is produced stepwise by moving from a general description of 'north Texas' to a more precise formulation of 'north EAST Texas' (line 12–13). marked by a 1.0 s pause and recycle by Ben at line 15: 'North Ea:st', with a slightly stretched syllable. Both the pause (line 14) and Ben's stretched syllable (line 15) appear to lead Erma to provide a closer characterisation of 'Just over the Oklahoma *line'*, which produces a 'change of state' token from Ben 'O:h-' (line 17). The notion of a surprise marker (see also lines 9 and 11 above) has been proposed by Heritage (1984b) as a display of new understanding, that is that a recipient's current state of knowledge, information or orientation had undergone some kind of change. In this exchange, Ben's initial insight (line 17) is recycled and further incorporated with a low-volume : '(Oh I *see*)' self-clarification, followed by his announcement of his 'brother who lives in Sweetwater which is near A:bilene I thi::nk', setting off a new round of locational analysis. Ben attempts to move into a new aspect of the topic by beginning to tell a railroad story : 'I rode on thee::- I *think* it was the(.) Denver Rio-Grande railroad I think I rode'. This play is minimally acknowledged by Erma (line 28), who returns to her narrative.

Example 10 (continued)

```
029    Ben     : And uh-
030    Erma    : .hh Well when- (.) when I:: lived there in this
031            liddle German community .h uh FARMING community
                                 [                    ]
032    Ben     :               .hh Oh yea:h
033    Erma    : =and uh- (.) th- the only way we could get out of
034            there was by.TRAIN, and it- it was on the branch
                               [        ]
035    Ben     :             Ye::s?
036    Erma    : =line of the MK and T .h:: we called it the KATIE,
037            it was uh- Missouri Kansas an' TEXas line and
                    [    ]                    [       ]
038    Ben     :      Yes                 Yeah
039    Erma    : =we- we uh-
                       [      ]
040    Ben     :        Do    they still have that railroad? I
041            think it's call- They do?
                    [                ]
042    Erma    :      YE:S I thi:nk so    I think so
                                        [      ]
043    Ben     :                       Yeah          I
044            'member cuz I RODE that one uh-
```


One of the communicative skills routinely demonstrated by conversationalists of all ages is the way in which the sequential implicativeness of one turn on another, and thereby one topic on another, is achieved by imbedding some item from the previous turn in the next-turn topic shift. Note therefore, in particular, Erma's way of embedding his 'railroad' topic as she describes the small German farming community where: 'the only way we could get out of there was by TRAIN, and it–it was on the branch line of the MK and T .h:: we called it the KATIE, it was uh- Missouri Kansas an' TEXas line' (lines 33–37). Ben brings this new aspect of their topical theme back to the present with: 'Do they still have that railroad?', which Erma acknowledges in overlap (line 42). Ben, it seems, rode a lot of railways in his youth as, at lines 43–44 he attempts yet another tale, which is quickly transformed by Erma back to her own narrative.

Example 10 (continued)

```
043   Ben    :                                              Yeah I
044          'member cuz I RODE that one uh-
045   Erma   : And the County Seat was Gai:nesville and uh
                                              [    ]
046   Ben    :                                Oh yes
047   Erma   : = the Cou:nty Seat and that- if we wanted to-
048          t'go to the County Seat we hadda either go by
049          bug- horse an' BUGGY o:r .h
                                    [        ]
050   Ben    :                        Uh! =
051   Erma   :                          = or the TRAI:N
052          HEH!
          [        ]
053   Ben    : .h::   Yeah, I was surprised to read uh—
054          (.) one of my ho::bbies is COOKING (.) to
055          learn that there's a lot of Ge:rmans in- in
056          Texas, partic'lly u:h- uhm- 'round an' above
057          San Antonio?
058   Erma   : Oh ye:s Hmhmm
```

and some turns later

```
059   Erma   : Well this place where I came to a- as a- as
060          a teenager in Texas .h was a German catholic
061          community!
062   Ben    : Oh yeah! What's the NAME of it the-
                                          [        ]
063   Erma   :                              MUNS TER,
064          M-U-E-N-S-T-E-R we called it Minster but- uh-
                                                    [    ]
065   Ben    :                                        it-
066          it had an u::mlaut over't
067   Erma   : Ye(h):: (h)s!
                    [    ]
068   Ben    :        I re mem ber it
                        [        ]
069   Erma   :               M-U-E- N-S-T-E-R Muens ter
                                            [    ]
070   Ben    :                              Yea :h
071   Erma   : An' uh there's a Muenster chee::se ya know
072   Ben    : YE:::s
          [    ]
073   Erma   : = An'  I guess there's a to:wn of Muenster in
074          Germany =
075   Ben    :          = there's uh- uh MUNS:-
                    [                    ]
076   Erma   :                  And I learned-  I learned some
077          GERman-?  there.
078   Ben    : Di::d you? =
079   Erma   : = Yes .h: but a:- after I left (.) Muenster an'
080          went on t'GAINESville an' then on to Da:llas
081   Ben    : Uh-huhm
082   Erma   : Why::- an' the war- the First World War came on
083          why w- we didn't speak much GERman s o:- Heh-hehm
                                            [                ]
084   Ben    :                              No, in fact
085          my parents tol' me they referred to- to SAUERkraut
086          as Liberty ca:bbage =
087   Erma   :                  = Yes huh-huh
```

This final example in our selection is rich in detailed topical coordination as Erma tells it like it was and Ben works to make his participation supportive and relevant. This accomplishment is by no means unique to the elderly, indeed our point throughout this

paper is twofold: the elderly have special topical mechanisms for weaving past into present in meaningful ways *and* they do so with the very common skill and fluidity often denied them by both commonsense assumptions of elderly functioning and social science research which frequently focusses either on slowing motor skills or the problems associated with institutionalisation (e.g. Obler and Albert, 1980).

Conclusion

For the elderly, whose long life history necessarily involves a high degree of variance along a wide range of social dimensions, intimacy in current interaction can, as we have seen, be readily achieved through a complex sharing of the past. Self-narratives and shared historical referrents are interwoven to express a theme of 'the way we were' in terms of 'the way it was' to account for 'the way we are now'. History thus shapes personal biographies, as Mills (1959) and others have suggested, but people in their everyday lives also interactionally shape both immediate relationships and, across time, society itself (Giddens, 1984; Boden, n.d.). The elderly do this in a special way and, as we have suggested, this everyday enactment of the past in terms of the present is a provocative area for social science research. Since most old people live actively in the community and talk spontaneously at every available moment, we are proposing that a research agenda located in natural settings, recording and analysing such routine behaviour as everyday talk can and will produce new insights into elderly functioning, and in ways as yet untapped.

It is a mistake, we would suggest, to presume that talking about the past, among the elderly or between the elderly and other age groups, is a process of 'harping back' to the 'good old days' in some retrogressive or nonadaptive manner. Nor is it necessarily a matter of 'rambling discourse' (Obler and Albert, 1980, p. 1) Instead, 'talking back' is a functional and effective form of communication, one which is essentially present-oriented, as well as expressive and practical. While the data analysed here are limited in nature and further limited to unacquainted interactants, initial comparison of these conversations with the Senior Centre materials in London and San Francisco, suggests similar patterns. Acquainted speakers who see each other regularly do not, reasonably enough, produce mini life-histories on each encounter, but the past plays a substantial part in their everyday present centred activity—a past told as stories, memories and downright nostalgia, but nevertheless told in terms of the 'here and now' of everyday life.

The implications of this approach to the study of elderly interaction are several. We need, with our aging population, to begin a much more careful examination of the ways in which everyday interaction *among* the elderly and *between* older and younger cohorts is shaping the social processes we all study. In the current literature, communication is frequently treated as a 'problem' for the elderly. It may be that this orientation, with its emphasis on experimental and clinical studies (e.g. Obusek and Warren, 1973; Botwinick *et al.*, 1974; Albert, 1980) of both healthy and impaired persons, has missed an important point. 'Communication' is not merely episodic exchange between patient and health care provider, nor between general service providers and the senior community, but rather an ongoing daily activity which needs to be studied as such. It is, no doubt, true that cognitive abilities decline with age and that language structure and performance change over time, but this process should also be studied in natural settings—in the home rather than in institutions, at normal social gatherings as well as in controlled experiments, in the family as a means of understanding cross-generational communication, and so forth.

We need, too, to begin explorations of differences between the 'old-old' (75 + years) and the 'young-old' (65–75 years), as well as variations by gender given a larger female aging population (Harris, 1978). The theoretical thrust of this kind of research suggests that the impact of past life experience and values can be used adaptively by an aging society. If the past, as we have proposed, is an active ingredient in daily elderly interaction, then it also constitutes a key element of everyday social practices. Cognitive and linguistic theorizing in elderly communication can benefit from the kind of close analysis presented here as a means of generating clearer models of the role of everyday talk in the healthful accomplishment of ever-extended life expectancy.

Talk and interaction are discursive and practical affairs; discursive and descriptive in their ongoing account of the way the world is (or was), and practical in that the structurally-driven topical procedures of everyday talk provide seen but unnoticed ways of collaboratively achieving meaning, identity and even power in face-to-face interaction (e.g. West and Zimmerman, 1983; Giddens, 1984; Wiemann, 1985; Molotch and Boden, 1985). The structure of conversation and the turn-by-turn organisation of topic produce and reproduce historically and interactionally situated social action. As old people weave past with present, they are simultaneously framing their personal biographies in terms of shared public events, activities and experiences. These, in turn, shape and renew their commitment to present interaction, and to the accumulated fragments of social life which constitute and are constituted by the emergent social structure. The reflexive relationship of talk, topic and social structure. with *past elaborating present,* constitutes meaningful and effective communication in the everyday lives of the elderly.

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APPENDIX

The transcribing conventions of conversation analysis were developed primarily by Gail Jefferson. They are designed to capture for the eye the general sense of how the talk sounds to the ear. The resultant reader's transcript is not intended to supplant the original recordings (cf. Schenkein, 1978).

The following conventions have been used in this paper:

A: Ye :s	Brackets indicate that the portions of utterances so bracketed are simultaneous.
[ ]	A single left bracket indicates the point of overlap onset, the right hand bracket
B: Ea ch of these	denotes its termination.
A: = Yea:h =	Equals signs are used to indicate no audible 'gap' between turns.
B: = two::,	
(0.0)	Numbers in parentheses denote elapsed time in tenths of seconds.
(.)	A dot in parentheses indicates a slight gap, typically of less than 0.1 s.
A: *Right.*	Italic indicates a stressed word or word-particle.
A: HOW MUCH?	Upper case indicates especially loud delivery.

A: So:::	Colons indicate that the immediately prior syllable is prolonged or 'stretched'. The number of colons denote, approximately, the duration.
A: We a:dded to-	A hyphen represents a 'cut-off' of the immediately prior word or syllable.
.,? ?	Punctuation marks are used to suggest intonation rather than grammatical phrasing:
A: Sure.	downward contour
B: i:ssue::,	sustained contour
C: Ca:mpus?	rising contour (moderate)
D: Plu::s?	interrogative contour.
A: (Hm.)	Single parentheses indicate low volume.
.hh::	A dot-prefixed 'h' indicates an in-breath, without dot, an exhalation.
(h)	An 'h' in parentheses indicates breathiness or plosiveness.
Heh-heh-huh-huh	Laughter syllables.
( )	Empty parentheses indicate the transcriber's inability to hear utterance.
((cough))	Double parentheses indicate sound 'descriptions'.