

Why people say where they are during mobile-phone calls

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Some information on Eric Laurier
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It's the sound and utterance of our decade. You're sitting on a train, you hear someone's mobile phone start playing a badly digitised pop or TV theme tune, they pick it up and say hello. Then: 'Well, I'm just passing Piccadilly.' Or you're walking in a park and overhear someone on their mobile saying, 'I'm at the swings, should be there in about five minutes.' Or you're in a café and you hear, 'I'm with Ignacio in Caffé Nero, where are you?' Why, you wonder, do people always say where they are during mobile phone calls? Why do they need to know – can't they talk to one another about something more important? Aren't they just talking for the sake of talking? Who cares where they are at this precise moment in time?

To provide an answer to these questions let's move on from imaginary examples since they are limited by what we can agree is imaginable (which is far less than what actually exists in the world). Let's move on to an actual instance of people saying where they are during a call. We can learn a great deal from a carefully described sample of social life. The following extract from a transcript involves two employees on the same team of a large business corporation. Sylvia has just dialled Ernie's number whilst sitting in her car in a traffic jam.

E: Hello, it's Ernie.

S: Hi Ernie, it's Sylvia.

E: Hi Sylvia, how ya doin'?

S: I'm all right. Where are you *today*?

E: Um, I'm in London at some point once the trains start running properly.

S: (Pause.) Have you got problems on trains?

E: Big time problems. (Pause.) Um er, there's track lines down at Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City so we've been standing here for about Christ knows how long jus' waitin' on a train into London.

S: Aw-w-w.

E: So all fun and games. How, where are *you* today [ha ha]?

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S: [Well] I'm gonna be in London for a short while today.

E: [Aw-right.]

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S: [I've] got a whole load of stuff I've just picked up from *Kingswood* for you. I was gonna work in Kingswood today, but I've decided to go and I wanna see Mark and do a couple of things for tomorrow.

To begin to describe what is happening here, we can see that Ernie and Sylvia do not try and deliver where they are as immediate geographical information, as in:

'Hi it's Ernie, I'm on a railway platform in Slough'

'Hi Ernie, it's Sylvia, I'm in my car sitting in traffic lights'

There are after all plenty of cases where we never bother at all to say where we are or we fit it in at the middle or end of a call. In this case they put it off for a turn or two of talk and it is Sylvia who asks: 'Where are you?' Yet notice that she ends and refines the question with an emphatic 'today', where she has a number of time-category words she could have chosen from. She selects 'today' over, say, 'right now', or 'in five minutes', or 'tonight' or 'tomorrow'. If she had not used 'today' and simply said 'where are you?', we and Ernie would likely have heard her to mean: where are you at this moment in time. 'Today' focuses Ernie's analysis on to his plans for the working day ahead, pulling out only the relevant geographical information by reference to who he is talking to. Such an analysis might seem to call for immense processing of geographical information, planning of routes and time frames. All of which has to be done by Ernie in seconds without consulting maps, timetable or doing exercises of the following kind: *if A is travelling from Slough by train at 15mph, departs at 9.30, and B is travelling from Bristol at 75mph, departs at 10.00 am, who will reach London first?*

Laurier's study on the mobile office

<http://www.geog.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/dynamic/junction17.htm>

Let's pause a moment to ask: is it really right to say that Ernie and Sylvia are providing one another with *geographical information*? Are they offering one another a sort of messier version of the accurate GPS locating of grid points with vectors and speeds? Well no, they are doing something seemingly more human, more meaningful than we would expect of computers pinpointing objects as sets of co-ordinates. They have cut lots of corners with the elegant simplicity of their conversational skills and skipped stating where they are right now at all. Do we know where Sylvia is? Do we know where Ernie is? Do they know where each other one is as they are speaking? Not in the slightest, and it doesn't matter – since it isn't relevant to what they are trying to do and they can get along without it. They have skipped ahead to the step of sorting out where they might be able to meet today without saying so in so many words. They are doing spatial analysis during their conversation on the phone. All of this can be done so quickly and economically because they are jumping straight to the task of co-ordinating their future movements, and their task sits upon the unproblematic background of expectations they share as work colleagues in the same business corporation with its particular geography of offices, clients and storehouses.

When Ernie says 'London', Sylvia, as his team-mate of two years, can hear 'London' as just a few possible places that Ernie might be in all of the millions of possibilities in the human geography of London. How can we be sure that she hears Ernie as saying they might be in these same places? It becomes clear when on her next turn at speaking she tells Ernie that she has picked up stuff at their 'Kingswood' store for him. She has, after checking where Ernie will be today, finally 'got to the point' of her call as it were, which involves being in the same place so she can hand over her 'whole load of stuff'. When they use these place terms they know what they refer to by their relation to their shared geography. Neither of them stops to ask '*what do you mean London! It's a crumbling maze of a place, give me the grid references for our meeting!*' They assemble where they will be with an evolving sense of what one another's plans are, turn by turn, in and as they talk on mobile phones.

What happens before Sylvia is allowed to 'get to the point' is intriguing since Ernie produces quite a piece of trouble talk. His geography of hold-ups and delays is peppered with 'Christ knows how long' and ending with the ironic 'so all fun and games'. Sylvia chimes in sympathetically 'aw-w-w', showing that she is sympathetic to Ernie's everyday epic journey to London. At one level Ernie is giving a straightforward piece of relevant information to Sylvia as to what is causing him to be delayed. This information is elegantly delivered; Ernie handles the story with expertise, invoking the double trouble of the railway track being inoperative in two different places and the commonly known and categorically negative experience of standing waiting endlessly for a train that never arrives.

To understand why Ernie might attempt to turn his troubles into a nicely packaged story asks that we consider the problems that we highly mobile people of the early 21st century face daily. If Ernie's trains do, ultimately, deliver him late to London, and he then misses or delays a meeting with someone else at the multinational, he is risking, by his not turning up on time, being attributed to the class of people at work known for 'being late'. This is a 'big time' problem that goes with increased personal mobility since travellers constantly face traffic jams, flat tyres, detours, delayed trains, air traffic controller strikes etc., and so each actual occasion of lateness requires careful accounting for in terms of these recognisable explanations, less the person becomes known as someone who is 'always late'.

How someone gains the reputation as 'always late' is in part through such actual moments as when one of his colleagues says to the other 'Ernie's late for this meeting' and they say 'Ernie's always late', and no one defends Ernie's *reputation*, and indeed colleagues can go away from the meeting with a 'choice piece' of work gossip to tell other people at the office (p44 Sacks 1992). After only a few such occasions Ernie's reputation as someone who is late can be passed on as part of his 'personality' for the purposes of the multinational and he may well have to work very hard to change this memorable aspect of his office personality since whenever people at the multinational have to meet him they will tend to look for confirmation of his lateness. The same principle of protecting one's personality applies to groups of friends or family. To offer a mild disaster story over the phone to Sylvia with some details about 'track lines' and place names, a tone of resignation and irony ('all fun and games') is to offer a neatly packaged account to someone who will be at headquarters with Ernie's colleagues when Ernie's lateness is remarked on and thus be able to give an account on the basis of this memorable defence, for Ernie-at-a-distance, to prevent someone else saying without contention that 'Ernie is always late'. For Sylvia to give such a substantiated defence is in her interest as well, since as one of the regional managers she faces the same problems of timing as Ernie does. If Sylvia gives an account of Ernie's lateness she tries to make sure the constant problems of travel for regional managers are a 'commonly known' thing amongst the desk jockeys at headquarters. In short, we can see then that saying where you are on your mobile phone is an opportunity to plan, protect your reputation and to share transport warnings, and to do all these things and more *in short*.

What I have not been able to show from Sylvia and Ernie's phonecall is the further key aspect of providing a relevant *context* to whether we can talk about what we want to on the phone or not. 'Landline' phone numbers are listed as *work* numbers and *home* numbers; when a caller dials a number, one element of context they have as they dial is whether they are calling the other person *at work* or *at home*. This simple and long-standing division into two phone numbers has had all kinds of implications about who we can

expect to be overhearing our calls at the other end, how long the call can be, what it might be interrupted by. When a manager calls her PA at her office number, for instance, she is well aware of the layout of the *place* she is calling. The manager can recall who will be sitting within earshot of her PA, where institutional resources are stored and what time various people take their lunch. Because a mobile phone call can be picked up in all manner of situations by its 'answerer', it thereby lacks definition as to whether its 'answerers' consider themselves to be in their working hours or not (see also Katz 1999). We the callers no longer know whether who we are calling will be answering the phone in their sitting room or someone else's sitting room, in a café or in a club, in the street or in the middle of their lunch. It severs the assumed reflexive connection between a telephone and its location.

In Emmanuel Schegloff's (1972) early work on place names in talk he refers to a relational type, such as, significantly, 'the office' or 'my home'; he suggests they have a special character in that not only are they understood as 'belonging to' someone (i.e. Eric Laurier's office), but that such a place for a member is also 'where he or she belongs' (i.e. one can reasonably call there without having to explain why one is looking for them there). Equally at the other end a stranger to the caller can pick up the phone in someone else's office or home with a phrase such as 'Eric Laurier's office', 'she's out right now, can I take a message' or 'you must have a wrong number'. What mobile phones bring is, then, a loss of the tie between place and person. This further severance helps us see why it is that one person seldom answers another's mobile phone even if they are friends, since the caller is expectably not calling a *place* but a *person*, and an 'answerer' will have to account for why a wrong person is picking up the phone, without recourse to a phrase such as 'she's not here right now', since the 'here' is no longer clear to either party as to where it is. So while we hear many more expressions of where an 'answerer' is, we hear many less of who the person answering the phone is. Answering someone else's mobile is comparable to checking the contents of their wallet, it requires special permissions and even husbands and wives may not have the right to do so for another. It is not that surprising that secrets are often revealed when they do.

Knowing at the outset whether one is calling a mobile phone or not is important, as I hope has been made clear, not because of a caller's concern with the charges they may be incurring when connected via a mobile network. It is important because it shapes the character of the ordinary geographical work that we need to do every time we are talking to people we know but we know not where.

References

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This *receiver* article is a shorter and revised version of an article originally published in 'Society and Space' (Laurier 2001).

The original essay

<http://www.geog.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/dynamic/S&Swhere2-Title.html>

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