

Location: a socially dynamic property – a study of location telling in mobile phone calls

Ilkka Arminen
University of Tampere

Mobile communication devices are by definition location free, they can be used anywhere, anytime (taken an existing network coverage). The usage of mobile communication device does not technically require the parties to get to know where the other party is (f.ex. Ling & Haddon 2001). In that respect, it is interesting that parties communicate their location in most calls. In my data, 62 mobile calls out of 74 involved a sequence in which a mobile party of the communication told her or his location to the other party. The location telling is an extremely common, even a predominant practice in mobile calls.

The commonality of location telling sequences is no more a new or subtle finding. Actually, it is much of a stereotypical image of mobile talk; there are even many jokes about that. Eric Laurier, who has written a paper about “why people say where they are during mobile phone calls”, starts from an observation of a mobile ringing on a train. “You hear it get louder as they fish it out of their bag. ‘Hi’ they say. There’s a pause. ‘I’m on the train. About half an hour away from London’.” (Laurier 2000. Laurier then asks ‘why do they always do that?’.

I have somewhat more complicated answer to this question than Laurier. First of all, people in my data people do not always tell their location straight ahead as in Laurier’s data. They seem to attach to the telling of where they are five different types of activities during mobile talk. In all, location telling seems to serve different social functions. These social functions are realized through different kinds of courses of talk- in- action (for parallel analysis on openings of mobile calls, see Arminen & Leinonen 2003). It seems that Laurier’s account describes one of these functions. To his credit, it seems to be the most common one, but definitely not the only one.ⁱ

The activity contexts of location telling in mobile calls

Location telling during mobile calls seems to take place in five different activity contexts. In other words, location seems relevant for parties in mobile interaction during five different types of activities. Location may be an index of interactional availability, precursor for mutual activity, part of the ongoing activity, or it may bear emergent relevance for activity or be presented as a social fact (see Table 1).

Table 1 Types of location telling in mobile phone calls

Location telling (N=74)¹

Interactional availability 10

¹ There are slightly more classified sequences of location telling (including their absences) than calls, as in some cases there are more than one location telling sequence in a call. However, multiple location telling sequences in a call are not typical. Mostly, one telling is enough for the speakers’ purposes.

Precursor for activity	31
Part of the ongoing activity	14
Emergent relevance for activity	6
Social fact (no activity implication)	4
No location telling	12
Landline contingency	1
In All	78

The earlier studies on landline calls have shown that in the opening answerers orient to demonstrating their interactional availability or the possible problems before the reason for call is dealt with (Schegloff 1986, 2002). In mobile calls, the answerers may volunteer to tell their infelicitous position for interaction through telling their location, such as being in the toilet (extract 1), or being in the fitting room. This may lead into a trajectory for rearranging a new call after some time or otherwise dealing the problematic situation. Respectively, audible “untypical” voices (answerer’s heavy breathing) or background noise (noisy restaurant or disco) or remarkable delays in answering may prompt the caller to make “where are you” inquiry. Occasionally, callers may anticipate a trouble in answerer’s availability (f.ex. in the beginning of early morning or late night calls), and make a query about the answerer’s availability or whereabouts. These kinds of inquiries and location telling sequences are done as a preliminary to call proper, before the parties have engaged in what ever is their reason for getting in touch. Interestingly, in fact these “interactional availability” location tellings are not so common as one might have expected on the basis of stereotypical images of mobile talk. It is possible that the etiquette of mobile calls has already developed. Namely, interactional availability inquiries presume that a call is answered anyhow, and not only when an answerer is available for talk, and that may have been the case when people were not used to using mobile phones. Currently, many people (in this data set at least) may have learned using silent mode of the phone and answering calls only when suitable to them. Infelicitous answering and parties’ concern about that seem rare. However, this data that was collected at one point of time and so guesses about the development of mobile etiquette are hypothetical, though likely.

Most location telling sequences in this data are linked with practical arrangements. People tell their location as a precursor for some practical arrangement, like meeting, seeing at some place, or finding out about their schedules that somehow impinge on their mutual task. Location telling may be an answer to “pre-sequence”(Schegloff 1980), such as what are you doing (extract 2). Typically, location is asked when parties seek to find out about possibilities for mutual activity, such as dinner time, etc (extract 1).

Location telling is also commonly done as a part of the real-time ongoing activity parties are engaged (extracts 3-5). A car driver may call and ask which direction to take, notably this is fast, real-time coordination task, and details of talk may also show parties orientation to fast exchange of information (extract 3). Location can also be a mutual real-time coordination task, such as seeing each other in the cafeteria to meet there (extract 4). Emergencies and hazardous situations are a salient class of real-time location sensitive activities; in extract 5, the car driver warns the car that is driving behind about a deer by the road. Finally, a kind of location that is also realized during ongoing activities is a virtual location referring to a web page or any web-based location (see extract 6).

Not so common, but existing social practice involves telling of location due to its social, symbolic qualities (and not as a part of practical arrangements). In extract 7, the caller tells that she on the beach. The telling of her location is not done in the context of asking the answerer to join the caller at beach. But “beach” seems to have been used due to its connotative meanings that signify “having fun”. In that way, location telling is used for arousing symbolic meanings, which for their part have practical bearings. Here the caller tells being on the beach to lure or seduce the other party to join her later. This kind of usage of location telling is not very common practice, but it is itself an interesting social activity.

Some calls also involve a informings of one’s own location for the other party without any explicit activity implications. In (8), the called person tells that he is in his home region (far away from the town he studies) while he answers to a “how are you” question. Here the location telling may have a negative implication, the party is not available to any mutual activity as he is away from the town. However, the location is not told in the connection of practical arrangements, nor are its practical implications dealt with in any observable way. It is noticeable any way that informings, like this are not a common practice. Some times location may have some symbolic significance, and those properties may be discussed. The relevance may be biographical, such as personal importance of a place; or it may be cultural, such as historic or aesthetic significance. Perhaps surprisingly, among ordinary calls social significance of location does not seem to be common.

Finally, there are also a number of calls that do not involve any location telling, but the large majority of calls involves location telling. Mostly location telling is related to prospective or ongoing social activities the parties are involved in. Location may also have direct interactional significance that is brought up, if a party’s availability for interaction is limited due to some situated activity. Also symbolic qualities of location may be brought up, occasionally bearing also practical significance. The different layers of meaning of location can also be embedded and realized during same interaction.

The landline calls have location sensitive contingencies of their own. Mostly though the parties’ location is not discussed explicitly, because at least the answerer’s location can usually be taken for granted. Then the caller’s location is the main issue. This and other location sensitive contingencies of landline calls will not be dealt with in this paper.

Location telling in mobile phone conversations

In this section, there are eight extracts from mobile conversations, in which location telling takes place. The speech is transcribed according to conventions of conversation analysis (CA), see Appendix for glossary of symbols used.

The extracts from mobile conversations illuminate different social usages location serves for parties in interaction. They show how location telling is linked with parties talk in interaction and to activities parties are engaged in. Potentially, different usages of location stand for a need for different kinds of location sensitive applications. Notably, only rarely geographical location as such is relevant for parties in interaction.

In extract 1, the caller immediately asks where the answerer is. It turns out that she is in the toilet of a train. For the answerer at that moment, the proximate location is relevant in that it indexes for her interactional difficulty. The caller, however, is interested in the answerer's location due to a prospective mutual activity (as it would turn out, she is preparing dinner, and waiting the answerer to show up). In this call, the parties orient to different senses of location 1) as an index of interactional availability, and 2) as a precursor for a shared prospective activity.

1) In the toilet of a train (T= Tiina v, P= Pirjo s) 2002- 06- 07_17- 09- 17.wav

¹T: Tiina?

² (0.5)

³P: no ↑hei missäpäin sä olet,
oh ↑they whereabouts are you,

⁴T: ↓tyypillistä junan vessassa,
↓ typical in the toilet of train,

⁵ (1.0)

⁶P: aha missäpäin juna o.
I see whereabout the train is.

⁷T: no#:# tulee #m#
e:#rm# comes #m#

⁸T: TÄÄ ajaa tää lähti jotenki kymmene minuuttii
THIS drives this left some ten minutes

⁹T: myöhässä tai jotain.
late or somethin.

¹⁰ (0.8)

11T: halo-

12P: nii lähdi sieltä neljän jälkeen.
so did you leave from there after 4 pm.

13P: haloo?

14P: haloo haloo,

15T: odota vähä.
wait a bit.

16 (0.6)

17P: joo.
yes.

In (2), the caller asks whether the called persons is doing anything special. This question is clearly a preliminary to something, i.e., the caller wants to know whether the answerer would be available for some joint activity (Schegloff 1980). The caller's second question shows that the previous question was a "pre" to it. The answerer's indirectly location sensitive response shows that she is not available at the moment (the delayed answer to "pre" makes the analyst wonder whether something else might have been tempting enough to make her to change her plans). The answer that she is about to start doing her laundry tells indirectly her location by tying it to the laundry facilities (most likely the laundry room of the student dormitory).

2) Preliminary Koeh.2. s.1 (S= Sanna, R= Riikka) 2002- 07- 10_18- 23- 32.wav

1 -> S: no ↑moi tota noi teet sä mitään ihmeellistä,
oh ↑hi: well erm do you do anything special,

2 (0.6)

3 -> S: aattelin vaan että lähetäänkö käymään tuola kylärannassa jätskillä,
I just thought could we go the village beach for ice cream,

4 (2.0)

5 -> R: mä meen seittemältä pyyks,
I'll go at seven to laundry,

6 (0.9)

7 S: >mitä,<
what,

8 (.)

9 S: seittemäks ö ä,
at seven

10 R: nih,
yeah,

11 (.)

12 R: pyykilleh.
to the laundry.

In (3), the location is told as a part of the ongoing activity. The car driver asks which direction to take by reading direction signs. The details of talk show that it is done in a hurry, for instance, the lack of response to greeting, and asking the question instead (line 3).

3) Direction instructions 2 (P= Pekka v, T= Timo s) 2002- 07- 06_10- 26- 55.wav

1P: moro,
hello,

2 (0.5)

3T: oo kumpi alajärvi vai moottoriveneilykeskus,
ee which alajärvi or motorboat center,

4 (.)

5P: siihe.
that one.

6 (0.6)

7T: HÄH,
HUH?

8 (.)

9P: siitä,
from that one,

10 (0.7)

11T: no kumpaa alajärvi,
erm which one alajärvi,

In (4), the interactants are about to meet in the cafeteria, and they share knowledge about their location to each other though their mobile talk until they see each other.

4) “I see you now” (J= Jarmo, S= Sari)

1S: joo?
yes?

2 (0.2)

3J: terve,
hello,

4 (.)

5J: no,
huh,

6 (0.8)

7S: missä sä oot,
where are you,

8 (.)

9J: täälä <ruokalassah,>
here <in the cafeteria,>

10 (0.2)

11S: nii minäki,
so am I:,

12 (0.2)

13J: aha (h[yvä,)
o:h (g[ood,)

14S: [(-)

15 (0.4)

16S: no nii mä nään sut. (h)e
oh yeah I see you. (h)e

In (5), the car driver warns the car driving behind about the deer by the road. Again location is told as a part of the ongoing mobile activity. Talk is produced economically to maintain the fast, real-time co-ordination of the activity.

5) “Be aware of the deer” (P= Pekka s, A= Ari v) 2002- 07- 06_23- 29- 48.wav

1A: no morjes pekka,
oh hello: pekka,

2P: kahteltiin tossa vasemmalla puolen tietä
we watched there at left side of the road

3P: peuraa äsken että,
deur a moment ago so that,

4A: ah[a,
I [see,

5P: [että varo.
[that be aware.

6 (0.4)

7A: misä kohtia te olitte.
at which point you were.

8 (0.2)

In (6), the virtual location being on a web page is part of the ongoing activity the parties are engaged in.

6) “I’m on this web page” (J= Jarmo s, I= Ismo)

1I: I_smo,

2(0.3)

3J: no: moro,
o:h hello,

4(0.6)

5J: tuota ni,
well erm,

6(.)

7J: mä oon nyt täällä
I’m now here

8(0.3)

9J: sivulla ni
on site/p age uh

10(0.)

11J: täss on neljä riviä hepreea ((idiom))

here is four lines of h**e**brew

12J: ja sillä sipuli. ((idiom))
and that's it.

13(0.8)

14I: #okei,#
#okay,#

15(0.8)

16I: selvä,
clear,

In (7), the physical location of the caller being at the beach does not seem to be the relevant issue. Instead the connotative meanings of the beach seem to be the thing. Laughter and other non-lexical interactional items seem to indicate the parties' orientation to the social significance of their mutual activity. Here the location telling sets up this "teasing" sequence (Drew 1987) that is a strong friendship ritual.

7) "I'm here on the beach" (litt. Leinonen 2002)

1V: kotosal,
(I'm at home)

2 (1.4)

3- > S: joo mä oon itse asias tääl rannalla #tääl
yeah I'm actually here on the beach #here

4- > hietaniemessä nytten,#
at Hietaniemi now,#

5- > V: aa:i, (h) (h) (h)e
I see::, (h) (h) (h)e

6 (0.2)

7- > S: joo tota, (0.3)
yeah well, (0.3)

8- > e(h) nii et sä tänää sit o lähössä £mihinkää illallah,£
uh so that you are not goin' £anywhere tonighth,£

9 (0.6)

- 10- >V: voim mää lähteekkih, (h)e (h)e
I indeed can go::, (h)e (h)e
- 11 S: ä(h)ä(h) (h)e (h)e (h)e .hii no ku fssä sanoit,£
u(h) u(h) (h)e (h)e (h)e .hii well cause fyou said,£
- 12 V: em mä mitää suunnitellu ollu mutta kyllä [mä läh]teev voi,
I hadn't planned anythin' but sure [I can go::,
- 13 S: [(h)e (h)e(h)e
- 14 V: y(h)(h)e
- 15 S: .hhh no ku sä sanoit viikko sitte että sä et oo lähössä, (h)e
.hhh well cause you said week ago that you are not goin', (h)e
- 16 V: (mieli) muuttu sej [jälkee,
(mind) changed after [that,
- 17 S: [ku ens viikolla on festarit,
[cause there are festivals next week,

In (8), location is told as a social fact, as a response to a how-are-you question. The location telling does not seem to have at least any direct practical relevance here (though it may have negative implications, showing that the party is away and hence not available, but this practical side is not discussed).

8) Missing text message Koeh.2. (S= Sanna, P= Petri) 2002-07-13_22-16-34.wav
((loud discussion of a crowd in the background))

- 1 P: (tai anne,)(h)e (h)e (h)e
(or ann,)(h)e (h)e (h)e
- 2 S: mitäpä sulle kuuluu,
so, how are you,
- 3 (0.8)
- 4 P: mitäs tässä ei mitään kummempia,
Okay nothin' special,
- 5 (0.5)
- 6- >P: koto puolessa,
in my home region/lands,
- 7 (0.2)

- 8 P: töitä töitä töitä,
work work work,
- 9 (.)
- 10 S: just,
okay,
- 11 (0.6)
- 12 S: ei kum mä vaan aattelin et ooks ksää suuttunu mulle
no I just thought that are you mad at me
- 13 S: sjostai tai jotai ku
for some issue or somethin' as
- 14 S: ksä et vastannu mun tekstiviestiini,
you didn't answer to my text message,

Discussion: The social functions of location telling in mobile calls

As a whole, location seems to have at least three distinct social functions of location telling in mobile calls. Parties may address the interactional location, i.e., whether the answerer is available for interaction at that moment. Sequentially, interactional location is (potentially) relevant in the very beginning of the call, before the reason of call is dealt with. As elsewhere, also in this data set many, even most of the mobile calls are done as a part of practical arrangements. The practical arrangements make relevant praxiological location that describes parties availability for action. The manner location is relevant and described to the other party is activity-bound, i.e., the relevance of location depends of the nature of activity, for instance, the very same location is different for a walker and a car driver. Last, location can also have a socio-emotional content. The socio-emotional content may also have a practical value for parties.

Discussion and findings of this study can be summarized with the help of the table 2.

Table 2 Three-dimensional relevance of location for mobile communication

- I Interactional location
- audio- physical and social features of proximal location: noise (disco), network availability, (train, remote areas) , involvement with proximal interaction, intimacy of situation (toilet, etc.)
- II Praxiological location
- spatio- temporal availability: readiness to engage in action (Are you doing anything special? Can you come to x?)
 - spatio- temporal location of a party vis-à-vis the engaged activity: temporal distance (half an hour [by car, by train, on foot, etc.]

- real-time perspicuous location in an ongoing action: visibility (I'm at x where are you), real-time location (I just saw a reindeer by the road, beware – [told to the car driving behind])
- instructable location: spatialized requests (I'm/accident at the crossroads of A & B, etc.)
- proximate praxiological location: microcoordination of activity (I'm feeling his pulse, the wound stretches from elbow to breast, etc.)
- virtual location (I'm on the web page x)

III Socio-emotional location

- socio-emotional significance of location: biographical relevance (I'm at the cottage of x/my friend; I'm driving car with x), cultural significance (I'm visiting x (old church, museum, medieval city, etc.), aesthetic significance (it's very scenic here)
- socio-emotional praxiological location: practical connotations of socio-emotional location (I'm on the beach, it's lovely here, why don't you come and join me)

Conclusion

The location of co-conversationalist is commonly relevant during mobile phone conversation.

However, the location is not discussed and does not appear to be relevant in geographical terms.

The location is done relevant by the activities parties are involved. Joint activities make relevant spatio-temporal location, such as distance in minutes from the meeting point via the vehicle used.

The precursor for any mutual communication is interactional availability, and the proximal location may have become relevant as a constraint, such as being on a dinner table or toilet. Extended discussions of location concern mainly its socio-emotional sense, such as biographical meaning, place where marriage proposal was done, etc. To put it other way round, the strict geographical location is relevant for mobile conversationalists only on few instances, such as instructing somebody on how to find place x (and even that may require further explanations). The design of location sensitive devices and applications should take into account that pure geographical location is rarely of users' interest.

References:

Arminen, Ilkka (2000) 'On the context sensitivity of institutional interaction',

Discourse & Society 11: 435- 58

Arminen, Ilkka & Leinonen, Minna. (2003) Mobile phone calls – reflecting a new type of openings as an emergence of a new genre of talk- in- interaction? Paper prepared for the conference on Pragmatics. Toronto, July, 2003.

Atkinson, J.M., J. Heritage, (1984) eds. Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis. Cambridge: Cambridge.

Drew, P. (1987) 'Po- faced receipts of teases', *Linguistics* 25: 219- 53.

Laurier, Eric (2000) Why people say where they are during mobile phone calls.

Glasgow 2000, see http://socio.ch/mobile/index_mobile.htm

Ling Rich / Haddon Leslie 2001 Mobile telephony, mobility and the coordination of everyday life. see http://socio.ch/mobile/index_mobile.htm

Schegloff, E.A. (1980) 'Preliminaries to preliminaries: "Can I ask you a question?"', *Sociological Inquiry* 50: 104- 52

Schegloff, E.A. (1986) 'The routine as achievement', *Human Studies* 9: 111- 52.

Schegloff E.A. (2002) "Reflections on Research on Telephone Conversation: Issues of Cross- Cultural Scope and Scholarly Exchange, Interactional Import and Consequences," in K.K. Luke and T.S. Pavlidou (eds.), *Telephone Calls: Unity and diversity in conversational structure across languages and cultures*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Appendix: Transcription symbols

In the transcripts, the speakers' names, and possibly some other details, have been commonly changed in order to secure the anonymity of the persons involved.

Transcription symbols and conventions of conversation analysis are used throughout the extracts (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984), unless otherwise stated.

The contributions are identified with the speakership symbols, like A:, i.e., A: Hi::, often with the initial of the speaker's name. Extracts have been identified with the code for the audio file.

[]	simultaneous speech and voices, its start and end
=	immediately continuous talk, no interval
(0.6)	pause and its length in seconds
(.)	micropause, shorter than 0.2 seconds
.h	in- breath
hh	out- breath
—	emphasis
:	stretch
YES	loud
.	falling intonation
,	continuing intonation
?	rising inflection, not necessarily a question
?,	weak rise in intonation
↑	marked rise in pitch
↓	marked fall in pitch
da-	production of word is cut off
word<	abruptly finished, but not cut off
> <	pronounced faster than the surrounding speech
< >	pronounced slower than the surrounding speech
\$	laughter in the voice
@ @	animated voice
° °	diminishing voice

# #	shivering voice
hah	laughter
(word)	unclearly heard
(())	researcher's comment
->	target line; crucial instance for the analyzed speech

ⁱ It may be that in Laurier's data this single function was dominant. As his material consisted of conversations by mobile professionals. The mobile conversations they engaged in were part of their business. They belong to the genre of what has been called institutional talk (Arminen 2000), which is goal-oriented, often involving monotopical interactions that are reduced from ordinary forms of talk. Laurier's data set consists of calls of a particular sort, and it does not involve many of the forms common in everyday mobile talk.