The Pragmatics of Aesthetic Assessment in Conversation

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Abstract

Judgements of taste are intrinsic to everyday conversational interactions. People make assessments, agree and disagree, and negotiate these judgements as a core part of how they participate in activities, create and share knowledge, and manage their relationships with one another. This paper proposes a 'conversational aesthetics' that sees aesthetic assessments in terms of the pragmatics of talk-in-interaction.

A review of the literature of conversation analysis (CA) picks out conversational devices people routinely use when making assessments. These devices then inform the analysis of a transcribed conversation presented (unanalysed) in Anita Pomerantz' foundational 1984 paper on conversational assessment (Pomerantz, 1984) that deals with apparently aesthetic issues, in this case, judgements of taste about artworks.

This analysis suggests that people accomplish aesthetic judgements using the same generalized and ordinary mechanisms of conversational assessment that are ubiquitous in everyday talk. Analysing Pomerantz' data in terms of more recent developments in CA also poses some interesting methodological questions, and suggests further research into how people can offer up multiple parameters for judgement in aesthetic assessments, and how this process may involve shifts and step-wise drifts between conversational topics.

1 Introduction

Art historical approaches to aesthetics have conventionally treated judgements of taste as by-products of specific formal or perceptual qualities of the objects being judged (Greenberg, 1939), as circumscribed by historical and institutional conventions (Kristeller, 1951) (Danto, 1964) (Dickie, 2004), or as constituted by the societal and interpersonal relationships entailed between those involved through their participation in aestheticised spaces, objects or cultural contexts (Bourriaud, 2002), (Kester, 2004). However, as Michael Corris, a conceptual artist from the 1960s group *Art & Language* has pointed out, "such social effects are generally demonstrated rhetorically" (Corris, 2006), rather than with reference to any specific forms of evidence and analytical methods.

Recent ethnomethodological studies have analysed naturalistic video recordings of people in galleries and museums to demonstrate how their attention to, and thereby experiences of artworks are constituted through their interpersonal interactions (Lehn, 2006). However, these studies have focused almost exclusively on people's movements, gestures and physical orientation; partly because of the practical challenges of recording conversations in galleries (Hindmarsh et al., 2002), and partly to remedy a perceived imbalance in favour of using interviews and surveys in the field of visitors studies (Lehn and Heath, 2001).

Building on this approach to aesthetics as an essentially interactional activity, but looking at interactions outside the specific institutional context of the art gallery or museum, this paper draws on the methods of conversation analysis (CA) to ask what everyday judgements of taste look like in terms of the analysis of talk-in-interaction. The literature of CA is reviewed here in order to identify key conversational devices people routinely use in everyday assessments. These devices are

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then used as a toolkit to analyse a naturalistic conversation about an artwork.

2 Mechanisms of conversational assessment

An obvious example of the ubiquity of judgements of taste in conversation are the everyday assessments of the weather that Erving Goffman terms 'small talk' or 'safe supplies' of chat, readily available to neutralise the potentially offensive situation of 'painful silence' (Goffman and Best, 1982).

In order to develop a CA-informed approach to aesthetic assessments, the following introduction to CA mechanisms and methods highlights low-level conversational devices people use when making these kinds of routine judgements of taste.

2.1 Sequence and turn-taking

Goffman's sociological approach sees these 'supportive' or 'remedial' exchanges as interactional norms with which speakers state and reinforce their social relationships (Goffman and Manning, 2009). Sacks (1987) builds on this basis to identify the apparatus used by participants to coordinate their conversational exchanges as sequences of utterances organised in elegantly interlocking 'turns' (Sacks and Schegloff, 1974a) bound together by frequently observable 'conventional parts' or 'adjacency pairs'(Schegloff and Sacks, 1969) such as exchanges of greetings. Schegloff (1968) shows how conventional parts of these pairs are evidently relevant to conversational participants by highlighting the way they work to overcome or mark problems in their talk that regularly appear when a relevant part of a pair is omitted.

For example, by showing how people deal with, account for and 'repair' (Schegloff et al., 1977), (Schegloff, 1992) misunderstandings, mishearings or 'attributable silences' (Stephen C. Levinson, 1983) at different turn positions in telephone conversations, Schegloff (2004) demonstrates various uses of the word "hello": to initiate a simple exchange of greetings, or as a second part response to the first part of a telephone ringing, or in the midst of a conversation as a presence indicator to resume an interrupted call.

In the same way, an apparent request for a personal assessment of wellbeing: "How are you", can be used as an initial greeting, as a reciprocation of an earlier mutual enquiry (Schegloff, 1968), (Heritage, 1998), as an occasion to draw the conversation to a close (Schegloff and Sacks, 1969), or as kind of conversation restart marker or topic shifter: a way to "move out of talk *about* a trouble" (Jefferson, 1985).

Focusing on terms that are demonstrably relevant to participants themselves (through regular production or marked omission), CA develops a mico-analysis of sequentially relevant utterances by cataloguing the methodical organisation of talk, and extrapolating types from that data (Sacks, 1987).

This approach self-consciously denies the relevance of any quantitative measures or theories of communication that are 'outside of talk' (Schegloff, 1993), relying instead on observing the work people do to make their talk and behaviour contingently and situatedly intelligible in the sense of 'observable-and-reportable' (Garfinkel, 1994). In this way, the relative preference for some methodical organisations of talk, and the dispreference for others emerges from systematic observations.

This notion of conversational preference is the basic building-block of CA required for developing a picture of how a CA-informed aesthetics might work.

2.2 Preference organisation and aesthetic assessments

Levinson (1983) distinguishes between the common definition of preference as an explicit wish from the technical sense of preference as the conversational path of least resistance: the one least marked by requests for clarification or repair from subsequent speakers.

This structure of preference and dispreference is one of the key analytical tools in CA because so much of what is relevant and available to conversational participants is only observable in the delays, pauses, softenings and deferrals that characterise the production of a dispreferred response, whereas agreement and contiguity is the hard-to-detect, unmarked norm (Sacks, 1987).

Combining analytical sensitivity to regular sequences and marked omissions, as well as dispreference and 'reluctance markers' (Bilmes, 1988) that characterise deferred or marked responses, CA uses preference organisation as a

"formal and anonymous apparatus for agreement/disagreement" (Sacks, 1987) that is teleologically independent of conversational context and topic.

In the following example, Pomerantz (1984) demonstrates the preference organisation of an assessment in which an initial assessment is 'shaped' for agreement, i.e. designed in such a way as to orient towards an agreement-preferred response:

```
     A: God izn it dreary.
→              (0.6)

     A:    [ Y'know I don't think-
(D)  B:      hh- it's warm though,
```

1: An agreement-preferred initial assessment shape featuring assessment of the weather. (Pomerantz, 1984) (NB:IV:11.-1).

In (1), an agreement-preferred initial assessment shape indicates that whereas the preferred response would be for immediate agreement (Sacks, 1987), the dispreferred disagreement indicated here with a (D), is marked as problematic by an attributable silence (Stephen C. Levinson, 1983) of 0.6 seconds and a partial softening of the disagreement with the weakened agreement modifier: "though" (Pomerantz, 1984).

This example demonstrates how even small-talk is coordinated with the same preference apparatus of delays, pauses and softenings of dispreferred responses common to participation in and agreement and disagreement with any assessment, even once the topic of the conversation moves beyond initial setting talk (Sacks and Schegloff, 1974b), (Maynard, 1984). As later examples will demonstrate, the same low-level mechanisms used here to talk about the weather are used in similar ways in extended conversations about art.

To summarise, the CA notion of preference sees assessments as organised sequences of utterances produced in interlocking turns, used to defer, delay and/or soften the impact of dispreferred second parts, or to reinforce the contiguity and agreement of preferred seconds with respect to their prior turn shapes.

2.3 Socioepistemic authority

> "[W]ith an assessment, a speaker claims knowledge of that which he or she is assessing." (Pomerantz, 1984).

Building on the idea of the authoritative primacy of recounting first-hand experience (Sacks, 1984), Pomerantz shows how participation and epistemic authority to assess are indexed in the participants' own terms by the way speakers account for not assessing something. Where an initial assessment invites a second response, a second speaker will regularly account for their not producing a second assessment by claiming insufficient access to or knowledge of the thing being assessed (Pomerantz, 1984).

Heritage (2005) uses these analytical building blocks systematically to index differences in 'epistemic authority' in talk as people introduce and negotiate different topics for assessment in conversation. An initial assessment sets out an 'information territory' with associated epistemic rights for different participants, which may be modified, challenged, downgraded or confirmed by subsequent assessments.

These modifications can be pre-emptive, for example, a speaker can downgrade the epistemic authority of an initial assessment with the use of an evidential such as 'seems' to shape an assessment for subsequent modification (Heritage and Raymond, 2005). Similarly, the authority of assessments can be pre-emptively bolstered by shaping them in the strongest terms for an agreed response, for example using the negative interrogative tag-question: 'isn't it?' (Heritage, 2002) to constrain subsequent assessments.

Specific prefixes such as 'Oh' often indicate a state-change in information territory which Heritage (1998) observes people using systematically in a way that re-orients the temporal or topical state of the conversation towards a new information territory in which participants may claim more or less authority to assess. This is observable in conversations in which co-participants compete for epistemic priority, claiming or ceding information territory by systematically differentiating their positions on assessments, even when seemingly reaching agreement.

For example, in (2), *D* and *C* are being asked by *A* to offer an assessment of a newly acquired print: "D'yuh li:ke it?", after which a second assessment

```
    A: D'yuh li:ke it?
(+) D:  .hhh Yes I do like it=
(−) D: =although I rreally::=
    C: =Dju make it?
    A: No We bought it, It's a  .hh a Mary Kerrida print.
    D: 0:h (I k−)=
    A: =Dz that make any sense to you?
    C: Mn mh.  I don' even know who she is.
    A: She's that's, the Sister Kerrida,  who,
    D:                                    [.hhh
    D: Oh[that's the one you to:ld[ me you bou:ght.=
    C:   [ Oh-                    [
    A:                            [Ye:h
```

(2) The evaluation of a new artwork from (JS:I. -1) (Pomerantz, 1984, p.78).

becomes relevant. *C's* subsequent question, and disclaiming of any knowledge of the author ("I don' even know who she is.") soften and defer the dispreferred critical assessments (Pomerantz, 1984) indicated by the bracketed minus mark.

Applying Heritage's (1998) observations about how this process demarcates information territories to Pomerantz's example, both *C* and *D* use 'Oh' in this extract while differentiating their responses to *A's* question. Firstly, when *C* asks who made the print, and *A* explains who the author is, *D* replies using "O:h (I k–)=" possibly beginning to mark a different information territory from *C's*. Later, when *A* initiates a comprehension check: "=Dz that make any sense to you?", *C* explicitly disclaims knowledge of the author of the print ("I don' even know who she is."), accounting for the lack of a second assessment, demonstrating diminished epistemic rights to assess the print. Once again, *D* follows *A's* explanation about the author with another "Oh", marking a state-change and a subtle temporal shift from *A's* explanation about the author to a prior conversation between *D* and *A* about the print: "Oh that's the one you to:old me you bou:ght.=". Finally, *C* then uses an 'Oh', seemingly to acknowledge the differentiation.

This illustrates what Heritage (2005) characterises as "a systematic dilemma at the heart of agreement sequences" in which co-participants generally seek mutual agreement, but when providing it, "must respect the other party's information territories and associated epistemic rights".

It also demonstrates how the process of shifting between these territories by means of subtle temporal shifts and marked state-changes can be linked to shifts between conversational topics.

2.4 Topical shift

Conversational sequences are conventionally tied together into contiguous topics by questions or assessments being followed by responses on the same topic. However, topics evidently do change (Sacks, 1987), often by means of disjunctive topic-shift markers such as 'anyway', 'so', or 'Oh!' (Jefferson, 1984), (Maynard, 1984).

Sacks (1987) also observes unmarked 'step-wise' topic shifts, which Heritage and Atkinson (1984) describe as the aspect of conversation most "complex…and recalcitrant to systematic analysis". This may be partly due to the complexity of the coordination of minute overlaps in speech and rapid uses of acknowledgement tokens such as 'OK', 'Yeah', or 'mhmmm' that characterise step-wise topic shifts (Jefferson, 1981), making it hard to identify segues from one topic to the next: a kind of 'topical drift'. It may also be an inherent limitation of CA's methodological commitments: if the shift between topics is unmarked by participants, it may be unavailable for analysis.

If topics in conversation can be seen as information territories with different associations of epistemic rights for each participant, assessment sequences provide participants with specific conversational devices for moving between those territories, such as parameter shifts.

2.4.1 Parameter shift

A$_1$ A: God izn it dreary.
A$_2$ P: hh- it's warm though

(3) Pomerantz' (1984) example showing the contrastive assessment of "a shifted parameter", (NB:IV:11.-1).

In (3), Pomerantz revisits her earlier example of weather-talk to point out what she calls 'a shifted parameter' (Pomerantz, 1984) by which the weather is assessed, in this case marked by a "though". Here, the parameter of assessment shifts from the appearance of the weather, to the temperature. Pomerantz later expands on these kinds of shifts in parameter, and how they can start to modify the way participants refer to the things they are assessing.

Pomerantz uses example (4) in a footnote to highlight an unusual type of assessment that agrees with, then upgrades its prior, and then accomplishes what she calls a "subtle referent shift" (Pomerantz, 1984) of the upgraded assessment.

A: They look nice together.
B: Yes they're lovely. But I particularly like the blue en gray, en white,
A: Yeah
B: What's so nice about this is you get two nice pieces.

(4) A further example of "parameter-shift" in (JS:II:137) from Pomerantz (1984, p.98).

Here *A* assesses two vases, citing the parameter of their looking nice together. *B* initially agrees, even upgrading this assessment: "Yes they're lovely", then, marking the parameter-shift with a "But", slightly modifies the assessment to point out the colours. *A* concurs with an interjected acknowledgement token "Yeah". *B* then modifies the overall parameter of *A's* assessment: the niceness of the objects "together", instead assessing their colour and appearance, and finally emphasising that: "you get *two [distinct]* nice pieces".

In terms of Sacks' and Jefferson's distinction between disjunctive and step-wise shifts, these *parameter shifts* are marked by disjunctive 'but' or 'though' tags, deployed within an organisation of assessment sequences that tend towards overall agreement and contiguity, softening dispreferred disagreements by means of a subtle stepwise shift. In Heritage's terms, this could be seen as co-participants asserting the independence of their assessments by shifting between subtly differentiated information territories.

Analysing assessment sequences that display this type of topical drift via parameter shift is problematic as much of the CA apparatus for dealing with assessments and their epistemic territories depends on reliably reading second assessments as "produced by recipients of prior assessments in which the referents in the seconds are the same as those in the priors" (Pomerantz, 1984). An assessment that has undergone sufficient parameter shift to amount to a kind of topical drift could be seen and treated by conversational participants as a "fully sentential declarative assessment" (Heritage and Raymond, 2005). Alternatively, it may be seen as a grey area characterised by Jefferson (1981) in her analyses of the complexity of topic-shifting in phone conversations as an ambiguously attributed information territory in which the interactional cohesiveness of an exchange may be expressed as normal[1] while at the same time the conversation is undergoing an unmarked 'topical rupture' (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984).

The following section uses the CA methods and conversational devices outlined above to analyse a conversation about an artwork presented, but not analysed in any detail, in Pomerantz' paper on conversational assessment. (Pomerantz, 1984).

3 Conversational Aesthetic Assessment

Analysing Pomerantz's example of an conversation about judging an artwork demonstrates how the same conversational devices ubiquitous in everyday talk are present in extended aesthetic assessment sequences.

Informed by more recent developments in CA, this analysis also suggests how participants negotiate the assessment by shifting between various information territories within an overall conversational topic.

[1] Jefferson observes how this ambiguity about topical territory seems to engender exaggerated forms of recipient assessment feedback and affiliation such as "collaborative completion" (Jefferson, 1981).

```
    A: D'yuh li:ke it?
(+) D:  ˙hhh Yes I do like it=
(−) D: =although I rreally::=
    C: =Dju make it?
    A: No We bought it, It's a  ˙hh a Mary Kerrida print.
    D: 0:h (I k−)=
    A: =Dz that make any sense to you?
    C: Mn mh.  I don' even know who she is.
    A: She's that's, the Sister Kerrida,  who,
    D:                                    [˙hhh
    D: Oh[that's the one you to:ld[me you bou:ght.=
    C:    [ Oh-                   [
    A:                            [Ye:h
    D:  [Ya:h.
    A:   Right.
       (1.0)
    A: It's worth something,
       (1.0)
    A: There's only a hundred of'm
       (0.5)
    D: Hmm
    E: Which picture is that.
    A: The one thet says Life.
       (1.5)
    A: (           ).
(−) D: ˙hhh Well I don't- I'm not a great fan of this type of a:rt.  There are
       certain- ones I see thet I like, But I like the w- =
    E: =Is there ano[thuh way of spelling Life?.
(−) D:              [-more realistic-.
    A: hhmh!
    E: That's all[I wd loo(hh)k fo(h),
    D:           [hh!
(−) D: Yih d-know why I don't go fer this type of uh:  art, Becuz it- it
       strikes me ez being the magazine adverti:sement ty:pe.  Which some
       uh-uh some a' them are really great.  But tuhm I-my, taste in art is
       for the more uhit-t-treh- it tends tuh be realistic.
```

(5) Evaluation of a new artwork from (JS:I. -1) (Pomerantz, 1984). In Pomerantz' transcription, a '-' sign indicates critical assessment and a '+' sign marks an appreciative assessment.

3.1 Sequence, Turn and Preference Organisation

In (5), the same low-level organisation of sequences, turns and preference make the conversation amenable to a CA-informed analysis.

A first offers up a print for assessment: "D'yuh li:ke it?", after which a second assessment becomes relevant to all those addressed. *D* responds immediately with a token preferred affirmation upgraded by an emphatic "Yes I do like it=". However, *D's* final assessment: "I don't go fer this type of uh: art =although…", produced only after a long series of turns by multiple participants can be seen as presaged by the modifier token "although".

Possibly reacting to this marker of an immanent critical assessment, *C* interrupts[2] *D's*, offering up an alternative candidate parameter for assessing the print: its authorship ("=Dju make it?").

This interruption, as well as *E's* later interruption: "=Is there ano-thuh way of spelling Life?"[3] both take place just before *D* produces a critical

[2]Pomerantz (1984) uses Jefferson's CA transcription style in which an equals sign at the beginning or end of an utterance indicates an interruption or lack of a pause or gap between speaker turns, and square brackets stretching over one or more lines indicate overlaps (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984).

[3]It is unclear from the transcript whether *E's* question is a topic-relevant interjection or a side conversation.

assessment, suggesting a degree of spontaneous group coordination in the softening of *D's* dispreferred assessment, which remains relevant but deferred until the last seven turns.

Four long pauses of 0.5 - 1.5 seconds after *A* says "Right", mark the sustained absence of a second position assessment relevant to *A's* initial question, and indicate that these pauses can be read as attributable (even painful) silences (Goffman and Best, 1982).

D's ultimately critical assessments start out shaped in a manner directly counter posed to *A's* initial question: ("D'yuh li:ke it?") with "'hhh Well I don't-", which *D* softens somewhat with a weakened critical assessment: "I'm not a great fan", and a generalisation of the referent from *A's* specific print to "this type of a:rt.".

3.2 Indices of Epistemic Authority

This conversation demonstrates an intense negotiation over information territories (Heritage and Raymond, 2005), in which participants seem to compete over who has primary epistemic authority to assess the print on their own terms.

D's partial repeat and modification of the initial question: "D'yuh li:ke it?", with stress on the copula "do": "'hhh Yes I do like it=", is an example of what Tanya Stivers (2005) describes as a method of asserting primary rights from second position.

C's epistemic authority in the assessment of the print is first undermined by *A's* explicit comprehension check: "Dz that make any sense to you?", shifting referent from the object of the overall epistemic struggle (the print), to *C's* comprehension of *A's* prior turn, which *C* answers with an agreement tag "Mm mh", and then fails to produce a second assessment, accounting for this omission by claiming lack of knowledge or access: "I don't even know who she is".

D interrupts *A's* explanation of who the author is with several 'oh'-prefixed responses: "Oh that's the one you to:ld me you bou:ght.=", shifting to talk about a different time and a different conversation, possibly constituting a shift to an information territory that is differentiated from *C's* declination to assess the print.

This marked shift from the question of the authorship of the print to the subject of a prior conversation between *A* and *D*, functions as another deferral and also as a claim of *D's* epistemic authority to assess. These shifts between information territories are accompanied by shifts between parameters for an assessment.

3.3 Parameter Shift

In this conversation, participants offer up different parameters for assessment, withholding or shifting away from clearly critical, dispreferred second assessments.

For example, *C* interrupts *D* when offering up an important criterion for assessing the print: its authorship, and particularly, whether *A* themselves is the author. A series of turns follow in which the question of the authorship of the print functions as a backdrop to a rapid offering-up of multiple possible assessment criteria including:

- authorship,
- knowledge of the author,
- monetary value,
- scarcity,
- knowledge about the print,
- correct spelling,[4]
- how 'realistic' it is, and
- how much like a magazine advert it is.

After the initial discussion of authorship is concluded, a quick exchange of "Ye:h, Ya:h, Right" acknowledgement tokens between *A* and *D* marks readiness for a topic shift (Jefferson, 1984), which in this case is organised as a parameter-shift from the local assessment of the criterion of authorship, back to the deferred overall assessment of the print.

A then offers two further parameter-shifts, proposing new criteria for assessment in each subsequent turn: "It's worth, something," or "There's only a hundred of'm". Each of these short turns are marked with attributable silences of up to 1.5 seconds, that Maynard (1980) characterises as failed speaker transitions, marking attempts at topic shifts where further topical talk from others becomes relevant but in this case, remains unsatisfied when *A* themselves takes up the next turn again. *D* finally interjects with an emphatic "Hmm", marking *D's* turn to propose assessment criteria, starting with how realistic the print is.

D's dispreferred critical assessment is somewhat softened by *E's* concurrent interruption, pos-

[4] Assuming that *E's* interjection about the correct spelling of the word "Life" in the print relates to the print in question and is not a side conversation, see note[2].

sibly checking on a spelling within the print, and suggesting that the spelling is "all I ws loo(hh)k fo(h),", i.e. a relevant criterion for *E's* judgement of the print.

D's quick prespeech inbreath "·hhh" (Jefferson, 1985) is followed by the delivery of a critical second assessment including the introduction of a further parameter for assessment, which functions as an account for the dispreferred response: the likeness of the print to a type of advertising.

4 Discussion

The CA-informed analysis of aesthetic assessments presented so far proposes conversational aesthetics as a distinctive set of interactional practices identifiable in the regular use of specific conversational devices. Future work may involve identifying more such devices as well as building on this initial analysis of how topical shift and step-wise drift are managed in aesthetic assessments.

4.1 Aesthetics as Information Territory

The conversation about *A's* print demonstrates assessments of taste in which the mechanisms of sequence, turn and preference organisation operate in each local assessment of various parameters, as well as in the overall global assessment via the deferral and softening of *D's* dispreferred second assessments.

Even after deferral, it seems that *D's* second assessments are softened to oblique critical assessments of "this type of a:rt", rather than a direct answer to *A's* initial question "D'yuh li:ke it?". *D's* conclusion: "I-my, taste in art is for the more uh:: uh it-t-treh- it tends tuh be realistic" is further softened by accounting for the assessment via a claim of "my taste", which functions here as the most explicit demarcation of an information territory to which *D* can claim exclusive access and absolute rights to assess. Even in this territory the assessment is still marked by agreement-disagreement assessment sequences ("some a' them are really great. But"), and tentative evidentials such as 'tends to be' (Heritage and Raymond, 2005).

In building up a picture of these core features of conversational aesthetic assessment, it is useful to bear in mind the CA view that any aesthetic discussion, however large or small, in any context, can be seen as a series of assessment sequences in which dispreferred second assessments are deferred by pauses, softenings and disjunctive parameter shifts.

4.2 Future Work: Parameter Drift

This paper has suggested how marked, disjunctive parameter shifts in which multiple candidate parameters are offered up for assessment can organise and facilitate a kind of step-wise topic shift. There are also unmarked drifts into different parameters and sub-topics such as *E's* apparent confusion about which print is being discussed segueing, unmarked, into either a separate side conversation about another print, or possibly into a discussion about whether the correct spelling of 'Life' in a print is a relevant parameter for its assessment.

The initial work presented here suggests that the nesting of local assessments with different parameters within an overall assessment may be seen as a landscape through which co-participants negotiate epistemic authority over their respective information territories. Further research is proposed into how, through this process, subtle topic shifts may be introduced into conversations, making new topics relevant to participants in the same way that in (5), the author of the print "Mary Kerrida" becomes relevant to the assessment.

This begs the question of whether shifts of topic via shifts in assessment parameters might help to explain how participants accomplish movement from topic to topic. The resulting availability of new and possibly unexpectedly relevant themes, contexts and objects for discussion might be useful as a pragmatic description of what could be called a creative conversation.

However, even if this idea is borne out by available conversational data, picking out shifts in the meanings and content that are brought into these interactions through assessment sequences rather than concentrating only on the structure and regularities of the shifts themselves stretches CA's methodological commitment to analysing only those interactions available to researchers and evidently at issue to the conversational participants.

Bearing the limitations of a CA-informed conversational aesthetics in mind, the next steps of this research will involve selecting naturalistic conversational data from the British National Corpus (BNC) (Burnard, 2000), re-transcribing some conversations in CA style using the newly pub-

lished Audio BNC (Coleman et al., 2012) and analysing everyday dialogue sampled outside specific aesthetic/gallery contexts that demonstrates some of the conversational devices of aesthetic assessment discussed in this paper.

4.3 Conclusion

It may be inconsistent to move from a CA-informed structural analysis to an interpretative analysis by taking into account the ostensible meaning or the assessed content of conversational topics. However, the availability of taste-talk and art-talk in the CA literature itself is the basis for this initial attempt to describe the machinery of everyday conversational aesthetic assessments.

Treating aesthetic assessments as conversationally negotiated information territories highlights the difference between this approach and art-historical aesthetic theories that have tended to focus on the centrality of the work of art itself, either as mimesis, expression, form, narrative or conceptual content, or on its positioning within specific socio-political contexts or relations (den Braembussche, 2009).

An analysis of how these theories relate to this conversational aesthetic approach is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth pointing out that post-modernist theories of art and culture (Lyotard, 1984) and some related sociological aesthetic theories (Wolff, 1993) make compellingly similar observations about the social construction of art, as well as the ways in which art can be used to as a healthy and respectful outlet for discussion and dissonance within a society (Mouffe, 2002).

These theories are, however, methodologically at right-angles to a CA-informed approach to aesthetics. Although CA accounts of sequence, turn-taking, preference organisation, negotiated epistemic authority and step-wise topic shift may seem irrelevant to conventional aesthetic discourses, the material evidence available to CA enables a systematic interactional analysis of how people make aesthetic assessments in everyday speech, without prioritising specific formal, narrative or contextual norms other than those evidently relevant to conversational participants.

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