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**COMPLAINABLE MATTERS: THE USE OF IDIOMATIC
EXPRESSIONS IN MAKING COMPLAINTS**

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Complainable Matters: The Use of Idiomatic Expressions in Making Complaints*

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Idiomatic, proverbial, and other figurative expressions are quite frequently employed by speakers in ordinary talk. Our analysis of idioms in naturally occurring conversations reveals that they are used, not randomly, but most notably when one speaker is complaining to another. In this sequential environment the particularly egregious character of the matter being complained about is portrayed through an idiom. In view of the role complaints play in casting private troubles or anxieties into the public domain, it is significant that typically a complaint is formulated idiomatically at a point where there is some conflict or lack of alignment between complainant and recipient. Thus, idioms are introduced in "inauspicious environments," where, up until then, recipients have withheld sympathizing or affiliating with a complainant. Idioms have a special robustness which lends them the function of summarizing the complaint in such a way as to enhance its legitimacy, and simultaneously to bring the complaint to a close.

This paper reports the findings of a study of the occurrence of idiomatic, clichéd, and proverbial expressions in ordinary talk—that is, expressions which are recognizably formulaic and largely figurative. We began our study with "relatively weak initial goals" (Sacks, 1972:137), to see whether, if instead of occurring just anywhere in conversation, idioms might have some kind of orderly sequential positions. Our investigation revealed a marked pattern of idiomatic usage in sequences where speakers are complaining about some personal difficulties, mistreatment, and the like. Moreover, these idioms occurred quite commonly within such sequences at positions where recipients of the complaints had thus far not affiliated, or had withheld affiliating, with the complainants. In this serendipitous fashion, then, we found a connection between an apparently minor and incidental detail of speech and the management of a significant social activity. We examine those patterns here along with the interactional work idioms perform in the making of complaints.

Idioms and Complaints in Conversation

From our data—recordings of naturally occurring conversations and of talk in more institutional contexts such as psychotherapeutic sessions and business and sales meetings—we have collected all the instances where a speaker uses one of the many forms of idiomatic expressions in our (British and American) language. These are formulaic constructions of more than one word, usually phrases but sometimes (as in the case of proverbs) whole sentences, whose meaning is largely figurative. The meanings of such expressions as "kick the

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bucket," "like banging your head against a brick wall," "doesn't cut any ice with me" and so on are, then, not determined by the literal application of the meanings of their constituent words (for a fuller account of, and conceptual distinctions between types of idiomatic expressions, see Fillmore et al., 1986).

Insofar as idioms are formulaic, colloquial constructions, their use is widely regarded as a "lazy" solution to linguistic selection. According to the predominantly cognitive standpoint adopted towards idiomaticity, it is held that in contrast to more imaginative and resourceful lexical choices, the use of idioms requires little mental processing, and is stylistically inept. Moreover, where idioms incorporate stereotypical knowledge—for instance about categories of persons, as in "boys will be boys," "a Jewish mamma"—they are regarded as unfortunate representations of social prejudice. Such views, particularly about the stylistic infelicity of idioms, rather well fit a quite common reaction to analyzing the details of what people say in ordinary (especially informal) interaction. This is that the particular words that are used, the particular means of expression, are "mere ways of talking," the result of more or less random choices between the various alternative ways of saying something. According to this view of the casualness of talk-in-interaction, best exemplified in its idiomaticity, there is likely to be no special pattern in the details of linguistic selection. This reaction, and the quite different line of enquiry pursued by conversation analysis, has recently been nicely summarized by Schegloff (forthcoming). In this study, we set out to find whether there is some discoverable orderliness to the occurrence of idioms. If there were such order, one could begin to account for the social interactional work idioms are methodically employed to manage.

Roughly a decade ago; Emerson and Messinger (1977) pointed to the crucial role complaints have in the process of transforming the initially privately experienced and sustained nature of personal troubles into openly acknowledged interpersonal difficulties. They suggested that complaints may be made after other more implicit (and perhaps less morally implicative) means of remedying the trouble have been unsuccessfully pursued. In such circumstances, complaints may be made to the one whose behavior is implicated in the complaint, to some intimate third party (close friends or relatives), or eventually to some official agencies whose "occupational mandates attract those seeking remedies for relational troubles" (Emerson and Messenger, 1977:127).

Emerson and Messinger further suggested that complaints play a crucial part in the negotiated construction of versions of just what the trouble may be. "Conceptually, the definition of a trouble can be seen as the emergent product, as well as the initial precipitant, of remedial actions" (Emerson and Messinger, 1977:123)—with complaints being the first such remedial action in which the nature of a trouble is given explicit formulation in language. This reflexively *constitutive* role of a complaint in formulating the nature of the trouble which occasioned the complaint is a central insight of their conceptualization. They add that "the attempt to obtain and shape the course of intervention may lead to the progressive clarification and specification of the nature and seriousness of the trouble" (Emerson and Messinger, 1977:128).

Part of the importance which Emerson and Messinger attached to complaints, then, is the role they play in the natural history of troubles management; making a complaint is the stage at which sometimes vague perceptions of something being wrong are cast into the public domain, in an effort to mobilize help in remedying the trouble. But in addition, they are providing an analytical account of how giving verbal expression to the trouble in complaining—in describing it or naming the trouble, explaining how it has come about, trying to persuade third parties of the complainant's version of events—is central to the identification and construction of just what the trouble is. In this sense complaints are constitutive features of the troubles they report. Furthermore, Emerson and Messinger highlighted the interactional and therefore negotiated nature of this constitutive role; formulating a version of the trouble in a complaint is shaped by interactional contingencies, such as the responses of the

complaint recipient, especially the extent to which the recipient affiliates with the complainant (1977:128-31).

However, while they have most usefully depicted in general terms the part played by complaints in formulating and communicating troubles,¹ Emerson and Messinger stopped short of giving detailed, empirical examples of, for instance, how the nature of a trouble may be specified, elaborated and thus constituted in making a complaint. They proposed a conceptual hypothesis of the role of complaints in the natural history of troubles management. Empirical analysis of the following matters is required: how complaints are managed, and in the course of their management, how the troubles they report are formulated; how the recipient's response might shape the formulation of trouble which emerges from the interaction; how complainants seek to persuade recipients of the validity of their accounts and hence of the justice of their complaints; and how the extent of a recipient's affiliation may have consequences for the organization of the activity of complaining. In brief, then, a fundamental phenomenon in Emerson and Messinger's conceptual account—complaints and their treatment—remains elusive in terms of its status as a social activity and its organized features.

Many aspects of the findings reported here about the use of idioms in complaint sequences bear directly on the empirical lacunae noted above in Emerson and Messinger's general conceptual framework. Whilst we are not concerned, as they were, with the eventual significance of complaints in seeking remedies for troubles, in mobilizing the intervention of outside agencies, and in the attribution of deviance by those agencies, we do focus here on some of the organized properties of the formulation of complaints. As we have explained, we did not set out to study complaints about troubles: these happened to be the sequential environment in which idioms are most frequently being used. As is general in conversation analysis, our aim is to uncover the sequential/interactional work being managed by a given conversational phenomenon, here the use of idiomatic expressions. With this in view, we shall consider here how idioms may be used (1) to formulate the nature of the grievance in a complaint, in sequences where recipients have withheld affiliating with the complainant, and (2) as terminal objects in such complaint sequences.

The Use of Idioms to Formulate Complaints

An initial finding from the collection of the occurrence of idioms in our data was that there appeared to be two distinct clusters of usage. The first cluster involved idioms with which a speaker is praising or extolling or reporting something especially pleasurable or exciting. In one such instance, for example, the children of a visiting couple are described as having been "good as gold"; in another, a woman describes how well she got along with a particularly eligible man, whom she met just the previous evening, by reporting "we were rilly talkin' up a storm." The other major cluster—the focus of this paper—involves idioms used when making critical assessments in the environment of complaining about one's treatment, somebody's behavior, or some misfortune. An instance of this occurs in the following extract, in which Emma is telling Lottie about the experience she and her husband had when they stayed at a well-known hotel at which her husband was playing in a golfing event.²

1. Emerson and Messinger are concerned with complaints made to both unofficial parties (friends, etc.) and official agencies. Their focus on the latter reflects their wider enquiry into the process by which troubles come to be labelled as possibly involving some form of social or official deviance. But they emphasize that the concept of trouble, central to an account of deviant careers, also "directs attention not simply toward early phases of careers into deviance, but also toward non- and 'pre-deviant' situations and settings generally" (1977:131).

2. As is general practice, all names—whether of speakers or those referred to by speakers—are pseudonyms.

[1] [NB:IV:10:36]

- Emma: Wel you know we were there in Ju:ne yihknow Bud played go:lf inna (.) when the air c'nditioner went o::ff? 'hhh En we're about (.) th'only ones that ha:d'n air conditioned room the rest of'm were bro:ken. 'hhh An'we went down to breakfast 'n there was only about two people to help for breakfast with all these guys goina pla:y go:lf. They were a:ll teed o:ff:.
- Lottie: Ye::ah?
- Emma: Becuz (.) Bud couldn't e:ven eat his breakfast. He o:rdered he waited forty five minutes'n he'a:dtuh be out there tuh tee off so I gave it to uh: (.) Karen's: liddle bo:y.
(0.7)
- Emma: ((swallow)) I mean that's how bad the service was'hhh
(.) It's gone tuh pqt. ←
- Lottie: u-Oh::: (.) e- Ye::: a h .

Here Emma summarizes her complaint about the poor facilities and the bad service at the hotel with the idiomatic expression "It's gone tuh pqt."

The kind of critical/complaining use of idioms illustrated in extract 1 occurs much more frequently in our data than their use in extolling. This led us to focus on those for the present. Idioms were used in complaints about diverse matters, some of which are illustrated in the following extracts. In 2, a patient is describing to a specialist (to whom he has been referred by his doctor) the headaches he has been experiencing and complains that they hurt "more than the devil in hell."

[2] [AN2Jewitt]

- Dr: hhhh I'm sure: Doctor: Macphale:s; right (.) I'm sure that these headaches:: yer gettin are:: er:: associated with a bit of arthritis:
(0.5)
- Dr: in yer er::(0.7) in yer neck(.)really: (.) more than your spine:: er:m: (.) hh I mean more han your lower spine it's the in your neck that's causin the::
- P: is it
- P: it seems to be he:re:: anywa:y:
- Dr: the problem that's correct
(0.2)
- Dr: yes mhhh
(3.2)
- P: that I could understood (.) because it (.) it's the headaches: was the thing thats: got me
(0.4)
- P: (more than anything else)
(1.2)
- P: more than he devil in hell because they were gettin ←
more or less (.) permanent yer know::
(1.2)
- P: they were coming even when I was never pain in the back of my neck
(28.0)
- Dr: hhhhhhhh right: well I'll tell what we'll do Mister Tarrett (.) I'll give . . .

In extract 3, A is complaining about what she regards as a quite inadequate pay raise. She begins by depicting the strength of her feeling in the idiomatic, "I'm so: God damn ma:d(.) I can't see straight."; and then A reports saying to a colleague at work, who appears to

have attempted to justify the pay raise (as the expected or promised five and a half percent), that it "doesn't cut a Go:damn bit'a i:ce with me:"—further adding that in turn she intends to keep strictly to her hours of employment, and if her employers don't like it "they can take a flying . . . scre:w at the moo:n."

[3] [JG III:19]

A: ah:(1.0) tell: you dupey:. I'm so: God damn ma:d (.) I can't see straight.
(.)

B: hmm.

A: tchhh So then: (.) y'u know = I ws sayin something tu Lee Schae:fer about it,
an Lee: sai:d, (.) Well, she said, Iz - that - five an a half perce:nt, (.) hhh
(.)

A: an:I: said, w:ell I: dun kno:w, I guess it i:z:.
(0.4)

A: hhh So,- y'know:- (0.5) they stuck ri:ght to that five an a half per cent deal.
(0.6)

A: chh an I: said bouht ah'll tell: you one: thing. I: sai:d tha:t
doesnt cut a Go:damn bit'a i:ce with me: ← 1
(0.4)

A: hh I said first of a:ll I said they've seen the end of my ten:hour days (.) an
my ni:n:e hour days
(0.3)

B: oh: you damn right.
(.)

A: an: I said they:can godu hell = I'm takin' an hour fur lu:nch (.) an if they:
don li:ke it, an I: dont intend to ca:ll um an
tellum whe:re hell: I: am? they can take a flying = you know, ← 2
scre:w at the moo:n. ← 3

In this next instance Shirley, who is selling a house, and Ilene, representing someone who is trying to buy the house, are in dispute about whether Shirley's real estate agents have, as they claim, sent some necessary documents to Ilene. Ilene has not received these documents and has contested that the realtors (referred to in the extract as "Moss and Company") never sent the documents. Having spoken to her agents, Shirley is now calling Ilene to confirm that she'll "have to acce:pt" her agents' version. While acknowledging Shirley's position, Ilene continues to contest the claim of the realtors and concludes by complaining that arguing with them is "like . . . banging yer head against a brick wa:ll."

[4] [Her:OI:1:2-3]

Raybee: Well as far as I'm con:cerned it's: that um I'll have to acce:pt Moss'n
Co's a:rgument that (0.3) your son was introduced to the property via
them.=

Ilene: =Yeg:s well no:w 'h obviously one's going to have to do that but I can
assu:re you: 'hh that he was not.
(.)

Ilene: 'hhh We've checked now on all the papers'e has an' Moss'n Comp'ny
said they were sent through the post we have had n:nothing from
Moss'n Comp'ny through the post.
(0.3)

- Ilene: Anyway, (.) Tha:t's th- uh you know you can't (.) argue
ih it's like (.) uh: m
Shirley: Well
(.)
Ilene: banging yer head against a brick wall. ←
Shirley: E z far as I'm concerned on this situa:tion,
all private negotiations between us must cea:se.

Extract 5 is a business negotiation in which Giles is expressing his concern about a deal that is being considered, complaining that if the deal goes through his company will lose seven thousand pounds "down the tube."

[5] [Anderson: LTC Cola:16-18]

- Giles: Now last year from Cola. And we're talking on the Cola one at the moment
'hhh (2.3) For the last two years if we keep these figures the same,
Henry: Twenty seven thousand
Giles: () we were talking twenty seven thousand to ourselves. 'hhhh If
we look at (1.2) thirty eight thousand. (0.7) uh split on a forty five f::fifty
five basis. Don't know. twenty one thousand, say, (.) whoever it might be.
'hhhh Where (0.2) 'hhh phhh! wihh
Split over two years. 'hh we're already. (.) 'h uh:: seven
grand down thih:: the the the tubes. ←
Henry: Mm.

Just before the exchange in this next extract, from a psychotherapeutic consultation, the patient, Brenda, has mentioned her fear that if something "traumatic" ever occurred, say, at the weekend, she would be stuck having to wait until their regular Wednesday session for Laurel to help her. Out of this she makes the complaint that Laurel has never told her to call any-time she should need help:

[6] [PB:9-15-71:(ms)24-26]

- Brenda: I know, (.) but you never told me um: (1.5) if I ever felt (1.4) I needed (.) to:,
then I could (2.4) call you, (0.9) so I wouldn't. (0.4) If I'm not told I
wouldn't do it.
Laurel: You wouldn't?
(1.4)
Brenda: I wouldn't care how bad it was because 'hhh If I felt I would have to call
you up 'hhh and you couldn't talk to me, 'hh because you were too busy
with something else 'hh then that would um (0.2) 't'hh (1.5) that could
really throw me off the deep end. ←

Laurel's not having advised her to call if she ever needed help has resulted, Brenda complains, in her fear that it would "throw me off the deep end" if Laurel were to reject an attempt by her to seek Laurel's help.

In extract 7 Emma is reporting to her daughter that her husband, Barbara's father, has walked out on her; in the course of which she complains about his treatment of her, that she "CA:N'T SEEM TUH SAY BLUE IS BLUE" without him arguing.

[7][NB:IV:7:4]

- Barbara: Is this been goin on lo:ng er wha:t.

- Emma: OH::: I DON'T KNOW I JIS CA:N'T SEEM TUH SAY BLUE IS BLUE ←
 HE AR:GUES e-WITH ME ER:: u- (.) u-SOMETHING EN: AH: DQNT DO
 THIS RI:GHT'n THAT RI:GHT. 'hhhhh I NEED hhHE:L:P'hh
 (.)
- Emma: EN BARBRA would you CA:LL him tohni:ght for me.

As a final illustrative case, Emma is again complaining, this time to her sister Lottie, about her family's lack of support over her husband's walking out, describing them as not giving her "two cents worth."

[8] [NB:IV:10:R:29]

- Emma: But wha:ta ga:l. Thirty eight year old gal:, 'n she (.) left me tonight she sais
 oh Emma yer so much she sais I love to have you rou:nd en in: yihknow
 yuh made me feel so goo::d'n I thought why'n the hell my family be that
 wa:y.
- Lottie: Ye::ah.
- Emma: They don't give me two cents worth of:,h ←

The kinds of grievances about which speakers are complaining in extracts 1 through 8 are quite various. They include poor hotel service, mistreatment by one's husband or family, the fear of rejection by one's therapist, physical pain, inadequate salary raise, loss of profit in a pay deal, and the purportedly false claims of a real estate agency. But across the diversity in the content of the grievances, we can notice that in each case an idiomatic expression is employed to formulate just what the complaint is.

In cases 1 through 8 the complainant engages in two distinct activities. One is to report some details concerning the grievance; while the other is to explicitly formulate, out of those details, a complaint. They are distinctive activities insofar as (1) they occupy different components in the telling, and (2) the point of the detailing is articulated in the idiomatic complaint. The details which the complainant tells about the grievance may be quite brief, as in 4:

- Ilene: 'hhh We've checked now on all the papers'e has an' Moss'n Comp'ny said
 they were sent through the post we have had n:nothing from Moss'n
 Comp'ny through the post.

Alternatively, such detailing may approach being a story about the circumstances of the grievance, as in extract 1:

- Emma: W'l you know we were there in Ju:ne yihknow Bud played go:lf inna (.)
 w'n the air c'nditioner went o::ff? hhh En we're about (.) th'only ones
 that ha:d'n air conditioned room the rest of'm were bro:ken. 'hhh An'we
 went down duh breakfast 'n there wz only abou' two people to help for
 breakfast with all these guys goina pla:y go:lf. They were a:ll tged o:ff:.

The detailing in Emma's story here is of course built so as to very clearly implicate a complaint, by mentioning particulars that display a lapse in or fault with the hotel service (that the air conditioners were broken; there were only two people to serve "all these guys" going to play golf; her husband waited 45 minutes, and hadn't time to eat his breakfast). While, then, the story's details are complainable matters, Emma makes her complaint quite explicit when she continues, "I mean that's how bad the service was 'hhh It's gone to pot." Through her use of the idiom she specifies her complaint about just how bad the service was. Thus a complainant's story detailing the circumstances of the grievance may be distinguished from the explicit formulation or "naming" of the grievance itself. In each of extracts 1 through 8 the complaint is made explicit in a separate object from the telling of the details of the

grievance—an object which formulates the point of the circumstantial details through an idiomatic expression.

The idioms work in a specially “powerful” way with respect to the details which they summarize: they represent their egregious character. Thus, for instance, it is not just that the service was bad, but it has “gone to pot” (extract 1); not only is the patient in 2 suffering pain from headaches, but the pain is “more than the devil in hell”; in 4 Ilene is not merely having difficulty getting the real estate agency to accept her point, it’s “like banging your head against a brick wall”; the patient in 6 claims that she wouldn’t only feel rejected if the therapist could not talk to her, that would “throw her off the deep end”; Emma’s complaint in 7 is not just that her husband is argumentative, but that she can’t even say “blue is blue” without him contradicting her; and Emma is aggrieved not just by her family’s lack of support in 8, but by their “not giving two cents worth.” The idioms work in each case to go further than the circumstantial detailings do in characterizing the strength of grievance to be found in those detailings (in a way that is similar to what Labov [1984] and other linguists refer to as “intensity”).

One further observation should be made about the distinctiveness of the activities of detailing the story of the grievance and the idiomatic formulation of the complaint. In the former, literal descriptions are offered: empirical, evidential details are reported, such as, for example in 1 that Emma and her husband were about the only ones to have an air conditioner which worked, that there were only two waiters at breakfast, that her husband waited 45 minutes and so didn’t get his breakfast, which she gave to her friend’s little boy. In contrast to detailing such concrete empirical facts, idiomatic expressions use figurative, metaphorical devices (e.g., gone to pot; banging one’s head against a brick wall) to depict the nature and strength of the grievance. The complaint itself is thereby, in the idiom in which it is represented, removed from the literal realm of its empirical detail.

The use of idioms is akin to the moral work that Pomerantz (1986) finds “extreme case formulations” do. Extreme case formulations are descriptions such as “brand new,” “didn’t say a word,” “out all day,” “completely innocent.” Pomerantz reports (1986:227) that such formulations “assert the strongest case in anticipation of non-sympathetic hearings,” and hence are frequently used in complaining. She further comments: “So as to legitimize a complaint and portray the complainable situation as worthy of the complaint, a speaker may portray the offense and/or the suffering with Extreme Case formulations” (Pomerantz, 1986:227-8). Similar to such extreme formulations, idioms may be designed to strengthen a complainant’s case by portraying the egregious character of the complainable circumstances.

However, two differences between extreme case formulations and idiomatic complaints arise from the discussion above of the illustrative data array 1 through 8. First, each may be used separately in the environments of the distinctive activities noted above—extreme case formulations may be used in detailing the circumstances of the grievance, while idiomatic expressions work to summarize those detailings. A case in point is taken from extract 4:

- Ilene: 'hhh We've checked now on all the papers'e has an' Moss'n Comp'ny ← 1
 said they were sent through the post we have had n:nothing from
 Moss'n Comp'ny through the post. ← 2
 (0.3)
- Ilene: Anyway, (.) Tha:t's th- uh you know you can't (.) argue
 ih it's like (.) uh:m
- Shirley: |Well
 (.)
- Ilene: banging yer head against a brick wa:ll. ← 3

When detailing her case contesting the claim of the real estate agents (Moss and Company) to have sent her the papers, Ilene uses two extreme case formulations—in describing the search

they've made: "checked all the papers" (arrow 1) and again in drawing a conclusion from that search, "we have had nothing from Moss'n Comp'ny" (arrow 2). She then goes on to use the idiomatic "banging yer head against a brick wa:ll" (arrow 3) to summarize her grievance with the agents. So that in detailing the case, a speaker may attempt to portray the complaint-relevant offense through the resource of extreme case formulations: he or she may then move to summarily depict that grievance/complaint in a separate component or object, through an idiomatic expression.

The second difference arises from the literal-figurative distinction noted above. Extreme case formulations purport to be literal descriptions of concrete facts, as is illustrated in the fragment above from 4³: thus they are subject to being empirically tested and validated. However, in being recognizably figurative—which is to say that they should be so recognized by competent users of the language, and ought not to be understood literally by them (Sacks, [1964-65] forthcoming, 1972; Gibbs, 1987)—idiomatic expressions remove the complaint from its supporting circumstantial details. This may give such expressions a special robustness: since they are not to be taken literally, they may have a certain resistance to being tested or challenged on the empirical facts of the matter.

Two further observations about the fragment from 4 above serve to introduce the issues considered below. One observation concerns the sequential context in which Ilene uses the idiom "like . . . banging yer head against a brick wa:ll." She does so as a complaint which contests the claim by Shirley's realtors to have posted the papers, a claim which Shirley has just before (see full extract 4) said that she accepts. Insofar as Ilene is taking a contrary position to Shirley's, she is making a complaint in a (sequential) context in which she cannot rely on her recipient's (Shirley's) affiliation. Here the special robustness, or resistance to empirical challenge, associated with the figurative character of idioms may make them especially suitable objects to use in such circumstances. The other observation is that in moving from detailing to summarizing her complaint with the idiomatic simile, Ilene is bringing the complaint to a close. The themes related to these observations—that complaints may be formulated idiomatically where a recipient's affiliation may be in doubt, and that the "summary" character of idiomatic formulations of complaints gives them a termination relevance—are to be developed in the remainder of this paper. While we treat these issues separately, this separateness is an artifact. It is apparent in the data that a speaker may use an idiomatic expression to summarize a case, and hence to bring the complaint sequence to a close on a point with which an otherwise "resistant" recipient may (but does not always) display some affiliation with speaker's complaint.

Seeking Affiliation through Idioms

There is evidence in many of the extracts quoted above, as elsewhere in our data, that when speakers use idiomatic expressions in complaint sequences, they cannot assume their recipients' sympathy or affiliation. We noted above that when in extract 4 Ilene details her grievance against Shirley's agents and formulates her complaint, she does so in the turn after Shirley has confirmed her acceptance of her agents' version. There are, then, clear sequential grounds on which Ilene can anticipate a non-sympathetic response. A similar instance in this respect is seen in extract 2, when the patient describes the intensity of the pain he is suffering from headaches.

3. Which is not to say that "extreme case formulations" have to be literally true descriptions. For example, Pomerantz points out that in a case when, asked at a Small Claims hearing the age of a dress she took to a dry cleaners (where she claims it was damaged), the plaintiff describes the dress as "brand new," that is not a claim that she had never worn it (Pomerantz, 1986:222). However, there is a difference between not literally true (e.g., an exaggeration) and only figurative.

- P: . . . because it (.) it's the headaches: was the thing thats: got me
(0.4)
- P: (more than anything else)
(1.2)
- P: more than the devil in hell because they were gettin'
more or less (.) permanent yer know::
(1.2)
- P: they were coming even when I was never pain in the back of my neck

The intensity displayed in the idiomatic “more than the devil in hell” is then related to the permanence of that pain, specifically that it was felt at times when the patient was not experiencing pain in his neck. The patient appears thus to be raising a doubt about the doctor's preceding diagnosis.

- Dr: hhh I'm sure: Doctor: Macphale:s: right (.) I'm sure that these headaches:: yer
gettin are:: er:: associated with a bit of arthritis:
(0.5)
- Dr: In yer er:: (0.7) in yer neck (.) really: (.) more than your spine:: er:m: (.) hh I
mean more than your lower spine it's the in your neck that's causin the:: . . .
the problem

The patient is presenting evidence contrary to both the doctor's assessment of the lack of severity of the condition (“a bit of arthritis:”) and the source of the headaches (arthritis in the neck). Thus he is complaining about his experienced ill-health (it is not in that respect a complaint against the doctor). But in doing so the patient may be heard not to concur with the doctor's diagnosis⁴ (albeit a diagnosis attributed to another doctor), which is a pretty clear basis for the patient to anticipate the doctor's non-affiliation.

So in cases such as 2 and 4 there is a clear sequential warrant for speakers, when they summarize their grievance in an idiomatic complaint, to anticipate an unsympathetic response; the warrant being that the utterance in which the idiom is used is designed to contest a position taken by the recipient in his or her prior turn. These complaints are being delivered in what is, in that respect, a hostile environment. This begins to connect with what Emerson and Messinger regarded as a key dimension of making complaints to outside third parties, or “troubleshooters,” to whom “. . . troubles pose issues of alignment.” They made the general suggestion that complainants may need to design their versions of events to attempt to convince the third party of the justice of their case, “to have their claims validated by the newly involved third party,” who “. . . proceed with some awareness that allegations may be distorted or false” (Emerson and Messinger, 1977:128,130).

This sense of a complainant trying to convince a skeptical recipient has a rather direct application in 2 and 4. However, the sequential grounds on which a complainant may anticipate some resistance by a recipient in aligning with them requires closer analysis in some other instances. One can begin to see in these instances evidence that idiomatic formulations of complaints are being deployed after recipients have had opportunities to sympathize and hence affiliate with complainants, but declined those opportunities. Hence the hostile environment in which idiomatic expressions are delivered may arise from complainants treating such missed opportunities as *withholdings* of affiliation/alignment by recipients. A case in point is seen in extract 7.

4. Heath (forthcoming) cites this instance as one of the very few cases in his (British) data of a patient raising any question about a doctor's diagnosis.

[7] [NB:IV:7:4]

- Emma: hhh En I: talk'to him la:st night I been kind of sick about it an:d
 'hhhhhhh uh:: It's a pro:blem I-ah'll ah'll tell you when I see: you I
 mean it'll work out I kno:w,hh I don't know whether we're gunnuh
 s::eparate I: don't know
 what the who:le thing's a:bout h h
- Barbara: Oh: really? ← 1
- Emma: 'hhhhh
- Barbara: Is this been goin on lo:ng er wha:t. ← 2
- Emma: OH::: I DON'T KNOW I JIS CA:N'T SEEM TUH SAY BLUE IS BLUE
 HE AR:GUES e-WITH ME ER:: u- (.) u-SOMETHING EN: AH: DON'T DO
 THIS RI:GHT'n THAT RI:GHT. 'hhhhh I NEED hhHE:L:P'hh

It will be recalled that Emma has called her married daughter, Barbara, to tell her that her husband—Barbara's father—has "walked out" on her; this is a few days before Thanksgiving, when evidently Barbara and her family are due to come down to her parents for the holiday. After some detailing by Emma of the trouble, Barbara responds here with two kinds of objects, a token which displays surprise at the news, "Oh: really?" (arrow 1) (see Heritage, 1984), followed by a further inquiry about the trouble, "Is this been goin on lo:ng er wha:t." (arrow 2). There may of course be a certain delicacy in complaining to one member of a family about another, here to a daughter about her father; the delicacy concerns with which of them, the complainant or the complained-about, the complaint recipient will affiliate or align—with whose side she will join. In both her receipt and inquiry here, Barbara treats Emma's story as just unexpected news; she neither receives it as bad news nor sympathizes with her mother (as she might have done with "Oh what a shame" or "Oh how awful for you"). Thus she retains a manifestly neutral stance with respect to what Emma has so far told her.

Whether or not the absence of some empathetic response at such a point is treated by speaker/complainant as a withholding, a declining to sympathize/affiliate, we cannot tell at this stage in our research. However, something quite like this has been explored by Jefferson (1980) though in the environment of troubles-tellings. Jefferson found that in response to the announcement of some trouble (which of course Emma's announcement "I don't know whether we're gunnuh s::eparate." is), recipients typically use either a form which "marks arrival at and elicits further talk on the matter but does not necessarily align recipient as a troubles recipient" ("Oh really" being one such form: see Jefferson, 1980:19), or a form "which commits recipient as, now, a troubles-recipient" ("Oh no" being such a form which more clearly affiliates recipient with the teller over the matter of their trouble). It is just such an acknowledgement but not yet an aligning with teller which occurs here: Barbara has not displayed sympathy or otherwise affiliated with Emma's predicament of being left by her husband and her now wondering "whether we're gunnuh s::eparate." So when Emma continues in response to Barbara's inquiry, her daughter is not yet a sympathetic recipient. And it is in that environment that Emma uses the idiomatic formulation of her complaint, "CA:N'T SEEM TUH SAY BLUE IS BLUE."

From the conversation immediately following extract 7 it becomes clearer that indeed Barbara is withholding affiliation. In this environment, now having grounds for not being able to count upon Barbara affiliating with her as a sympathetic hearer, Emma produces another idiomatic version of her complaint.

[9] [NB:IV:7:4]

- Emma: EN BARBRA would you CA:LL him tohni:ght for me,
 (.)
- Barbara: Ye:ah,

- Emma: 'h HU:H?h
 Barbara: Well if he doesn't co:me I won't uh:: (0.2) dra:g (.) Hugh en everybody dq:wn
 Emma: CUZ I:'D L::OVE tuh (.) cook for yuh,
 Barbara: We'll I don't- you know I don't wanna get invq:lved down- I don't wanna haf: yihknow ah come dow:n over the weekend stay with you but I don't want yihknow Hugh tuh come: (.) down if it's a mess,
 Emma: It's NO ME:SS IT A::LL. I ta:lk to him la:st ni:ght but he just doesn't wah-e-he's: I dihknew this e-he's holding me ←
 onna spot here wih the Thanksgiving deal. Yihknow he's ←
 done this on holidays now'n then 'hhhhhhhhh=

Barbara's minimal and less than enthusiastic agreement ("Ye:ah") to her mother's plea for help rather plainly displays her non-affiliation with Emma. And it is analyzed as such by Emma, who treats Barbara's "agreement" to call her father as quite questionable or a matter of doubt—exhibited in her questioning "HU:H?" which possibly initiates repair on the absence of the preferred, more positive answer to her solicit for help. Upon which Barbara not only fails to indicate any greater willingness to help by calling her father; she specifically declines her mother's embedded request to urge her father to come down for the thanksgiving holiday ("... if he doesn't co:me I won't uh:: (0.2) dra:g (.) Hugh en everybody dq:wn," meaning that if her father isn't going to be there, Barbara won't bring her family down). Thus Barbara withholds affiliating with Emma by avoiding giving any more positive agreement to her mother's request to call her father. This continues when, in response to Emma's inducement to Barbara to come down for the holiday as planned, Barbara says "I don't wanna get invq:lved," depicting what's happening between Edna and her husband as "a mess." By now Barbara's treatment of the matter in terms of her own self-interest has rather exposed her declining to sympathize with Emma's predicament. It is in this environment of Barbara having withheld affiliation that Emma goes on to complain, idiomatically, that her husband is "holding me onna spot." So that while the absence of Barbara's sympathy with her trouble is more incipient when Emma complains in 7 that she "can't say blue is blue," the subsequent idiomatic version of her complaint in 9 follows clearer sequential evidence that Barbara is withholding affiliation.

A little after the conversation from which 7 and 9 are extracted, Emma talks to her sister, Lottie, and is telling her about a visit earlier that evening by a younger friend of hers, who is the "gal" referred to at the beginning of extract 10. Emma reports the warmth with which this friend expressed appreciation at her company—which Emma contrasts with how little her family think of her.

[10] [NB:IV:10:R:29]

- Emma: But wha:ta ga:l. Thirty eight year old gal: 'n she (.) left me tonight she sais oh Emma yer so much she sais I love to have you rou::nd en in: yihknow yuh made me feel so goo::d'n I thought why'n the hell my family be that wa:y.
 Lottie: Ye::ah. ← 1
 Emma: They don't give me two cents worth of:,h (0.2)
 Lottie: I: knq>w it. ← 2
 Emma: I'm no bottle of milk, hhh=
 Lottie: (Nu:h.)
 Emma: E n LO:TTIE I'm (.) uh:::h Let's don't us have any pro:blem plea:se,

- Lottie: Oh I'm nɔ:t
 Emma: |Fore:ver.
 Lottie: |No: : I'm nɔ:t (.) No: I'm not gonnuh
 have'ny problem But I mean I've jiss:
 Emma: | O k a y .
 Lottie: Yihknow ah wɔn'have the Christmas p a r t y
 Emma: |Well yihknow tha:t's Bud's fau:lt.
 (0.2)
 Lottie: Nɔ:?: It i:sn't? uh:: . .

In complaining that her family “don’t give me two cents worth,” Edna quite overtly displays her understanding that earlier Barbara had not given her support or sympathy. But extract 10 is relevant in some further respects. It somewhat parallels extracts 7 and 9, insofar as (1) recipient’s responses less than fully affiliate with the complainant, Emma, who (2) produces two idiomatic versions of her trouble after each of Lottie’s responses, and (3) the divergence between sympathy for Emma’s complaint and recipient’s self-concern is again manifest in Lottie’s proceeding to orient to the latter. Lottie only minimally concurs (“Ye::ah”; arrow 1) with Emma’s (somewhat idiomatic) complaint “why ‘n the hell my family be that way.” When Emma produces a fully idiomatic version of her complaint, they “don’t give me two cents worth,” Lottie does a slightly upgraded response, “I: know it” (arrow 2), which seems only to be a confirmation rather than sympathetic affiliation. That is, Lottie seems just to agree with Emma, without taking much of a supportive position, e.g. by joining with Emma in criticizing Emma’s family (one of whom, of course, Lottie is). The balance which Emma now adds to her complaint in the idiomatic self-criticism “I’m no bottle of milk” is being done, therefore, in a similarly non-sympathetic, non-affiliative environment as occurs in the exchange between Emma and Barbara. And here, too, Lottie’s response to Emma’s appeal that they two should not “have any problem” displays a self-orientation rather than orientation to, and sympathy with, Emma’s troubles. The lack of affiliation incipient in Lottie’s two initial responses in this extract is given most overt expression in her emphatic rejection of Emma’s direct attempt to blame her (Emma’s) husband (Bud) for Lottie’s decision not to have a family Christmas party.

Although in these extracts speakers are not making complaints in contradistinction to positions previously and explicitly taken by recipients (as we saw in extracts 2 and 4), they are formulating idiomatic complaints following responses which are least ambiguous with respect to whether or not recipient is affiliating with them, and in which recipient might well be withholding affiliation. That is, where some complaint-relevant story has been told, and recipient responds, that may be an opportunity for recipient to display affiliation with speaker’s complaint. The absence of overtly affiliative responses constitutes, then, an environment in which complainants may anticipate that they cannot rely on recipients’ support. Thus an idiomatic summary of the complaint may be employed to persist with a complaint in an at least incipiently, and in many cases overtly, non-conducive, non-sympathetic and generally “inauspicious” sequential environment (Jefferson, 1985:451-62). This is easily evident in instances of some actual conflict between the parties; but it is no less the case in instances such as 9 and 10 in which complainants may be alive to the possibilities of recipients’ divided loyalties, to monitoring where recipients’ sympathies lie, and in trying to mobilize those sympathies on the side of complainants.

In telling about a grievance or trouble, a speaker may expect or seek (as a preferred response) the recipient’s sympathy. In the sequences examined above, such recipient affiliation has not been forthcoming; recipients have had opportunities to sympathize or align with complainants but have not done so—having in some cases conspicuously withheld affiliation. Speakers have nevertheless persisted with making their complaints, albeit in inauspicious environments. In such circumstances, speakers deploy idiomatic versions of their complaints.

It appears, then, that idioms may be used as objects which will somehow “stand up” or be sustainable versions of complaints in the absence of recipient affiliation with the prior detailing of the grievances.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explicate just how idiomatic expressions are fitted to manage that task in such a sequential environment. Some clues about this are provided by remarks which Sacks ([1964-65] forthcoming, 1972) variously made about the robustness of proverbs—that because they are not empirical propositions about some actual state of affairs, and are thus atypical, they are “correct about something.” The possibility that formulaic and figurative expressions have some special resistance to being challenged with concrete, empirical facts, and that this quality may be used in complaints done in inauspicious environments, needs further investigation in our data. It is, however, characteristic of many of the idioms used by complainants in our data that they manage to represent the speaker as a quite “innocent victim” in an impossible position and not responsible. Such is conveyed in idioms like “can’t say blue is blue,” “like banging your head against a brick wall,” “they don’t give me two cents worth,” “like talking to a wall,” “holding me on a spot,” and so on. A nice illustration of this occurs in and just after the conversation shown in extract 4. It will be recalled that Ilene has summarized her difficulty with Shirley’s agents as like “banging y’r head against a brick wall” (arrow 1); at which point, just in overlap, Shirley takes up the matter from her point of view.

[11] [Her:OI:1:2-3]

- Ilene: Anyway, (.) Tha:t’s th- uh you know you can’t (.) argue
ih it’s like (.) uh:m
- Shirley: Well
- (.)
- Ilene: banging yer head against a brick wa:ll. ← 1
- Shirley: E z far as I’m concerned on this situa:tion,
all private negotiations between us must cea:se.
(0.2)
- Shirley: ‘hh
- Ilene: Mm hm
- Shirley: Ah:nd (.) any negotia:tions you: wish to enter in on the property
you have to go via Moss’n Co.
- Ilene: Mm:
- Shirley: ‘hh I been on t’th’ solicitor (he thought that) yihknow give
me s’m: legal gui:dan:ce
- Ilene: Yeah:. Yah.
- Shirley: A::nd I’m really left between th’ devil’n deep blue sea; I ← 2
have no option BU:T’h (0.2) to revert to that.
(.)
- Shirley: Uh:; because of the c-the cost invq:lved an:d
- Ilene: Mm
- Ilene: Yeah.
- Shirley: w’n it beek- ended up in an ar:gument,

Shirley’s use of “between th’ devil’n deep blue sea;” (arrow 2) idiomatically represents her position as impossible, as being innocently caught between two intractable forces. So each protagonist employs an idiomatic representation of their complaint, Ilene concerning her treatment by Shirley’s agent, and by Shirley about the position she’s in—each representing herself as an innocent party. A particular delicacy of the idioms they deploy is that they claim innocence but without directly accusing the other.

Topically Terminal Character of Idioms

We have seen above that by using an idiomatic expression, a speaker may move from detailing a grievance to a more general formulation, a figurative summing-up of the complaint. Moreover, complaints may be formulated idiomatically where there is some lack of alignment between complainant and recipient. These properties coalesce in accounting for a position in which idioms very regularly occur, that is, in terminating a topic. An idiomatic formulation of the complaint may be used to bring the matter to a close on a point with which the other may concur, to bring speaker and recipient into some kind of alignment before changing the topic. The following instances illustrate the topically terminal position in which idioms frequently occur.

[12] [D.(2)[JGI(S):X15:4-5]

P: but u-certain: (.) things wi:ll do that you know they're re- ru-
they're **BOUND** to. 'hhh in certain industry.

M: Yah.

(0.2)

M: Yah,

P: Different things'll pick up when it- begins to be spring of the yea:r and
everything.

M: Yah.

P: 'hhh But I think it'll iron itself out, ←

M: I sure hope so.

P: I'll see you Tuesday. ←

[13] [Heritage:1:6:5-6]

((Mrs H is complaining about the trouble she's having cutting her dogs' claws.))

Mrs H: En that's botherin' me yo u know I get worried in case I've hurt=
Ilene: Yc:s.

Mrs H: them.

Ilene: Well that's it because you've only just got to cut the tips off.

Mrs H: Mm::.

(.)

Ilene: You know you- you musn't cut it very far down, 'hh=

Mrs H: Yes.

Ilene: You musn't cut it onto the bla:ck because it's li:ke cutting into our own
quick.

Mrs H: Yes of course it tips.

Ilene: En they'll scream blue murder if you ←

d(h)o th(h)a(h)t
Mrs H: hih hih Y(h)eh ah Well I've given it up as a ←
bad job anyway.

Ilene: eh heh heh hih-n-hn-n

Mrs H: You know, 'h But I:look ←
ah I wz (0.2) I'm havin:g sti:ll. dah-a big pro:blem with my: ←
sister's ba:ck.

[14] [Rah:(18):5-6]

Jenny: Ahn' the trouble is you see if you tighten th'clips too much they snap.

Ann: Yes. Well that's what I do. Breakin'them.

responding idiom (see Jefferson, 1979). At which point Mrs H. turns to a quite different topic, and the matter about which she has telephoned—the problem with her sister's back. Similarly, this happens in 16, where in turning down Emma's invitation (not shown) to come over for dinner, Gladys concludes her account with the simile-cum-cliché "like Garbo," referring to the excuse Greta Garbo so frequently used to give in her films that it became a kind of by-line, "I want to be alone." After some reciprocal laughter, Emma displays both her understanding of and alignment with Gladys by supplying just that by-line (and imitating Garbo's Germanic accent). With that, Gladys promptly brings to a close her rejection of Emma's invitation by inquiring after Emma's husband.

It appears, then, that a troublesome topic may be brought to a close by summarizing the matter through an idiomatic formulation. If the position taken in the idiom is supported by recipient's alignment (note that in 12 through 15 recipients' affiliative responses do not introduce something new to be added about the matter), then the topic of conversation can be changed.

Idioms occur in just such topically terminal positions as are illustrated in 12 through 15 with very great frequency in our data. However, there is further evidence of the use of idioms to terminate topics, evidence of the kind which may be regarded as a particularly powerful warrant for supposing that a phenomenon is intersubjectively oriented to as part of a shared competence. Such evidence is provided when two speakers—independently but simultaneously—produce the same object in the same structural position. This thereby provides some "proof" of the relevance, or appropriateness, of the production of such an object in just such a slot. This happens in the following extract. Nancy has been detailing at considerable length the misdemeanors of her estranged husband Rob. She has complained particularly about some financial matter which has involved her forwarding him a check.

[16] [NB:II:2:33]

Nancy: So: I just took the second page of the letter? 'n (.) stuck ← 1
th'fifty dollars: check innit? 'n 'hhhhh (0.2) mailed it to Ro:b.
(0.3)

Nancy: I just uh, h forward his mai:l stick it in th'envelope'n

Emma: Mm:

(0.4)

Nancy: send it all on up to him en 'hhh hhh

Emma: You know where he is the;n,

(0.8)

Nancy: I have never had any of it retu:rn'd Emma,

Emma: Oh::

Nancy: At a:ll, so: I jist assume that the notice thee: the telegram that went
from the bank was returned because he didn't w:ant to accept it.

(0.4)

Emma: OH::h

Nancy: See,

Emma: Mm hm?

(0.4)

Nancy: But nothing has been return' to me:, (.) en I've had my return address
on it a:nd addressed it to him at that
addre:ss:,h 'hhhhhhhh

Emma: Mm hm,

- Nancy: A::n' apparently he accepts things that (.) I s:end him but he just (.)
won't accept anything else I came home the other night'n found a
'hhhhhh car:d e-an' a,h (0.2)'hhhhh (0.2) uh: (.) note'hh (0.2) from: a
ma:n, from a (.) collection bureau in regards to his Master: Charge.hh
(0.4)
- Emma: Mmh.
- Nancy: hhhhh A:nd ah so apparently if I'd been here yihknow why he'd a'
(1.0)
- Nancy: gi:ven me the, (.) baloney'h
- Emma: M m hm
(0.2)
- Emma: Yah,
- Nancy: But uh,h 'hhhh So I js stuck it e-in on en:velope'h (0.2) ← 2
and sent it on to Rob p'hhhh So:: if he's (.) getting these things he's got
some idea of what's happening. Yih
know,
- Emma: Mm
(0.3)
- Emma: 'hhhhh WE:LL kid that's tough. ← 3
- Nancy: He'd better kno :ck it o:ff. Ye:ah. ← 4
- Emma: You keep your nose clea:n,
- Nancy: Oh I- 'n-
- Emma: You'll work out a:l r i ght
- Nancy: Ye:ah.
- Nancy: I intend to.
- Emma: You just keep goin straight
- Nancy: I a:m.
- Emma: Y'got any(b) frie:nd boyfrie:nds? er anything goin: steady'r:

It may be noticed that almost throughout this extract, Emma makes only minimal responses to Nancy's grievances about her estranged husband's irresponsible lack of courtesy (in failing to acknowledge receipt of things she sends him, in continuing to use her address for his credit card charges, and so on). Emma's responses thus closely resemble those discussed in the previous section insofar as they do not display sympathy for Nancy's troubles or in other ways affiliate with Nancy. In this respect Nancy's idiomatic complaint, "if I'd been here yih know why he'd a' given me the, (.) baloney," may be an attempt to solicit a so far unforthcoming sympathetic understanding from Emma. However, once again Emma does only a minimal response, "Yah." Upon which, Nancy (arrow 2) appears to bring her story to a close by recapitulating the upshot of the tale in a near repeat of the way she earlier reported that upshot (in the first five lines of the extract). The clear summary and closing relevance of Nancy's "recycled" upshot is strengthened by Nancy's moving from reporting past events to pondering present circumstances, "So:: if he's eh(.) getting these things he's got some idea of what's happening" (on which, see Jefferson, 1980:39-41).

It is at this point, after Nancy has apparently concluded her story, that both she and Emma simultaneously produce idiomatic expressions (see arrows 3 and 4). Emma's "WE:LL kid that's tough" is an expression of empathy, while Nancy overlaps with one of complaint, "He'd better kno:ck it o:ff." It is, however, worth examining in a little detail how they come to do these idiomatic terminations *in overlap*. After the conclusion of Nancy's story (arrow 2), Emma first does a minimal acknowledgement, "Mm." After a short pause she begins a turn in the way that prototypically heralds the closing of one matter and transition to another, that is, with a long inbreath, and raised volume on the initial "WE:LL." From that, Nancy might have understood that it was at least possible Emma was about to change the topic or perhaps

initiate the closing of the call. Having not received an affiliative, sympathetic response to her story, and recognizing that Emma may be about to move to other matters (e.g., a call closing) without yet affiliating or sympathizing with her, Nancy cuts in with an idiomatic summary of her complaint.

The complainant, Nancy, produces an idiomatic form of her complaint at a point where it appears her earlier summary may have failed to elicit Emma's sympathy or affiliation (recalling the argument in the previous section). As it happens, Emma had been in the course of doing just such a sought-for affiliative response when she began "hhhhh WE:LL kid . . ." The relevance of Nancy's prior recapitulation for closing the topic is oriented to by Emma in her idiomatic sympathetic response. This orientation is evident partly in the way Emma does not respond to any particular detail or aspect of Nancy's grievance or revelation about her ex-husband's conduct; instead the response is generic, referring to the situation as a whole. But the closing is more fully realized through Emma's employing a little series of idiomatic exhortations or encouragements, "You keep your nose clea:n," "You'll work out alright," and "You just keep goin straight." She thereby manages a transition to a related but different (next) topic, how Nancy's love-life is making out.

Thus each of these speakers employs an idiom to draw the story to a close. They do so at the same moment, displaying their independent analyses of this being the point to conclude the complaint. The respective activities of the speakers—for the teller, summarizing the complaint to elicit the other's support; for recipient, to conclude with an affiliative response in preparation for moving on to another topic—converge in terminating with idiomatic expressions. However, this terminal quality of idioms is more prosaically manifest in the frequency with which, in our corpus, idioms are used to shut down a prior topic before moving to another. In this way, idioms may be topically terminal and transitional objects.

Conclusion

This paper has explored some aspects of speakers' use of idiomatic expressions in complaint sequences in naturally occurring interactions. Idiomatic and other formulaic, figurative expressions are not, of course, restricted to this sequential environment. We have focussed here on complaints only because in the corpus of idioms we have collected it turned out that in a majority of cases one or other of the speakers has engaged in making a complaint. Indeed as we showed in the first part of the paper, the matter about which the complaint is being made may be detailed in an often elaborated story; but the complaint itself is characterized and summarized in the form of an idiom. It may be that the interactional aspects of idioms identified in this paper, associated with their use in complaint sequences, are quite general for other environments in which idioms occur. For instance, the termination relevance of idioms may be a feature of environments where it's not so much that a complaint is being made as that there is some other difficulty or interactional "trickiness" involved in the conversation (for example, that someone is rejecting a proposal or invitation made by the other, as in extract 15). Whether these properties of idioms are more generic is something left to be investigated, as is the possibility that different types of figurative expressions, by virtue of the different forms of reasoning which they embody, have different sequential positions or implications. But the salient points to have emerged so far in our analysis are that idioms are a resource whereby speakers may formulate complaints they have about their treatment by others, the position they've been put in, the behavior of someone. They are used to summarize such complaints, and they may be a special means of seeking to have the other side sympathize with the teller over the matter about which he or she is complaining—often in circumstances where such affiliation or sympathy has not been forthcoming or otherwise cannot be relied upon.

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