

From lifeguard to bitch

How a story character becomes a promiscuous category in a couple's video call

Richard Fitzgerald and Sean Rintel

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines a single case of story telling between a couple in a long-distance relationship conducted via video calling. Drawing on Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) we examine the way the teller incrementally reveals information about a character in order to build a story of coincidences. In doing this, however, the recipient begins to treat the evolving character as relevant to a different device, that of their relationship. Our discussion develops on the analysis of omnirelevance devices (Sacks, 1995) by examining how categories can be shifted between devices. In so doing, we highlight the way categories introduced for one task may be put to other uses; that is, how categories may become 'promiscuous'.*

Introduction

In this paper we draw upon the method of Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) (Hester & Eglin, 1997; Sacks, 1972, Hester and Eglin 1997) to examine a single instance of story telling between two people using video calling who are in a long distance relationship. The interaction involves 'Des' relating a story to 'Kay' about his sneaking into a pool complex to have a swim. The focus of analytic interest is the way divergent orientations concerning the primary character of the story, a female lifeguard at the pool, become apparent. The teller, Des, uses the unfolding nature of story construction (Jefferson, 1978) to incrementally reveal attributes about the lifeguard character in order to reveal finally that she was a friend-of-a-friend. However, the recipient, Kay, treats the

Richard Fitzgerald, Sean Rintel, School of Journalism and Communication, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.

evolving character as open to a different interpretation, and which for her has a categorial and moral valence in terms of their relationship (Selting 2010). We explore this data to examine the character/category work, with particular attention on how holding back the relevance of a character for a story makes the character potentially ambiguous. This ambiguity, we suggest, provides a space for the character to be treated as 'promiscuous', by which we mean a category that is recast by other parties as a membership category of a different device. Here, we suggest the character in the story is recast by the recipient as a category related to the omnipresent device of the long-distance relationship'.¹

In this analysis we focus on the evolution of one character over the course of the story as she is transformed from a 'character appearing-on-cue' through various descriptors for each interactant, but which ends with divergent situated relevancies. As this is a news-of-the-day story telling occurring between two people over distance, the teller and recipient have different knowledge of the characters' eventual place in the story, the characters' relationships to each other, and the relevance of the characters for the story. Here, the teller has a complete sense of all characters, relationships, and relevance, and is packaging this information post-facto to produce a dramatic narrative, where the ambiguity of the lifeguard character's relevance is a design feature of the story. The recipient, however, must piece these things together aggregatively and iteratively, knowing some characters and not others, but being able to make judgements and assessments about how all characters should act in the story according to mundane methods of social categorial reasoning (Fitzgerald, 2012; Sacks, 1995, Fitzgerald 2012).

Data and method

The data for this paper is drawn from a corpus collected as part of a research project into technologically mediated relationships. Couples in long-distance relationships, where at least one member was in Northeastern USA, were recruited by flyers and email. The six self-selected couples who completed the trial were all native English speakers, under 21, college-educated, and primarily white, well-resourced members of the Millennial generation. The couples were supplied with cameras, headsets, and video calling software, and were asked to talk for at least 20 minutes once a week for two months, on their own schedule. There were no controls, content, or tasks requirements beyond minimum technology standards. With

each couples' consent, all video calls were recorded automatically and remotely. The combination of content, schedule, and recording-effort freedom thus allowed for very naturalistic experiences (see Rintel, 2007).

The entire corpus consists of almost 57 hours of talk, and it has been analysed with different foci (see overview in Rintel, 2010; more detailed papers in Rintel, 2013a; Rintel, 2013b). This paper is a single-case analysis of a conspicuous instance of what we term categorial promiscuity in one couple's talk. The instance comes from the first video call of a couple Des and Kay (pseudonymised), who had been in a romantic relationship for a little over a year and living apart for most of that time. The pair was from the same home town. Kay lived in a college five hours south of the pair's home town where Des still lived. After about 30 minutes of call-initiation, sorting out technology issues, and playing with a cartoon video overlay that came with the webcam, the pair settled into relaying the day's news. Des announced that he had two stories, of which this story telling episode was the second. Devoting this article to one instance allows us a detailed exploration of the interrelated and consequential interactional phenomena over an extended period of interaction (Schegloff, 1987). The goal of the paper is to illustrate the extent to which the development of characters in news-of-the-day story telling is far more than one part of a static information transfer. Rather, character work is a negotiated interactional process that may have emergent relevancies and divergent outcomes.

The analysis draws upon the method of Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) as a way of revealing the artful interactional work of the parties as entwined and multilayered, with categorial and sequential relevancies for both the interactional task and the wider relevancies of the parties involved. The analysis of members' social category work in interaction was initiated by Sacks (1972, 1995) and has since been developed by subsequent authors (Jayyusi, 1984; Watson, 1997; Hester & Eglin, 1997; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002, 2009; Jayyusi, 1984; Stokoe, 2010, 2012; Watson, 1997). Since Sacks's original work, research under the heading of MCA has continued to develop upon his ideas, accumulating a body of work that includes both explicit category references as well as implicit and inferential category work embedded within a multi-layered flow of interaction (Butler, 2008; Fitzgerald & Housley, 2002; Hester & Eglin, 1997; Watson 2009; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009, Butler, 2008; Stokoe, 2012; Watson, 2009). Recent work has also begun to further explore tacit category orientations where unstated membership devices are seen to be oriented to by the

participants at the level of the overall interactional event (Sacks, 1995). This involves examining instances where an orientation to the overall interactional event may be invoked within the ongoing interaction such as invoking 'therapist' and/or 'patient' during a therapy session, or 'host/caller' in a radio phone-in. This research seeks to begin to draw attention to the way participants invoke and orient to a locally relevant organisational device of 'who we are and what we are doing' (Butler 2008; Butler & Fitzgerald 2010; Stokoe, 2012). Much of this work draws upon and develops Sacks's ideas around 'always possibly relevant devices' that can be seen to be invoked by the participants in particular instances during the interaction. Sacks observes that if such a device is invoked it is *treated by the participants* as having priority over the current events. Sacks refers to these types of devices as 'omnirelevant' (Sacks, 1995, p. 314). However, this term suggests that they are always relevant rather than always possibly relevant. For our purposes, then, we will refer to these devices as 'omnipresent'² to indicate they are available (present), but not always relevant or made relevant within the interaction.

One of the analytic issues raised when focusing on members' tacit category work is a concern around the rigor of the analysis when category orientations are not made explicit, ie named by the participant. The concern, raised by Schegloff (2007), is that analysts may bring their own suppositions to the data and ultimately obscure or ride roughshod over the members' orientation. Schegloff describes this concern as analytic 'promiscuity', such that without explicit category description, members' category work may become removed from its local use and used by the analyst to (even inadvertently) do other work, such as reinforcing *their* assumptions about what is going on. However, while this analytic issue of analysts bringing their own assumptions to the data is not restricted to MCA (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006), we argue that it is also not restricted to those engaged in formal analytic procedures, but rather it is a members' phenomenon. By this we mean that where a member's category work is not made explicit, then a category can become ambiguous and potentially 'promiscuous' as it is removed from the immediate action and repurposed by other parties to the interaction. However, before examining the data and analysis, it is important to be clear about what we mean by omnipresence.

Omnipresent category work

As indicated above, MCA examines members *in situ* social category work as reflexively embedded in the localised flow of action, where

'who-one-is' for a particular situation is part of the interactional work in which such social category reference is invoked, deployed, and negotiated (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). This categorial work and orientation may then be both explicitly oriented to, or tacitly oriented to, as part of the contextual relevancies of the ongoing flow of the interaction. While the body of work examining explicit category work continues to provide a rich area of research, recent work has sought to extend the understanding of local category work by examining the way tacit membership categories and relevant devices are invoked and thereby through which analytically reveals a level of contextual orientation above the immediate task or action towards an omnipresent device for the event. Or in other words, as has been described previously, this is an orientation to 'who-we-are-and-what-we-are-doing' (Butler & Fitzgerald, 2011; Fitzgerald et al., 2009). This work draws upon and develops on Sacks's (1995) original analysis of an exchange in the therapy session data, where explicit reference to the institutional category of the therapist is invoked by one of the therapy participants. Sacks suggests that this action invokes the 'omnirelevant' device therapist/patient, and thus reveals the participants' orientation to the event (who-we-are-and-what-we-are-doing) as a therapy session.

According to Sacks (1995) 'omnirelevant' (or 'omnipresent' for our purposes) devices are those that are composed of collections of membership categories that are always *potentially* applicable and that, when invoked, have priority in terms of organising action within—and only in—situated interaction. This is not to preclude the relevance of other devices in the production of an interaction, and does not assume that an omnipresent device is always in operation for the duration of an encounter, but that

Things may be going along, the device isn't being used; at some point something happens which makes it appropriate, and it's used. And when it is used, it's the controlling device, i.e., there is no way of excluding its operation when relevant. (Sacks, 1995, Vol. 1, p. 314)

Sacks's observation points to both the categorial and sequential relevance of the device in that, at any point in an interaction, someone can expectedly and relevantly invoke an omnipresent device to accomplish an activity, and make relevant and consistent the application of the device to the membership and action of other members whom that device may be used to categorise. To suggest that a device is omnipresent, then, is to say that it operates at an

organisational level (of the overall interactional event) and, at times, an immediate level (the current action) (Butler, 2008; McHoul and Rapley, 2002; Fitzgerald & Housley, 2002; Fitzgerald et al., 2009; McHoul & Rapley, 2002).

Invoking an omnipresent device effectively moves the participant orientation from any particular local action, such as telling a story or some other sequential local action, to the wider context within which this action is taking place. As such an omnipresent device, once invoked, ties the particular interactional moment to the local context of the interactional event by drawing attention to who-we-are-and-what-we-are-doing. While this focus of category analysis is by itself potentially ambiguous, research is beginning to explore the way omnipresent devices are invoked and the reflexive oscillation between interactional task and locally contextual relevancies, highlighting the complexity of members' category work.

Turning now to our analysis, we briefly describe the beginning of the story where the lifeguard character is introduced by Des and then trace Des's incremental revelation of the character's category attributes and how Kay's reactions demonstrate the promiscuity of those attributes. For transcription conventions, see this issue's Transcription Key (p. 119).

Analysis

Setting the scene

Des sets the scene of his story as giving a problem to be overcome: he and a character Des refers to as "Lizzie" wanted to go swimming but their preferred public pool was not open, so they decided to try to sneak into another pool. The use of first-name references propose at least some sense of shared familiarity with Lizzie (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979), and we know from other data in the corpus that Lizzie is a friend in common. Des then proceeds to introduce other characters, including the female character that is the focus of the story: the lifeguard.

Role-based character: "just the lifeguard"

Des describes how he and Lizzie find a pool and then encounter the next two characters, introduced as "just the lifeguard" and "one person sitting in a chair".

Extract 1

41. Des: =So:, (.) we walk do::wn (.)
42. to this really really ni:ce apartment compl(h)e(h)x?
43. snh a:nd lo and behold there's a ↑pool there.
44. and (0.4) it's- there's like- u:m
45. → there's like just the lifeguard,
46. >and then like one person sitting in a chair.<
47. (1.1)
48. So:, (0.3) hh. s'like >okay let's just like
49. play it- (0.3) do:wn low or whatever.
50. snh (.) u:m >so I'm like yeah wha:tever.<

In contrast to Lizzie, the next two persons described in the story are not introduced in a manner that implies Kay knows them and so are heard as characters in the story whose status is uncertain. Both are presented as appearing-on-cue (Sacks, 1995, Vol. 1, p. 182), that the pool is the occasion for their appearance, and that they are relevant categories for the setting. The two characters also belong to story-relevant indirect membership categories of gatekeepers. The lifeguard has professional predicates; most immediately as a safety official but also with official or unofficial knowledge of who has official access rights. The “one person sitting in a chair” is inferentially a device to describe genuine residents of the complex who have official pool access rights and the potential ability to recognise non-residents. Despite the downgrades that infer some ease of access, the gatekeeper categories are, of course, critical to building the drama of the story based on the causal “so” setting up the pool access strategy as having to “play it- (0.3) do:wn low or whatever”. In other words, because of the presence of gatekeepers, Des and Lizzie attempt to not draw attention to themselves as not belonging to the complex.

Evaluation-based personal character: “the lifeguard's this girl, and she's li:ke super nice”

Des formulates the next action of the story as involving an incrementally built description of the lifeguard character, focusing the recipient's attention on the character and adding some specific features.

Extract 2

51. Des: – =so we- we go in, (.) a:nd (.) >the lifeguard's this girl,
52. – and she's li:ke super nice,
53. so I started li:ke ta(h)lki(h)ng to h(h)e(h)r he .hh

To “the lifeguard” is first added “this girl”, describing the lifeguard in terms of gender and implied similar or younger age than Des. The direct connector “and” attaches these to the postively-valenced upgraded

personality trait “super nice”. Of course a predicate of “lifeguard” may well be “girl” and in dealings may be described as “super nice” but for Des to string the description of “super nice” to “girl” is a personal evaluation that backgrounds the lifeguard’s character of safety official and gatekeeper, and foregrounds instead a *set of characteristics of attractiveness*: a “lifeguard” (a safety official who is presumably physical active and hence potentially physical attractive); a “girl” (similar or young enough in relation to Des to be potentially attractive); and “super nice” (having an attractive personality characteristic).

As he continues (“so I started li:ke ta(h)lki(h)ng to h(h)e(h)r”), Des’s use of “so” could be just a convenient linking term between his character description and action, but it also hearably more causal than linking the action with “and”. As such, as Des begins to describe his ruse (lines 54–58), there is a sense of consequentiality between the character attributes and Des’s next story actions of providing false details.

Extract 3

54. Des: \$an [I made up this whole sto:ry about like,\$]
 55. Kay: [@Smiles a little ((‘tightly’))@]
 56. Des: how Lizzie lived in the building
 57. and I was just mooching off her
 58. to get the free poo::l a(h)n(h)d
 59. (0.4)
 60. Des: .hh
 61. Kay: mh °hmhmh.°
 62. Des: [\$like all this] stu:ff,\$
 63. =like I gave a phony nu:mber and everyth(h)i(h)ng?
 64. (0.4)
 65. [an she like-]
 66. Kay: [Wai:t, you gave] her a number to ca:ll you?
 67. Des: No no a hou- uh >an apartment number,<
 68. (0.4)
 69. Kay: ↓°Oh.°
 70. Des: >I j’st like, looked at some of them
 71. when we were walking up the:re,<
 72. (0.5)
 73. Des: and I was like yeah I live in: thirty one
 74. eig(h)h†(hi)ty hu.
 75. Kay: Yo[u mean Lizzie lives there?]
 76. Des: [and um er] >Lizzie lives
 77. in °thirty one eighty.=yeah.° u:m (1.0) so:

After initially glossing how he constructed his ruse (“made up this whole story”; “and all this stuff”), Des produces a specific example of a false detail followed by an ‘etcetera’-type tag to indicate that this

was one of an uncountable number of false details: “like I gave her this phony nu:umber and everyth(h)i(h)ng?”. The formulation of the details involves not simply their type (“phony number and everyth(h)i(h)ng>”) but also a version of the deliberate nature of their conveyance: “I gave her”. As Des attempts to continue, Kay cuts him off with an imperative to halt the turn in progress and a candidate-answer request for clarification of the particular false detail that Des chose to name: “[Wai:t, you gave] her a nu:umber to ca:ll you?”. Kay’s action provides a subtle first glimpse of the potential for category promiscuity in the form of a subtle layering of different orientations to the lifeguard.

Kay’s request for clarification may be the result of mishearing “phony” as “phone”. However, Kay’s question does not seek to clarify the adjective describing the number (“phony”) as potentially misheard not does it seek clarification by asking for an explanation (such as ‘why did you give her a phony nu:umber?’). Rather it orients to category promiscuity in Des’s conveyance of false details to the lifeguard. Specifically, Kay treats the clarification as oriented to both Des and the lifeguard’s actions in the story and as oriented to what it means for Des to be telling Kay about giving his telephone number to other women. First, Kay uses Des’s formulation of how he conveyed the details, “I gave her” becomes “you gave her”, which, notably, does not emphasise giving false details as strongly as his prior formulation, “I made up” (line 54). Second, Kay leaves out “phony” but recycles “number”, treating that as clearly heard, and seeks confirmation of a candidate category-bound action that has promiscuous predicates: “you have her a number to call you” indexes a partner giving a telephone number to a (potentially attractive) person outside of the relationship. That this was a mishearing does not diminish that Kay’s response shifts the character and focus from just the *story* to how the *story-telling* is subject to clarification concerning activities and categories relevant to the omnipresent device of the long-distance relationship. That is, Kay’s response shows the omnirelevance of the relationship as a sense-making device because it takes precedence over the story and its telling.

Des’s rapid correction is fitted to Kay’s question and its layering of omnirelevance. He disconfirms the candidate and prefaces “number” with a cut-off replacement “hou-” and then a full replacement “apartment” (“No no a hou- uh >an apartment number,<”). Kay responds with a quiet change of state marker “↓°Oh.°”, indicating at least initial acceptance of a credible replacement and hence potentially the end of the matter. However, instead of leaving the correction at

simple replacement of a candidate, he further elaborates by providing both the genesis of the number (“I j’st like, looked at some of them when we were walking up the:re”) and reporting his speech when actually conveying the number (“I was like yeah I live in: thirty one eig(h)h↑(hi)ty hu.”). Des’s elaborations employ an unusual form of duplicative organisation in which giving the number is explained using the collection of activities required to “give a false apartment number’. This elaboration, we suggest, is again a possible glimpse of an orientation to an omnipresent relationship device, in this case because the category of “number” has been the subject of correction with respect to a matter of relational import.

Des’s initial version of the ruse involved describing *Lizzie* as the complex resident and himself as merely “mooching” pool use from her. Here, though, Des describes *himself* as the complex resident. Kay points out this contradiction with an exposed correction request: “Yo[u mean Lizzie lives there?]”. Des accepts the correction by incorporating it into an otherwise identical repetition of the reported speech: “Lizzie lives in °thirty one eighty.=yeah.°”. Again, it is possible that Kay’s clarification formulation and her exposed correction of the subsequent discrepancy may be just matters of non-relational clarification from a highly observant recipient. However, drawing attention to discrepancies in Des’s story about what was told to this particular character, the ‘super nice girl lifeguard’, cumulatively points to the orientation to the omnipresence of their relationship and the character as a possible relevant category now relevant to that device (Fitzgerald, Housley and Butler 2009, Butler & Fitzgerald, 2010; Butler & Fitzgerald 2011; Fitzgerald, Housley, & Butler, 2009).

Social network-based character/category: “She was like a lifeguard, with Jo:hn, for li:ke yea:rs”

Following this initial disruption, Des then moves on to relating how, while swimming, he overheard the lifeguard telling a story to “another guy” at the scene. Kay does not seek further detail about this new character—for example, she does not seek to tie this referent to the earlier referent “one guy sitting in a chair”, nor does Des provide it. Given how carefully Kay has followed prior missing or discrepant information, this is, arguably, a notable absence that treats any male local to the story as not relevant in terms of the omnipresent relationship device. After reporting the story-within-a-story (lines 84-92), Des then moves to the first dramatic peak; purporting to know a character in the story-within-a-story and thus discovering a friend-of-a-friend connection between himself and the lifeguard.

Extract 4

92. Des: from the pool, .hh and I like jumped over.
93. =and I'm li:ke I'VE HEARD this story before:ð hhh.
94. → do you know J(h)ohn Bens(h)on? .hh
95. → and she's li:ke ↑yea::h. ha ha ha.
96. (0.4)
97. → She was like a lifeguard, with Jo:hn, for li:ke yea:rs.
98. >and the hil- most hilarious part was:
99. Lizzie was on the phone with John
100. when we discovered this? and he's like {SOUND CUTS OUT} -mhm

The revelation of a character known in common (John Benson) is a crucial part of the drama of Des's story, as is the accompanying coincidence of Lizzie actually speaking with the character known in common on the telephone while Des was talking to the lifeguard. The social network connection of the lifeguard as a friend-of-a-friend has been withheld by Des until this point. That is, while Des must be aware of this information and their level of mutual familiarity when beginning to tell the story, the drama stems from the point in the story where this coincidence is revealed as one of a series of interactions between Des and the lifeguard up to this point.

Named character: "oh yea:h Jan.=I remember her"

After a brief technical disruption while reporting more of the telephone conversation, Through reported speech from John Benson, Des provides the first name "Jan" for the now now-known to be friend-of-a-friend lifeguard, through reported speech from John Benson. This first first-naming is used to demonstrate both in-story familiarity between John Benson and Jan, and also to provide Des with a warrant to refer to Jan by her first name as well.

Extract 5

114. Des: → And then he was like ↑oh yea:h Jan.=I remember her.
115. so: then I talked to Jan some mo:re, and

Again, it is important to note that while Des knew Jan's name from the outset, the drama of the unfolding coincidences relies on withholding the name from Kay until this point. Jan's name is actually irrelevant to the coincidence except that it is minor additional evidence of the link to John Benson, and of course further consequence of Des and the Lifeguard's lifeguard's increasing levels of familiarity as they continue to talk. The story could have the same impact without revealing Jan's name. However, using Jan's name from the beginning of the story

would have undercut the impact of the coincidence, since Des would have had to explain who she was and how he came to be talking to her. Further, that version of the story would have emphasised Jan as more of a focus by establishing her as a unique individual with whom Des is now on a first-name basis (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979). While that is not Des's point in telling the story, from Kay's perspective Des's incremental revelations of the lifeguard's status highlights this narrative of familiarity through the evolving character/categories—lifeguard, girl, super nice, friend-of-a-friend, Jan. In this sense, then, the character becomes treatable as a 'promiscuous' category through it being open to different and divergent devices, as becomes clear in Kay's upshot summary of the story's relevance to Des.

From story character to relationship-based category: "now that you've flirted with the bitch a whole day"

Having reached the dramatic height of the story, Des produces a highly elaborate account of attempted match-making for John Benson and the lifeguard (lines 117–124), and then attempts to finish the story with a return to noting the failure of the lifeguard as gatekeeper and the ongoing availability of the pool (124–139). While this involves new character attributions of the lifeguard that may close off some category promiscuity from Des's perspective, Kay provides an alternative and more promiscuous relevance of the lifeguard based on the omnipresent device 'our relationship'.

Extract 6

117. Heh I actually tried to talk John up.=>I was li:ke<
 118. yeah he's he's †si:ngle right now.
 119. he's got a really good jo:b. he [makes a lot of mo:ney,]
 120. Kay: [he he: †he-]
 121. Des: You sh- you should definitely get his digits.
 122. - n then she's like, <o:h \$I'm moving in with my boyfriend.\$>
 123. and I was like oh. oh well. .h
 124. um he he he. .hhh but- so I tried.
 125. >>but she was really nice.<<=and it was s:o funny
 126. because- (0.4) . like tow- by the end she's like
 127. (0.5) you kno:w >I don't even know<-
 128. I don't even have any way to check if people actually
 129. 1-{SOUND CUTS OUT} live in these apartments,
 130. =when they go in this pool, like there's no way to know:,
 131. (0.5)
 132. Kay: Mhm=
 133. Des: =um. an I'm like †oh really.
 134. and I'm like so I can come back without he:r?
 135. (.)an(h)d I poi(h)nted at Lizzie,
 136. Kay: h[eh]
 137. Des: [And] then she was li:ke, †yeah you can come back

138. \$whenever you w(h)a(ha)nt.\$
 139. Kay: uh hehehe,
 140. Des: °so I have a new pool to go° \$swimming (h)in.\$
 141. (0.6)
 142. Kay: Okay well now that you've
 143. → flirted with the bitch a who:le day. hehehe.

In Des's account of matchmaking he introduces a category collection about John Benson that proposes putatively desirable characteristics for a relational partner ("single", "really good job", "makes a lot of money"). In response to this matchmaking attempt, Des reports the lifeguard's speech as revealing a further category relationship device that she treats as morally constraining from her entering into a relationship with John Benson: "I'm moving in with my boyfriend". From this Des moves to end the matchmaking account and attempts to finish the story. He begins with the contrastive connector "but-", inserts an evaluation of his matchmaking action ("but- so I tried"), and then repeats the contrastive connector and then re-evaluates the lifeguard positively ("she was really nice") and an upshot of the situation (inherently involving the lifeguard) as "so funny". These evaluations (especially with some sense of contradiction of reported speech versus description), however, work to return the lifeguard character to a state of possible ambiguity at just the point when Des is attempting to end the story.

While the category of gatekeeper was only inferential at the beginning the story (line 45–49), Des returns to this aspect of the lifeguard and her self-description as a poor gatekeeper in instances such as the very one in which Des is involved (lines 126–130). This is used to set up the end of the story, which specifically turns not only on the lifeguard as a poor gatekeeper, but also on the potential for Des to return to the pool in the future when the lifeguard is there. Des reports asking her if he can "come back" on his own without Lizzie and reports speech from the lifeguard that he can "come back" whenever he wants. The concept of 'coming back' is then reinforced by Des moving out of the story itself and into a conclusion that proposes coming back as a future possibility ("°so I have a new pool to go° \$swimming (h)in.\$").

Kay's response is to provide her own summary in the form of a recasting of the character and Des and her (Kay's) actions using negative formulations, albeit ending with three low-intensity laugh particles that propose the formulation is not entirely serious: "Okay well now that you've flirted with the bjtch a who:le day. hehehe." The categorisation of the lifeguard as a "bitch" and Des's actions as "flirted

with the both a whole day” are clear reformulations of character as action from the perspective of the omnipresent device of Des and Kay’s relationship. Unlike Lizzie, who Kay does not treat as requiring further categorisation or evaluation, Kay’s treatment of the lifeguard is quite an explicit recasting of both the story and Des’s story-telling as involving a collection of accountable actions with respect to the omnipresent relationship device, and that this device has a moral dimension by which actions will be evaluated. In this case Kay is clearly proposing a negative evaluation of Des’s moral compass. Such a recasting, of course, relates not only the relevance of the omnipresent device for this story

Despite Des’s attempts to close down this recasting with ironic agreement (144) and returning to his positive evaluation of the story—although with a qualification—as “quite fun” (146), Kay does not allow Des to finish the story on his own terms. She reinforces her recast version of the story, and the omnipresent device of Des and Kay’s own relationship, by returning to discrepant aspects of Des’s story that involve the lifeguard: the fact the lifeguard will notice Lizzie’s absence (lines 147–154) and, more importantly, that interacting with the lifeguard contradicted the proposed need for pretence enacted by staying “down low” (162–179).

Extract 7

142. Ka : Oka ell no ha o ' e
 143. → flirted with the bitch a who:le day. hehehe.
 144. De_B: Yep ep ep
 145. (0.6)
 146. De_B: [I a_B q i e f n.]
 147. Ka : [>Li ie doe_Bn e en li e here]
 148. She'_B going o no ice ha Li ie'_B ne er
 149. going o be here again.<
 150. (0.4)
 151. De_B: So? eh hehe,
 152. Ka : eh h[eh]
 153. De_B: [Ma be] I'll come clean.>if I e er _Bee her again.
 154. i a_B SO FUNNY I L SOUND CUTS OUT
 155. _Bo like, (0.5) _Bo in o he lie.
 156. i a_B j _B (h) hilario _B b don' kno
 157. (0.5)
 158. De_B: I- I had f[n]
 159. Ka : [Ye]ah?
 160. (0.5)
 161. De_B: Me_Bing a[ro nd].
 162. Ka : [I ho gh o ere going _B a DEE EL,
 163. and o : > en and go a:lK o her, hh.
 164. De_B: Wha ?

165. Kay: I thought you were gonna be on the †down †low,
 166. and then you went and talked to her.
 167. (0.5)
 168. Des: → Well she wa- >she was so like friendly,< and
 169. said hi. >and then I- when I was getting in the
 170. pool, it was really co:ld. (.) an::d
 171. → I was li:ke (0.4) I don't know she made some like
 172. → funny co:mmments, because I was taking so
 173. long to get in the †water. =an::
 174. we just started †ta:lking. I don't know.=
 175. Kay: =Mhm
 176. Des: → she was †friendl(h)y, he he. .hhh °geez°
 177. I- I- thought it was just funny.
 178. (0.8)
 179. Kay: ((flat intonation)) °It w'z funnyz°

While Des tries to discount his relational connection to the lifeguard as irrelevant (“[Maybe] I’ll come clean.>if I ever see her again.”; “messing a[round”) or an amusing aspect of the situation (“it was SO FUNNY”; “it was just (h) hilarious”; “I had [fun]”), Kay pursues the manner in which Des came to interact with the lifeguard (162–166). She draws out from Des new details about the timing of events (168–174) and more positive category descriptions of the lifeguard (“so friendly”; making “funny co:mmments”; “†friendl(h)y”). Des twice proposes difficulty in providing this information, using “I don't know”, between his actions and the point at which the lifeguard talked to him, and again at the end of describing talking. Kay meets the new information—and Des’s claimed uncertainty—with a flatly intoned continuer (“Mhm”), after which Des moves to a laughed-through final categorisation of the lifeguard, a defensive exclamation (“°geez°”) and another attempt at proposing the story should be heard as funny—although this time with a downgrade (“thought it was just funny.”).

Kay’s response, a flatly intoned second assessment (Pomerantz, 1984) (with accompanying flat facial affect), ends the storytelling episode with a fairly clear indication that she has taken a divergent interpretation to Des with respect to the character in the story and the current interaction, a stance based on recasting the character as a category relevant to their relationship.

Conclusion: Recasting promiscuous categories

In this paper we have sought to explore the way a story telling device that involves incrementally releasing relevant information at various times in order to heighten the drama of the story can become problematic for both the teller and the recipient. At first we noted how,

as the story unfolds, the recipient challenges the teller about the events and eventually provides her own summary of the people and actions. In our analysis we suggested that at the heart of the interactional troubles was the issue of characters not being fixed, or being ambiguous, and that because of this, such characters were amenable to be recast as categories in other devices. For this story, the relevance of the lifeguard character and her increasing familiarity with Des was not made clear, and so became ambiguous and available to be recast by the recipient for a different relevance, 'our relationship', evident through Kay's questioning the details and truth of the story. Thus, while for the story teller the character was cast for the purposes of the story, because of the character's ambiguous relevance in the story the lifeguard was then available to be recast into a different relevance, one that invoked the omnipresent device 'our relationship'. Thus for Kay, the 'super nice lifeguard Jan' has a problematic relevance to the relationship device of Des and Kay as boyfriend/girlfriend.

Finally, this discussion has also sought to analytically explore the way members recast characters and categories in relation to various devices as the interaction unfolds. In doing this, the essential indexicality is highlighted as a routine that members resource through the subtle ways categories and their related devices evolve in interaction, where the relevance of particular categories may shift between different levels and where available categories may be used for different tasks. Shifting from a story character to a relational category highlights that neither categories nor categorial relevance are fixed, even when explicitly mentioned in any particular instance. Rather, they can be seen not only to evolve, change, and shift in the course of the interaction, but can also shift between different levels of the interaction in relation to differing sequential and categorial tasks, and furthermore these can and do overlap and entwine as they traverse through the interaction.

Notes

1. Here, as elsewhere (Butler & Fitzgerald, 2010), while we draw on a common-sense understanding about social categories, for example boyfriend/girlfriend, our aim is to unpack when and how the members orient to membership in these categories in the moment-by-moment unfolding of a sequence of action. That is how these categories are made operative and consequential at particular times (Sacks, 1995).
2. Thanks to Rod Gardner who suggested this clarification.

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