

Do continuing states of incipient talk exist?

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Abstract

'Incipient talk', or more often 'continuing states of incipient talk' is an ill-defined concept that refers to some state other than talk-focused interaction. Although commonly invoked in conversation analytic and interactional linguistics research and meetings, reference to the concept is centred around a brief note in the conclusion of Schegloff and Sacks's (1973) seminal paper on closings in conversation. Their note contains neither data nor analyses and mentions only that their paper does not deal with such instances, yet it has been treated as an empirically defined phenomenon by numerous colleagues. Whilst terms may be used initially in a less technical sense, they can take on an authority of their own over time. Many authors do not even cite Schegloff and Sacks's use of the phrase. This paper aims to explicate the assumptions made in the adoption of 'incipient talk' by showing the range of ways in which this term is used within conversation analysis and related fields and by making explicit the contradictions of stated and/or implied reasoning within and across studies that use this term. We do so both quantitatively and through a subsequent narrative, conceptual discussion examining uses of 'incipient talk' in their contexts. This dual approach allows for not only identifying the patterns in which the term is used in the literature but also how individual authors relate it to their data and other terms. By approaching the issue with a focus on the ways in which the term is used in the literature, one can see the degree to which idiosyncratic uses and definitions dominate the field.

We present results from a content analysis of 113 papers that use the phrase 'incipient talk' and show that multiple, disparate usages and definitions exist. We then discuss some of the uses and compare 'incipient talk' to possibly related concepts 'open state of talk', 'unfocused interaction', and 'islands of talk'/'Gesprächinseln'. We provide suggestions for future research in clarifying whether 'incipient talk' exists and what it might be.

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1. Introduction

Although many people spend a large amount of time each day not engaged in conversation (even if in the presence of others), we may be tempted to think of talk as the norm and silence as an inherently accountable phenomenon. This approach may be due to the ease with which talk is recorded for research, as opposed to the long stretches of silence typical of unplanned daily life. However, another explanation for the unproblematic nature of silence in social interaction is that the interaction constitutes a *continuing state of incipient talk*. A continuing state of incipient talk, or sometimes simply *incipient talk*, is an ill-defined concept that refers to some state other than talk-focused interaction. Discussion of incipient talk is centred around a brief note in the conclusion of Schegloff and Sacks's (1973) seminal paper on closings in conversation:

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... What we are really dealing with is the problem of closing a conversation that ends a state of talk. It does not hold for members of a household in their living room, employees who share an office, passengers together in an automobile, etc., that is, persons who could be said to be in a 'continuing state of incipient talk'. In such circumstances, there can be lapses of the operation of what we earlier called the basic features; for example, there can be silence after a speaker's utterance which is neither an attributable silence nor a termination, which is seen as neither the suspension nor the violation of the basic features [(1) at least, and no more than, one party speaks at a time in a single conversation; and (2) speaker change recurs (p. 293)]. These are adjournments, and seem to be done in a manner different from closings. Persons in such a continuing state of incipient talk need not begin new segments of conversation with exchanges of greetings, and need not close segments with closing sections and terminal exchanges. ...

Schegloff and Sacks describe such a 'continuing state of incipient talk' not as an explanation of a phenomenon under study but as a loose conceptualisation of what they were *not* considering, i.e. examples of situations that would not require closings. They have deposited a variety of situations into a 'not relevant for closings' collection and made a passing comment that people in such situations could be said to be in a 'continuing state of incipient talk'. Although Schegloff and Sacks provide a very limited definition, their concept has been subject to *conceptual drift*, a term introduced to describe changes in usage of scientific terms over time (Lochhead and Yager, 1996). The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'incipient' as 'beginning; commencing; coming into, or in an early stage of, existence; in an initial stage'. If taking a literal view of 'incipient talk', we are dealing with the *onset* of talk rather than the *potential* for talk. However, it is clear that Schegloff and Sacks (1973) intend for us to understand a situation in which talk could start rather than one in which talk is constantly beginning anew (as with a broken record). Their note, though rich and lucid contains neither data nor analyses, nor do Sacks's (1992) lectures from the same period ever address this idea. Yet it has been taken as an empirical fact by many. For example, Szymanski et al. (2006) credit Schegloff and Sacks (1973) with 'discovering' continuing states of incipient talk: "When Schegloff & Sacks, 1973 first discovered a continuing state of incipient talk, they were examining the talk-in-interaction of copresent parties – travellers seated next to each other on an airplane, or family members gathered around their dining-room table."¹ Neither incipient talk nor continuing states of incipient talk have ever been defined through systematic, large-scale analyses utilising a variety of sources and large collections of phenomena which have been at the heart of conversation analytic research since its inception. Individual authors have idiosyncratically defined incipient talk and used it to support their analyses.

Terms may be used colloquially initially but take on an authority of their own over time. For example, Macbeth (2004) critiques established usage of 'repair' to refer to pedagogical corrections in classrooms, citing the poor comparability that repair in everyday conversation vs. corrections to known-answer questions in classrooms have. Likewise, the present paper aims to explore assumptions made in the adoption of incipient talk or continuing states of incipient talk by showing the range of ways in which these terms are used in conversation analysis and related fields and by making the contradictions within and across studies explicit. By focusing on the ways in which terms are used in the literature, one can see the degree to which idiosyncratic uses and definitions dominate the field. Given the abundance of components through which incipient talk is defined, a quantitative analysis is appropriate for exploring the complex links between components and identifying clusters of components that co-occur. We begin with a quantitative content analysis to explore the complex inter-linkages of how authors use 'incipient talk' and whether they vary across publication year and type. We then discuss specific themes in how authors define and use incipient talk, compare potentially related concepts, and suggest future research.

2. Method

To assess the scope and range of usage of incipient talk, we performed a systematic review of papers mentioning 'incipient talk', incorporating a content analysis on interactional features that are described as incipient talk and definitions (if any) that are given as well as a narrative analysis of these uses and definitions.

2.1. Search strategy

Because incipient talk is often mentioned in passing or minor analytic points, abstract databases were inappropriate for this study. For example, PsycINFO gave only two results for "incipient talk", whereas Scopus gave four. Furthermore, the paper from which incipient talk originates is itself not included in major databases. Therefore, we used Google Scholar,

¹ Treatment of 'incipient talk' as an established fact is by no means limited to these authors, and it is not our intent to bring about unfair criticism. As we will show, over 2/3 of papers that mention incipient talk take it for granted.

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