The act of speaking entails the transformation of communicative intent—the thoughts we want to express—into a string of words, a process called “linearization” (Levelt 1989). One interesting consequence of the need to linearize is that an utterance, until complete, bears only an imperfect resemblance to the message that it is intended to convey. This is inconsequential when one is speaking to oneself, but in conversation involving other individuals it leaves one vulnerable to interruptions that cut short the utterance before the point of intended completion. As a result, what is heard to have been said, and thus what can be responded to, is an incomplete and even distorted version of the message that was intended originally.

Insofar as linearization is governed by rules, turns-in-progress are not only vulnerable to interruption, but vulnerable in recurring and identifiable ways. Because English favors subject-verb-object linearization, for instance, English speakers are vulnerable to interruptions that prevent them from specifying the object of the verb. Japanese, in contrast, employs subject-object-verb linearization; as a result, a turn is more vulnerable to interruption that preempts the verb itself.

Sometimes interruptions are innocuous. In particular, it is common for one person to be interrupted mid-sentence by another, who then goes on to finish the sentence in more or less the way that the initial speaker had intended (Lerner 1996b). Other interruptions are less innocuous: here I am interested in those which are warranted by the initial speaker’s turn-so-far, but which subvert (at least briefly) its likely trajectory. I refer to these as “opportunistic interruptions,” both because the opportunity for such interruptions is tightly circumscribed and because they can be deployed for strategic ends, to advance the interrupter’s objectives at the expense of the interruptee’s.

In this paper I demonstrate how openings for opportunistic interruptions are created by linearization. As a secondary objective, I explore how these openings are appropriated: that is, precisely how opportunistic interruptions are accomplished, given their *prima facie* nature as turn-taking violations (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). First I discuss the concept of interruption, and offer working definitions of both *interruption* and *opportunistic interruption*. Then I present some of the main principles of linearization,
drawing upon research in linguistics, psycholinguistics, and conversation analysis. Next I describe my data sources, namely Supreme Court oral arguments and Pentagon press briefings; both of these are adversarial settings in which participants have reason to employ aggressive interactional tactics. The analysis is organized around the types of content that interrupters can anticipate and interdict: options, actions, reasons, consequences, opinions, and restrictions. In the discussion, I make more general observations about the kinds of things that opportunistic interrupters can accomplish, the ways in which opportunistic interruptions take advantage of some conversational rules while violating others, and the consequences of opportunistic interruptions for subsequent talk.

**INTERRUPTION**

Most research on interruption involves the statistical analysis of who interrupts whom. Zimmerman and West (1975) began this research tradition with their finding that men interrupt women more than the reverse. They took this finding, as many have done since, as an indicator of differential power. Smith-Lovin and her colleagues (Okamoto and Smith-Lovin 2001; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 1990; Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989) have done much to continue this line of research. They found, among other things, that their female subjects actually interrupt men at equal rates and that the female difference: they interrupted females more frequently than their fellow males, and yielded to interrupting males more readily than to interrupting females (Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989).

In operationalizing interruption, these studies begin with the turn-taking model of Sacks et al. (1974). That model posits that a speaker normally will be allowed to retain control of the floor until she or he has completed a “turn-construction unit,” or TCU. Although it is difficult to specify in the abstract what counts as a TCU (Ford and Thompson 1996; Schegloff 1996), one feature of a TCU is that it is “hearably complete” in its context. An important way in which a turn can be hearably incomplete is when it “projects” itself into the future: that is, when the turn-so-far, taken in context, creates the anticipation of a yet-spoken portion. To take a simple example, a turn beginning with A dog projects, at the very least, a verb as forthcoming, unless it is an answer to a question (Schegloff 1996). Similarly, if someone begins a clause with If, a then-clause is projected (unless the consequence was stated first).

For a more complicated example, consider It goes without saying. Whether this projects its own continuation depends on the context: if the thing denoted by the anaphoric it has been expressed already (and recently), this may count as a TCU; if not, it creates the expectation of a forthcoming embedded clause (...that we’d rather not pay taxes). Moreover, it is in the nature of a TCU that what can be taken as complete may be rendered hearably incomplete by the addition of something as simple as a conjunction. Thus It's raining may be a complete TCU, but It's raining, so is not, because it projects additional talk.

In the studies cited above, someone is considered to be interrupting when she or he begins speaking while the prior speaker is still in the midst of a TCU. I adopt this definition, with the additional requirement that the initial (prior) speaker is actually prevented from completing that TCU; thus I limit myself to what Smith-Lovin and Brody (1989) call “successful” interruptions. This excludes periods of extended overlap when neither party yields (Schegloff 2000); “terminal overlap,” when the start of a new speaker’s turn overlaps with the final word or syllable of the initial speaker’s turn without preventing the initial speaker from completing a TCU (Jefferson 1983); and various “continuers,” by which a listener encourages the speaker to continue without vying for control of the floor (e.g., uh huh) (Schegloff 1982).

At the same time, however, the definition of interruption subsumes “anticipatory completions,” mentioned earlier, when one person finishes a TCU started by someone else (Lerner 1996b). It also subsumes instances of “recognitional onset” (Jefferson 1983), when
the thrust of a TCU is inferred and a response is made before the TCU is complete. These last two phenomena both involve the cessation of the initial speaker’s TCU before the point of minimal completion—that is, before the point at which it can be taken as possibly complete, whatever the speaker’s intentions.1

Here, however, I am interested not in (successful) interruptions as a whole, but in a subset, namely “opportunistic interruptions.” These have an additional defining characteristic: the interrupting utterance is made possible by the precise sequential environment in which it occurs. That environment consists of both an observed past and an anticipated future, and this characteristic means something different for each. Looking backwards, it means that the utterance would not have been appropriate earlier. One can imagine most anticipatory completions and recognitional onsets meeting this requirement. Not only would an anticipatory completion not count as such if it did not hearably complete anything; in addition, at most prior locations in the conversation the utterance probably would have been judged entirely misplaced.

An interruption is opportunistic in the forward-looking sense when a listener interrupts a turn-in-progress with an utterance that might have been less viable if that turn had been permitted to continue. Listeners are able to anticipate the likely form of a turn, aided by knowledge of the principles of linearization reviewed below. They also are able to make educated guesses about the turn’s likely substantive trajectory, in terms of the claims the speaker is likely to make and the positions he or she is likely to take. These guesses are based on the turn’s completed portion, on listeners’ past experiences with the speaker (in the current and previous encounters), and sometimes on institutional contexts that assign known objectives to the occupants of particular roles.

Given such an expectation about the probable course of a turn-in-progress, a listener and prospective interrupter is especially likely to judge a potential utterance as only fleetingly sayable when it would amount to a willful misconstrual of the trajectory of that turn, even as it is warrantied by the turn-so-far. Most anticipatory completions and recognitional onsets are not of this sort, insofar as interlocutors are interested mainly in cooperative encounters involving a minimum of discord (Lerner 1996a), and use these resources so as to respect one another’s intentions. Consequently most anticipatory completions and recognitional onsets could be postponed until the initial speaker self-concludes and still appear appropriate (though perhaps with different interactional import: in the case of an anticipatory completion, as a resaying of the TCU’s second part rather than as an initial saying of that part). When these resources are deployed opportunistically, however, they become anticipatory miscompletions and misrecognitional onsets, which cannot be postponed lest the basis for the misconstrual evaporate with further airing of the turn-in-progress.

The logic of opportunistic interruptions also can be expressed in terms of the conversation-analytic notion of “sequential implicativeness” (e.g., Schegloff 1987). An utterance is sequentially implicative insofar as it is consequential for what can be said as a response in the following turn, and what can be heard as such. But an utterance’s sequential implicativeness changes as it is produced incrementally: what can be said as a response after the first few words is often different from what can be said after additional con-

1 As noted by Schegloff (2002), participants in an encounter may not view anticipatory completions and recognitional onsets as interruptions. More generally, Murray (1985) took issue with all attempts at operationalizing “interruption” using hard-and-fast rules. He argued that whether or not participants view speaker transition or overlap as involving an interruption depends upon an assortment of contextual factors; moreover, interruptions differ in their degree of perceived severity. Thus my definition here is more analytical than ethnomethodological, representing an attempt to pull together a number of phenomena under a single umbrella regardless of whether lay actors perceive them in that way. However, “opportunistic interruption,” defined below, is more restricted, and arguably does correspond to something that lay actors recognize (or could easily be brought to recognize) as unitary. Furthermore, because the methodology of this paper is qualitative rather than quantitative, the data can be examined for at least some of the contextual factors relevant to the classification. (For a statistical comparison of the different coding criteria, which suggests that they are measuring the same construct in any event, see Okamoto, Rashotte, and Smith-Lovin 2002.)
tent has been aired. An interruption is opportunistic (in the forward-looking sense) when it exploits this fact by introducing a response which is consistent with the sequential implicativeness of the interrupted turn-so-far but which might not have been consistent with the turn-as-it-was-about-to-develop. Again, a genuine recognitional onset does not qualify because the two are presumed to be identical; nor does the case of an interrupter who is responding to something that was said earlier, thus ignoring entirely the matter of the interrupted turn’s sequential implicativeness.

LINEARIZATION

Assumed in the above discussion is the linear nature of language: that is, the fact that a speaker produces one word at a time. Though occasionally we struggle with “how to begin” an utterance, only rarely do we actually try to pronounce two words at a time. More often than not, we commit to a particular linearization effortlessly. This means that before the onset of an utterance we devise a turn-construction plan for converting a thought into a string of words. Of course, such a plan can be derailed before completion, not only by interruptions that bring the turn to a dead stop, but also by other interactional exigencies, such as indications of listener confusion, that force the speaker to alter the plan midcourse. Further, a speaker sometimes must extend a turn incrementally beyond the intended completion point, specifically when no one else is inclined to take the floor (Sacks et al. 1974). Yet none of these situations eliminate the need to begin with one word rather than another and to decide which word that will be, so long as we grant that there is no talk without the intention to talk, and that the intention extends beyond the word-in-progress to encompass a succession of words selected and organized with an eye to communicating the intended message.

Though the term linearization is generally used only by psycholinguists such as Levelt (1989), any research about the order in which turn components are articulated is relevant. This includes work by linguists on grammatical rules, as well as research by psycholinguists into the effects of psychological constraints. I also use the term to refer to conversation analysts’ research into how speakers begin their turns so as to display proper orientation to the prior turn—for instance, when a speaker begins with a token agreement even though she or he then goes on to disagree. Below I present some of the main principles, starting with those which are general, and which apply across syntactical levels; then I turn to more strictly grammatical principles. The list is not intended to be exhaustive—I will invoke other principles in the empirical analysis as needed—but rather is meant to illustrate the kinds of principles at work, both in regard to origin and level of operation.

General Principles

Some of the principles of linearization, particularly those rooted in cognitive constraints and conversational norms, operate at multiple syntactical levels, or at least suffer no inherent syntactical restrictions. Among the most general principles is that what is familiar precedes what is new (familiar + new). At the sentential level, this means that “[u]usually, speakers place newly focused or newly introduced information later in the sentence than information that is currently focused or is already in the discourse model” (Levelt 1989:120); that is, than information that has already been introduced into the conversation (also see Chafe 1994:82–92). For instance, we are more likely to say You can take the ferry across the bay if the ferry has already been under discussion, but You can get across the bay by taking the ferry if recent talk has been about the bay. (Of course, in both cases the familiar noun will likely be replaced by the pronoun it.) And at a higher level—that is, extending across individual clauses and sentences—speakers achieve intraturn topical shifts through a succession of steps, beginning with the (familiar) topic already under consideration and then using each successive TCU to move incre-

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2 My expanded notion of linearization places conversation analysts on a par with psycholinguists, about whom conversation analysts are generally skeptical (e.g., Schegloff, Ochs, and Thompson 1996). I return to this issue at the end of the present section.
mentally toward the new topic (Schegloff 1996:67).

The familiar + new principle organizes an utterance with an eye to its relationship to the prior turn. Conversation analysts have identified two other principles of this kind under the rubric of “preferences.” The “preference for agreement” (Sacks 1987) refers to the tendency to begin a speaking turn with an expression of agreement with the view expressed in the prior turn, even when one intends to go on to disagree with it. This gives rise to such turn-beginnings as That’s absolutely true, though . . . and Well, I agree with that, but . . . . The “preference for contiguity,” in the meantime, refers to the tendency of someone who has been asked multiple questions to respond to the most recent (i.e., final) question first, as a way of keeping at least one answer contiguous to its question.

Linguists and psycholinguists have identified a different sort of linearization principle, informed less by the sequential context than by cognitive considerations. This is the principle that “light” (simple) constructions precede “heavy” (complex) ones (light + heavy). It operates in various guises. In Levelt’s (1989) research on how subjects describe a complex diagram, it takes the form of the principle of “minimal load,” which refers to subjects’ tendency to describe the simpler parts of the diagram before the more complicated parts. And at the level of clausal syntax, the order of direct and indirect objects is influenced by their relative weights, such that the indirect object is more likely to precede the direct object when the former is “lighter” (Wardhaugh 1995:161–63). Thus I gave my class a long, complicated, difficult exam is preferred, all else being equal, to I gave a long, complicated, difficult exam to my class.

Different still are principles that derive from the relationship between language and the world of objects and events. The principle of “natural order,” for instance, refers to the practice of preserving the world’s temporal order. Thus, at the level of individual sentences, we are more likely to say Jack fell down the hill and Jill followed than Jill followed Jack after he fell down the hill. Longer stories carry an even stronger imperative for chronological ordering; indeed, we might not call something a story—or recognize the special conversational prerogatives that storytelling involves (Sacks 1995b:222–28)—if events are related out of order. Our descriptions of objects also are subject to linearization principles: we tend to place figures before ground (The cat is in front of the house), and moving objects before stationary ones (The horse is approaching the track) (Levelt 1989:138, 155).

Grammatical Principles

While the principles described above apply at multiple levels, grammatical rules are more specifically responsible for the construction of individual sentences and their constituents. The rules overseeing the construction of clauses are particularly rigid. The most basic is the rule governing the order of subject, verb, and object. English is an SVO—subject + verb + object—language; children assimilate the SVO rule, and can use it productively, by the age of about four years (Tomasello 2003:127–28). Japanese, in contrast, places the verb after the object (SOV). Thus in English we say John likes Sue, while the Japanese equivalent is John Sue likes. According to linguists, this difference is symptomatic of a more sweeping distinction, between “head-first” languages, such as English, and “head-last” languages, such as Japanese and Korean. The example just given involves a verb phrase (likes Sue/Sue likes); an example involving an adjective phrase is the English excited about summer and its Korean equivalent, summer about excited (Poole 2002:70–72).

Linguists view systematic exceptions to SVO linearization as rule-governed transformations of the basic structure. In wh-questions, for example, such as those beginning

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3 Levelt suggests that this minimizes the cognitive burden because it takes work to remember that a branch awaits description. When one starts with the simpler branches, the number of branches still awaiting description is reduced more quickly.

4 The “head” of the adjective phrase excited about summer is excited, while the head of the verb phrase likes Sue is likes. In each case, the head forms the basis of the phrase and gives it its name.
with *when* or *where*, the *wh*-word is substitut-
ed for the argument to which the question
pertains. Then this *wh*-word is moved to the
beginning of the sentence and is followed by
*be* or *do* in the tense of the original verb,
which is rendered in the present tense. Thus
*She left yesterday* can be transformed in three
steps into a question: *She left yesterday* → *She
left when* → *When she left* → *When did she
leave?* Among the alternative linearizations
thereby ruled out is *When leave did she?*
Passive constructions also can be viewed as
rule-governed transformations of SVO,
involving inversion of the subject and object,
the appropriate verb set (at a minimum,
tense marker + past participle of head verb),
and the insertion of *by* before the subject.
And although the availability of the passive
seems to give speakers a way out of SVO lin-
erization, this construction also is subject to
constraints. For example, when multiple
items occupy a given (subject or object) slot,
these must move together (Wardhaugh
1995:143–44). Consequently we can trans-
form *Mary and John ate the pizza* into *The
pizza was eaten by Mary and John,* but not
*Mary and the pizza was eaten by John.* Also,
“pseudo-transitive” verbs cannot be made
passive at all: we cannot transform *It cost a lot
of money* into *A lot of money was cost by it.*

With or without such transformations,
adverb, adjective, and auxiliary verb series
within a clause appear to be subject to lin-
erization rules as well. Wardhaugh (1995:40)
proposes that adjective series are linearized
as general + size + shape + color + substance
+ nationalities + noun. For example, we can say
*The old brown Victorian house,* but would not
say *The brown Victorian old house.* Adverbs,
in turn, appear to be subject to the order of
place + manner + time + frequency + pur-
pose/reason (Wardhaugh 1995:62). Thus we can
say *He stood there stoically yesterday in
order to make a point,* but not *He stood yester-
day in order to make a point there stoically.*
Finally, auxiliary verbs follow a fixed order:
mood + aspect + voice, followed by the main
(lexical) verb. For instance, we can say *She
could have been eating,* but not *She have been
could eating* (Finch 2000:130).

Thus far I have focused on the grammar
of individual clauses. In linguistic terminol-
ogy, a sentence with more than one clause is a
“multiple sentence.” This type includes sen-
tences with clauses conjoined by coordinat-
ing conjunctions such as *and* and *or,* as well as
sentences with embedded clauses. Embedded
clauses come in three types: relative clauses,
which modify nouns (*the boy who gave it to
me*); noun clauses, which substitute for nouns
(*I was told that they would be here on time*);
and adverb clauses, which modify verbs (*I
jumped when the phone rang*) or certain
adjectives (*glad that you’re here*) (Wardhaugh
1995:103). (Embedded clauses are underlined.)

Embedding is subject to a number of
grammatical constraints. Relative clauses, for
one, must follow the noun phrases they mod-
ify. Thus we can say *The man who(m) you hit
yesterday is suing,* or *The man is suing
who(m) you hit yesterday,* but not *Who(m)
you hit yesterday the man is suing.* Adverb
clauses modifying adjectives also tend to fol-
low those adjectives. Thus we say *I am
pleased that the week is over* rather than *That
the week is over. I am pleased.* When an
embedded noun clause serves in subject posi-
tion, however, there are actually more lin-
erization options than in single-clause
sentences. Consider *That he didn’t show suggests
the worst.* This can be transformed into
the passive, so that the object is frontline: *The
worst is suggested by the fact that he didn’t
show.* Yet it is also possible to say *It suggests
the worst that he didn’t show,* and essentially
front the verb, though we would never trans-
form *The letter suggests the worst,* which lacks
an embedded noun clause, into *It suggests the
worst the letter.* (A noun clause in subject
position moved in this way is called “extra-
posed.”) Furthermore, the same verb
fronting is possible when the noun clause is in
object position if the sentence is first trans-
formed into the passive. For instance, *His
absence suggests that he doesn’t care* cannot
be transformed directly into *It suggests that
he doesn’t care his absence,* but it can be
transformed into *That he doesn’t care is
suggested by his absence,* and then *It is suggested
by his absence that he doesn’t care.*

Although the fact of linearization is
incontrovertible, it can be difficult to decide
with any certainty which principle or princi-
ples undergird the production of any given
utterance, particularly when the utterance is
interrupted before completion. Consequently my identification of the principles operative in the data will be somewhat speculative. Also, although I will continue to draw from both conversation-analytic and linguistic/psycholinguistic sources, I refrain from any pronouncements about the conditions under which principles of one sort prevail over those of the other. Perhaps unsurprisingly, conversation analysts have challenged the applicability of psycholinguistic principles identified in the laboratory to naturally occurring interactional talk (e.g., Schegloff et al. 1996). Yet there is no a priori reason to believe that the cognitive constraints thought to underlie, for instance, the principle of minimal load are somehow suspended when people converse. And there is certainly good reason to think that grammatical rules still operate, for however far we stray from textbook grammar when conversing, we still manage to generate recognizably grammatical utterances. Furthermore, whether principles uncovered in one setting generalize to others is always an open question, decidable only through empirical research. Thus my approach here is to remain eclectic in the sources of the principles I invoke, even though this means repeatedly crossing disciplinary boundaries.

Whatever principles apply on a given occasion, they operate largely on the level of “practical consciousness” (Giddens 1979), governing the turn-construction efforts of speakers as well as the interpretive work of listeners, who can use their own (tacit) knowledge of the principles to form expectations of where a turn is likely to be heading. This, in turn, has systematic consequences for what people can say, either as potential interruptees or as potential interrupters. SVO linearization, for instance, makes English speakers vulnerable to interruption by someone interested in providing different objects than the initial speaker may have intended. And Sacks’s (1987) preference for agreement can temporarily make speakers appear to be more agreeable than they will prove to be if allowed to finish their utterance. This creates an opportunity for someone to interrupt immediately after the show of agreement, and to respond to that agreement, or otherwise build upon it, as if it faithfully captured all of what the interrupted party intended to say. Thus the conventions of linearization, whatever their basis, make particular sorts of opportunistic interruption more or less possible, as illustrated below.

DATA

The extracts analyzed here were drawn from two settings in which opportunistic interruptions are particularly abundant: Supreme Court oral arguments (specifically Grutter v. Bollinger, the University of Michigan affirmative action case, and McConnell v. Federal Election Commission, the campaign finance reform case), and Pentagon press briefings in the months during and following the 2003 Iraq war. Both settings were “institutional” in that both were embedded in organizations and were occupied by talk geared toward the performance of tasks incumbent upon the people involved as occupants of formal roles (Drew and Heritage 1992). More important, both settings provided for confrontational interaction between people with divergent, preexisting commitments, in the presence of witnesses whose views on the matters under discussion were both sensitive to the repartee and consequential for substantive outcomes of concern to the principals. These conditions, I suggest, encourage opportunistic interruptions.

5 One reviewer observed that an interruption after an initial show of agreement does not necessarily thwart the negative intent of the truncated turn, because listeners can project this as having been forthcoming. Although the ability to project the course of a turn is, in fact, an important part of my argument, I claim that the interrupting party has the most immediate obligation to fashion a response to the aborted turn-so-far. Further, this obligation can be used opportunistically for saying something that otherwise might not have been sayable, even though everyone involved may know that it is premised on a willful misconstrual of the interrupted turn’s trajectory.

6 I transcribed excerpts using a subset of the conventions developed by conversation analysts (see the appendix). All of the excerpts are available as audio files on the author’s web page: www.soc.upenn.edu/~gibson/; contact the author if these become inaccessible. The Supreme Court oral arguments are available online at http://www.oyez.org/oyez/resource/case/1541/resources and http://www.oyez.org/oyez/resource/case/1637/resources.
The Supreme Court oral arguments consistently pitted attorneys against skeptical justices—frequently of the opposite ideological bent—who were not reluctant to interrupt the attorneys, sometimes in order to seek clarification but just as often to challenge some aspect of the case being made. These exchanges were consequential insofar as the votes of at least some of the justices could be influenced by the relative merits of the arguments presented, where the outcome of the case itself was something in which the principals had an obvious stake. The Pentagon press conferences set reporters eager to find fault with the administration’s war planning against administration officials equally eager to defend it. These exchanges were consequential for the administration officials insofar as they affected public perceptions of the war, and for the journalists insofar as they affected how the journalists were seen by their peers and by the public.

I suggest that the confrontational, consequential nature of the settings encouraged opportunistic interruptions in two ways. First, it provided motivation to make use of aggressive conversational tactics, such as opportunistic interruptions, which are avoided in the more cooperative exchanges that are the bread-and-butter of ordinary sociability (Lerner 1996a). Second, one reason why they were confrontational is that they involved people with preexisting, and known, commitments rooted in conviction and/or professional obligations. Therefore, listeners had the means of forecasting the substantive course of a turn, and thus of judging the urgency of interrupting it before the projected point of completion.

Although I have attempted to explain why these two settings encouraged opportunistic interruptions, heeding Schegloff’s (1992a) warning about unwarranted appeals to institutional contexts, I reserve judgment about whether opportunistic interruptions are restricted exclusively to such settings. My goal is not to make an argument about talk under certain institutional conditions (see Heritage and Greatbatch 1991), but rather to study a distinct and potentially consequential form of conversational action—a form encouraged, perhaps, by the confluence of certain institutional conditions, but made possible at a deeper level by the linear nature of language and the ordering choices that this forces upon us.9

ANALYSIS

People do various things when they talk, and any of these can be interrupted. Sometimes speakers are interrupted while listing options, sometimes while relating a series of actions or events, and sometimes when on the cusp of expressing an opinion. At other times they are interrupted before giving the reason for a claim, before fully explaining its scope, or when on the verge of identifying its consequence or implication. I organize the analysis around these possibilities because each entails distinct vulnerabilities for speakers and distinct opportunities for prospective interrupters.9

I start each section by identifying the main vulnerabilities arising from the need to linearize that content, given the linearization principle(s) likely to operate upon it. Then I present an example of an opportunistic interruption. The analysis of each of these occurs in two main stages:

The first stage involves an analysis of the turn-constructional shape of the interrupted turn, and of the interactional exigencies surrounding the interruption itself. Here the objective is to explain why the interrupted turn was hearably incomplete in its context, and to ask whether those exigencies account

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9 For evidence that press conferences have become increasingly adversarial, see Clayman and Heritage (2002).

9 I do not claim that this is an exhaustive list of what people do when talking, or even of those doings which are particularly prone to interruption. Rather, it arose from direct examination of the candidate instances of opportunistic interruption found in the data, and from a need to make distinctions in terms of different types of projected content.
for the interruption as something other than a flagrant violation of turn-taking procedures.

In the second stage of the analysis of each extract, I move up a level to ask what the initial speaker would have been seen as possibly attempting with his or her turn, what the operative principle of linearization might have been, and how the interrupting remark intercepted this project midcourse so as to take the interrupted turn-so-far as its justification and to occasion the saying of something that might not have been sayable had the interrupted TCU been permitted to run to minimal completion.

Projected Options

One thing that people do when they talk is list options. These can be alternative objects of the clausal verb (You can have cake or ice cream), alternative verbs (I will either swim or jog), or alternative subjects (Either John or I will pick you up). They can also be independent clauses (After dinner John either reads or he listens to music) embodying alternative actions or situations. The fact that such items must be linearized at all leaves a speaker vulnerable to articulating only a subset of the planned constituents before interruption. Because linearization follows certain principles, these vulnerabilities are systematic in terms of the options that speakers are at risk of being unable to articulate.

Grammar is silent on how such items should be listed; therefore their linearization will reflect the operation of the general principles, such as light + heavy and familiar + new. For instance, You can have a coke or some freshly made decaffeinated raspberry-ginger iced tea is consistent with the principle of light + heavy. Consequently the risk is that one may be heard to articulate the light but not the heavy option, or the familiar but not the new option, before interruption—and then that the interrupter will respond only to the light or the familiar portion.

Extract 1 illustrates the sort of vulnerability—and opportunity—created when two possibilities are to be conjoined by or. Here, on the day when the United States declared an end to “major combat operations” in Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld is asked a question about Iraqi exiles who had originally been slated for military training and deployment on the ground, something that did not come to pass.

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(1) Pentagon, May 1, 38:08

Rumsfeld: ((...)) there are plenty of people who are anxious to participate and assist in the humanitarian aspects of it, .hhh and in terms of training more people at this stage it just didn’t uh I am assuming it just di[dn’t]

Journalist: [ i- ] is it a money

→ problem or is it a=

→ Myers: =it’s not a money problem. ah it’s it’s more of a timing problem trying to get thee u:h .hhhh thee additional forces that we wanted to get ((...))

Actually, two interruptions are made here in quick succession. Although both may be opportunistic, I am concerned only with the second, which is marked with arrows. The journalist’s “is it a money problem”\(^\text{10}\) is a hearably complete TCU, but one that is projected as continuing by the “or is it a.” For this reason the entry by General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, counts as an interruption. We find no apparent mitigating circumstances that would give us reason to consider this as anything but a breach in turn-taking etiquette: the journalist clearly is still in the course of producing the first TCU of her turn, and is doing so without any apparent “hitches” (Schegloff 2000), such as a

\(^{10}\) When quoting from the extracts, I use quotation marks rather than italics, reserving the latter for fabricated examples.
pauses or a restart, that might signal an inability to complete the TCU and thus a willingness to relinquish the floor early.

As noted by Schegloff (2000), turn-taking violations invoke the possibility of interests or objectives external to those of the turn-taking system itself, in the minds of both the analyst and the participants. Here the officials’ interest is to control the information disseminated so as to create a positive impression of the war. This puts them in a difficult position, however, because the press-briefing format includes time for questions and the expectation that these will be answered, or at least that the officials will go on record as officially not answering. As seen here, one stratagem used is to interrupt a question partway through, in order to respond to the initial portion in isolation from the projected remainder. Here it is hard to say what this might have been. The important point is that there is a distinct prospect of a difficult second option, such as “or have you lost confidence in the Iraqi exiles?” Neither Myers nor Rumsfeld would be eager to discuss such a possibility, nor even to be seen as deliberately not responding to it. Whatever the journalist’s intentions, Myers interrupts shortly after the “or” so as to sharply dismiss the “money problem” option in favor of a fairly bland answer involving logistics.

One possible linearization principle for occasions such as this is light + heavy; if journalists asking questions involving multiple options place the simple options before the complex. This would leave them vulnerable to interruption before the more complex possibilities can be articulated. Of course, it is also possible that journalists, sensitive to the possibility of interruption, deliberately begin with the more important options, just as newspaper section editors present their strongest articles first when lobbying for front-page space (Clayman and Reisner 1998). Yet, it is not at all obvious that speakers can flout the linearization principles for strategic ends without compromising the message’s comprehensibility, if application of the light + heavy principle, for instance, facilitates the hearing as well as the saying. And insofar as multiple choices are presented for a good reason, such as to compel the questioned individual to answer with a certain degree of specificity, any interruption is likely to result in a subversion of the question’s intended effect regardless of the order of options.

Projected Actions/Events

A speaker also can relate some series of actions or events. Insofar as these are linearized according to the principle of natural order, a speaker will be at risk of describing the earlier events in a series but not reaching the later ones. Something of this kind occurs in extract 2. This exchange took place five months after the exchange quoted above, after the Governing Council was established and well into the period of insurgency that followed the end of formal hostilities. The interruption occurs when the journalist presses General Myers on what U.S.-trained Iraqi security personnel (of whom there were earlier said to be 118,000) are actually prepared to do. The “supplemental” refers to additional money provided by Congress.

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11 On the question-answer format of news interviews, see Heritage and Greatbatch (1991).
12 Another option is to employ some form of evasion; see Clayman (2001).
As in extract 1, what happens at the
arrowed lines is an interruption because the
journalist’s turn foreshadows its own contin-
uation, most obviously by means of the
“and.” Also, in this context, the complete
clause preceding the conjunction does not
count as a complete action because the jour-
nalist is obviously aiming to ask more than
how many of those 118,000 are permitted
outdoors. And once again the interruption
occurs although the journalist displays no
apparent production difficulties (in sharp
contrast to those encountered by Myers at
the end of his initial turn here, to which some
extent mitigate the journalist’s own interrup-
tion). That said, matters are obscured some-
what by five or so syllables of indistinct
speech.

As in the first example, Myers has reason
to fear that the question will only become
more difficult to answer as it develops. A lit-
tle earlier, the same journalist asked whether
the security forces were prepared to “go after
the insurgents.” Because of the initial word-
ing of the question, Myers was able to give a
general answer in terms of the levels of train-
ing provided to police versus military person-
nel, and avoided any reference to the
insurgents. Now, however, the question is
developing more pointedly, as a request for
an exact number—possibly of those prepared
to “go after the insurgents,” possibly of some-
thing else. We never find out because Myers
interdicts the developing question to respond
to the highly generic “go out and” with a reas-
surance that the assorted Iraqi trainees all
have important roles, such as guarding oil
pipelines while armed with radios.

But what is the function of the “go out
and” that provided Myers with the opportu-
nity to interrupt opportunistically? The lin-
earization here is idiomatic, though
consistent with the principle of natural order.
The idiom is go out and + verb phrase, as in
I’m going to go out and get a job, and They’re
going to go out and find some food. In each
case, the initial “go out” denotes a first step of
venturing forth, of leaving the starting con-
fines to do something in the wider world.
Although not much is added in these two
hypothetical examples, in extract 2 the idiom
does important work. Had the journalist
omitted this and asked How many of those
118,000 are able to go after the insurgents?,
Myers could have answered, simply and safe-
ly, that none are able because of (say) their
current location. The “go out and” precludes
this as a possible answer by anticipating the
minutiae of deployment so as to focus on
whatever is to come next. Thus, ironically,
although the question was designed to ward
off one sort of misconstrual (e.g., as an
inquiry about current location), it thereby
created the possibility of another (as pertain-
ing to “going out” to perform some “impor-
tant function”).

Projected Reasons

Grammatically speaking, causes can pre-
cede their consequences or vice versa: once
again, this means that the general principles
have room to operate. For instance, following
the familiar + new principle, we are more likely to say *I'm leaving because of what you said* if the leaving is already evident but the reason is not, but *Because of what you said, I'm leaving* if the cause of the offense is more evident than the penalty. When, as in the first case, the consequence comes first and the reason is projected, a speaker can be interrupted before having a chance to explain himself or herself. Extract 3 illustrates. Here Kirk Kolbo, representing the petitioners against the University of Michigan, is stating his main point, that the Constitution prevents race from being used as a factor in admissions.

(3) Supreme Court (*Grutter v. Bollinger*), 2:50

| Kolbo: | ( {...} ) but race because (.2) your honor .hhh of the constitutional command of (.3) equality .hhh must be beyond the bounds (.5) (for the [u-]) |
| O'Connor: | [you] say that’s not (.3) it can’t be a factor at all .hhhh is that it (.2) that your position that it cannot be (.9) |
| Kolbo: | our view=. |
| O'Connor: | =one of many fa[ctors] |
| Kolbo: | [.hh ] our view your honor is that race (.2) itself (.2) sh should not be a factor (.6) ah among others (.2) in choosing st[ ud ]ents >because of the [con-] < |
| O'Connor: | [well] [.hh ] have some (.3) some precedents out there that you have to (.2) come to grips with (.2) because (.5) the court (.5) obviously has upheld (.5) .hh uh (1.4) thee (.6) use of race in making selections or choices in certain contexts (.4) ah (.6) for instance (.2) to (.2) remedy prior d- d- discrimination and .hhh in other contexts= |
| Kolbo: | =oh absolutely your honor. |
| O'Connor: | all right. |

My concern, again, is with the speaker transition at the arrows. Justice O’Connor initially attempts entry in the midst of “students.” Had Kolbo finished this word and then stopped, and had O’Connor continued, it would not have been an interruption because “students” finishes a TCU. Instead, however, O’Connor pulls back, permitting Kolbo to launch his embedded *because*-clause but not to complete it. This is an interruption because “because of the” obviously projects further content, namely the cause or justification for the preceding claim, that “race should not be a factor among others in choosing students.” Far from encountering any glitches that might have warranted O’Connor’s second entry, Kolbo’s adverb clause is markedly rushed (as indicated by >...<), presumably in an unsuccessful attempt to ward off an interruption before its completion. Schegloff (1982) refers to this as tactic a “rush-through.”

There are clues indicating where Kolbo is heading at the point of interruption, clues available to us just as they were to O’Connor. Earlier in the extract, he appealed to the Constitution in arguing against the affirmative action programs; another such appeal seems incipient in the interrupted “con.”. Thus the interruption at this point leaves Kolbo in the position of having stated “our view” but not its constitutional basis. An explanation for why the *because*-justification was linearized after the claim rather than
before is that, at that instant, the claim, that “race itself should not be a factor,” was the more familiar component. O’Connor is responsible for this: she responded to Kolbo’s initial turn, which contained references both to race and to the Constitution, in such a way as to recite the claim about race (“it can’t be a factor at all”) but to make no reference to its purported justification. O’Connor, in other words, kept the race claim afloat conversationally while permitting the Constitution to submerge.

By then denying Kolbo the chance to refer again to the Constitution, O’Connor— who went on to write the Court’s opinion supporting affirmative action in this case— affords herself the opportunity to challenge Kolbo’s claim about the irrelevancy of race in light of past court decisions, without placing these decisions in uncomfortable juxtaposition to the Constitution. In other words, by interrupting at that instant, an instant constituted by the turn-so-far and the linearization principle behind it, O’Connor can point out the difficulty posed to Kolbo’s position by past court decisions without being heard to extend this critique to the Constitution. She thus seizes the opportunity to say something that might not have been said so easily after Kolbo’s initial turn in this extract (where the reference to the Constitution occurred mid-clause), or if Kolbo had been permitted to take his projected turn to completion.

Projected Consequences

Consequences also may follow their causes, as in Because of what you said, I’m leaving. When linearizing in this way, speakers may find their causes or reasons challenged before the consequences or conclusions can be stated. This happens in extract 4, from McConnell v. Federal Election Commission, the election finance reform case. Kenneth Starr, representing the petitioner and thus contesting the McCain-Feingold reform finance law, on several occasions before this extract had invoked the “congruence and proportionality” criterion for judging whether the McCain-Feingold law is too sweeping. According to this principle, set forth in City of Boerne v. Flores, legislation that seeks to safeguard a constitutional right by prohibiting particular activities not specifically prohibited by the Constitution is justified if there is “congruence and proportionality” between the injury to be avoided and the means provided by the law. Starr contends that McCain-Feingold fails this test because the activities banned are out of proportion to the problem of “undue influence” by wealthy individuals, corporations, and unions. Justice Souter invokes another concern, however: that McCain-Feingold is necessary to prevent an “end run” around prior legislation, whose constitutionality Starr earlier had refrained studiously from disputing.
Souter interrupts Starr after the first component of the if . . . then construction, when the then-clause is clearly imminent. Again, Starr’s turn lacks a proximate glitch that might account for the interruption as an admissible turn-taking “rescue,” though he breathes audibly for an instant (less than .2 second) before Souter begins speaking. That same in-breath gives the fleeting impression that Starr has yielded the floor willingly, because it means that nothing is overlapping with Souter’s “large.” Souter then tries to continue, however, but withdraws when it becomes apparent that Souter is inclined to push forward with his remark.

Consider, now, the construction of Starr’s turn before the point of interruption. Starr begins his turn with “no.” Under the circumstances, this is the preferred response to Souter’s question because Souter’s position is that the “end run issue” should not be ignored. Starr then embarks on what seems at first to be an explanation of this position, consistent with the minimal response + explanation principle identified by Clayman (2001). Actually, however, Starr has no interest in defending his initial response, which would undermine his own argument. Thus he struggles to find a way to follow the “no” with something that has the form of an explanation for the “no” but that will provide him the opportunity to ultimately draw a much different conclusion. After a false start, he resolves to use an if . . . then construction. This allows him to remain in nominal explanation-giving mode while signaling that he is not identifying the conditions that justify the “no,” but rather stating the conditions warranting some other conclusion projected as forthcoming with a then.

Souter interrupts, but not with an anticipatory completion of the type that sometimes follows if-clauses (Lerner 1996b). Instead he interrupts in order to challenge the premise encoded in the if-clause: that the evil to which McCain-Feingold should be “congruent and proportional” is the appearance of corruption. Admittedly Souter could have waited until the end of Starr’s projected turn before taking issue with this premise. Perhaps what Souter gains by not waiting is the chance to confront Starr’s if-clause as freshly produced talk; subsequent to the then-clause, Souter would have had to do more work to refer back to it. Further, by waiting, Souter would have run the risk that another justice would begin talking first. Perhaps that justice would have been more sympathetic to Starr’s line of argument (as Justice Breyer earlier had demonstrated himself to be) and thus inclined to let the premise of the if-clause go unchallenged.

Projected Opinions

Speakers also express opinions. Frequently we signal that an opinion is forthcoming, and then go on to express it in the form of an embedded noun clause. Common openings of this sort include I think that, It’s our opinion that, and so on. In general, these serve as an advanced caveat with respect to the forthcoming assertion, allowing one to distance oneself from the appearance of making an inconvertible claim even as one identifies personally with that claim (Schiffrin 1990). Although the placement of such an item at the leading edge of an assertion is consistent with the light + heavy principle, such placement has a more immediate explanation, and one more in the spirit of this paper. Specifically, a late-placed caveat may never be uttered if one is interrupted first; as a result, one will be identified with a stronger claim than was intended.

This type of opening, however, practically invites anticipatory miscompletions, particularly in the Supreme Court. There it gives skeptical justices the opportunity to point out unstated implications—ostensibly to the attorney but actually, and more importantly, to one another. This is illustrated twice in extract 5, taken from the Grutter v. Bollinger oral arguments before the Supreme Court, regarding affirmative action policies at the University of Michigan. This particular exchange involves General Theodore Olson, representing the Bush administration and appearing in support of the petitioners (and thus against affirmative action), and Justices Stevens and Ginsburg, two of the liberal justices who ultimately voted in favor of the University’s policies. The “brief” mentioned by Olson was submitted in support of the University of Michigan; it presented the military as a positive example of the benefits of
affirmative action. In responding to a question about its bearing upon his argument, Olson mentions *Rostker v. Goldberg*, in which the court essentially held that the military could discriminate between one kind of recruit and another (in that case, on the basis of sex) only when equal treatment would create exceptional practical difficulties. This reference implies that the military academies’ affirmative action policies are themselves contrary to court opinion.

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*Supreme Court (Grutter v. Bollinger)*, 19:47

Olson: (....) and that to the extent that there’s any difference in analysis, the court might consider its position (.3) the position it articulated in connection with the military in *Rostker versus Goldberg*. But our position with respect to that brief is... ( )

(a)-> Stevens: [your suggestion is the military has broader latitude than the uni-] ( )

Stevens: well I’m suggesting that.

(a)-> Olson: yes I’m suggesting that the court will want to look at each of these individual situations according to the circumstances and that may be a factor in that context. But I started—uh my answer justice Stevens by saying we do not accept the proposition that race neutral means should not be used and employed fully. To uh uh to make sure that the academies are accessible and open and offer opportunities for as many people as possible.

Ginsburg: but you recognize general Olson that here and now (.7) all of the military academies do have race preference programs in admissions. (spoken slowly)

Olson: the coast guard does not it’s prohibited by congress from doing so. I do acknowledge justice Ginsburg that the other academies are doing so. It’s the position of the United States. (rushed) (.3)

(b)-> Ginsburg: is that that’s illegal what they’re doing. (.5)

Olson: pardon me?

Ginsburg: is it (.2) that it is illegal? a violation of the constitu[ ]

Olson: [it it] it we haven’t examined that, and we haven’t presented a brief with respect to the specifics of each individual academy. And we would want to take into consideration any potential impact. Ah suggested by the court in the *Rostker* case.
There are two events of interest here, marked by the arrows. Both qualify as interruptions because both project their own continuation by signaling forthcoming opinions. At (a), Justice Stevens enters before General Olson has even provided a verb for the TCU-in-progress (starting with “but our position”). Yet, even if Olson had first completed his “is,” additional contents would have been projected, namely the specifics of “our position.” This is the case because “is” is a “linking verb” in this context, requiring a subject on one side and a subject complement on the other. At (b), this grammatical requirement is already satisfied by the time Justice Ginsburg enters: “it” serves as the subject and “the position of the United States” as the subject complement of the contracted “is.” The “it,” however, is a forward-looking pronoun, awaiting a referent, because it obviously does not refer again to the Coast Guard (the most recent referent of “it”). Once again, this referent is to be the specifics of “the position of the United States,” the projected extraposed noun clause.

Yet again, the transcript contains nothing that would mitigate the interruption at (a). The situation in (b), however, is different. Before the .3–second pause, Olson employs the “rush-through” tactic mentioned earlier, talking very quickly in the apparent effort to prevent anyone from interrupting his response to Justice Ginsburg. This succeeds until he pauses, at which point Ginsburg interrupts despite the lack of TCU closure, and even though the pause itself is very brief.13

Both instances might be regarded as anticipatory completions (Lerner 1996b), in the sense that the interrupter provides a candidate concluding component to the interrupted TCU. Neither, however, fits precisely the syntactical shape of the interrupted turn. At (a), Stevens begins with “your suggestion,” though this is redundant with “our position” and merely delays the syntactically fitted anticipatory completion: “the military has broader latitude . . .” And at (b), Ginsburg begins with a syntactically superfluous “is,” again even though what follows (“that that’s illegal what they’re doing”) seems to be tailored carefully as syntactically continuous with the interrupted turn.

These apparent imperfections in the production of anticipatory completions, however, actually do important interactional work. It is evident from Olson’s response to each interruption that these are actually anticipatory miscompletions, in the sense that the proposed TCU conclusions are not those he intended, nor anything close. The seemingly awkward completion beginnings are evidence that the justices know this, for those beginnings flag the completions as completions rather than as stand-alone TCUs, for which they might otherwise have been mistaken. Had Stevens, for instance, interrupted simply with “the military has broader latitude than the private university,” Olson and others might have taken this as an independent TCU, a declaration of Stevens’s personal position. But by starting with “your suggestion is,” Stevens flags his remark as a proposed continuation of Olson’s TCU. This is necessary only because there is reason to fear that it may be taken as something else. Ginsburg’s starting “is” can be taken in the same way, as a marker that the forthcoming remark is not an expression of her personal view but a proposed (mis-)completion of Olson’s TCU.

In both cases, the justices use Olson’s “I think” + opinion linearization to offer completions that are contrary to Olson’s intentions and are known to be such. In the first case the position attributed to him, and to the administration he represents, is that of denying to a private university the latitude accorded the military. In the second case it is that the military is engaged in illegal practices. Olson does not have an interest in being associated with either of these claims. Thus both completions subvert whatever he intended to say, if only temporarily, while permitting the justices the opportunity to score rhetorical points that might not have found an opening, nor have been as effective, later on.

13 The pause follows, however, .2 second of nonvoiced consonants at the end of “states;” as a result, it sounds longer.
Projected Restrictions

Speakers frequently follow their claims, including their opinions, with restrictions on the scope of the claims’ applicability. Although sometimes it is possible to declare these restrictions first (Present company excluded, most people have a dishonest streak), the resulting formulations can be awkward, especially when the restrictions are complicated (i.e., heavy). Further, as stated earlier, grammatical constraints apply when the restrictions are expressed in the form of a relative clause, which must follow the noun (or noun phrase) it modifies. If the interruption occurs before the relative clause (or the restriction more generally) is produced, the truncated TCU can appear more diffuse or more unqualified than was intended.

This point is illustrated in extract 6. Here, a little more than a week into the war, a journalist asks Secretary Rumsfeld about the administration’s strategy of targeting the Iraqi regime, and has begun to make a potentially troublesome connection to the Iraqi populace when Rumsfeld interrupts.

Here the journalist is attempting a particularly complicated construction, involving a relative clause embedded in an embedded adverb clause. This is diagrammed in Figure 1.

The relative clause is projected because the journalist is clearly concerned about more than the population of Iraq. For this reason, Rumsfeld’s entry before its onset, but after the noun phrase it modifies (“any significant number of Iraqi people”), counts as an interruption. We find no apparent glitches that might account for the interruption as warranted by turn-taking exigencies. Indeed, it is revealing that Rumsfeld interrupts where he does rather than at one of the two pauses earlier in the journalist’s turn. This suggests that he is waiting for the turn to develop far enough to allow his entry to be designed as a response to the TCU-so-far, even while he remains alert to the possibility that by waiting longer he may be faced with the need to answer a more difficult question.

Figure 1. Embedded Clause Structure in Extract 6
This, in fact, is exactly what is threatened by the reference to “any significant number of Iraqi people.” From the start, there was concern about the reception that coalition forces could expect from the Iraqi people. Shortly before the exchange reproduced in extract 3, Rumsfeld had admitted an inability to know their “mood.” Now it seems that he is to be asked pointedly how the lack of reliable information on this subject affects the plan to win the war by targeting the upper levels of the Iraqi government. This plan was a centerpiece of the coalition strategy and was premised on the idea that the Iraqi people basically welcomed the invasion. Rumsfeld, however, successfully dodges the question by exploiting the fact that noun phrases precede embedded relative clauses to contest the suggestion that the war planners lack a “sense” of the Iraqi people. At the same time, he prevents the journalist from specifying exactly what information is wanting.

It is interesting that Rumsfeld declines to connect this response back to the issue of military strategy. One reason may be that, having successfully challenged the (aborted) if-premise (the higher-level adverb clause), he is no longer obligated to address the implication of this premise—that it “complicates” the favored military strategy. Another possibility is that the obligation to respond to whatever was said in the prior turn (Schegloff 1988) allows one to “forget” its leading contents when additional response-worthy clauses followed. Whatever the justification, Rumsfeld manages to respond only to the most proximate component of the interrupted TCU.

DISCUSSION

The above extracts illustrate how the need to linearize leaves speakers vulnerable to interruptions that interdict the articulation of options, actions, restrictions, and so forth which are heavy, new, or otherwise syntactically late-placed. Here I make some observations about the kinds of things interrupters can accomplish by exploiting these vulnerabilities, the ways in which opportunistic interruptions take advantage of some conversational rules while violating others, and the consequences of opportunistic interruptions for subsequent talk.

An opportunistic interruption can introduce talk designed to sound like an anticipatory completion, syntactically continuous with the interrupted remark and thus hearable as a proposed continuation of that remark, but actually discontinuous with the interrupted speaker’s likely intentions. This was the case in the two instances shown in extract 5, except that each began with a syntactical wrinkle, a fleeting jaggedness in fit with the interrupted turn. I argued that such a wrinkle served as a signal that what followed was a proposed (if insincere) completion of the interrupted TCU rather than an independent TCU. My reference to these as “anticipatory miscompletions” is thus doubly appropriate: they not only attribute to the initial speaker a TCU completion that he or she did not anticipate producing, but also mark this completion with a syntactical glitch.

We also can imagine someone opportunistically interrupting so as to respond to one reading of the possible import of the interrupted turn, through a recognitional onset that is actually a misrecognitional onset. This would be the case when that reading of the import is incongruous with the interrupted speaker’s recognized intentions. Yet I discovered no clear-cut instances of this phenomenon in the two data sources. Rather, most of the interruptions involved responses to the interrupted TCU as it stood at the instant of the interruption, or soon before, without any pretense to inferring its unspoken portion. This describes the arrowed interruptions in extracts 1, 2, 3, and 6. In extract 1, for instance, General Myers responds only to the “money problem” possibility, without attempting to guess the alternative. In extract 3, Justice O’Connor responds only to the claim that “race should not be a factor among others,” and makes no reference to the Constitution, though Kolbo was clearly on the verge of doing so at the point of successful interruption.

An opportunistic interrupter can also challenge some premise encoded in the interrupted turn-so-far without disputing the interrupted TCU’s incompleteness. This happened in extract 4, when Justice Souter chal-
lenged Kenneth Starr’s *if*-clause. Here Souter disputes Starr’s attempt to draw any conclusion from this premise without denying Starr’s intention to draw *some* conclusion—that is, to continue with the TCU with further content in the form of a *then*-clause.

Whatever they accomplish, opportunistic interruptions involve the simultaneous violation and exploitation of conversational rules. By definition, they violate the turn-taking rule specifying that a speaker should be permitted to continue speaking until she or he reaches a possible TCU completion point (Sacks et al. 1974). At the same time, these interruptions make exploitative use of the more general one-speaker rule, because the initial speaker must choose either to cede the floor or to be partly complicit in the production of overlapping talk. An opportunistic interrupter is a conversational bully, but one whose tactic succeeds only insofar as others can be expected to yield for the sake of safeguarding the more broadly encompassing social order.

Opportunistic interruptions also exploit the general conversational expectation that one’s turn be hearable as a response to whatever was said in the prior turn (Sacks 1995a:250–52). With each passing turn, it becomes more and more difficult for the person initially interrupted to correct the mistake without challenging the claims made and the positions taken by the intervening speakers. Thus an opportunistic interruption is likely to become not only more consequential with time, but also increasingly harder to rectify.

**CONCLUSION**

Much social theory takes action to be instantaneous, or nearly so. Particularly in game theory (von Neumann and Morgenstern 1980), actors decide to do one thing or another, and in so deciding make it a *fait accompli*. Conversation, however, may shed more light on social action than does the prisoner’s dilemma, in part because so much action is conversational. In conversation, a projected turn takes time to unfold, and in unfolding exists in a state of incompleteness that leaves it vulnerable to interruption. In the wake of this interruption the interrupted party may be worse off than if he or she had never undertaken the action initially. On the other side, from the perspective of an observer/listener, the incremental unfolding of someone else’s action project can be watched closely for the fleeting opportunities it creates for responses—themselves actions—that exploit its incomplete form; such responses might not have been viable had the action reached completion. In conversation, ends need means and means take time. These means may require entry into a vulnerable middle ground scrutinized by those who stand to benefit from acting upon the *fait inachevé*, the unfinished act.
APPENDIX.
TRANSCRIBING CONVENTIONS

The transcription conventions described below are meant to capture the main features of conversation relevant for the analysis in this paper, especially the timing of interruptions and overlapping speech, as well as some other features of traditional interest to conversation analysts, such as stress and pauses.

1. Overlapping speech
   A: constit\(u\)tion
   B: [it it]
   Brackets indicate overlapping speech.

2. Pauses
   race because (. ) your honor
   hhh of the constitutional
   command of (.3) equality
   Numbers in parentheses indicate pauses in seconds, measured to one decimal point. A lone period indicates a “micro-pause,” audible but too short to be measured reliably (<.2 second).

3. Condensed/expanded talk
   >because of the con-
   Inward-pointing more-than and less-than signs (>talk<) indicate that the enclosed talk is faster than that which preceded it in the same turn. Outward-pointing signs (<talk>) indicate a period of slowed talk.

4. Latched turns
   A: or is it a=
   B: =it’s not a money problem
   Affixed to the end of one turn at the beginning of the next, equal signs indicate “latched” turns, when there is no pause between turns.

5. Self-interruptions
   i- is it a money problem
   A dash indicates self-interruption.

6. Intonation
   A: is that that’s illegal what they’re doing.
   B: pardon me?
   Except for apostrophes, punctuation is used only to represent intonation: a period indicates falling intonation; a comma indicates slightly rising intonation; and a question mark indicates steeply rising intonation.

7. Stress
   but you recognize
   Underlining is used to indicate stress, normally a combination of volume and pitch.\(^a\)

8. Sound stretching
   u:h
   One or more colons indicate that a sound within a word (that preceding the colon) is “stretched,” or prolonged. The more colons, the longer the prolongation.

9. Breathing
   .hhh the court might consider
   Audible breathing is transcribed with one or more hs. The number of hs reflects the duration: each h corresponds to .2 second’s worth of breath (where the measurement is rounded to the nearest interval). Inhaling is indicated with a leading period, and exhaling with the lack of a period.

10. Inaudible speech
    (how does that)
    ( )
    (without having na-/with the heavy na-)
    Single parentheses contain the transcriber’s guess as to speech that cannot be discerned clearly, or (if empty) indicate entirely unintelligible speech. A slash (/) indicates alternative hearings of the same talk.

11. Transcriber’s comments
    ((spoken very slowly))
    (((...)))
    Double parentheses contain the transcriber’s description of events, not spoken words. Ellipses enclosed in this way at the start or end of a turn indicate that the current speaker was already talking when the extract began or continued to talk after its conclusion.

\(^a\) Although conversation analysts sometimes use capitalization in place of underlining to indicate stress or to indicate increased volume alone (i.e., without higher pitch), here only the first-person “I” is capitalized. I do not capitalize the first letter of a turn otherwise, nor the first letter of proper names.
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David Gibson is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. His research areas include network analysis, organizations, and microinteraction. He is working currently on a study of career patterns and news coverage at the New York Times.