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The dilemmas of third-party complaints in conversation between friends

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Abstract

This paper deals with third-party complaints in ordinary conversation. It is based on recordings of visits amongst friends, which are analyzed in an interactional perspective. The overall aim is to describe the way in which the co-conversationalists introduce, accept or refuse, develop, and close the activity of complaining in the course of their exchanges. Beyond this general purpose, two main issues underlie the analysis: (1) to identify the structural features of this type of activity; (2) to discuss through data analysis some of the analytical problems raised by the description of long sequences.

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1. Introduction

This paper deals with an interactional activity identified in conversations between friends, in which one participant turns to complain to her/his interlocutors about someone or something external to the situation. In French, which is the language of the data, what the initiator does would typically be called *se plaindre* (“to moan” or “to complain”), whereas the interlocutors – if they affiliate – would be said to *le/la plaindre* (“to pity” or “express that they feel sorry for him/her”). In French then, the pair of verbs *se plaindre/plaindre* encapsulates this interactional activity. On the other hand, the verb *se plaindre* in French would not be the most commonly used one to refer to the activity of expressing one’s grievance about the recipient (“to complain”, “to reproach” or “to blame”). This other activity would rather be named *reprocher, faire des reproches*. We thus have no equivalence between English and French concerning this lexical field (in spite of the common Latin etymology of “to complain” and *se plaindre*). This is relevant for our study in that the activity we intend to examine corresponds to the current meaning of the verb *se plaindre* in French, but not to the most common use of “to complain” in English.

In order to clarify, as far as possible, the focus of the study, we will speak, from now on, of “third-party complaints” (as opposed to “complaints about the recipient”), and we will put forward a tentative extensive definition of what this activity is, according to its salient and recurrent features: namely, a participant expresses negative feelings (displeasure, sadness, anger, etc.) related to what she/he presents as a “complainable matter” (Drew and Holt, 1987). This “complainable matter” is a third-party, that is, in most cases, a person who is not (one of) the recipient(s), but it can also be a fact, an object or a situation. An utterance like “pffouh j’en ai marre:/ d’cette maison:” (pffouh I’m fed

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up/ with this house) extracted from one conversation in the data (excerpt 1) is a typical third-party complaint initiation, in which the speaker states her negative stance (“I’m fed up”) towards a “complainable matter” (the house).

A last core feature of the activity concerns its orientation towards getting others’ affiliation.

As Curl et al. (2002) have emphasized, complaints about the recipient and third-party complaints can be distinguished from each other in terms of how they relate to affiliation, in so far as in response to the former, recipients defend their conduct, or admit to the wrongdoing, whilst they respond to the latter by expressing, or not, their affiliation with the complaint. We will say that, in third-party complaints, the speaker shows her/his expectation of her/his interlocutor(s) affiliating. In French, this aspect could be phrased in the following way: “celui qui *se plaint* attend de ses interlocuteurs qu’ils *le plaignent*” (the one who complains expects to be pitied/supported by her/his interlocutors). Affiliating does not necessarily imply siding with the complaint teller *against* the third party; since the complaint teller often evokes the complainable feature of her/his situation rather than a clear third-party’s wrongdoing or guilt. But it does imply that the complaint recipient recognizes that the complaint teller’s (negative) feelings are justified, i.e. that her/his situation is complainable. In many cases of course, this orientation is not followed up in the subsequent turns. In fact, although the activity is grounded on an assumption of affiliation, the form and degree of affiliation that participants express continuously fluctuate along the exchanges. This constitutes, in our view, both the issue at stake in the activity and its mainspring.

The aim of this analysis of “third-party complaints” in the data is twofold: on the one hand, to uncover the interactional structure of the activity and to identify the devices used by the participants (complaint teller and complaint recipient(s)) to cope with it; on the other hand, to discuss some of the methodological issues raised by the analysis of “long sequences”. In trying to do so, we will be faced with the intricate issue of identifying an order in a structure that is apparently always “evolving.” To be specific, data analysis shows that complaining, in a similar way to other interactional activities such as trouble-telling or confiding, for instance, is prone to numerous pitfalls and difficulties. In fact, one almost never finds a smoothly developed sequence in the form of *l’un se plaint—l’autre le/la plaint* (one complains—the other pities/supports him/her). Rather, what happens is a somewhat convoluted and painstaking progression of the sequence up to the expression of affiliation by the recipient, which, actually, continues till the sequence closure.

The first two sections of the paper present the theoretical and methodological framework used in the study. The next two examine the stages of the complaint sequence through data analysis. The methodological issue of identifying and describing long sequences is discussed on this basis.

2. Complaints

Previous studies on complaints have highlighted some specific, localized strategies participants use while partaking in this activity. Drew and Holt (1987) examine how idioms are used for formulating complaints, getting the recipients’ affiliation and bringing the topic to an end. Their investigation leads to delineate differences between idioms and “extreme case formulations” (Pomerantz, 1986): whereas the former consists in stylizing the topic through a figurative formulation, the latter reports facts and provides concrete details, as a way of supporting one’s grievance. Mandelbaum’s study (1991/1992) focuses on methods used by participants to disattend the interlocutor’s complaint. She shows the very subtle interactional work the teller performs when giving the recipient the option of developing the proposed topic while bypassing the ‘gripe’ factor, and conversely the continuous attention the recipient devotes to not engaging in the complaint activity while keeping the topic alive. Affiliation and disaffiliation are also the focus of Drew and Curl’s paper (this issue). They examine how complaints are introduced and developed, revealing the “quite complex picture of complaint sequences” (this issue:xx–xx) within their data in regard to both the sequence structure and the interactional roles involved.

Our study of complaints between friends focuses on this last analytic line, through investigating complaints as “long sequences”.

3. Complaining to close friends in the course of a conversation

The data are constituted of conversations between friends during visits. These visits last from about 20 min to several hours. A complaint never constitutes the whole of a conversation during these visits, but is a recognizable interactional activity that takes place at a certain moment in it. Previous studies on the data, focusing on the successive

activities participants engage in (Traverso, 1996), have led to show that specific activities emerge out of a more general background of “chatting exchanges” (which stand for the typical form conversation takes, with a turn-taking system offering an open range of possible next action(s) after a first action¹; a topic organization with no predetermined (macro-)topic, nor agenda; and symmetry in the contributions²). In this paper, complaining will be studied as one of those specific interactional activities within conversation.

Some aspects of visits between friends may have consequences for the way in which participants deal with complaints. As for the relational dimension, Mandelbaum (1991/1992) speaks of a specific form of attentiveness expected of friends. In the data, various aspects of the participants’ behavior support this claim: they continuously display their concern about others through the use of routines and rituals, they carefully listen to others’ worries and problems, and they give access to each other through telling anecdotes and stories about their everyday life (Traverso, 1996).

With regard to visits, they constitute a setting in which participants share an unlimited amount of time, which is essentially devoted to talking. Complaints can thus expand in an open-ended manner, and due to the fact that no pre-determined objective for the encounter exists, they do not compete with any overriding purpose.

4. Complaint sequences: methodological issues

This section is devoted to the methodological problems raised by identifying the structure of complaining. First, however, issues connected to analyzing long sequences are discussed.

4.1. Describing long sequences

In the data, complaints develop in long sequences. This can probably be related to the features of “conversation between friends in visits” that have just been mentioned: in contrast with what is the case in institutional settings (cf. Ruusuvoori and Lindfors, this issue), for instance, the data’s complaints are, not only never left unattended, but also developed as fully-fledged activities, in which participants engage totally for long periods of time.³ As for how they structure the activity, despite the complainer’s orientation towards getting her/his interlocutor’s affiliation, the overall complaint structure cannot merely be summarized by the following adjacency pair format:

- A: I’m fed up with this house (Turn 1: A complains)
B: you poor thing, I really feel sorry for you (Turn 2: B affiliates with A’s complaint)

When this pair type occurs in the data, it is the outcome of a preceding phase and it always works as an agreement for a successive one. Therefore, it does not grasp the whole activity. Sacks raises this issue related to long sequences (“big packages”) in the following way:

“It turns out that one central problem in building big packages is that the ways the utterances that turn out to compose the package get dealt with as single utterances or pair of utterances or triplets of utterances, etc. may have almost no bearing on how they’re to be dealt with when an attempt is made to build a larger package. That is to say, that the operation is not at all additive.” (1992:354)

A strictly utterance-by-utterance analysis may not be sufficient for packaging long sequences, for this enterprise requires linking what goes on at one particular point to the overall orientation of the sequence (Psathas, 1992)⁴. In order to follow up the discussion, I will rely on previous studies on activities that develop in long sequences and that are related, somehow or other, to complaint: storytelling (1), troubles-telling and confiding (2). These three activities are interesting also in that their analyses illustrate two different ways of coping with the issue of long sequences.

(1) Storytelling: projection of a sequence

¹ In contrast with what happens in institutional settings (Drew and Heritage, 1992; Schegloff, 1999).

² Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1990), Drew and Heritage (1992), Traverso (1996).

³ By way of example, the complaint about Carla (excerpt 3) lasts about 8 min out of a 26 min visit; the complaint about Alex (section 5.1) lasts longer than 10 min as well as that about S’ girlfriend (excerpt 2).

⁴ Which does not necessarily entail going from a structure-based approach to a topic-based one (see Schegloff, 1990 on this point).

Whereas troubles-telling and confiding resemble complaint in many ways, storytelling's relationship with complaint is more complex. We will not discuss this issue in a detailed manner but only recall that complaining generally encompasses storytelling (as all previous studies have shown) as a way of getting the listener both interested and on side. Storytelling can therefore be studied according to its location and function in an ongoing complaint from which it (partly) gets its meaning. Moreover, common devices are used for introducing a story and a complaint. This is due to the fact that, in both cases, the speaker attempts to get the floor for more than one (extended) turn. The feature that mainly differentiates storytelling and complaining is directly consequential for their analysis as long sequences. It lies in the fact that, unlike storytelling, a complaint is not introduced with an early projection of its overall coherence, which triggers in the recipients a sense of the point at which it will end (Sacks, 1992). The complaint teller's orientation towards getting the recipients' affiliation displays an expectation on the activity, more than it really projects at a very early point a coherence of the whole package. In that respect, complaining, more than storytelling, is subject to interactional contingencies.

(2) Troubles-telling and confiding: a sequence structure

Gail Jefferson's work on troubles-telling (Jefferson, 1980, 1984; Jefferson and Lee, 1981) directly deals with the issue of identifying a troubles-telling sequence. She speaks of the "vague sense of trouble-talk sequential order" emanating from her data which led her to hypothesize on a trouble talk "sequence candidate":

"[...] there seemed to be a shape that recurred across the range of conversations, a shape that was rather well-formed in some of the conversations and distorted or incomplete in others." (1988:418)

The "sequence candidate" comprises six elements: Approach, Arrival, Delivery, Work-up, Close implicature, Exit (1988:420). Jefferson insists on the fact that actual "candidates" always are "misshapen, incomplete, variously problematic instances" (1988:419) and she links this observed disorder to "general problem-types encountered or generated by troubles-talk" (1988:440) rather than to the specificity of a given conversation. As compared to Sacks's analysis of storytelling, the outcome is rather different here: it does not consist in locating a point of projection for the sequence but in identifying a structure, composed of a series of sequentially ordered elements.⁵

Confiding bears a strong resemblance to trouble talk as well as to complaining, although it may revolve around pleasant subject matters. As for troubles-telling, a schema functioning with an "at-one-point projection" of the whole sequence has not been identified in previous studies, but rather a sequence structure (Traverso, 1996, 1999, 2000; several papers in Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Traverso, 2007) composed of four phases (Opening, Exposition, Sharing, and Closing).

The analysis of complaints in our data also led to the identification of a sequence structure.

4.2. *The complaint structure*

The sequence structure identified in the data has four stages: (1) initiation, (2) core part, (3) complaint development, (4) closing. In the first phase, the complaint is introduced. The initiator's problem here is to get this introduction recognized and endorsed by the recipient(s). She/he frequently gives preliminary cues that prepare the complaint topic. Phase 2 is the moment when the complaint is approved by the recipient(s) via an expressed agreement on the complaint topic and an affiliation with the complainer. It can be seen as the core part of the sequence, and its completion leads to the "complaint development" phase. In this phase, participants flesh out and explore the complaint and its ramifications until they can steer themselves towards the closing phase.

In the following section, we will show how these phases are identified upon cues that are used and recognized by participants.

5. Data analysis

We will concentrate on the first three phases, trying to show the complex structuration of the activity. Although only a small set of short excerpts can be analyzed in this paper, our aim is to illustrate the functioning of complaints as long sequences. Complaint closings will not be studied. In the data, they never coincide with the conversation closings. In some

⁵ Psathas work on direction-giving similarly ends up in identifying a sequence structure (Psathas and Kozloff, 1976; Psathas, 1986, 1991).

cases, they are nevertheless achieved on the occasion of a strong change in the situation (for example a new participant arrives or the participants decide to go out). When this is not the case, breaking rather than closing of the activity is frequently used.

5.1. Initiation

The initiator's problem during this phase is to have her/his initial complaint proposition recognized and validated by the recipient(s). This phase begins with what can be called a "potential complaint":

Turn 1: "potential complaint"

Turn 2: treats or does not treat T1 as a complaint

Turn 3: accepts or does not accept T2's orientation

5.1.1. Turn 1

In turn 1, the complaint is only a potential one, for it has not been agreed on in the conversation. It is nevertheless uttered as a complaint by using various devices, ranging from the choice of particular lexical items to prosody and paraverbal markers. However, only certain follow-up turns will transform the complaint into a shared activity.

(1) Corpus Clodif. Parents visiting their daughter

- 1 M ((revenant de la salle de bains)) faudra pas en
2 conclure qu'j'ai fait pipi par terre hein
3 C y'a d'l'eau/ encore/
4 M oui c'est encore- ça suinte
>5 C pffouh j'en ai marre:/ d'cette maison:

Translation

- 1 M ((coming back from the bathroom)) don't go thinking
2 I've peed on the floor now
3 C is it wet/ again/
4 M yes it's still- it's oozing out
>5 C pffouh I'm fed up/ with this house

Here, the complaint emerges in a sudden way following M's return from the bathroom with her humorous comments re the water on the floor (lines 1–2). In line 3, C's exclamation asks for a confirmation of the leak, revealing that it is a familiar topic. In line 4, M's confirmation "it's oozing out" downgrades C's assessment ("is it wet", line 3). The complaint (turn 1 in the model) is uttered in 5 where C triggers a minor change in topic, from the dysfunctional bathroom to the house as a whole, and from the matter described to what she feels about the whole situation. Her turn is built as a complaint: it explicitly states a complaint matter ("this house") about which a feeling of dissatisfaction is expressed via "I'm fed up" and reinforced by the use of "pffouh", which is a heavy and emphasized sigh, expressing exasperation.

Such direct and explicit expressions of a complaint are more the 'exception than the rule' in the data. More often, the teller(s) resort(s) to more implicit devices, as in the following excerpt in which P (L's sister) introduces a complaint about her boyfriend, Alex.

(2) Alex

- 1 P hier j'suis allée voir Fin d'Automne/ (1.0) d'Ozu
2 (0.7)
3 L c'est bien/
4 (1.9)
5 P j'trouvais qu'c'était vach'ment beau/ t'vois/ ça m'a
6 plu esthétiquement\ (0.7) et puis:: y a vach'ment
7 d'humour et tout/ (0.8) mais euh: (.) les personnages
8 m'ont super crispée

6

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- 9 (2.0)
- 10 L t'as pas vu:/ (.) Flo//
- 11 P non non (0.7) <((plus fort)) non:/ mais (.)
- 12 mais là euh:> j'sais pas\ i craque Alex c'temps-
- 13 ci/ <((très bas)) alors j'suis partie au cinoche>
- 14 L moi j'irai voir Le goût du Saké/ (.) j'crois
- 15 (2.3) [talk about the movies]

Translation

- 1 P yesterday I went and saw Fin d'Automne (1.0) Ozu's film
- 2 (0.7)
- 3 L any good/
- 4 (1.9)
- 5 P I found it very beautiful/ you see/ I
- 6 loved the way it looked\ (0.7) and it is full of humor
- 7 and stuff/ (0.8) but uh (.) the characters got on my
- 8 nerves
- 9 (2.0)
- 10 L have you seen// (.) Flo//
- 11 P no no (0.7) <((louder)) no:/ but (.) but now euh:>
- 12 I don't know\ he's really losing it Alex these days/
- 13 <((very softly)) so I split to the movies>
- 14 L you know Le gout du sake, that's what I'll go and
- 15 see next I think (2.3) [talk about the movies]

In lines 7–8, P closes her comment on Ozu's movie with an utterance evoking a negative feeling. After a long pause, L utters a follow-up turn, which constitutes a topic reorientation (10) "have you seen Flo//", about a friend of theirs who works at the cinema where Ozu's films are being screened. P's answer (11–13) shows that this topical orientation was not the expected one. She first answers the question directly ("no no"), then after a pause, she changes her tone of voice with a third "no", which, more than simply repeating the first two, serves as a topic boundary marker (Schegloff, 2001). After the pause, the contradictory particle "but" also indicates a topic reorientation. It is immediately followed by the introduction of the "complainable" matter, Alex. This topic is shown to be "complainable" via several devices: after the pause, a hesitation marker "I don't know", then the mention of a dysphoric feeling, which is not P's own but Alex's: "he's really losing it". In this utterance, the use of the present tense operates to create a generalization, as if Alex's state of mind was not just the reason for why she went to the movies, but also an ongoing mood.

In this excerpt, despite the cues we have identified, the complaint remains implicit to such an extent that L does not follow up, and continues talking about films (14). P aligns herself with this topic, and the two participants talk about Ozu's films for a while, before P returns to the complaint matter, Alex.

5.1.2. Preliminary cues

Often, prior to turn 1, preliminary cues are given by the complainer re her/his preparing the way for a complaint. That was already the case in excerpt 2, as well as in the following excerpt:

- (3) Corpus Claudif. Parents at their daughter's
- 1 C et puis:./ voilà/ quoi\ non non c'soir on fait:.
- 2 relax hein\ (tu vois) on fait des jeux (0.9) on
- 3 s'repose (1.3) ah ben pfff (1.2) c'matin final'ment
- 4 j'me suis l'vée tôt pour rien (1.1) il est pas v'nu
- >5 l'type (0.3) puis euh: (3.0) on s'est engueulés avec
- >6 Carla/ (.) c'tait vach'ment sympa

Translation

1 C and there::/ you have it/ then\ no no this evening we
2 relax right\ you know just games (0.9) and taking it
3 easy (1.3) ah well pfff (1.2) this friggin'
4 morning I got up early for nothing (.) he didn't
>5 come the guy (0.3) and after: (3.0) the shit hit the
>6 fan with Carla (.) just great

In the lead-up, M has asked a question about whether their visit is badly timed. C insists that their arriving is no trouble at all. Then, at the beginning of the excerpt, C closes the topic by recapitulating the whole with a summary formula (2–3). After a long pause (3), she introduces the next topic, the tone of which contrasts heavily with the previous utterances. The utterance begins with the particle “ah ben”: “ben” would commonly be translated into “well”; preceded by “ah”, it gets an exclamatory feature. “Ah ben” indicates that a new topic is being introduced and it is commonly followed by a formulation of the topic (ex. “ah ben elle marche maint‘nant ta machine”, “*ah ben* does it work now, your washing-machine”). Here, it is followed by a heavy sigh (“pfff”), which then somehow gets the status of a statement, expressing tiredness and despondency. It is emphasized by two long pauses. Then (line 3, 4, 5) a first unpleasant event is reported and followed by the potential complaint (5–6): “the shit hit the fan with Carla (.) just great”. The complaint matter is explicit (Carla), and the dissatisfaction is expressed ironically.

In this excerpt, before the complaint, preliminary cues have been given about the troublesome nature of the subject to be discussed. They are located very close to the potential complaint, and gradually shift the mood away from smooth and relaxed at the beginning of the excerpt towards negative. These cues are an erratic part of the overall structure: they can be absent; they can appear just before the complaint as in this excerpt, or a long way before its occurrence. They sometimes go unnoticed and/or “un-interpreted” by the potential complaint receiver, despite their repetition.⁶

5.2. *The core part*

What comes after turn 1 can vary, in regards to the complaint activity, because, in turn 2, the potential complaint may or may not be treated as a complaint. We will begin with the case when the complaint is approved in turn 2, then turn to other forms that have been identified in the data.

5.2.1. *Immediate affiliation.* It sometimes happens in the data that the recipient affiliates in turn 2, as in the following excerpt:

(4) Corpus Clodif (following excerpt 3)

>13 on s'est engueulés avec Carla/ (.) c'était vach'ment
14 [sympa
15 M [encore// [(.) oh:: mais c'est- c'est la- la barbe/
16 C [ouais
17 M (.) cette fille
18 C hm

Translation

>13 the shit hit the fan with Carla (.) it was just
14 [great
15 M [again// [(.) oh but it's- she's- she's such a pain
16 C [yeah
17 M (.) this girl
18 C hm

⁶ It can also be the case that a recipient who has recognized and interpreted such cues may find a way of stopping the complaint from getting the floor (Mandelbaum, 1991/1992; Schegloff, 2005).

At the end of the potential complaint, line 14, M immediately affiliates with C: her turn is focused on Carla (the complaint matter); she uses a marked prosody on the adverb “encore” (again), expressing indignation (an emotional stance that is ‘complementary’ to C’s displayed dismay) and an exclamatory structure (“oh but it’s- she’s”). On the verbal level, she aligns with C’s stance that Carla is a person about whom one can complain, through an explicit negative assessment (“she’s such a pain (.) this girl”).

It seldom occurs that agreement and affiliation are obtained instantly after the first occurrence of a potential complaint, as in this excerpt. More often, several attempts need to be made before this happens, raising negotiations for the introduction of the activity.

5.2.2. Negotiations

Two different sources of negotiation occur in the data: either the complaint is not followed up on, or it is challenged.

5.2.2.1. *The potential complaint is not followed up on.* This case is frequent. It is achieved via two types of follow-up turns: firstly, when turn 2 is not topically linked with turn 1, i.e. B achieves a topic reorientation or a topic break in turn 2 (Mandelbaum’s “blatant disattending” (1991/1992:100)). Or, secondly, turn 2 is topically aligned but non affiliative (Mandelbaum’s “subtle disattending” (1991/1992:105)). Both cases result in preventing the complaint from developing at the next turn, and can lead speaker A to reintroduce it further along in the conversation. The following excerpt shows a topically aligned nonaffiliative follow-up turn:

(5) Corpus Katjav. K introduces a complaint about Francine

- 1 K i’s ont ma grand-mère/ pis i’s ont le p’tit:/
- 2 (0.4)
- 3 L et:- et:- [et Francine/ avec]
- 4 K [ben t’sais l’gamin]
- 5 K hein/
- 6 L et avec Francine/
- >7 K euh:: ben Francine/ elle- ouais mais alors Francine
- 8 moi elle me fout les boules hein (0.3) j’te jure hein (1.4)
- 9 elle fout rien::/ putain mais ma mère/ c’est vraiment
- 10 d’la merde hein (0.4) ‘fin tu vois elle a une attitude
- 11 quand même euh::/ (.)
- >12 L elle s’occupe pas du::: de son fils/

Translation

- 1 K they’ve got my grand-mother/ and there’s the little one/
- 2 (0.4)
- 3 L and:- and:- [and also Francine/]
- 4 K [well you know the kid]
- 5 K eh/
- 6 L and Francine as well/
- >7 K well you know Francine/ she just- yeah I tell you
- 8 she just gives me the shits (0.3) I swear (1.4)
- 9 she does bugger all::/ fucking hell she treats my mum
- 10 like dirt see (0.4) the thing is she’s really got an
- 11 attitude problem I mean:: (.)
- >12 L she doesn’t look a- /::: after her son/

At the beginning of the excerpt, K itemizes who is present at her parents’ at this time. In 2, L adds a last person to the list, in the form of a question. After an overlap that causes a mishearing and its repair (lines 2–5), K utters the potential complaint about Francine (line 6). The turn is constructed with a left-hand dislocation (“Francine she. . .”), in which the topic is repaired: K begins as if she was going to answer L’s question (with the marker “ben” (well)), then she restarts with another syntactic structure. In this new structure, Francine is presented as the cause of K’s anger

(complaint matter and negative feeling). The utterance is built with a typical exclamatory structure “well you know Francine she just yeah she just gives me the shits”. The left-hand dislocation permits K to add other successive predicates upon the topic for justifying her feeling: after swearing, she gives an account of Francine’s behavior (“she does bugger all”, “she’s got a real attitude problem I mean”). At the end of the turn, she adds an exclamatory utterance describing the way (she feels) Francine treats their mother (“fucking hell she treats my mom like dirt see”).

Despite these markers and despite her sticking to the topic, L does not take up K’s emotional stance at all. Instead she asks a factual question in the successive turn (lines 11–12), thus disattending the complaint entirely.

5.2.2.2. *The potential complaint is challenged.* In this case, the second speaker does treat turn 1 as a complaint but through stating that the matter is not worth complaining about. In so doing, she/he takes up the complaint matter, minimizing the seriousness of the problem and challenging its “complainability.”

(6) Corpus Clodif (following excerpt 1)

5	C	pffouh j’en ai marre:/ d’cette maison:
>6	M	ah ben c’est d’l’eau (.) oh ben
7	C	ah mais c’est comme ça tous les jours// (.) y’a
8		toujours de l’eau qui filtre [..]

Translation

5	C	pffouh I’m fed up with this house
>6	M	oh well it’s only water (.) I mean
7	C	ah but it’s the same thing day in day out// (.) there’s
8		always water that seeps through [..]

In line 6 (turn 2 in the model), M responds to C’s complaint by downgrading C’s assessment of the seriousness of the problem. C has previously switched from speaking about water seeping in the bathroom to negatively evaluating the house as a whole (line 5). M performs the opposite switch by claiming (in line 6) that water is not such a serious matter. This type of follow-up turn generally prompts speaker A to justify the complaint once more. In the data, no occurrence was found of speaker A aligning himself/herself by saying something like “well, no it’s not that important”. On the contrary, A supports the original complaint, and a form of negotiation is opened up. In our excerpt, in line 7 (turn 3 in the model), C begins to argue that the matter is worth complaining about, by asserting the frequency of the problem (“day in day out”, “always”) and using exclamatory and contradicting particles (“ah but”).

Negotiations for the introduction of the complaint are the most frequent case. They do not always lead to the completion of the complaint core part (for instance, in the complaint about the house, after rather long exchanges built upon the disagreement on the matter’s complainability, participants orient to finding solutions for damp problems in bathrooms). But they always take time. The sequence thus becomes extended even before the complaint becomes a shared activity.

5.3. *Once affiliation is obtained: the complaint development*

A fascinating feature of complaining is that the completion of the core part does not indicate that participants are now ready to head towards the sequence closure. The completion of the core part works as an agreement to deepen the involvement in the activity. Hence, in most cases, if a fair amount of time is required to reach affiliation, even more time is needed to deepen the subject matter once affiliation has been reached.

The participants’ task throughout this third phase is to sustain the activity, and to find the appropriate means and devices to this end:

- As far as the complaint teller is concerned, her/his time is mainly used continuing to demonstrate that the matter is worth complaining about. To this end, she/he resorts to a range of rhetoric devices in order to enhance the matter’s “complainability” (cf. Pomerantz, 1986 on extreme case formulations). In the data, “repetition”, “amplification” and storytelling/anecdotes are the most frequently used devices, along with displays of emotion.

– As for the complaint recipient, she/he is faced with a dilemma. She/he cannot carry on simply reasserting her/his affiliation stance, and has to turn to other resources (for example, offering up explanations, taking a stand for one of the protagonists, etc.). But, in so doing, she/he inevitably tends to transform complaining into another activity (explaining, criticizing, etc.). Hence, once affiliation is obtained, the activity can neither be closed at once, nor remain a constant.

In other words, the overall picture of the activity that emanates from the data is that, in most cases, the complaint becomes the focus of the exchange through a (sometimes extensive) negotiation phase, and then it unfolds with endless fluctuations with regard to affiliation, agreement and disagreement, and even to what participants locally achieve. In order to illustrate this process, I will mainly rely on the complaints about Carla (excerpts 3 and 4 above) and about Alex (excerpt 2 above).

5.3.1. *Changing stance*

A first phenomenon we can illustrate concerns fluctuations in the complaint recipient’s expression of affiliation. In the following excerpt, M, who has displayed an immediate affiliation with C about Carla as a complainable matter (excerpts 3, 4), subsequently retracts this stance through putting forward a tentative explanation for Carla’s behavior:

(7) Corpus Clodif. Carla (following excerpt 4)

15	M	[encore// [(.) oh:: mais c’est- c’est la- la barbe/
16	C	[ouais
17	M	(.) cette fille
18	C	hm
> 19	M	mais c’est p’têt[(parce q)
20	C	[elle nous cherche/ (.) \elle nous cherche (.)
21		elle nous trouve/
22		(2.0)

Translation

15	M	[again// [(.) oh but it’s- she’s- she’s such a pain
16	C	[yeah
17	M	(.) this girl
18	C	hm
>19	M	well maybe it’s [(because)
20	C	[she asks for it/ (.) \she asks for it (.)
21		she’ll get it/
22		(2.0)

M turns from expressing an emotional stance about Carla that supports C’s claim (lines 15 and 17) to suggesting accounts for the situation. In so doing, she does not really alter her position, but reorients the discussion. This is sufficient for C immediately to react (see the overlap in line 20) and stop this topical line through reasserting her emotional stance (by way of a figurative expression that not only pictures anger, but also suggests a repetitive process “she asks for it/ (.) \she asks for it (.) she’ll get it”). She refocuses on Carla as the complaint topic. Her turn in lines 20 and 21 is followed by a long pause, at the end of which she sets about backing up her feeling with the help of a series of anecdotes.

This excerpt illustrates first that the expression of affiliation fluctuates all along the sequence, and second that the feeling that the recipient’s affiliation lessens may lead the complaint teller to strengthen her/his claim.

5.3.2. *Taking a stand against the complainable matter*

Another interesting phenomenon, which may appear somewhat contradictory to the previous one, is that the complaint recipient sometimes goes further than the complaint teller through explicitly criticizing the third party (see also Drew and Curl, this issue). We have already seen such a case concerning Carla (excerpt 6 “she’s- she’s such a pain this girl”, lines 15–17). Here is an even clearer example. P has explained that she has bought watercolors for Alex, but fears that he should buy some before she gives them to him. She then closes the topic wishing that he would enjoy her gift and shifts to a more general topic about Alex:

(8) Alex

- 1 P j'espère que ça va lui plaire putain (0.9)
2 t'sais en plus c'temps-ci j'ai l'impression qu'tout
3 c'que j'peux faire euh: (.)
4 L l'énerve/
5 (0.6)
6 P euh: (0.5) NON/ c'est tout c'que je n'fais pas/ qui
7 l'énerve
8 (0.3)
9 L ah: / ouais mais:
10 (1.0)
11 P [et: / euh:]
12 L [y a plus de] choses qu'on n'fait pas que
13 <((voix riante)) d'choses qu'on fait [dans la vie>]
14 P [t'sais/ que tout: /]
15 (.) tout [c'que] j'peux faire c'est
16 L [(inaud.)]
17 P merdique // (0.8) par rap[port à lui
18 L [mais c'est dans la réalité/ ou c'est: /
19 (1.0)
20 P BEN: / j'en s[ais rien: pa'ce:]
21 L [c'est qu'il le] prend mal // quoi (0.4)
22 mais qu'est-ce qu'il a il a mal aux dents/
23 (0.9)
24 P ben: i s'énerve/ pa'ce qu'il est à la bourre pour son
25 projet d'décor euh: /
[7 lines omitted about Alex's work]
26 P bon\ bref et: (0.8) t'sais alors euh (.) j'me dis qu'y
27 a toutes les chances pour qu'ça lui plaise pas
28 L ho ben quand même ho / [..]

Translation

- 1 P hell I hope he will like them (0.9) you know
2 there's another thing it seems that everything I do
3 for him these days it uh: (.)
4 L just gives him the shits
5 (0.6)
6 P uh: (0.5) NO/ it's everything I don't do/ that
7 shits him
8 (0.3)
9 L ah yeah but:
10 (1.0)
11 P [and: / uh:]
12 L [there are more] things that one doesn't do than
13 <((laughing voice)) things one does [in one's life>]
14 P [you know that all: /]
15 (.) all [I can do is
16 L [(inaud.)]
17 P //garbage (0.8) as far [as he is concerned
18 L [but are there any grounds for it/ or is
it/
19 (1.0)

12

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- 20 P WELL:/ I'm [buggered if I know/ becau]
21 L [is it that he's taking it]
22 badly I mean (.) but what's his problem what's eating him
23 (0.9)
24 P well:: he's stressed out because he's behind with
25 his interior design project and uh::/
[7 lines omitted about Alex's work]
26 P so\ anyway and:: (0.8) you so know then uh:: (.) I tell
27 myself that there's every chance that he'll not like them
28 L hey come on now easy does it [..]

In the first part of this excerpt, although L is focused on the topic, several attempts are needed before she seriously focuses on it as a complaint: although P clearly expresses her emotional stance towards Alex (lines 1–3), she first takes it up in a very light fashion (lines 9 then 12–13, via a joke). Then, as P pursues her line, L turns to a factual question (line 18) focusing on P's feeling ("but are there any grounds for it"). In her answer (line 20), P displays her uncertainty both on the verbal level ("well I'm buggered if I know") and by the pause before the answer. Her response thus emphasizes the complexity of the situation, and indirectly calls for co-elaborating the matter. The two participants are thus aligned on dealing with the complaint topic. In her next contribution (lines 21–22), overlapping P's line 20, L takes a stand "against" Alex as the cause of the problem ("it's that he's taking it badly", "what's eating him"). P refuses this orientation of the exchange in her next turn (lines 24–25) through putting forward a first precise reason for Alex's uptightness (his lateness with his project). In fact, she defends Alex against L's cutting remarks. After some exchanges about Alex's work, in line 26, P turns back to the watercolors issue and to her fear that Alex will not like them. Here again L's protest (line 28) raises a light disagreement between the interlocutors that they continue to be engaged with for a while.

Such little disagreements are a recurring feature of complaints in the data. On the one hand, if we consider that affiliation necessarily fits in alongside agreement, they illustrate the extent to which finding the right stance in the activity is a dilemma for the complaint recipient. On the other hand, if we accept that one can be in solidarity even when disagreeing, these light disagreements can be viewed as one of the basic stepping stones upon which complaints progress.

5.3.3. *Switching topics during the exchange*

Another recurring feature of complaints in the data is a form of easing in and out of the activity: at various points, one participant or the other – the complaint teller or the complaint recipient – momentarily exits from the complaint activity to develop a totally different subject matter, before returning to the complaint. Excerpt 10 takes place after the discussion has expanded from Alex to P's previous boyfriends.

(9) Alex

- 1 L mais c'est //curieux j'trouve pa'ce que (.) quand
2 même euh (.) souvent les mecs i't'font c'reproche
3 P hm
[6 lines about the boyfriends]
9 L mais:: c'qu'y a d'bizarre c'qu'moi je:: ressens pas
10 du tout ça chez toi au contraire j'trouve que (.) tu
11 dépenses ouais une énergie phénoménale ((rires)) (.)
12 c'est vach'ment curieux (1.6) non//
>13 P oh// c'est beau//
14 L quoi//
15 P la table
16 L [..] J qui l'avait mise au grenier j'lui ai
17 empruntée
>18 P //ouais non mais c'est vrai que: t'vois au jour le
19 jour comme ça (.) j'veux dire euh: pour faire des

- 20 trucs c'est vrai qu'j'ai pas tell'ment d'en- d'sons
21 t'vois pour aller au cinoche et tout euh:
>22 L t'veux pas qu'on y aille là: pas: tout d'suite mais:
23 P si on va y aller [11 lines omitted about the movies]
>24 P et euh: /t'sais c'est vrai que (.) y a des- pour des
25 trucs (.) t'sais desfois j'ai l'impression de d'pas
26 avoir de:: (3.0) pa'ce qu'en- je- je n'émetts jamais
27 d'désir (.) propre [...]

Translation

- 1 L but it's weird you know because (.) finally uh
2 (.) guys keep harping over that with you
3 P hm
[6 lines about boyfriends]
9 L but:: what's strange is that I (.) really don't feel
10 that about you quite the reverse I feel that (.) you
11 put in yeah an almighty effort ((laughs)) (.)
12 it's really weird (1.6) don't you reckon//
>13 P oh// how nice//
14 L what//
15 P the table
16 L [...] J'd put it the attic and I borrowed
17 it from her
>18 P //yeah well but it's true that: you see on a day
19 to day basis (.) I mean uh: for doing things it's
20 true that I don't feel up to- well you know like
21 going to the movies and stuff uh:
>22 L you don't want us to go now: not: right now but:
23 P yeah we'll go [11 lines omitted about the movies]
>24 P and uh: /you know it's true that (.) there are- for
25 some things (.) you know sometimes I feel I don't
26 have enough (3.0) because in- I- I'm not very vocal [...]

In this excerpt, several topic breaks take place. Between lines 1 and 12, L develops a long statement about P. She expresses her amazement that P's boyfriends repeatedly reproach her for being without energy, whereas she feels quite the opposite. At the end of the turn, line 12, she asks for confirmation. The pause before the tag-question clearly indicates that she gives the floor to P expecting her to comment. Instead of the expected response, P comments on the new table (line 13). A further remark is made about how it was obtained before P resumes the previous topic and completes the question/answer pair (line 18). A second topic break is achieved at the end of her answer. L picks up the "movies" topic that has been mentioned at the end of P's turn in line 21, and proposes they go together a little later (line 22). After a short debate, P returns to developing the topic of her overall condition (line 24).

It is noticeable that these local exits from the complaint sequence remain very brief, and do not disrupt the overall coherence of the sequence: when the participants return to the "main" topic, they pursue it as if nothing had happened in between.

6. Discussion

The data analysis has shed light on different aspects of complaints in conversation, at the level of how an utterance can be displayed as a complaint (via the use of lexical, syntactical and paraverbal devices) as well as on the way in which complaints are achieved as an interactional activity. This activity has been shown to unfold according to a recurring sequential structure made of four phases. In spite of this recognizable order, complaint

sequences also present several forms of disorder. Some of them are easily described as negotiations for the initiation of an activity. Others appear to be more specific: we have seen that, once participants are clearly and fully involved in the activity, they, nevertheless, seem to withdraw from it from time to time. Similarly, though a preference for affiliation runs through the sequence, the recipient's affiliation regularly fluctuates as the sequence develops and incessant micro-disagreements emerge in the course of the exchanges. Due to their recurrence, these fluctuations cannot be considered as events occurring in an otherwise smooth sequence, nor as breakdowns during its execution. They rather appear as a regular part of the complaint. This reminds the most intriguing problem raised in Jefferson's papers: the "observed disorder" in trouble-talk sequences. This disorder is unquestionably present in complaints too. Then, if we take into account the recurrent sequential structure along with this disorder (cf. Jefferson's question as to whether trouble telling sequences are roughly or tightly structured, 1988), the problem we have to face is that of dealing with bulks of talk that are simultaneously ordered and disordered, and in which disorder or instability is an essential part. Tentative reasons can be put forward for explaining this observation: it can be related to the nature of complaint topics (speaking of oneself, dealing with emotional subjects) or to the participants' relationship (speaking between friends).

But, this observation is, above all, interesting in connection with the more general issue of how long sequences work. In this perspective, the question concerns the extent to which this observed disorder is specific to complaint or trouble-talk, or whether it characterizes any long sequence. The hypothesis we have made in this paper is that complaint sequences are inherently instable, that is, that they fluctuate throughout their unfolding, but that participants nevertheless keep on dealing with the complaint. Two alternative options would be to consider either that the complaint sequence boils down to what we have called the core part, or, more radically, that the four stage overall structure we have identified is but an analyst construction, which does not account for what really goes on from the participants' point of view. With our hypothesis, we assume that participants have a sense of being engaged in a complaint activity, although they locally achieve other actions, such as entering into a disagreement. To find out if our hypothesis stands, comparison with empirical studies on other long sequences would be in order. Despite a lack of such studies, one is able to point out that complaining seems to diverge from other types of "long sequences" like direction-giving (Psathas, 1986, 1991), which is more likely to be adequately described as expansions of an adjacency pair. Instead, it shares features with activities that are built upon disagreements (see Plantin, 1996 on argumentative situations), though it mainly revolves around affiliation. In these argumentative situations, unceasing changes similarly occur, resulting in apparently transforming the topic or the activity into something else when, in fact, participants are still dealing with the matter at hand. Broader comparison with various "long" interactional activities would permit one to refine the methodological reflexion on how to deal with this "meso-level" of interactional structures.

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Appendix A. Transcription symbols

[overlapping
(2.1)	pauses (seconds)
/ \	rising/ falling\ intonation
((laughter))	described phenomena
eh-	truncation
=	latching
(.)	micro-pause
(inaudible segment)	
exTRA	marked segment
:	lengthening
&	continuation of the same turn

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