

## *Moaning, whinging and laughing: the subjective side of complaints*



*Discourse Studies*  
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 SAGE Publications.  
 (London, Thousand Oaks,  
 CA and New Delhi)  
 www.sagepublications.com  
 Vol 7(1): 5–29.  
 1461-4456  
 (200502) 7:1;  
 10.1177/1461445605048765

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**ABSTRACT** Indirect complaint sequences are examined in a corpus of everyday domestic telephone conversations. The analysis focuses on how a speaker/complainer displays and manages their subjective investment in the complaint. Four features are picked out: (1) announcements, in which an upcoming complaint is projected in ways that signal the complainer's stance or attitude; (2) laughter accompanying the complaint announcement, and its delivery and receipt; (3) displacement, where the speaker complains about something incidental to what would be expected to be the main offence; and (4) uses of lexical descriptions such as 'moan' and 'whinge' that formulate subjectivity, investment, and a disposition to complain, and are generally used to counter a complaint's evidential basis or objectivity. Laughter and irony provide complaint recipients with response cues, and are used in ways that can strengthen as well as undermine a complaint's factual basis and seriousness.

**KEY WORDS:** *announcements, complaints, conversation analysis, discursive psychology, displacement, laughter, subjectivity*

### *Introduction: the subjective side of complaining*

Complaining deals not only with the complaint's object, the thing being complained about, but also its subject, the complainer (or 'complainant'). Let us call this the *subjective side* of complaining, the way that a complaint may index the speaker/complainer. Complainers may display or manage a range of speaker-indexical characteristics that we can gloss as attitude, stance, investment, jocularity, and so on. A complaint can be done in ways that enhance its objectivity and seriousness, and its chances of being taken seriously. On the other hand, rather than simply reporting factual and complainable matters, a complainer may (also, or instead) be heard as moaning, whinging, ranting, biased, prone to complaining, paranoid, invested, over-reacting, over-sensitive, or whatever other vernacular category might apply. The present study explores this 'subjective side' of complaining, not as an analytically discernible characteristic of speakers, but

as a performed, managed, interactionally produced and interaction-sensitive feature of how complaints are done. Of course, not only complaints, but discourse of all kinds, are available for evaluative inferences about the speaker: 'our accounts may themselves be evaluated ... in terms of the propriety or fairness or justice or accuracy with which we have reported some (external) events, or our motives in doing so' (Drew, 1998: 295–6). Sacks (1992) also drew special attention to the speaker-indexical properties of compliments and complaints, particularly with regard to 'safe' and 'unsafe' ones.<sup>1</sup>

Some studies distinguish between *direct* and *indirect* complaints. Direct complaints are made against the talk's current recipient (e.g. Dersley and Wootton, 2000); indirect complaints are made about someone or something else (e.g. Drew, 1998). The present study focuses on indirect complaints. This focus is dictated partly by what is available in the materials used for the study, but also by the need to restrict the scope and complexity of the analysis. We should also note that the direct/indirect dichotomy is not always straightforward. For example, Sacks (1992) observed how complaining about a restaurant to one's fellow diners may implicate the one who brought you there, requiring some delicacy in how it is done. Similarly, there are settings such as family therapy and neighbourhood complaints mediation (Stokoe, 2003), in which complainees (those against whom complaints are made) may be present but not directly addressed.

Various studies of everyday talk have focused on how some object is made a 'legitimate complainable' (Pomerantz, 1986). *Objectification* of a complaint is one way (in fact, a variety of ways) of handling the subjective side; the more a complaint can be built as a factual description of its object, the less available it is to be heard as stemming from the speaker's disposition to see, feel, or interpret things negatively. Members' objectification methods include 'script formulations' (Edwards, 1994) in which specific events are offered as instances of generalized, recurrent patterns; extreme case formulations (Edwards, 2000a; Pomerantz, 1986); independent corroboration by other victims and witnesses (Edwards and Potter, 1992); graphic narrative description (Geertz, 1988; Potter, 1996; Wooffitt, 1992); verbatim quotations with 'active voicing' (Wooffitt, 1992); invocation of category-based knowledge entitlements (Potter, 1996; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1990); uses of factual presupposition;<sup>2</sup> and joint production of the complaint itself. The latter, joint production, is a notable feature of indirect complaints where the complaint's recipient affiliates with, and may join in with, the complaint's production. There are examples of joint production in the data used in this article.

The analytical focus of this study, however, is on ways in which a complaint's subjectivity is actively managed. A subjective stance of some sort is typically a performed feature of the complaint's production and receipt. While drawing heavily on the principles and methods of conversation analysis, it is also a particular feature of discursive psychology to explore the close, mutually implicative nature of subject–object relations, as a managed feature of discourse of various kinds. In the case of complaints, this is a matter of how talk constructs the object

of a complaint in combination with the dispositions and mental states (in common-sense terms) of the complainer, in ways that handle the indexical and interactional features of complaining.

#### IDENTIFYING COMPLAINTS

In order to collect samples for analysis, it was necessary to start with at least a loose, to-be-refined notion of the phenomenon, in this case, 'complaints'. Speech acts such as questions, requests, and commands are types that once seemed relatively straightforward to define in terms of grammar and felicity conditions (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Yet even for those types, problems of 'indirectness', and the contingencies of conversational turn-taking and indexicality, have hugely complicated the task of offering formal definitions (Aarkhus and Aldrich, 2002; Levinson, 1979, 1983; Schegloff, 1988). 'Complaints' elude formal definition, and remain a largely normative and vernacular, rather than technical, category.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, characterizing something as a *complaint* or an *accusation* is properly understood as part of the phenomenon, part of the practices in which people themselves may use words to construct the nature of things. In conversation-analytic terms, complaints may start to be technically specifiable, if they turn out to occur in bounded sequences with clear beginnings, endings, and interactional characteristics. Although some complaints are indeed clearly bounded (Drew, 1998), others are not so well marked (Dersley and Wootton, 2000; and this applies to several examples used for the present study). Let us explore, then, the vernacular sense of *complaint*.

The word *complain* overlaps and contrasts with a range of relevant alternatives such as *criticize*, *(be)moan*, *accuse*, and *denigrate*. But it is a feature of complaining, as an actual conversational activity (rather than a topic for conceptual analysis), that the word itself is seldom used. The same stretch of talk might also be glossed as criticism or accusation, troubles-telling, or merely story-telling or factual reportage, which are potentially relevant alternatives for speakers when characterizing their activities. Speakers may even work against the notion that what they are doing is complaining, rather than simply reporting some observations. For example, callers to helplines for reporting child abuse often express their 'concerns' (Potter and Hepburn, 2003), where any suspicion that they may have a personal grievance with their neighbours might threaten the factual objectivity of what they are reporting, and question for whose sake they are reporting it. Given that a complaint involves some kind of *grievance*, this immediately makes relevant something that a speaker may work to minimize, which is any kind of motivated, or dispositional, basis for what they are saying. This makes complaints particularly interesting when examining the management of subjective investment in descriptive discourse.

We start, then, from the notion that 'complaining' is a defeasible vernacular category with normative, oriented-to properties and consequences. There is a set of participant roles: a *complainer*, an *object* or complainee (if the object is a person), and a complaint *recipient*, who will also be the object/complainee in

cases of direct complaints. Various kinds of 'footing' (Goffman, 1979) are possible, where a speaker may offer a complaint on someone else's behalf, or as a relay or 'animator' of another person's complaint. Complaints are also inherently *negative*, just as criticisms are, and take the form of morally implicative stories and descriptions of people and places. The complainees' *agency* is normatively invoked, such that someone can be held culpable or negligent. Complainers may 'work up' a complainees' agency, through how their actions are described and sequentially narrated. For example, 'overdetermined descriptions of actions' (Drew, 1998: 318)<sup>4</sup> can suggest deliberateness, and thereby enhance the actor's culpability. A complaint also includes a *grievance* (or infringement, or transgression), which is something that 'criticism' need not include; or, to put it another way, something that makes criticism start to sound like complaint. Typically, but not necessarily, the aggrieved person will also be the complainer.

The following analysis focuses on ways in which indirect complaints handle or manage the complainer's subjectivity, including their disposition to complain, and their current 'attitude' to the complaint's object. It is worth emphasizing at this point that 'subjectivity' is not simply a threat to a complaint being taken as serious and factual. It may do that, but it may also enhance factuality and seriousness, and be oriented-to in that way by recipients, by signalling how aggrieved, long-suffering, and non-disposed to complaining, the complainer may be.<sup>5</sup>

### *Materials and method*

The main materials used for this study were the extensive set of mundane domestic telephone conversations collected by Elizabeth Holt and transcribed by Gail Jefferson using the conventions developed for conversation analysis; special thanks to Gail Jefferson for the considerable time and expertise involved in transcription. These materials are supplemented, for one specific analytic feature, by examples from the specialized setting of neighbourhood complaint mediation, collected by Elizabeth Stokoe. The use of conversation-analytic transcription enables a focus on precisely how complaints are delivered and taken up in talk-in-interaction. Extracts are selected not only as clear or representative examples of a phenomenon, but also on the basis that they generally contain several of the phenomena under analysis, which makes for a more economical use of multiple data sequences.

The procedure was to work through the audiotapes and transcripts, collecting candidate examples of complaints. Examples were excluded that seemed to be criticism or accusation without complaint; in other words, those that lacked a sense of grievance. This collection was then further reduced to those which displayed the range of 'subjectivity-managing' features that became the focus of close analysis. The analysis itself applies the basic principles of conversation analysis, with a view to discursive psychology's central concern with how psychological characteristics (in this case, the subjective side of complaining) are handled as part of talk's performance of social actions.

## Analysis

The analysis outlines four ways in which a speaker/complainer's subjectivity is displayed and managed. Although the four may occur together, there is no claim or requirement that they are always present whenever a complaint is made. Rather, they are to be understood as optional members' methods; that is to say, recurrent and systematic ways in which the (potential) subjectivity of a complaint may be handled, and where, on each occasion, there is some interaction-oriented work being done through their use:

1. *Announcements*. Before elaborating a complaint, speakers may formulate how they are affected, or their stance/subjectivity/attitude towards it, which also provides for how the complaint recipient might appropriately respond to it.
2. *Laughter*. Laughter may display 'attitude' and provides for receipt.
3. *Displacement*. Complaints may be directed at a common-sensically lesser or less obvious object, sometimes comical in its choice and description.
4. *Lexical descriptions*. Words alternative to *complain*, such as *moan* or *whinge*, characterize a complaint's subjective basis, and may be used to counter and undermine its factual grounds or seriousness.

### ANALYSIS 1: ANNOUNCEMENTS

A recurrent feature of complaints is that the complainer signals not only that a complaint is coming, but also their stance or reaction on the matter. By formulating how they are affected, whether at the time of the offence or now at the time of reporting it, the complainer provides the essential *grievance* component of complaining, signals its seriousness and current relevance (given that it is usually a past event), and also attends to the recipient's task of how to hear and respond:

#### (1) Holt:M88:1:5:22

- 1 Rob: → ↑Well ↓and the other thing I wz disgusted b- I'm  
 2 ↓sorry you're getting'n earful'v this you couldn't'v:  
 3 phoned't a better ↑tj:me,hheh ↑he|h  
 4 Les: [ .hh ↑Oh that's  
 5 alri:ght,  
 6 Rob: Well the ↑other thing ↓I've (.) found very strange  
 7 is ↑there weren't any dictionaries in the classroom  
 8 Les: .t.k.hhh|h  
 9 Rob: [Not actua|l  
 10 Les: [↑No children's dih- e-w'l not  
 11 many children's dictionaries,hh  
 12 Rob: W'l, they ↑have those little (.) booklety ↓things

Extract 1 is several minutes (22 pages of transcript) into a phone call between Robbie and Lesley, two schoolteachers who are sharing stories and complaints about various other staff at their school. The announcement is in line 1: 'the

other thing I wz disgusted b(y)', and the complaint proper is in line 7, the absence of dictionaries. The use of the extreme case formulation (ECF) 'weren't any' helps mark it as a complaint (Pomerantz, 1986).

The extract contains features that display the interaction-orientation of the upcoming complaint and its announcement. Robbie cuts off the announcement (line 1) to insert an apology to Lesley (lines 1–3) for what is clearly to be a further complaint in a series. The description 'n earful'v this' implies that Lesley may be tired of hearing them. Lesley's '↑Oh that's alri:ght,' grants Robbie permission to continue, although there is no expression of enthusiasm, and no obvious uptake of Robbie's irony and laughter ('you couldn't v: phoned't a better ↑t̩:me,hheh ↑heh', lines 2–3). The analytic interest here is in how these orientations to subjectivity or attitude, by complainer and recipient, are part of the action of complaining. Following Lesley's less than enthusiastic receipt of a projected additional complaint, Robbie downgrades her subjectivity announcement from 'disgusted by' (line 1) to 'found very strange' (line 6), still prior to delivering the complaint. Further recipience problems and downgrades are then done on the complaint itself, with Robbie shifting from the extreme 'weren't any dictionaries' to the softened 'not actual' and 'not many' (lines 9–12; cf. Edwards, 2000a, on the interactionally occasioned uses of ECF softeners).

The details of extract 1, therefore, show the participants' sensitivity, during the announcement and production of a complaint, to the complaint's projected and ongoing receipt. The complainer's subjectivity and stance are a feature of that. Note that the first object repaired is not the complaint itself, but the nature and strength of Robbie's feelings about it. Faced with a possibly non-affiliative receipt, Robbie downgrades the grievance (from 'disgusting' to 'strange'), and jokes at her own reporting of it (lines 2–3), prior to making the complaint proper.

Extract 2, from a phone conversation between Lesley and Joyce, is the start of a complaint sequence that we return to later, in extract 6:

**(2) Holt:C85:4:2**

- 1 Les: → °Oh:° .hh Yi-m- You ↓know I-I- I'm broil<sup>ing</sup> about  
 2 something hhhheh[h<sup>eh</sup> .hhhh  
 3 Joy: [Wha::t.  
 4 Les: Well th<sup>at</sup> s<sup>a</sup>↓:le. (0.2) at- at (.) the vicarage.  
 5 (0.6)  
 6 Joy: Oh ↓ye[:s,  
 7 Les: [.t  
 8 (0.6)  
 9 Les: u (.) ihY<sup>our</sup> friend 'n mi:ne wz the:re

Lesley's expression 'I'm broil<sup>ing</sup> about something' again serves as an announcement of an upcoming complaint. As Drew (1998) notes with regard to this sequence, it formulates the complainer's sense of grievance, which is a canonical component of complaints:

Reporting in this way their emotional response – their sense of grievance – enables

complainants to characterize how far the other's behavior has caused offense. In this respect it may be noted that these expressions of indignation are formed as first person assessments, for example, as 'I was so angry,' 'w'l tha tee:d me o:ff,' rather than as generalized assessments (in the form 'it was so ...'). (Drew, 1998: 311)

But note also the way Lesley delivers her announcement. The term *broiling* metaphorically signals a particularly strong reaction to an event that turns out to be a person saying to her at a vicarage jumble sale,<sup>6</sup> somewhat teasingly, 'hhello Lesley, (.) ↑still trying to buy something f'nothing'. Without detailing the whole story sequence, extract (2) contains, already in the announcement section, some orientation to the possibility that Lesley might be heard to be making rather much of a small event. Specifically, there is the laughter in line 2. Combined with the metaphor 'broiling', this is hearable as Lesley announcing an upcoming complaint whose possibly ironic, even comical features, and her proposal not to be taking it too seriously, are projected in how the announcement is delivered. Lesley's announcement, through its combination of a strong metaphor and laughter, manages to provide a sense of Lesley being truly aggrieved, while not making too much of it. Again all of this is accomplished, or at least projected, along with the further ironic remark 'Your friend 'n mi:ne' (line 9), prior to the complaint itself being told.

Extract (3) is the beginning of Lesley's relaying to Gwen, a complaint made by a third party, Jean-Claude, who has written a letter to Lesley. The complaint itself is examined in extract 10; here we are looking at Lesley's initial announcement of it:

**(3) Holt:J86:1:4:1**

- 1 Les: We:ll. We ↑got a ↑letter t'da:y, an' ih- (.) it wz  
 2 very: Jean Clau↓:de you kn[ow.=how'e]goe:s,  
 3 Gwe: [Y e : i s ? ]  
 4 (0.2)  
 5 Les: → .hhh An' (.) an' really it made us lau:gh,[but- it=  
 6 Gwe: [hhh!  
 7 Les: → =wz very ↓sa↓:d.  
 (0.2)  
 8 Les: [Eh:m]  
 9 Gwe: [Oh : :i?]  
 10 (1.4)  
 11 Les: eHe says that his mother's left his ↓fa↑ther,

Lines 1–7 contain the announcement, in which Lesley signals various subjective takes on the yet-to-be-recounted complaint. For her own part, as the complaint's relayer or 'animator' (Goffman, 1979), it is something both humorous and sad (lines 5–7), where Lesley's prime response is probably the humour of it. There are several bases for claiming humour as primary: (1) it comes first, in line 5, with 'it wz very ↓sa↓:d' offered second, where it works as a corrective (introduced by 'but') to any impression that she might be making light of someone's distress, or indulging in *Schadenfreude*; (2) it is a first person assessment (cf. Drew, 1998:

311), characterizing Lesley's actual reaction, in contrast to the generalized assessment 'it wz very ↓sa↓:d'; (3) Lesley has already prefaced Jean-Claude's complaint as dispositional, as a recognizable kind of thing that he does, and therefore as perhaps not too serious<sup>7</sup> – 'it wz very: Jean Clau↓:de you know.=how'e goe:s' (lines 1–2).

The upcoming complaint is not in fact the content of line 11, that Jean-Claude's mother has left, but develops in extract 10 in ways that we shall explore with regard to displacement and humour. The point here, as with extracts 1 and 2, is the quite detailed subjectivity-managing work done by Lesley in how she announces the complaint, prior to relating it. An expression of sympathy and seriousness such as 'but- it wz very ↓sa↓:d' does not simply counter Lesley's ironic take on the complaint, but is part of its production; Lesley and Gwen can go on to share a laugh on the basis that they are not being heartless. This echoes other studies of phenomena such as the role of 'weak agreement' in producing and projecting disagreements (Pomerantz, 1984); the work done by 'show concessions' (Antaki and Wetherell, 1999); and Sacks's remarks on how complaints themselves are recognizable through, rather than despite, their being accompanied by contrastive appreciations of the complaint-object (Sacks, 1992: vol. 1, 359).

Extracts (4) and (5) are further examples of announcements that formulate the speaker's subjectivity; in these cases the speaker is also the complainant:

**(4) Holt:X(C):2:1:9:1**

- 1 Moi: (...) Les I just wanted a' ↓sa:y .hhhhh eh:m::: .t I'm  
 2 sorry about what I hea::rd about:t (.) an' I'm not being  
 3 nosey is there anything I c'n do: or (.) can I help in  
 4 any wa[y o : :]r would you] rather not ]talk about it. ]  
 5 Les: [↑eh::] h e h heh ↑ ]What about]the ↑bu::r[glar]  
 6 (0.2)  
 7 Moi: .t ↓Ye:s  
 8 (.)  
 9 Les: ↑Uhhh! .hh (.) ↓No::: It's very kind of you; .h  
 10 → ↑No::: .hh In fact (.) ↑we ↓thought it wz killingly  
 11 funny really,

**(5) Holt:88U:1:4:5**

- 1 Dana: (...) an' I wz going abs'utely crazy I mean I wz  
 2 sat there .hh leaping up'n do:wn  
 3 (0.9)

In extract 4, Lesley's '↑we ↓thought it wz killingly funny really' precedes her account of a recent burglary at her house. In this case, rather than simply announcing the story, it prefaced it by correcting Moira's assumption that it might be a delicate or painful matter to talk about (lines 1–4). On the contrary, Lesley laughs off any sense of seriousness and delicacy (line 5), and goes on to formulate the whole thing as 'killingly funny'. Again, the initial focus for both

Maira and Lesley is on feelings and attitude, rather than the event itself. Extract 5 is Dana's preface to a rather jocular complaint about having been kept waiting for a lift home by someone who kept ignoring all signals that Dana wanted to leave.

One thing to note in these examples is that subjectivity formulations, and their use within story and complaint announcements, can be used to enhance, as well as to undermine, the factuality or seriousness of the event concerned. The extremity of 'going abs'utely crazy' and of 'leaping up'n do:wn', lend themselves both to the seriousness of anything that might cause such reactions, but also to a potential for jocularly, or indeed both (Edwards, 2000a). It is a matter of specific lexical choices, and how they are used, indexically and sequentially, on any occasion of telling. We have seen that formulating a reaction or grievance as a recurrent or characteristic disposition of the complainant tends to counter the seriousness of their complaint. In contrast, a strong one-off reaction, clearly occasioned by events, can enhance a complaint's credibility. An important function of complaint announcements is to signal to the recipient what kind of stance or attitude is being adopted and proposed.

#### ANALYSIS 2: LAUGHTER

Laughter occurs in some of the extracts we have already examined: see extract 1, line 3, extract 2, line 2, and extract 4, line 5. This is in addition to reports such as 'really it made us lau:gh' (extract 3), and '↑we ↓thought it wz killingly funny really' (extract 4). Laughter occurs at various junctures: in announcements of upcoming complaints, in the course of complaining and narrating complaints, and in complaint receipts. The unexpected prevalence of laughter in the complaint sequences collected for this study is probably related to their being indirect complaints, and ones that often concern past circumstances. In any case, detailed studies of laughter in conversational interaction (e.g. Glenn, 1995; Haakana, 2001; Jefferson et al., 1987) have revealed various kinds of 'serious' business being performed, including participant alignment and misalignment. Accordingly, rather than interpreting the laughter that accompanies complaints in terms of people simply finding their troubles amusing, we explore the recipient-designed work it does in managing stance, 'take', or attitude. In particular, laughter can signal that a complainable item, even when serious, is not something that the complainer is disposed to moan about, indulge in, or make heavy weather of (Jefferson, 1984).

Extract 6 continues a few turns after the end of extract 2, in which Lesley announced (with laughter) her upcoming complaint about an incident at a vicarage jumble sale. In extract 6 she relates the incident:

#### (6) Holt:C85:4:3

- 1 Les:     AND uh ↑we were looking rou-nd the ↓sta:lls 'n  
 2           poking about 'n h<sub>e</sub> came up t'me 'n he said Oh:  
 3           hhello Lesley, (.) ↑still trying to buy something

- 4           f'nothing,  
5   ():       .tch!  
6   Joy:     .hh[hahhhhhh!  
7   Les:     [↑.hhohhh!  
8            (0.8)  
9   Joy:     Oo[ : : : ]: L e s l e y ]  
10 Les: → [↑Oo:.]ehh heh ↑heh ]  
11           (0.2)  
12 Joy:     ↓I:s[n ' t]     [↓he  
13 Les:     [↑What]do ↑y[ou ↑sa↓:y.  
14           (0.3)  
15 Joy:     ↓Oh isn't he ↓drea:dful.  
16 Les:     °eYe--:s:°  
17           (0.6)  
18   ():       .tch  
19 Joy:     What'n aw:f'l ma::[::n  
20 Les: →                   [ehh heh-heh-↑heh  
21 Joy:     Oh:: honestly, ↓I cannot stand the man it's just  
22           (no [ :            )  
23 Les:     [I thought well I'm gon' tell Joyce that,  
24     → ehh[heh [heh-heh he-e].uh: ↑.e[h .eh↑ .hhhhh  
25 Joy:     [( ) [O h : : : .:]I     [dO think he's  
26           dreadful  
27 Les:     .tch Oh: dea-r  
28 Joy:     Oh: he r[eally i]:s,  
29 Les:     [↑He dra-]ih-he (.) took the win' out'v my  
30     → sails c'mpletel(h)y

The analytic focus here is not the complaint itself (see Drew, 1998, on this sequence), but how Lesley manages her sense of grievance, and her attitude as complainant. Although Lesley does plenty of laughing (lines 10, 20, 24, 30), Joyce notably does not, but continues to receive the complaint as serious (cf. Jefferson, 1984, on the withholding of affiliative laughter in troubles-telling receipts). Yet Joyce does not sound misaligned; it is as if she is taking it seriously on Lesley's behalf, while Lesley herself, as the aggrieved complainant, provides all the complainable materials that Joyce needs (lines 1–4), while making light of it. It remains a clearly identifiable complaint, but one told as an almost delightfully painful story, rather than something serious with real damage done.

It is worth considering what it is that Lesley may be managing here. The offence itself, rather than being a clear insult, can easily be heard as an ironic remark, teasing or poking fun at her. In that case, for Lesley to be simply offended could display her as having no sense of humour, or as over-sensitive. That the man was teasing, rather than doing serious character assassination, seems warranted by Lesley's expressed difficulty in knowing how to respond ('↑What do ↑you ↑sa↓:y' line 13; and 'he (.) took the win' out'v my sails c'mpletel(h)y' lines 29–30). Some ambiguity of intent is always part of a good tease, and can present problems for recipients (Drew, 1987). Lesley's mixture of complaint and laughter

conveys a sense of being wrong-footed by the man, and unsure of how best to evaluate the episode, and therefore what stance to take on it both at the time and now in the telling. Whether the man was poking harmless fun at her, or slandering her, or both, is probably what makes him so 'dreadful', which is Joyce's response in line 15 immediately following not the reported incident itself, notably, but Lesley's '↑What do ↑you ↑sa↓:y.'

Extract 7 is a report of a complaint that is now, so to speak, ancient history:

**(7) Holt:88U:2:4:25**

1 Car: (...) I said well (.) Ronald said he 'ad mellowed which  
 2 'ee had I mean .t.hhh It was rather- his b'aviour wz  
 3 rather different from: when 'ee met me in the office  
 4 after my fa:ther'd died'n said ↑Oh: they tell me your  
 5 fa:ther has died 'n I nearly said sh'd 'ee've asked  
 6 → your p(h)erm(h)issio(h)o[n]  
 7 Ski: → [Oowehhhh hhah ha:h uh-;  
 8 .uh:: .uh .hfhhhh

Carrie is telling Skip about a man who once made an insensitive remark to her, following the death of her father. Her laughter is in line 6. The complaint itself is no longer a live issue; the offender has reportedly 'mellowed' (line 1), which Carrie herself confirms ('which ee' had' – lines 1–2). She reproduces the complaint in the form of a re-enacted, actively voiced dialogue (lines 4–6; cf. Lesley in extract 6). Note the precise placement of her laughter, not inside the complaint-object, which is what the man said to her, but rather inside her own ironic response: 'I nearly said sh'd 'ee've asked your p(h)erm(h)issio(h)on'. Carrie is rehearsing her reaction to the man's insensitivity. The insensitivity complaint remains hearable, but Carrie also manages, in its telling, to display that she is not making heavy weather of it.

A particular feature of Carrie's story is that her jocular, ironic reply did not actually happen; it is reported as something she 'nearly said' (line 5). This device, of nearly having said something, whatever its basis in fact or memory, enables what may be a current stance or attitude to be back-dated to the original events, as (in this case) an ironic rather than painful reaction to a piece of insensitivity. In the telling, and in the precise manner of its formulation and laughed-through delivery, Carrie conveys a recipient-designed stance upon the event as speaker/complainer. Skip's nonverbal response (lines 7–8) receives it just as Carrie offers it, as a somewhat shocking (his initial news-receipt 'oowehhhh'), but also laughable story (the immediately subsequent laughter particles 'hhah ha:h').

Jefferson remarks on a pervasive asymmetry of laughter in troubles-tellings (a phenomenon that overlaps somewhat with indirect complaints), where troubles-tellers may laugh, but recipients withhold laughter:

... a laughing troubles-teller is doing a recognizable sort of job. He is exhibiting that, although there is this trouble, it is not getting the better of him; he is managing; he is in good spirits and in a position to take the trouble lightly. He is exhibiting what we

might call 'troubles-resistance'. But this does not mean that ... a recipient is invited to join in the merriment, to also find the thing laughable ... In troubles-talk, it appears to be a recipient's job to be taking the trouble seriously; to exhibit what we might call 'troubles-receptiveness'. (1984: 351)

One useful thing that this subjectivity-work (displaying 'good spirits', etc.) accomplishes, is enabling a complaint story to be told without placing the current recipient in the awkward position of hearing 'an earful' of troubles (see Robbie's apology in extract 1), and perhaps being expected to offer advice or help (see Moira's opening in extract 4, where both sensitivity and possible assistance are invoked). Indirect complaints, being delivered to an uninvolved complaine, require some kind of management of their current interactional relevance – indeed, of the complaine's uninvolvedness. Various risks may arise if not forestalled, such as the complaine hearing the complainer's grievance as here-and-now rather than there-and-then; or the complaint as somewhat 'direct' or implicative of them (cf. Sacks, 1992: vol. 2: 297). Laughter can manage reciprocity by marking the speaker as not-here-in-this-telling worried/upset/angry, and so on, but rather, that those 'feelings' are a proper part of the (elsewhere) offence, and yet still felt, and even re-animated in the telling.<sup>8</sup>

#### ANALYSIS 3: DISPLACEMENT

Ironic delivery of complaints can be accomplished in various ways including laughter, the use of excessive and extreme versions of events (Edwards, 2000a), and a caricatured tone of voice best appreciated by listening to the audiotape. The device examined here, however, is the use of a 'displaced' complaint object. That is to say, where there is an obvious and serious object for complaint, such as being burgled or losing one's parents through marital separation, the speaker may complain instead about what might be considered, normatively, to be secondary or incidental details. Displaced complaints resemble 'buffer topics' in troubles-tellings, these being topics 'biased towards nonserious treatment' that can provide 'a time out for pleasantries' (Jefferson, 1984: 351ff.). Buffer topics may be relevant or not to the trouble itself, and Jefferson focuses on their relevance in laughter sequences where, unlike with troubles proper, recipients will do affiliative laughter. Displaced complaints include some buffer topics of that kind, but are nevertheless objects of complaint.

Extract 8 continues Lesley's report to Moira about the burglary (see extract 4) that Moira has tentatively and sensitively inquired about, and that Lesley has prefaced as 'killingly funny really'. Extract 8 begins at a point in the story after Lesley's husband had got out of bed to investigate a noise downstairs, and discovered evidence of a break-in:

#### (8) Holt:X(C)2:1:9:3

- 1 Les: (...) u-we:ll what I did ↓ have agains' this bu:rglar  
 2 → .hh was he: his ↑ muddy fee:t.hh  
 3 (0.3)

- 4 Moi: khh! (.) h[a ho hu-uh ]  
 5 Les: [You know: ↑a]ll over the cushion[:s eh-]  
 6 Moi: [Youu:r ]  
 7 ti:dy mi:n:d. O[ h : : ]dear  
 8 Les: [We:ll h]heh! .hh You ↑should see↑ the  
 9 ↑window ↓s:ea:t.h

Rather than objecting to the obvious offence, indeed crime, of being burgled, what Lesley complains about is the muddy footprints the man left. Burglary is something familiarly characterized as a traumatic personal violation, and Moira had oriented to that in broaching the topic very delicately in her initial inquiry (see extract 4, lines 1–4). That makes the muddy footprints a candidate for *displaced complaint*. Indeed, it is picked up ironically by Moira in line 4. Its status as ‘displaced’ is signalled in Lesley’s contrastive expression, ‘what I did have agains’ this bu:rglar ...’ (line 1), which contrasts it to what one might expect to be complainable, the crime itself. In fact, nothing appeared to have been stolen, and the muddy footprints were apparently the only effective damage. But again, the irony not only orients to that displaced, downgraded object (muddy feet rather than break-in and possible theft), but also displays Lesley’s above-it-all coping attitude, produced in contrast to Moira’s initial projection of it all as a very sensitive matter.

Moira’s expression ‘you:r ti:dy mi:n:d’ (lines 6–7) subjectivizes Lesley’s complaint, in line with Lesley’s ironic production (Lesley responds in line 8 with another laughter token ‘We:ll hheh!’). At the same time, Moira acknowledges that for *someone such as Lesley*, muddy footprints are a serious enough matter (‘Oh:: dear’, line 7). Through displacement, uptakes and laughter particles, Lesley and Moira manage to share a notion of a burglary that did some damage, but that Lesley is well on top of, and able to laugh about. The nature of the break-in and its consequences, the offence and grievance, is tied up with the management of subjective attitude to the event and its telling.

In extract 9 Lesley responds to a later inquiry about the burglary, from Arthur:

**(9) Holt:X(C)2:2:2:2**

- 1 Art: (...) How how’ve you settled in now after thē: (p)  
 2 visitor.  
 3 (0.2)  
 4 Les: .hhh Oh: (.) eh hheh he .hh Well- (0.2) .h (.) I  
 5 → ↑mus’ say this finger↓print stuff makes a me:ss but  
 6 Art: Oh:.  
 7 Les: An’ I can’ get the mud off the cushion: but a↑part  
 8 f’m that we’re alri:gh[t?  
 9 Art: [What a ↓nuisance.  
 10 (0.2)  
 11 Les: Ye:[s.  
 12 Art: [(Fancy) galloping all over the cushion this is  
 13 ridiculous isn’it

The displaced complaint on this occasion is the fingerprint dust left by the police (line 5), followed again by the muddy cushion (line 7). The notion of displacement is normatively relevant again, in that the obvious object for complaint would expectably be the burglar and the break-in, rather than the police doing their normal investigative work. Note how Arthur makes his inquiry (lines 1–2). He does not broach the topic with as much delicacy as Moira in extract 4, but still his inquiry is into how Lesley might be coping with the experience ('how've you settled in now'). He also uses the euphemistic category 'thē: (p) visitor', rather than, say, 'the burglar', where the pronunciation 'thē:', with the long vowel, displays an orientation to the category *visitor* as somewhat 'thoughtfully' selected. Lesley acknowledges the delicate and ironic nature of Arthur's inquiry in line 4, by receiving it with a news marker ('oh:') and laughter ('eh hheh he').

These details are the context for the fingerprint complaint, whose *displaced* status is somewhat marked in how Lesley delivers it, preceding it by 'well' and 'I ↑mus' say', which offer it as a contrast to what might be expected from her.<sup>9</sup> Rather than reporting how she is coping with the experience of having been burgled, Lesley offers a complaint about the mess left by the police. Arthur receives that in line 6 as news ('Oh:'), and takes Lesley's complaints seriously (line 9). The sequence continues in mildly ironic manner, with Arthur appreciating the point of Lesley's complaint, while nevertheless formulating it in an upgraded, metaphorical, and rather comical manner as 'galloping all over the cushion' (line 12). Similarly, Arthur's description 'ridiculous' (line 13), in line with the gently ironic tenor of this sequence, connotes laughing at something and not just condemning it (which a term such as *awful*, or *disgraceful*, would do). Through citing displaced objects of complaint, then, Lesley has again managed to convey the genuinely complainable nature of those things, but also their ironic status and, with that, how well she is coping with the more obvious experience of having been burgled, that Arthur (like Moira in extract 4) had delicately inquired about.

Extract 10 starts a few lines after the end of extract 3, where Lesley has announced to Gwen the laughable but also 'very ↓sa↓:d' content of a letter from Jean-Claude, in which 'He says that his mother's left his ↓fa↑ther' (extract 3, line 11). Jean-Claude's complaints about it are reproduced here by Lesley, accompanied by laughter from both her and Gwen:

**(10) Holt:J86:1:4:2**

- |   |      |  |
|---|------|--|
| 1 | Les: | .hh An' <u>h</u> e s- Oh:-: it's such <u>a</u> <u>s</u> ad letter really he          |
| 2 |      | writes um: .tch .hhhh (0.3) oh I haf to buy my own                                   |
| 3 |      | stea:ks 'n[ <u>£</u> co <u>o</u> k th'm <u>£</u> eh <u>h</u> <u>↑</u> h <u>e</u> h[h |
| 4 | Gwe: | [.hhh [a <u>h</u> -ah-[ah-ah-[ah   |
| 5 | Les: | [.hhh [An'   |
| 6 |      | my father wakes me up every mo:rn <u>i</u> ng an' he s <u>n</u> ores                 |
| 7 |      | all ni:ght   |
| 8 | Gwe: | Oh <u>↑</u> : <u>↓</u> :   |
| 9 | Les: | [And uh eh- (0.3) e-he <u>w</u> ants me as a sla: <u>v</u> e an'                     |

- 10 I've got to cook .hhh an' clean for him: an' .hhh (.)  
 11 do the washing an' £look£ a:£[ter the shee[ps.hh  
 12 Gwe: [ h h : : : : [ha-ha-ah-  
 13 ah-ah-ah-ah.hhh<sup>ehhh</sup> ↑I:t looks as though the fa:ther  
 14 stayed in the ↑house the↓:↓n.  
 15 Les: [.h ↑Yes m:Madam ↓Duval's  
 16 gone off to Rouen.

The section omitted between extracts 3 and 10 deals with how the parental separation was not unexpected, and Lesley and Gwen discuss the topic more sympathetically later in the call. Our focus here is on how Lesley recounts Jean-Claude's complaint about his father. There are various indications of irony and humour, interactionally produced by Lesley and Gwen; we picked out several of these in the opening sequence in extract 3. In extract 10, note also the 'smile voice' (marked by the £ signs) manner of Lesley's delivery in lines 3 and 11, performed inside the description of the mundane household chores and services that Jean-Claude is now complaining about having to do. There is the standardly comic 'snores all ni:ght' (lines 6–7), which is also extrematized, at least in Lesley's reproduction of it ('all ni:ght'; cf. 'every mo:rning' and 'wants me as a sla:ve'), and the comical French spelling error 'sheeps' (line 11), faithfully reproduced by Lesley, and laughingly received by Gwen. What makes all of this a laughing matter is not only its enactment as funny, but *displacement*. Jean-Claude's reported complaints are not about the trauma or sadness of his parents' separation, family break-up, his father's distress, or his missing his mother, but rather his father's snoring, and his having to do the household chores.

As we also noted for extract 3, Lesley's remark in extract 10, line 1, 'it's such a sad letter really', is echoed in other remarks throughout a long sequence, in which she displays sympathy and concern as well as jocularly. Lesley works at ensuring that her jocular treatment of the letter does not index her as laughing heartlessly at Jean-Claude's expense. This is discursive psychology in action, a speaker's display and management of subjectivity and attitude in talk. In keeping with discursive psychology's general approach to such matters (Edwards and Potter, 2005), there is no implication here that Lesley or anyone else is expressing 'actual' or 'underlying' states of mind. Rather, these notions of investment, irony, attitude, etc. indicate participants' practices and concerns, performed and oriented-to in how they talk.

#### ANALYSIS 4: LEXICAL DESCRIPTIONS

When speakers formulate the kinds of speech acts done in complaining, the word *complain* is not the only option. An ad hoc selection of related alternatives might include *blame*, *accuse*, *criticize*, *slander*, *slag off*, *castigate*, *denigrate*, *censure* and *condemn*. We have noted that some of these alternatives, such as *accuse* and *criticize*, while applicable to lots of actions that could also be called complaints, do not require the sense of transgression and grievance that *complain* possesses. But there is a further indefinitely extendable set of alternatives that not only include

a sense of grievance, but also add an element of subjectivity and investment on the part of the complainer. These include *moan*, *grumble*, *go on and on*, *gripe*, *carp*, *grouse*, *nag*, *bellyache* and *whinge*.

The word *whinge*, for example, reflects the major indexical danger of complaining, that it is an action that may rebound upon and index the complainer. It is used not only to characterize the complainer, but to counter the complaint. Take the celebrated Australian expression *whinging Pom*, generally applied to British visitors who complain about the climate, the dangers of insect or snake bite, being unlucky at cricket, or whatever other standard misfortunes may afflict them. The expression implies complaining for some flimsy, insufficient reason, and negatively rather than constructively solution-oriented.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the category *Pom* calls up an MCD<sup>11</sup> for the whinger, such that the act of whinging is hearable as an expectable, incumbent characteristic of members of that category: as *dispositional*. The category *whinge* locates the reason for the complaint not in its object, but in the complainer. As a corollary, the person who applies the category 'whinging Pom' is reflexively displayed as 'true blue Aussie', not prone to whinging, and whose analysis of the circumstances being whinged at would be more favourable, or more constructive. The relevance of that reflexivity comes into its own where complaints are being countered and discounted.

The relevant term that features most often, in the conversational data used for this study, is *moan*. In extract 11 Lesley is talking to her mother ('Mum') about Lesley's mother-in-law 'Nan' (named elsewhere), whom she has been characterizing as a hypochondriac who prefers to stay in bed and have other people (including Lesley herself) do her shopping, cooking and housework. That is what Mum is responding to in line 1, with the strongly dispositional formulation, 'y'won't cure'er ↓now love it's too late':

**(11) Holt:1:1:12**

- 1 Mum: Ah well- (0.2) y'won't cure'er ↓now love it's too late  
 2 Les: No an'she wz ever so na:sty tuh Mark when'ee ca:lled  
 3 | [as'week]  
 4 Mum: [Was she]:?  
 5 Les: Oh: ↓yes.  
 6 (0.8)  
 7 Les: He came: back r:ea::lly: sh:aky  
 8 (0.4)  
 9 Mum: Oh: (um) what'd she say to'im.  
 10 (0.7)  
 11 Les: Oh:: all about sh:-he lea:ves'er too l:on:g an:d um  
 12 .tch.hh An' I: wz RUDE tuh MISSI:Z uhm:: someb'ddy or  
 13 other once ↑SIX YEARS AGO this was hhuh hah[h°ah  
 14 Mum: [Oh:.  
 15 Les: → .hh She wz moaning on about m-me:: an:' (.) m:oaning  
 16 on about him'n[ohh  
 17 Mum: [(well) she's got a ba:d meh- uh long  
 18 mem'ry abou:t (0.2) that sort'v thing (...)

In the context of complaining about Nan, Lesley dismisses Nan's reciprocal complaints as 'moaning on' (line 15). The phrase 'moaning on' portrays Nan's moaning as repetitive and prolonged. In addition to the category *moaning on*, the grounds for complaints/emoans about Lesley herself are also undermined by the long time since Lesley's transgression happened (emphatically 'SIX YEARS AGO this was'), and the downgraded, vague, almost forgotten nature of it as a one-off ('once', line 13) rudeness towards 'MISSI:Z uhm:: someb'ddy or other' (lines 12–13). Along with these other details, the description *moaning on*, like *Whinging Pom*, manages both to characterize the complainer as disposed to complain, and to dismiss the complaint as poorly grounded, and negative. Line 1 is also interesting from the perspective of 'moaning' being unconstructive (see again note 10); Mum's remark 'y'won't cure'er ↓now love' projects Lesley's own complaints about Nan as potentially solution-oriented, rather than the kind of inconsequential, disposition-based moaning in which Nan herself indulges.

Mum's uptake about Nan's 'long mem'ry' (lines 17–18) picks up Lesley's sense of Nan as dispositionally *prone to* complain about a range of things ('that sort'v thing', line 18). In fact, Nan's dispositions, as the explanation of why she complains, are already strongly formulated in line 1. So we have here a jointly produced portrait of Nan, in which Nan's complaints about Lesley are grounded not in their object, Lesley, but in the subjectivity of the complainant, Nan herself. Examining how complaints are countered throws into sharp relief the features of complaining that speakers/complainers attend to when mounting a complaint. Terms such as *moan* and *whinge*, along with 'scripted' descriptions of the complainant's recurrent *moaning on*, shift the cause of the complaint from its object to the dispositions of he or she who complains.

There are formulations of the act of complaining that, rather than pointing to the complainer as moaner or whinger, characterize it in benign terms. Extract 12 provides brief examples in which, relevantly, Robbie is doing self-characterization, in the context of a jointly produced, strongly affiliated complaint sequence:

**(12) Holt:M88:1:5:42**

Rob: Well thanks ↑ever so much f'r llisten↓ing to me an'  
letting me get it off my ↓chest.

And shortly afterwards:

Rob: perhaps have another chat again an' sort'v (release)  
a little stea--:m ↑.hhh heh heh (heh)

The idiomatic metaphors of releasing steam, and getting things off your chest, manage to convey subjectivity without bias. They formulate benign motives for talking, being expressions that imply doing something that has to be done, in the sense that steam pressure builds up and requires releasing (see Lakoff, 1987, on anger metaphors), and that burdens that weigh down on one's chest need to be

removed. Such motives for complaining stand in stark contrast to others such as spite, rancour, or Nan's propensity to moan about nothing.

Given the usefulness of terms such as *moan* and *whinge* in countering complaints, I close this section with examples from a special setting where complaint-countering is prevalent: neighbourhood dispute mediation.<sup>12</sup> Recall first, Lesley's use of *moan* in extract 11:

15 Les: → .hh She wz moaning on about m-me:: an:' (.) m:oaning  
16 on about him'n[ohh

We noted that the expression *moaning on* implies something extended and repetitive, and how that starts to index the complainer rather than the object/complainee. This is further conveyed by the repetition of the verb with two object complements 'about m-me::' and 'about him', where the complaint's specific object is unclear – moaning about what in particular? What had anybody done? There is an implied lack of discrimination, a sense of repetitive attacks against persons, rather than properly grounded complaints. The lack of a clear object or cause for complaint aids Lesley's rejection of it; the sense is of someone complaining for no good reason. Terms such as *moaning* and *whinging* lend themselves to essentially intransitive uses, as actions directed at no clear object or cause but, rather, informing us about the complainer. Although they *can* take clear objects, they are often used intransitively (with no object, as in 'whinging Pom'), or else with objects that are very unspecific. Here are three examples of *moan*, taken from two different neighbourhood mediation sessions:

**(13) Med-1:5**

1 Ann: (...) but I shouldn'ave t'[do that 'n my own house,=  
2 Med: [°mm°  
3 Ann: =sh[ouldn'ave t'sjt with my telly as low as it'll=  
4 Med: [°mm°  
5 Ann: =go cuz she's sayin' th't she cn hear m'telly, ↑I 'EAR  
6 → 'ER ↓telly I 'ear (0.6) [it's ↑just ev'ryday thi:ngs  
7 Med: [°mm°  
8 Ann: → she]'s moaning about.  
9 Med: [°mm

**(14) Med-1:5**

1 Ann: so every time I come ou:t I fee:l (0.5) like when  
2 she goes t'peg the [washing ↓out] o:r (.) the other  
3 Med: [ °mm: hm,° ]  
4 Ann: day it rai:ned, (.) I wouldn't go o:ut becuz (.) I  
5 >thought'w'l< if I go out she prob'ly gonna start  
6 → moa:nin' abo[ut somethin' ↑else.  
7 Med: [°mm:°

**(15) Med-5:30**

1 Mac: U:UHH (.) an' then I: (.) said (0.2) u::h >som'ing  
2 about< I like t'do: (0.5) a bit o'garden:'n he said

3            I: don't ↑mind if you ↓do a bit of gardening,  
 4            (.)  
 5    Mac: → he wɜ: (.) ↓moaning about som'ing else I can't  
 6            ↓remembe:r,

In extract 13, Anne is countering a neighbour's complaint about various kinds of household noise, including that from her television set. The object of the verb *moan*, however, is '↑just ev'ryday thi:ngs' (line 6). The television noise is being used as an instance of the category 'everyday things', and Anne nicely formulates it as both routine and reciprocal: 'she cn hear m'telly, ↑I 'EAR 'ER ↓telly' (lines 5–6). The sense is conveyed, therefore, of a neighbour who is disposed to complain about non-complainables (in the same sequence Anne also mentions complaints about footsteps on the stairs).

Extracts 14 and 15 contain the same vague moan-object: 'moɑ:nin' about somethin' ↑else' (extract 14, line 6), and '↓moaning about som'ing else I can't ↓remembe:r' (extract 15, lines 5–6). 'Something else' is a nicely chosen expression, conveying something vague and unremarkable; 'I can't ↓remembe:r' adds to that sense. Again, the impression is of an essentially *intransitive* kind of moaning, an activity done by, and indexical of, the complainer, rather than something caused by a specifically complainable event or circumstance. The phrase 'start moɑ:nin' (extract 14, lines 5–6) works in the same way as 'moaning on', implying a sustained activity being embarked upon, given whatever pretext, by the complainer. Through the choice and application of lexical descriptions, then, speakers can characterize the activity of complaining in ways that either support or undermine its causation, constructiveness, and legitimacy. Much of the everyday work done in countering complaints works up their subjective, irrational, dispositional causation.

### Discussion

The idea that making a complaint may require the management of speaker-indexical matters such as motive, disposition, or subjective investment, was raised by Harvey Sacks with regard to direct complaints, in a consideration of what next turns might do.

... if you say 'You interrupted me' and I say 'You're always complaining', then the next move might turn on a discussion, not of my interruption, but of your complaining ... And if you don't want your complaining to be the topic, then you may have to avoid making things which are formulatable as 'complaints'. And in that regard, if somebody does something routinely which is capable of being complained about, and you complain about it each time, you're in a good position to be treated as complaining. (Sacks, 1992: vol. 1, 637–8)

Sacks pointed to two features that we have also focused on here: the speaker-indexical dangers of complaining, and the way in which recurrent actions work in practical reasoning as a basis for ascribing dispositions ('you complain about it

each time, you're in a good position to be treated as complaining'; see Edwards, 1995).

Sacks's idea that 'complaining' might therefore be something to avoid being characterized as doing, raises the issue of the analytical status, and formal identifiability, of the speech category 'complaint'. Complaining will sometimes be overt and obvious, but it is also likely to be a subtle business in which speaker/complainers work against the indexical category of dispositional moaner, while providing object-descriptions that permit the complainable nature of those objects to be heard and taken up by recipients. It is a feature of the ironic and jocular delivery of complaints examined in this study, and of the choice of displaced objects, that speaker/complainers manage to accomplish some 'serious' complaining within an ironic delivery. The tendency of recipients to acknowledge the seriousness of an ironically delivered complaint, even when laughing along with it, may be in recognition of the complainer's need to avoid some such category as moaner or whinger. Indeed, that is precisely what the laughter, irony and displacement bring off. There is a tendency in making complaints, as with invitation refusals and 'dispreferred' actions<sup>13</sup> generally, to project oneself as doing it reluctantly, or only through necessity.

One feature of *indirect* complaints is that they are often performed at some distance from the offence itself. They are often reports of past events, past complainables. This gives rise to a kind of duality between the situation pertaining when the offence took place, and the current situation of talking about it, in which the initial complaint has to be re-animated. Subjectivity announcements, and the detailed activity of complaining, attend to this notion of what kind of grievance it is/was, how the complainer is now dealing with it, and how the current complaint-recipient should hear it as relevant to them, here and now. Past complainables seem to be routinely done ironically, whether humorously or as something now coped and dealt with. This is reminiscent of a thousand holiday, family and peer group disaster stories, everyday 'war stories' in which all kinds of things that went wrong get to be the stuff of tall tales, funny stories, and accounts of triumphing over adversity and seeing the funny side of it all. There is a surprising frequency in the data used for this study, of some kind of ironic take being done. The laughter and irony are probably there, not because people find their misfortunes all that funny, but rather, as recipient-designed management of attitude, coping, and (as Sacks anticipated) general avoidance of being seen as a complainer.

Irony and humour, in enacting a complaint, are members' methods for displaying and managing the speaker/complainer's stance or attitude, such that the complaint recipient is not placed in the potentially awkward position of having to work out how to respond. But humour is also done as *part of* the act of complaining, not merely as a contrast to it, nor to suggest that the complaint is weak or unfounded. It can even be part of getting a complaint taken seriously, precisely by signalling that the complainer is not disposed to make too much of it. This may be a basis for serious uptakes of humorous deliveries, where the

humour is not taken to be inviting the hearer to laugh, nor showing that it is nothing serious. Rather, it is doing what Sacks suggested might be necessary, avoiding finding yourself 'in a good position to be treated as complaining'.

Institutional relevancies come into play. In the neighbourhood mediation data, which figured briefly in the final section of the analysis, complaining is not only frequent, and of endemic relevance to the setting, but there is also an orientation to the setting, to the need for mediation or police action (cf. Meehan, 1989), and to the role of mediator as a questioning, sympathetic, but non-partisan complaint recipient. A complaint in such a setting also has to be made severe enough to be worth resorting to that kind of setting, requiring those kinds of resources. This is reminiscent of couple counselling, in which couples work up the extremity and intractability of their mutual complaints during initial troubles-telling (Edwards, 2000b), in response to the question of what brings them there. In the mundane telephone calls, that provided the bulk of materials for this study, a complaint can be something much more casual and underplayed, and not at all the kind of thing requiring or orienting to formal mediation procedures. In fact, this was the main reason for focusing on mundane interactions; that they are the site for complaints to have to be broached, worked up, and performed 'from scratch', where there is no institutional or pre-established relevancy or requirement for it, or for its severity or seriousness. As Drew notes, 'we do not complain to just anyone: we choose who to complain to and what kinds of complaints might appropriately be made to which kinds of recipients' (1998: 323–4). That kind of situated, recipient orientation remains a topic in need of investigation.

The phenomenon of 'displacement' may be a way of avoiding talking about personal feelings on sensitive matters, such as how Lesley or Jean-Claude felt, how hurt they are, how vulnerable it feels to have someone break into (or walk out of) your home like that. Recall that Lesley's 'muddy cushions' complaint (extracts 4 and 8) was preceded by a delicate inquiry by Moira, into something Moira did not name, and that Lesley would perhaps 'rather not talk about'. Psychological explanations might be offered for avoiding sensitive and painful matters, including the Freudian, psychodynamic possibility, where the term 'displacement' is also used, of some kind of avoidance or repression of deep, painful feelings. However plausible such explanations may be, the discursive-psychological analysis offered here is different, in three ways: (1) we are examining it as interaction; (2) it makes sense in interactional terms; and (3) the psychology is presumptive, and may be a case of providing a psychodynamic or mentalistic explanation for something whose nature is to be found in the observable dynamics of social interaction (Billig, 1999; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Wooffitt, 1992). It is not so much a matter of disproving psychodynamic explanations as obviating them, or at least of analysing social interaction in its own performative, occasioned, and sequentially organized terms.

The major focus of this study has been the subjective side of complaints as a performed and managed feature of how they are made. In making and reporting

complaints, speakers display some kind of stance or attitude, both to the complaint-object and to the current action of telling. Complainers work to objectify complaints (Pomerantz, 1986), and also use displays and formulations of emotional investment, or ironic stance, in ways that may either enhance or distract from a complaint's seriousness and consequentiality. It is not only a matter of softening complaints by playing them down or laughing through them, nor a matter of choosing between irony and seriousness. Rather, it is a matter of how complaining is effectively done, in which speaker-indexical features, and potential recipient uptakes, have to be managed.

## NOTES

1. 'Safe' compliments and complaints are those that have no negative implications for other people present, who might be characterizable under the same membership category used for the compliment/complaint.
2. Edwards (1997, 1999) examines the uses of presupposed and 'given' information in factual rhetoric; Sacks notes specifically with regard to complaints, that 'a possibly correct statement is accepted as correct if it's complained of' (Sacks, 1992: 358).
3. Identifying something as a complaint may depend on contextual features of the talk: 'routinely a piece of praise plus "but" plus something else, tells you that the something else is a "complaint," where it isn't obvious, often, that it is a complaint. That is to say, isolated, it wouldn't be a complaint' (Sacks, 1992: 359).
4. 'Overdetermined' descriptions are those where instead of, say, 'I had a drink', the speaker reports that she 'took the drink and drank out of it' (Drew, 1998: 318).
5. Drew (1998: 311) also notes that 'reporting ... their emotional response – their sense of grievance – enables complainants to characterize how far the other's behavior has caused offense.' This echoes discussions of the everyday rhetoric of emotion talk, where emotional reactions may be opposed to rational judgements, making an emotion-driven report unreliable; but they can also be used to signal the spontaneity and genuineness of whatever version of events they are attached to (Edwards, 1997, 1999).
6. A jumble sale is an informal, occasional, usually charitable sale of cheap bric-a-brac that people donate to raise cash for some kind of community project.
7. Characterizing a complaint as expectable from the complainant, i.e. as dispositional, can be a way of undermining its factual basis or seriousness. See Edwards (1995, 1997) on the relations between 'script formulations' and dispositional characterizations of actors, and the relation of that to factual reporting.
8. The specific placing of the laughter may signal sensitivity to this then-versus-now 'risk' of indirect complaints. Examples include: 'I thought well I'm gon' tell Joyce that, ehheh heh-heh he-euh: ↑.eh.eh↑.hhhh' (extract 6); 'I nearly said sh'd 'ee've asked your p(h)erm(h)issio(h)on' (extract 7); and 'you couldn't v: phoned't a better ↑t̩:me,hheh ↑heh' (extract 1).
9. Something you 'must say' contrasts with something you might *want* to say. Lesley is complaining about fingerprint dust left by the police. She is complaining while implying reluctance to do so, or an orientation to the delicacy of doing so. Again, this is a small token of subjectivity or 'attitude' management, of managing speaker-indexical implications of saying something.
10. One feature that can make a complaint a candidate 'moan' is the absence of orientation to constructive next actions or solutions. Meehan notes, in a study of telephone

calls to the police, how 'complaints' (in the sense of reported disturbances, offences, etc.) are normatively oriented to subsequent police action: 'they will try to formulate events in police-worthy form' (1989: 117).

11. Membership Categorization Device: see, for example, Hester and Eglin (1997), Sacks (1992).
12. Thanks to Elizabeth Stokoe for making some neighbourhood mediation data available. Some of the discussion in this article, on the nature of complaints and what they are designed to manage, was helped by examining a wide range of materials that it is impossible to include within the scope of a single article.
13. 'Dispreferred actions' in conversation analysis are actions such as refusing invitations and declining offers, where speakers orient in various systematic ways to the normative expectation that such things will be accepted (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984).

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