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Waiting to Inhale: On Sniffing in Conversation

Elliott M. Hoey

Department of Linguistics and Literature, University of Basel, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

This article examines sniffing in everyday conversations. It builds on prior conversation analytic research on respiratory conduct, which has shown how things like inbreaths, sighs, and laughter are delicately organized and consequential components of the social occasions into which they figure. Sniffing—the swift, audible, intake of breath through the nasal passage—is analyzed by reference to its sequential placement in talk. Using a collection of 70 cases of sniffs in naturally occurring conversations, two recurrent uses of sniffing are described. Sniffs placed before or during a turn-at-talk serve to delay turn progression. And sniffs placed in the postcompletion space of a turn can indicate its completion. This association between postcompletion sniffing and turn completion is further supported through a comparison with postcompletion inbreaths. By situating sniffing in its sequential contexts, the organization of breathing is shown to be bound up with the organization of speaking. Data are in American and British English.

Sniffing—the swift, audible, inhalation through the nose—is analyzed in this article as a social interactional phenomenon. Much existing research on sniffing has approached the topic from medical, physiological, and neurocognitive perspectives, with concerns like “huffing/sniffing” toxic substances (e.g., Streicher, Gabow, Moss, Kono, & Kaehny, 1981) and olfactory perception (e.g., Wachowiak, 2011). By contrast, this article offers a naturalistic account of sniffing as an identifiable and recurrent behavior in everyday conversational interaction. It is situated in the tradition of research that has shown how linguistically marginal vocalizations like response cries (Goffman, 1978; Hofstetter, 2020/*this issue*) and sound objects (Reber, 2012; Reber & Couper-Kuhlen, 2020/*this issue*) are interactional practices delicately fitted to their sequential contexts. On the basis of a range of naturally occurring interactions in English, the analysis demonstrates how sniffing is used as an organizational resource in turn construction and turn taking.

Respiration in interaction

Respiration is a prerequisite for speech, so we expect forms of breathing to be related to forms of speaking. The relationship between respiration and speech planning has long been a concern in psycholinguistics, but such work has historically relied on reading studies and controlled laboratory experimentation rather than natural conversation (Włodarczak &

CONTACT Elliott M. Hoey  elliottmichael.hoey@unibas.ch  Department of Linguistics and Literature, University of Basel, Maiengasse 51, Basel 4056, Switzerland.

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Heldner, 2017; though see Torreira, Bögels, & Levinson, 2015). Close observation of conversation, however, can reveal participants' practical knowledge of breathing and speaking. As Schegloff (1996, p. 106) observed:

Breathings—whether in or out—are practices; they can be done in various modalities (e.g., designed to be heard or not, of different “sizes” or “depths”); they can be placed variously in the developing structure of the [turn-constructive unit]. They [...] are deployable elements of its construction, and thus candidate building blocks for its grammar.

Breathing has long been recognized as important in the organization of turn taking (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Inbreaths can show a participant as “gearing up” to speak (Jefferson, 1986) and recurrently serve as pre-beginning objects that project turn initiation (Schegloff, 1996). This association between an inbreath and imminent talk is so conventionalized that releasing that breath is often treated as abandoning preparation to speak (Lerner & Linton, 2004; Local & Kelly, 1986). The difference between inbreaths-for-speaking and inbreaths-for-respiration is hearable as well. Pre-beginning inbreaths show greater amplitude than subsequent same-turn inbreaths (Aare, Włodarczak, & Heldner, 2015). Similarly, inbreaths associated with turn initiation tend to be longer than those associated with turn holding (Hammarsten, Harris, Henriksson, & Włodarczak, 2015).

An underlying feature of respiratory practices is their manipulability. Participants can specifically place and design their respiratory doings. Broth (2011), for example, has shown that theater audiences refrain from coughing and throat-clearing during actors' on-stage actions, indicating that audience members' positioning of such objects is normatively organized. Various manipulations of breathing are available to interactants. For example, relatively intense inbreaths (gasps) can project some reportable matter by indicating that something was just remembered, noticed, or realized (Lerner & Linton, 2004). The shock that gasping can display neatly contrasts with its reverse action, relatively intense outbreaths (sighs), which often convey weakly negative affect akin to resignation (Hoey, 2014). As the cases of gasping and sighing suggest, many respiratory behaviors are conventionally associated with affect and stance taking. Laughter, of course, is the paradigm case of this (e.g., Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1977), but scholars of interaction have also documented the situated uses of things such as teeth sucking (Goodwin & Alim, 2010), clicks (Ogden, 2013, 2020; Wright, 2011), and the characteristically French *pf* (Baldauf-Quilliatre, 2016). This article continues this line of research by taking sniffing as its focus.

Sniffing

Analytic interest in sniffing emerges from its potential for social use by interactants. Research has only recently begun on the social dimensions of sniffing. Work in social psychology has shown that experimental subjects often sniff their hands after greeting a confederate with a handshake (Frumin, Perl, Endevelt-Shapira, & Sobel, 2015) and that movie viewers mirror the sniffing behavior of on-screen actors (Arzi, Shedlesky, Secundo, & Sobel, 2014). In nonhuman animals, subordinate rats have been observed decreasing their sniffing frequency when being inspected by dominant rats, suggesting that sniffing indicates social hierarchy (Wesson, 2013). This article adopts an interactional perspective on sniffing and analyzes it as a social practice.

Sniffing has features that seem to afford communicative use, especially as a practice distinct from inbreaths. First, sniffing moves air at a higher velocity than modal breathing, resulting in its characteristic sound. That is, sniffing is auditorily distinct from inbreaths, and so participants may treat them differently. Second, the anatomical mechanics of sniffing may predispose it to interactional use. If the lungs are near capacity, sniffing is relatively difficult, suggesting that deep inbreaths (i.e., in preparation to speak) are in complementary distribution with sniffs. Furthermore, sniffing is most easily done with lips closed, which is often understood as a visible display of nonspeakership. And third, sniffing can be presumed to be done volitionally and therefore as designed in both its placement and form.

Goffman was perhaps the first to attend to sniffing as a social activity. Though sniffing itself was never his express interest, Goffman (1974) developed a framework for understanding it as an “out-of-frame” activity that fits into a “directional stream” of interaction, where it may organize participants’ attention and regulate activity progress. He specifically characterized sniffing as a “creature release” alongside other bodily attentive acts like scratching and coughing. Lerner and Raymond (2017) similarly argued that bodily attentive conduct could be used to regulate participation, insofar as things like self-grooms offer participants “somewhere else to go and something else to do” (p. 312).

The ways in which sniffing may frame or regulate interactional behavior has been the subject of some conversation analytic work. Hepburn (2004) examined sniffing and “sniffing” during episodes of crying by callers to a support helpline (see also Hepburn & Potter, 2007). Her preliminary look at sniffing showed substantial variation in form: Sniffing varied in intensity and routinely accompanied other nasolaryngeal sounds to produce hearably “wet” and “snorty” sniffs. Additionally, Hepburn observed that “the positioning of sniffs often seems interactionally interesting” (p. 264), noting in particular its occurrence in lapses (Hoey, 2015), after bouts of sobbing, and prior to same-speaker talk. The association between sniffs and “trouble” broadly understood was also observed in later studies. In a study of second-language classroom interactions, Hosoda and Aline (2012) demonstrated how sniffs and other nonvocal conduct recurred amidst trouble in formulation and suggested that they served to “buy extra time” (p. 65). Ticca (2013) similarly suggested that sniffs in the prebeginning region of an answer could presage a dispreferred response.

Taking these observations and studies as a point of departure, this article explores the recurrent uses of sniffing in everyday conversations. It seeks to develop an account of the respiratory behavior by reference to its placement in the course of the participants’ situated activities.

Data and methods

The analysis is based on a collection of 70 cases of sniffing, which refers to the swift, audible intake of breath through the nasal cavity that occurred out of sync with normal respiration. These were located via text search of transcripts for the terms ((*sniff*)), *.snf*, and minor variants thereof. I used transcripts of audio/video recordings of natural interactions in American and British English (e.g., Newport Beach, Holt/Field corpus, and Santa Barbara Corpus). Most were transcribed using Jeffersonian conventions (2004), though some were created using Discourse Transcription (Du Bois, Schuetze-Coburn,

Cumming, & Paolino, 1993) or GAT2 (Selting & Auer, 2011). Nearly all cases (96%, $n = 67$) came from casual conversations between family, friends, and intimates; the remaining three cases appeared in a Watergate telephone call, a workplace meeting, and a doctor-patient interaction. These recordings were collected by researchers with the participants' informed consent.

Acoustically, the sniffs in my collection were relatively consistent in form. Figure 1 shows a sniff (from Extract 1), which is representative of most cases: It lasts about 250 ms, occurs under one respiratory contour, and, as shown by the blue line, rapidly builds in intensity/loudness, peaking at 66 dB then decreasing in energy.

Sniffs can, of course, depart in form from this typical instance, though the variation in my collection is less than the diversity of formats that Hepburn (2004) found in crying-related sniffing. Sniff duration ranged from 150–900 ms. Regarding intensity, most were clearly hearable, and others were almost inaudibly soft. While most cases (86%, $n = 60$) appeared under one respiratory contour, there were also compound sniffs, such as long continuous sniffs with two peaks of inspirational intensity—these were counted as single sniffs in the collection.

To approximate the phenomenon acoustically, all sniffs for which audio was available are transcribed as *>.nh<* (cf. Hepburn, 2004, p. 264). The *><* symbols capture the rapidity of sniffing, which is the qualitative acoustic criteria used to distinguish them from other nasal inbreaths, which are transcribed as *.mh* or *.nh* (see Mondada, 2020/this issue on olfactory nasal inbreaths). Some transcripts were taken from existing publications, and audio data was not available; the sniffs in these transcripts (Extracts 5, 13) appear as in the originals.

The sniffing behavior examined in this article is distinguishable from olfactory sniffing (see Mondada, 2020/this issue). None of the sniffs in my collection appeared to be odor-directed. Moreover, most cases (84%, $n = 59$) came from telephone calls, meaning that

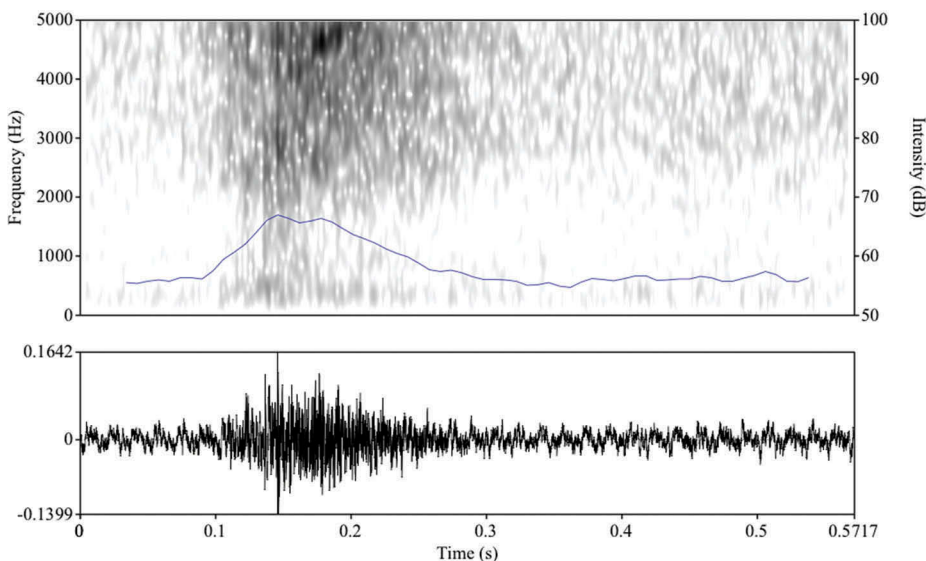


Figure 1. Spectrogram and waveform of a typical sniff.

participants were in separate olfactory environments, which largely controls for the possibility of sniffing to detect what others are smelling (see Arzi et al., 2014).

Though sniffing is often associated with illness, allergies, crying, etc. (i.e., sniffing to prevent fluid/mucus from escaping the nose), no distinction was made a priori between that and sniffing that is done for apparently “no reason.” Though we may suspect that these are different phenomena, it remains to be seen whether they are in fact organized differently in conversation. And methodologically we should avoid speculating about whether a participant “actually” needs to sniff. Furthermore, while there may be auditory differences between such “wet” and “dry” sniffs, that is not invariably so. For this article, then, I remain agnostic regarding the relationship between sniffing and the participant’s physical condition.

The analysis follows a conversation analytic approach (see Hoey & Kendrick, 2018), which assumes that social interaction exhibits “order at all points” (Sacks, 1984). Accordingly, the orderliness that sniffing presumably exhibits is what the following analysis seeks to describe. I proceed structurally, analyzing what sniffing does according to where it occurs in the organizations of turn (Schegloff, 1996) and sequence (Schegloff, 2007). I first describe sniffs by selected next speakers, who may sniff before beginning a response ($n = 5$), and by current speakers, who may sniff midturn before a first place of possible turn completion ($n = 13$). I argue that these sniffs delay the progressivity of the speaker’s turn. Then I describe sniffs that speakers produce after possible turn completion ($n = 29$), which, I argue, routinely mark turn completion and yield the turn space. In the final analytic subsection, I compare postcompletion sniffs with postcompletion inbreaths, and through distributional evidence and deviant case analysis, I argue that these are different practices, rather than merely alternate means of respiration.¹

Analysis

Delay and delicacy

Sniffing is a determinate acoustic occurrence. It not only occupies some stretch of time in interaction but also physiologically inhibits concurrent speech. Perhaps for these reasons it stands among the class of devices for delaying the initiation or progression of a turn-at-talk.

Next speaker sniffs before beginning response

When a participant is selected to speak next, he/she may sniff before beginning their response ($n = 5$).² The placement of a sniff in this prebeginning position (Schegloff, 1996) amounts to delaying a next item due (Hosoda & Aline, 2012, p. 66fn) and can prefigure a dispreferred response. In Extract 1, two couples (Vivian and Shane; Nancy and Michael) are working out the logistics of attending an event together. Nancy asks Michael when the

¹The reader may note that the analysis is restricted to speakers’ sniffs and covers only 48/70 cases. The remaining 22 cases occurred in the following environments: recipient sniffs at TRP of current speaker’s turn ($n = 9$), recipient sniffs in middle of current speaker’s turn ($n = 8$), participant sniffs in a long lapse ($n = 3$), and recipient sniffs in postbeginning of current speaker’s turn ($n = 2$). Fuller analysis of these is reserved for another report.

²Though only two examples are shown in this section, all five precede an analyzably dispreferred or misaligned response.

other couple should “c’m over t’morruh.” Michael is now obligated, as next speaker, to respond (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Transcripts follow Jefferson (2004) conventions.

(1) ChickenDinner_2340

01 NAN: Soo w'time sh'd they c'm over t'°morruh.°
 02 MIC: >.nH< ((withdraws gaze))
 03 (1.5)
 04 MIC: I don'know wuh ti-:me
 05 (1.1)
 06 MIC: °ah::m°=
 07 SHA: =He's g'nna ask me. He's he's goin=
 08 SHA: =Ee[z (gotta resoom) tuh ask me.
 09 MIC: [Sha (prohibly)c' c'm over abah:t- (0.5) no later'n
 10 eight thirdy.

Michael, rather than responding right away, shows considerable difficulty in answering. This is first observed in his sniff (line 2), which occurs in the transition space of Nancy's turn. Its placement here, an environment where turn transfer should properly occur, renders the sniff hearable as a pre-beginning element (Schegloff, 1996) to Michael's turn to come. Michael's coparticipants also treat Michael's turn as forthcoming, insofar as they do not treat the lack of an answer as due to disattention or misunderstanding. The sequential placement of this sniff shows it to be an alternative to turn initiation; it displaces his turn by occurring in the place normatively reserved for beginning a response.

Michael's sniff is a first component of several that indicate an upcoming dispreferred response. After he sniffs, Michael withdraws his gaze and allows silence to develop (line 3), both of which portend trouble (Kendrick & Holler, 2017). And indeed, in his response he doesn't provide a relevant answer (i.e., a “time when they should come over”) but a dispreferred nonanswer “I don't know” (Beach & Metzger, 1997; Keevallik, 2011; Stivers & Robinson, 2006).

A similar case follows, taken from a recording of a family dinner. Virginia implores her brother Wesley to intercede on her behalf and convince their mother to increase her allowance. Virginia first summons his attention then makes her plea.

(2) Virginia_1716

01 VIR: °Wesley. °Wesley.
 02 PRU: Mm hm.
 03 (.)
 04 VIR: °Plea:se try tuh help me talk Mom (into't.)
 05 please?<I'd do it for you,
 06 (0.4)
 07 WES: EHHHH! [hih-heh-huh.uh! °huh-huh] (.) °uh
 08 PRU: [Ah-hah-hahh-uh-huh-huh-huh]
 09 VIR: Plea::se.

10 (0.9) ((WES lifts drink))
 11 WES: >.nh<
 12 PRU: °uh .hhh
 13 (0.4) ((WES suspends glass before face))
 14 WES: eh-uh::(.) I'll think about it.

After Virginia's plea, there is a gap followed by disaffiliative laughter from Wesley (who is joined by his girlfriend Prudence). Their laughter treats Virginia's plea as risibly overdone (Clift, 2016). It is a reaction to the formatting of her action rather than to the action itself, which allows Wesley to avoid responding to her request (Sacks, 1989). Virginia nevertheless pursues with "Plea::se" (line 9), providing Wesley another opportunity to respond. In this environment, Wesley reaches for his glass as a gap develops (see Hoey, 2018b), and while he brings it to his face, he sniffs (lines 10–11). This sniff precedes the suspension of his glass before his face (see Raymond & Lerner, 2014) and a noncommittal "I'll think about it" (lines 13–14). Like the last extract, this sniff heralds a dispreferred response. What this extract shows in greater detail is how the sniff marks a change in the speaker's interactional trajectory.³ Wesley's sniff marks a shift in stance regarding Virginia's request from openly disaffiliative to noncommittal. This parallels an embodied change too: His sniff marks a shift from "bringing drink to face" to "suspending drink before mouth." Selected next speakers may thus sniff before beginning a response, which delays that action and can portend a dispreferred turn.

Current speaker sniffs midturn

Sniffing can also implement a delay after recognizable turn beginning and before that turn's possible completion ($n = 13$). Speakers may sniff at a place of syntactic incompleteness, where some determinate linguistic item has yet to arrive (see Ford & Thompson, 1996; Schegloff, 1996). These midturn sniffs regularly occur in the doing of "hesitation" or "delicacy" (see Lerner, 2013). In the following, Gordon is producing the very sensitive action of breaking up with his girlfriend Denise over the phone.

(3) G&D:II_Breakup

01 GOR: I think maybe u- u- I w- (0.2) um would like tuh-
 02 stop really goin ou:t at least for right no:w
 03 DEN: Yeah.
 04 GOR: .hh U::m I jus- .hhhh (0.5) u::h hh I feel really ba:d
 05 because I- u:m (1.0) >.nh< I wish- I think I just we
 06 don't have as much in common as: I think we both tho:ught

Breaking up with someone generally accompanies a "reason for breaking up." Gordon projects his reason with "I feel really ba:d because," then cuts off that turn constructional unit (TCU). In the space where some explanation is expected, we instead see an "u:m," a 1-second pause (Jefferson, 1989), and a sniff (line 5). These turn constructional devices

³I thank a reviewer for suggesting this line of analysis.

constitute Gordon's action as sensitive. Had he produced a "reason for breaking up" with no display of difficulty, he could be seen as glib or insufficiently sympathetic. But by arresting the forward progression of that action, he exhibits it as difficult to formulate. After these hesitation devices—the last of which is a sniff—Gordon's turn shifts slightly in trajectory: While he had projected a "reason for feeling bad," where he ends up is "we don't have as much in common as I think we both thought." This shift echoes what was seen with the sniff in Extract 2 and comes into plainer view in the following extract.

In Extract 4, Jill sniffs while formulating a disagreement with her boyfriend Jeff, who makes the dubious claim that you can legitimately make assumptions based on your feelings because sometimes "it turns out to be that way."

(4) SBC028_1837

01 JEF: you know like (.) you ca::n (.) make an assumption
 02 (0.4) and, (0.2) .mh you can assume something that
 03 feels (0.3) y'know really- (0.5) (e)- (.) correct
 04 and<and it turns out to be that way.
 05 (0.5)
 06 JIL: .h sure, some of the time?
 07 (0.3)
 08 JIL: KHEHehheh=
 09 JEF: =.H (0.4) uh yeah.
 10 (0.2)
 11 JIL: .H: fI feel like, f (0.2) well: if you also felt that
 12 (.) °>.nh< fI: don't know you could feel °something that
 13 (0.6) fwouldn't be proved right?°
 14 JEF: .mk yeah.

Jeff's claim is initially met with silence, portending disagreement, which Jill provides in the form of less-than-full agreement (Pomerantz, 1984) moderated through postcompletion laughter (Shaw, Hepburn, & Potter, 2013). What is relevant here is some account for her disagreement. Jeff's acknowledgment (line 9) orients to this by passing on the chance to respond (Schegloff, 1982). Jill's account for disagreement begins with an "I feel like" hedge produced with smile voice quality, which auditorily indexes a nonthreatening stance. She then abandons that phrasing and embarks in another direction using a *well*-prefaced (Heritage, 2015) conditional statement "if you also felt that" (line 11). This *if*-clause projects a complement clause, but rather than producing that clause, Jill pauses, sniffs, and restarts her account. This extract, then, structurally resembles the previous one: While producing a disaffiliative action, the speaker halts turn progression, pauses, sniffs, and shifts direction. That is, the midturn placement of the sniff not only constitutes her action as delicate but also prefigures a change in trajectory. In this case, Jill had projected a complement clause but then, after sniffing, reworks her turn as an "I don't know"-qualified counterargument (lines 12–13).

The delicate actions shown here are constituted as such in part through the midturn placement of sniffs. This emerges from the more general feature of sniffs as a device for delaying the progressivity of talk. In the following cases, speakers' midturn sniffs operate as part of word searches (see Goodwin & Goodwin, 1986), specifically "approximation" searches.

(5) T15:11–12 (from Zimmerman, 1993)

01 A: An all the- fraTERnides an' saRORities are having'
 02 ((sniff)) che:ers and stuff like that
 03 B: heh-heh

(6) SBC028_1101

01 JEF: he went from like the romantic- sexual getawa:y, to:=
 02 JIL: =UHhmm=
 03 JEF: =>yknow< a soul searching_ (.) >.nh< bond with nature
 04 type'a: hh deal.

(7) NBIV13_0916

01 EMM: Da:mn turkey y'c'd put 'n the .hff >.nh< thing in the
 02 oven 'n ba:sting it 'n errything'n

In each case, the speaker stops speaking at a place of syntactic incompleteness then sniffs before producing a searched-for word. Each case also has a "general extender" formulation (Overstreet, 1999): "and stuff like that," "type'a: hh deal," and "n errything." These invoke a broader semantic domain that encompasses the searched-for word and retroactively exhibit it as an "imprecise but good enough" formulation.⁴

These extracts demonstrate how speakers use sniffing as a turn constructional device for delaying a turn's forward development. Speakers sniff as an alternative to producing some projectably relevant talk, either in the course of or just prior to a speaker's turn. These positionings allow speakers to prefigure an upcoming dispreferred response, show "delicacy" in formulation, and do "approximation" word searches.⁵ In the following subsection, I move forward in the organization of a turn to examine sniffs placed after the possible completion of a turn or TCU.

⁴Contrast with "precision" searches (see Lerner, 2013), where speakers are accountably invested in "getting it right" (e.g., person or place name). Contrastively, in doing "approximation" speakers seem less attached to their searched-for word and may indicate the acceptability of alternates (through, e.g., *yknow* or general extenders).

⁵This section shows five examples of midturn sniffs out of 13 in the collection. The remaining eight cases were categorized as follows: two "delicate" types, three "word search" types, and three "activity shift" types. Activity shift sniffs were not shown for space considerations, but a brief description can be given: Participants may sniff midturn prior to a change in activity, such as going from a prosaic description to an embodied reenactment or depiction. This is consistent with the analysis of other midturn sniffs in that activity shift sniffs preface a slight change in the speaker's trajectory.

Marking turn completion and yielding the turn space

The primary locus of turn-taking activity is the transition relevance place (Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 1996), and so conduct appearing around there will be organized relative to the practical problems of coordinating turn transfer. In this section I argue that sniffs occurring post-possible-turn completion ($n = 29$) routinely mark turn/sequence completion and yield the turn space. These cases appeared in a variety of sequential positions: after a possible sequence-final turn ($n = 14$), after a first pair-part ($n = 8$), at possible story completion ($n = 5$), after the recognizable launch of a story ($n = 1$), and after a backchannel during a telling ($n = 1$).

Post-possible-completion sniffs

Speakers regularly arrive at possible turn completion and then sniff.⁶ In the following cases, speakers produce an initiating action and then sniff directly after turn completion.

(8) NB:IV:10R_p2_1446

01 EMM: Isn't that a pretty place that Spa:, >.n [hh< >.nh<]
 02 LOT: [Ye:ah, Gee en] we
 03 jist hadda ba:ll

(9) NB:IV:4_1058

01 LOT: Howard didn' have enough left yihknow en'e gay me the
 02 money? [>.nHh<
 03 EMM: [Ye:ah.
 04 (.)
 05 LOT: tSo ah ent do:wn there'n got et (.) Rancho a fresh one.

In these cases, sniffing occurs in the transition space of a sequence-initiating action and overlaps with the next speaker's response. The coincidence of the sniff and response

⁶Some postcompletion sniffs seem to have a physiological motivation of recovering breath. This is apparent after laughter, which involves relatively great respiratory exertion. In the following, Lottie completes her turn with laughter and then sniffs.

NBIV10R2_1841

01 LOT: I yelled in et'er tuh Ad'line 'n God s(h)he b(h)een up
 02 f::er (.) ↑HOU:RS YIHKNOW EN she's gunnuh be quiet fer
 03 ↑ME~*:..h[k hu[.>.nhhHh<
 04 EMM: [°~*Oh:° [°*bless'erhear:t.°

This postlaughter environment doesn't exclusively host sniffing, however. Oral inbreaths are common after laughter (Jefferson et al., 1977, p. 66; Hepburn & Varney, 2013). Furthermore, sniffing also occurs after bouts of sobbing (Hepburn, 2004). Laughter and sobbing are both respiration-heavy activities and may occasion the intake of breath. Postlaughter sniffs may thus be part of a more general practice whereby inbreaths—oral or nasal—follow a respiration-heavy activity.

reveals participants' convergent orientations to this space as one where turn transfer should occur.

We can contrast sniffing with alternative occupants of this environment. The “default” case would be ordinary turn completion through prosodic, syntactic, and pragmatic completion (Ford & Thompson, 1996). This environment also provides for turn extension, for example through abrupt joins (Local & Walker, 2004). In contrast to practices for turn completion and turn extension, sniffing may act as a turn-yielding device, similar to tag questions (Sacks et al., 1974) and sequence recompletion (Hoey, 2017). Sniffing augments other turn-completion practices by audibly showing the participant as doing something that precludes speech.

To more fully appreciate how post-possible-completion sniffs can mark turn completion and turn yielding, we can consider them in a range of sequential environments. One environment where coordinating turn transfer is a systematic problem is at possible sequence completion (Hoey, 2018a). In this environment, participants have treated the current course of action as adequately complete and in need of no further action (Schegloff, 2007). This normally provides all participants the opportunity to self-select and proceed to something else. But it's also systematically provided that no one in particular ought to speak next. These circumstances provide for the relevance of turn yielding and therefore for the relevance of a sniff. In Extract 10, Jill and Jeff are chatting on the phone, marveling at the rapid pace of their friend's “medical school year.” After his “fast” assessment (line 1) Jeff launches a question-answer sequence with “when did they start” (line 3).

(10) SBC028_1200

- 01 JEF: That's a fast (.) medical school year.
 02 JIL: Unh hu::h..h=
 03 JEF: =↑Wo:w when did they start,
 04 JIL: ih'was ↑really quick,<I ↑think=h u:m, like mid-August?
 05 JEF: °mid-Au:gust°
 06 JIL: ye::ah.
 07 (.)
 08 JIL: or maybe mi- (0.3) maybe the beginning of August.
 09 (0.3)
 10 JIL: >.nhh<
 11 (0.6)
 12 JIL: .mTSK [maybe the beginning.
 13 JEF: [↑Wow

This question-answer sequence arrives at possible completion in line 8, where Jill revises her answer. Possible sequence completion permits movement onto other trajectories of action (Schegloff, 2007). But here, rather than moving onto something else, a silence develops into which Jill places a sniff (lines 9–10). With this, Jill recognizably passes up the opportunity to speak. Due to its placement in a sequence closure environment, her sniff operates retrospectively, by treating the prior sequence as adequately complete, and prospectively, by displaying momentary reluctance to self-

select. In this way, it marks a place where self-selection by Jeff is possible. Additional evidence for this analysis comes from the participants' subsequent behavior. As the interaction continues, the silence lengthens (line 11), indicating an impasse regarding who should speak. Finally, Jill produces a self-repeat, "maybe the beginning." Self-repeats in environments of possible sequence closure allow a speaker to show their prior turn as adequate and in no need of revision (Hoey, 2017). This retroactively locates her sniff as possibly sequence-final—a position that provides for self-selection by anyone. This analysis is further confirmed by Jeff's self-selection in overlap with Jill's self-repeat (line 13); the near simultaneous start reveals his understanding of her sniff as opening the floor to him.

Another environment where turn-taking matters are a going concern is the beginning and ending of storytellings (Sacks, 1989). Participants entering a storytelling activity have as their practical task the suspension of turn-by-turn talk and conversely at the end of a story the resumption of turn-by-turn talk. The next extract shows a sniff placed after the recognizable launch of a story (line 9). This sniff is potentially oriented to the coordination of turn transfer in that it marks the opportunity for something from Geri, the story recipient.

(11) GeriShirley_0910

06 SHI: YihKNOW Gabbi, (.) Warren Miller's ex girlfrie[nd,]
 07 GER: [Yee]ah.
 08 GER: [°°M-hm?°°]
 09 SHI: [.hhhhhhhh] Okay. Gabbi came in las'night. >.nHh<
 10 (0.4)
 11 SHI: .t
 12 (0.6)
 13 SHI: .p Whenever she comes in she always wants me t'do
 14 something fer her,
 15 GER: M-hm,

Ordinarily, after the recognizable launch of a story, the story recipient may explicitly align with the structural asymmetry that a story projects—for example, through a token like *mhm* (Stivers, 2008). Here, however, Geri does not do so after line 9, and instead a silence grows (lines 10–12). This silence shows Shirley as not immediately continuing with her story, which may orient to the absence of alignment from Geri. This supports an analysis of sniffing as turn yielding in that the sniff audibly marks the opportunity for alignment, and the growing silence marks its absence.

Speakers may also sniff in the closing of a story. In Extract 12, the teller sniffs as she progressively distances herself from her story after less-than-enthusiastic uptake from her story recipient. Emma reports an exciting recent event: Her son Larry met and accompanied some visiting marines, which Emma found “wo:nderf!l” (line 6). Emma's story receives subdued reception, however, occasioning pursuits of more favorable uptake from Lottie and then finally story exit.

(12) NB:IV:12_0056b

01 EMM: Theh gon' take'm down th'beach now 'n wa:lk'm down the
 02 beach<ih [wz so: cute'n one of'm's BLA:ghCK hn
 03 LOT: [°↑Oh::: ~goo:d.°
 04 (.)
 05 LOT: uAt's u [We:-
 06 EMM: [That's wo:nderf' l is [n'it?=
 07 LOT: [I-
 08 LOT: =[I wz js tell'n [Ea:rl we ha::d a: f [ew up there=
 09 EMM: =[.snh [hhhhahhh [.snhh
 10 LOT: =la:st night the firs'time we've ever had um.
 11 EMM: .hhhhh (.) ↑Well they looked so ↑cute'n their uniforms
 12 they wen'i[:n en they took off ther coa:ts now=
 13 LOT: [Mmm:~,
 14 EMM: ='n ther ~waghlkin down the street yihkn[ow isn't that uh=
 15 LOT: [Ye::h?
 16 EMM: =rils well I oughta (d) (.) ~done that t'da:y~
 17 LOT: °Ye[:a::h. That's ni::[ce.°
 18 EMM: [°~Well,° [Ya:h,
 19 LOT: °Ye:a:[h.°
 20 EMM: [W'l LARRY'S a good bo:y, >.nh<
 21 LOT: =Ye:ah.
 22 EMM: En then weg-<we ev'n tagh:lked to the ma:n across
 23 s'street 'e came over talk tih Bud a lo:ng ti:me he
 24 siz he goes intuh Wilshire Boulevar'd erry day. >.nh<
 25 LOT: Uh huh?
 26 EMM: .t Well ah'll tahlk tihyuh ~later dear.~

The highlight of Emma's story is met with subdued approval "°↑Oh::: ~goo:d.°" (line 3) and occasions a small reciprocal telling from Lottie (lines 8, 10). Lottie's reciprocal telling apparently displays insufficient appreciation of Emma's story, as Emma reissues its main point: how "↑cute" the scene was (lines 11–12, 14, 16). Again, however, Lottie gives only a muted "Ye:a::h. That's ni::ce" (line 17). In light less-than-enthusiastic uptake, Emma distances herself from her telling. She projects a departure with turn-initial "well" (Heritage, 2015) then hearably proposes closure of the storytelling activity with "W'l LARRY'S a good bo:y" (line 20). This proposes closure by repeating "Larry," an element from the start of the story (not shown; Schegloff, 2011), and by offering a summary assessment of him (Schegloff, 2007). Having made this move away from the telling, Emma sniffs, treating her turn and telling as complete.

In this environment, Lottie may relevantly align with Emma's movement to closure, for instance by agreeing with her summary assessment. However, Lottie maintains a disengaged stance with a plain "Ye:ah" acknowledgment (line 21). Given Lottie's minimal engagement, Emma pivots to something new. She reports other events of

that day and caps off that topic shift with a sniff (lines 22–24). Her postcompletion sniff audibly marks turn completion and furnishes a space for Lottie to do something with those new topical materials. But Lottie responds with an “uh huh?” elicitor, treating Emma’s action as the start of an informing rather than an opportunity to engage in topic talk. Finally, Emma orients to Lottie’s apparent disinterest by moving to end the call (line 26).

Facing weak engagement, storytellers can pursue more substantial or favorable uptake. In this case, Emma’s postcompletion sniffs orient to Lottie’s weak engagement by marking turn completion, which provides for responsive action by Lottie. Also register how after each sniff, Emma moves onto another matter—from closure of the telling, to topic shift, to ending the call. These movements to other matters display Emma’s understanding of her sniffs as prefacing shifts in interactional trajectory.

In a similar use of turn-yielding sniffs, participants can indicate that they will not pursue some matter any longer. In the following phone call, Leslie tells her mother that the biscuits she got cost around “one pou::nd ten pee” and asks “is that alright.”

(13) Holt:X:1:2:7

02 LES: I’ve got them: o[ne pou:] :nd ten pee or something=
 03 MUM: [Oh good.]
 04 LES: =is that alright,
 05 (0.9)
 06 MUM: ↑Pard’n luv?
 07 LES: ABOUT ONE POUND TEN pence [is that alr-
 08 MUM: [Oh↑ that’s o↓ka:y yes
 09 LES: Yes.
 10 (0.6)
 11 LES: THAT wz ABOUT the cheapest you could ↑ge:t.
 12 (.)
 13 MUM: ↑Oh my goodness.
 14 (0.5)
 15 MUM: ↑Oh you should’n- I: didn’t mind about cheapness
 16 but I wanted.hh a pound in weight.
 17 LES: YES WELL THEY’RE not QUITE A POUND in weigh[t.
 18 MUM: [↓Oh well
 19 (.) °never mind°.↓
 20 (0.2)
 21 MUM: ((sniff))
 22 (0.2)
 23 LES: Yes.
 24 (.)
 25 LES: But I thought that wz.hhh a ↑lot’v money but (.)
 26 that wz the cheapest we could get at the International
 27 MUM: Oh well that didn’ matter

Leslie's purchase turns out to have been not what her mother wanted. She opted for "the cheapest you could get:" (line 11) whereas her mother "didn't mind about cheapness" and instead would have preferred "a pound in weight" (line 16). Mum accepts this news with a "disappointment finalizer"—"Oh well"—then begins to move past the matter with "never mind" (lines 18–19; Couper-Kuhlen, 2009). There is then a small gap, indicating the completion of Mum's turn and embodying her decision against continuing with the matter. These prepare a place for Mum's sniff (line 21), which is hearable as "dropping the matter" or "letting it go."

Comparison with postcompletion inbreaths

What should be clear from the preceding analyses is that sniffing after possible turn completion across a variety of sequential environments recurrently indicates noncontinuation. We can consolidate our understanding of these sniffs by comparing them to inbreaths in the same sequential environment. Like sniffs, inbreaths recur in the transition space, as in the following.

(14) Debbie and Shelley

01 SHE: it w's like awright fi:ne, I'll let you: (.) buy my-
 02 my plane ticket, thats not a problem, [.hh a]n: now=
 03 DEB: [uhuh,]

(15) NBIV10R

01 LOT: How is she doi[n.
 02 EMM: [Ohgh: fi::ne she heard f'm Bill: he
 03 arri:ve'sa:fely: 'nd (.) a: [nd uh
 04 LOT: [°Uh huh
 05 (.)
 06 EMM: He's doin fi:ne, .hhu:hh Gee: uh-m-did Ear:l getta turkey

(16) Watergate_ekalm

01 KAL: y:ou: en Bo:b en the Presidint jis' too good (0.3) too good
 02 frie:nds [.hhh. [ti:h ever put me in the pi:hzi:sh'n where
 03 EHR: [(°Mh- [hm°)

In these examples, the postcompletion inbreath is immediately followed by same speaker turn continuation. This contrasts with the previous postcompletion sniffs, where the same speaker continued only contingently after providing space for turn transfer to occur (Extracts 10–11). This suggests that inbreaths and sniffs are distinct practices, not simply alternate ways to breathe after speaking. Whereas postcompletion inbreaths forecast same speaker turn continuation, postcompletion sniffs indicate turn completion.

Distributional evidence supports this generalization. Out of 29 cases of postcompletion sniffs, 93% ($n = 27$) were followed by silence or turn exchange, and only 7% ($n = 2$)

followed by immediate turn continuation (i.e., a micropause or less separating postcompletion sniff and turn continuation).⁷

This is consistent with the previous analysis and strongly suggests that postcompletion sniffing marks turn completion and turn yielding. An alternative explanation is that sniffs only disfavor turn continuation rather than mark turn completion/yielding, given that sniffs are typically done with the mouth closed, which disfavors immediate turn continuation. However, further inspection of the 27 postcompletion sniffs suggests this is not the case. If speakers' postcompletion sniffing acts as a turn-yielding cue, then we would expect another participant to speak after the sniff. And indeed, this is what the data show: After a postcompletion sniff, there are 20/27 cases of turn transfer, 6/27 cases of silence followed by same speaker continuation (e.g., Extracts 10–11), and 1/27 case of ambiguous turn transfer.

We may also look to postcompletion inbreaths for evidence. Using seven of the same recordings used to build the collection of sniffs,⁸ I located the first 10 postcompletion inbreaths, collecting a total of 70 cases. Of these, 77% ($n = 54$) were followed by immediate turn continuation, which is consistent with the analysis that postcompletion inbreaths project same-speaker talk. Moreover, I can account for 12/16 of the cases deviating from this pattern. Five are explained by the inbreath's placement after laughter, as in the following.

(17) Virginia

01 PRU: That was what I got. (m)yeah. nih-hih-huh-huh-huh .hhh
02 (0.2)

⁷One of the two deviant cases follows, taken from the opening of a call from Dana to her boyfriend Gordon, who had called late the previous night, drunk, angering her mother.

HOLT:U&88-1-4:1

01 GOR: How are you.
02 (0.5)
03 DAN: I ['m okay
04 GOR: [.tplk
05 (.)
06 GOR: .pk Good,
07 (0.5)
08 DAN: Actually I'm no[t but (.) the(h)re we go:, =
09 GOR: [.hhh
10 GOR: =.hhhhehhhhe:hh .hh But (.) yih (.) you are but you're
11 not. .hh[h=>.nhh< Hey listen I'm sorry about last ni:gh,
12 DAN: [(Right)
13 DAN: [Mm:,
14 GOR: [.km.tch I didn't think your mum would go (0.5) .pt.k
15 over the top,

Dana is hearably irked; her response to "How are you" is a downgraded "okay" (Jefferson, 1980), which gets revised into "Actually I'm not." Gordon treats her response as laughable (see Sacks, 1992), then in the transition space of his turn he takes an inbreath-turned-sniff. He immediately continues speaking to produce an apology. I account for this deviant case by reference to the structure of call openings (Schegloff, 1986). Ordinarily, after the how-are-you phase the caller (Dana) produces a reason-for-the-call. Given this normative structure, for Gordon to apologize as soon as possible, he would need to wrest from Dana that structurally provided opportunity. He does this with a postcompletion sniff followed by a misplacement marker "Hey listen" (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973).

⁸Debbie and Shelley, HOLT M88.1–5, NB:IV:10:R, NB:IV:13:R, SBC28, Virginia, and Watergate419ekalm.

03 PR?: In high school?

Because laughter does not conform to the one-at-a-time feature of conversation and because laughter is a respiration-heavy activity that may require an intake of breath, these cases do not properly deviate from the pattern shown by other postcompletion inbreaths.

Seven other deviant cases are accounted by their occurrence in overlap. In the following, Debbie concludes her turn with an inbreath and then does not continue speaking.

(18) Debbie and Shelley

01 DEB: ya shoudn't be defensive I mean theres been pa:rtie:s
 02 like here comere here do this or whatever:an [.hhh
 03 SHE: [you were
 04 at the halloween thing.
 05 DEB: huh?

This is related to Shelley's entering to speak in overlap with Debbie's inbreath. Speakers are normatively allotted a single TCU, and next speakers are entitled to self-select at the first possible completion of that TCU (Sacks et al., 1974). The contingent occurrence of turn transfer in overlap with Debbie's inbreath accounts for this and other cases where a postcompletion inbreath is not followed by turn continuation.

This subsection shows that postcompletion sniffs regularly display that participant as "no longer speaking" and indicate both turn completion and the possibility/relevance of turn transfer. A comparison of postcompletion sniffs and postcompletion inbreaths revealed, through distributional evidence and deviant case analysis, that sniffing and inbreaths are not alternate methods for breathing but distinct turn-taking practices in this environment.

Discussion

This article constitutes sniffing as an orderly object—a social fact as well as a respiratory act. It shows sniffing as intimately bound up with the production of talk by analyzing its occurrence in various structural positions in talk-in-interaction. Sniffing was shown to be a turn constructional device for delaying talk. The placement of a sniff prior to the beginning of a turn may precede a dispreferred response (Extracts 1–2). And when placed in the course of a turn-at-talk, sniffing implements a delay that can contribute to doing "hesitation" or "delicacy" (Extracts 3–4) or "searching for a word" (Extracts 5–7). This confirms prior observations about the association between sniffing, dispreference, and difficulties in formulation. It also suggests that sniffing forms a natural class of delay devices along with objects like *uh(m)* and throat clearings.

It was also shown that possible turn-completion sniffs systematically mark turn completion and turn yielding. This was observed in various sequential environments: after initiating actions (Extracts 8–9), at possible sequence completion (Extract 10), at the beginning (Extract 11) and ending of tellings (Extract 12), and in environments marked

by disappointment (Extract 13). The association between postcompletion sniffs and turn yielding was further supported through a comparison with postcompletion inbreaths. In a turn's postcompletion environment, sniffing recurrently indicates turn completion, whereas an inbreath recurrently indicates turn continuation. Sniffs and inbreaths, then, are not alternate modes of inspiration but distinct interactional practices.

These findings suggest that sniffing is an orderly alternative to speaking—orderly in that it is understood by reference to the organizations of turn construction and turn taking. Based on its placement in the course of action underway, a sniff can be heard as a display of not currently speaking, just finished speaking, not going to continue, or not speaking right away. Speakers who sniff amidst active projections could be seen as not yet producing that projected material. And given a particular sequential context, this can invite interpretations of the sniff as a display of delicacy, unsureness, inability, etc. Sniffing thus may enter the “directional” track of interaction (Goffman, 1974); though not focal itself, it is monitored because it organizes what participants attend to.⁹

The usage of sniffing as an organizational resource for interaction may emerge from the affordances of the act and how it is conventionally understood. Its characteristic closed-lip formation and the impossibility of concurrent vocalization provide physiological grounding for the association between sniffing and nonspeakership. An equally important basic feature is that sniffing directly suggests the need to clear the nasal passage. Participants normally accord to others a legitimate right to such “creature releases” (Goffman, 1963) and thereby treat sniffing as an evergreen engagement. This permissibility may relate to the omnirelevance of presenting oneself as competent (Goffman, 1959): Sniffing is always permitted because it is always relevant to show yourself as in control of your body, its functions, and especially its effluvia. The swiftness of a sniff may also be pertinent. As the self-same denotation and resolution of a bodily need, sniffing is near instantaneous and so minimally intrusive. Sniffing is thus a “ready-made” resource (Lerner & Raymond, 2017) for organizing participation. This extends to nonfocused interactions too, where it may display “civil inattention” (Goffman, 1963). Sniffing audibly broadcasts one's presence, acknowledges co-present other(s), and discreetly advertises no intention to engage—for example, the sniff heard from a stall in a public restroom when someone else enters. Indeed, the audibility of sniffing predisposes it to such situations: It is not only perceptible in the absence of visual access but perceptible precisely in/for situations where sustained mutual gaze is avoided.

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⁹Not to suggest that sniffing is always disattended. Sniffing can be a meaningful act itself. For example, a sniff accompanied by widened eyes and raised brows can display surprise. Or if at a night club one asks, “Why did they go to the bathroom?,” a sniff in response can answer “to do cocaine.”

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