

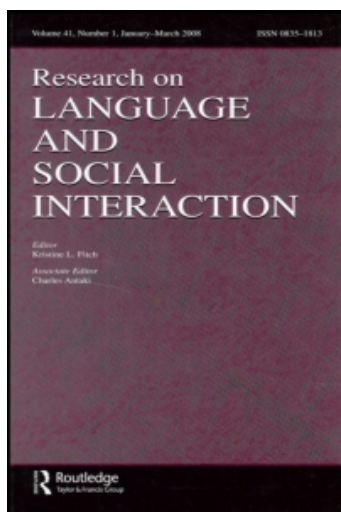
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Transgression and Intimacy in Recreational Talk Narratives

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Potentially transgressive or “unsafe” narrative themes offer a means of achieving intimacy among speakers. We examine 3 extracts from leisure-time conversations among different groups of young friends, where stories are told on topics that are conventionally considered “rude” or risqué—the defiling of food, vomiting, and watching animals having sex. The analysis shows how speakers in various ways negotiate their own local orientations to the status of topics—as transgressive but talkable—and how participants build rapport through their shared alignment to and enjoyment of transgression. Talk is established as playfully open and permissive through focus on “rude” topics. Although such newsworthy and high-involvement narratives diverge radically from prototypical small talk, viewed as phatic communion, they nevertheless meet some of its core criteria—the use of ritualized sequences, the strengthening of relational ties, and low commitment to veracity.

Small talk as phatic communion has traditionally been seen as involving predictable, “safe” topics such as the weather, the “here and now” of an event in progress, or other aspects of a locally shared environment. The

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topics of small talk have been seen to be less important than the fact of achieving “communion” through talk, with the further criterion that a neutral or positively solidary relational tenor is maintained (Coupland, 2000; Firth, 1972; Laver, 1981; Malinowski, 1923/1972; Schneider, 1988). If small talk is “safe,” we might expect it to be filled out by conventional topics of talk and formulaic language (Coupland, Coupland, & Robinson, 1992; Scollon, 1985) for it to show low speaker involvement and a certain semantic emptiness (Sacks, 1975).

Small talk is, however, a broad and differentiated generic category, with gossip as just one example of this differentiation. Gossipers engage enthusiastically with newsworthy topics and build relational allegiances and conflicts. Gossip themes are often potentially unsafe and face-threatening, which is why gossip is entertained between friends, family members, or other intimates (Bergman, 1993; Blum-Kulka, 2000; Egging & Slade, 1997). The delicacy of gossip lies precisely in the risks that speakers take in negotiating relationships with present and absent others. When gossip is solidary it is often because speakers fashion new or closer alignments with each other and *against* or to the detriment of third parties. A key risk factor in gossip is where to draw boundaries between what is discursively and relationally safe and unsafe.

Another type of small talk, narratives told among friends in leisure-time conversations, can involve similar risks, when, for example, speakers report on salacious, transgressive, or “rude” events. In this article, we analyze three instances¹ where groups of (U.K.) university students, who are already friends, are in conversation in their own homes and where one or more speaker tells “a rude story.” Extract 1 is a sequence where two female friends, while eating, tell “urban myth”-like stories of food contamination. In extract 2, a group of boys exchange accounts of hangovers after drinking alcohol, leading to a story of one of them vomiting. In extract 3 a female tells her friends about when she saw pigs copulating. Our aim is to analyze how, through specific sorts of discursive collaboration, “unsafe” talk is developed in ways that both reflect the group members’ preexisting intimacy and achieve new intimacies at the level of the interaction itself. The general device brought into play—in different ways in the different extracts—is *achieving a shared openness to transgression*. That is, speakers find ways to acknowledge that the status of the narrated events is transgressive, according to general societal norms, but also to work up a unified stance, for themselves and for the present interaction, as tolerant of transgression and indeed as enjoying its riskiness. Finally, we assess how

transgressive storytelling is functionally positioned vis-à-vis small talk and its putative subgenres.

INTERACTION AND ENGAGEMENT IN SMALL TALK NARRATIVES

As research has moved beyond early structural accounts of narrative (Labov 1972), it has often commented on the affective and social functioning of conversational narratives (Tannen, 1990, 1995). Cheepen (1988, p. 52) claimed that storytelling accounts for most of the time spent by the participants in informal conversational exchanges, also that sequences of talk that are culturally recognized as stories as such are generally classifiable as “entertainment.” Similarly, Eggins and Slade (1997) commented that:

storytelling is very common in casual conversation. It provides conversationalists with a resource for assessing and confirming affiliations with others... [Stories give] participants the opportunity to share experiences and to display agreement and shared perceptions... [In stories] values, attitudes and ways of seeing the world are created and represented. (p. 229)

Norrick (1997, p. 203) claimed that often the principal goal of storytelling in conversational interaction consists in reliving pleasant moments.

These views support the general claim, which we also make in relation to the data presented later, that coparticipation in developing narratives is a prime means of evaluating experience, achieving consensus, and doing recreation. But this perspective also sounds too bland and undifferentiating for the present instances of talk. Transgressive narratives initially pose a threat to a dyad or group's cohesion. They require tellers and listeners to review the extent to which they do in fact subscribe consensually to norms that permit transgressive talk—what Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff (1987) referred to as “improper talk” (p. 160). In these cases, Bruner's proposition (1990, cited in Blum-Kulka, 1993, p. 361) that we tell stories “as a way to test the borderlines between the exceptional and the ordinary” seems a more pertinent perspective. The stories in the following data, we argue, are “exceptional” in relation to certain norms of conduct (in the events reported) and talk (in the telling of these events). The dyad or group needs to negotiate the tolerances on its own engagement with otherwise taboo content and

practice. For a transgressive story to be performed and enjoyed, the group or dyad may need to frame it as exceptional, as a transgression of norms that they would otherwise subscribe to. As we see later, one strategy for achieving this is to frame-mark the sequence as play.

The immediate appeal of transgressive stories is their ability to stretch or break social norms, and we can interpret this as their newsworthiness. Blum-Kulka (1997, p. 107) referred to the well-documented principle that what is told in stories should be at least “reportable,” meaning newsworthy, to those who are recipients (she cited Hymes, 1981). Newsworthiness is marked discursively by listeners’ high involvement response strategies (Blum-Kulka, 1993; Cheshire, 2000; Tannen, 1984, p. 30). Active listening, for example, providing not only minimal back-channeling but also comments, encouraging questions, and strongly positive affective signals such as laughter, accompanies many or most narratives in recreational talk settings. But what is most significant for our own analysis is to identify the means by which participants signal individual and shared orientations specifically to the transgressive elements of a narrative and its newsworthiness in that regard. All the stories in the three extracts we present here are first tellings, and the events they recount are therefore “A-events” in Labov and Fanshel’s terms (1977, pp. 62–64).² But it is striking that, in some cases, tolerance for and favoring of transgressive talk is signaled even before specific events are themselves told. It seems that a speaker offering the group the opportunity to transgress conversationally can in itself be “newsworthy” in the sense of opening up a new and attractively risky footing for talk. This is how, in some sequences, metacommentary on “doing transgression” features in the workup to particular narratives. But even though transgressive, participants’ orientations to these stories indicates their status as elaborately *ritualized* sequences of talk, at least in the sense that, as with phatic communion, interactants’ commitment to veracity is routinely backgrounded to the communing function of the talk and to individuals’ displays of regard for each other (Tannen, 1995, p. 198). It is useful at this point to detail Jefferson et al.’s (1987) discussion of impropriety in conversation, which indicates how transgressive talk may be *constitutive* of intimacy:

[I]t is a convention about interaction that frankness, rudeness, crudeness, profanity, obscenity etc. are indices of relaxed, unguarded spontaneous, that is, intimate interaction.... By introducing such talk, a speaker may be initiating a move *into* intimate interaction.... A speaker may be offering an invitation to his co-participants to produce talk together whereby they can see themselves as intimate: together they will be

constructing intimacy... instances of... response can be arranged on a hypothetical continuum ranging from rejection to acceptance, from disaffiliation to escalation. (p. 160)

Our data analysis proceeds to explore the link between intimacy and transgression first by tracing the precise means by which speakers establish a footing in which transgression can occur and second by showing the interactive payoffs that appear to accrue to participating in transgressive storytelling.

TRAILERING TRANSGRESSION

The series of stories in the following extract develops topically out of talk about the participants' food likes and dislikes and the participants' voiced concerns about invisible practices in food processing. Given this, the extract shows the complex talk work that may be used by tellers to trailer their transgressive stories.

Extract 1 ("Meat treatments")

A and B are female students, one undergraduate and one postgraduate, who are housemates chatting in their student house kitchen while preparing and eating their evening meal.

- 1 Ann: I hate pot noodles I'm sorry I know you (.) I I just hate them
 2 Beth: I don't really like them (.) just a snack you have (you know)
 3 (4.0)
 4 Ann: (3 sylls)³ I mean what sort of food is that?
 5 Beth: what?
 6 Ann: pot noodle (.) I mean what is it? ((laughs))
 7 Beth: I know (.) processed
 8 Ann: exactly I hate to think what they put in it (2.0) I I'm (eating) like um
 9 Italian tomatoes I mean being in Italy I hate to think sort of like ((laughing))
 10 the way they were collected and processed I mean (6.0) ((giggling)) I
 11 suppose you can think that the same thing about wine and stuff
 12 Beth: mm (3.0) I mean everybody who's worked in the catering industry knows
 13 [yeah
 14 Ann: yeah
 15 don't they
 16 (4.0)
 17 Beth: I mean I used to work for Wimpy
 18 Ann: mm (.) but weren't they quite (1.0) particular?
 19 Beth: oh very particular yeah but (1.0) (no one knew)
 20 Ann: yeah I mean it's like

- 21 [
- 22 Beth: it was just the I it was up to the individual staff?
- 23 Ann: mhm
- 24 Beth: I won't I won't tell you now because it's really quite grim when we're
- 25 eating (2.0)
- 26 Ann: I've got a um (1.0) s-story about Sainsbury's actually (.) which I'll tell
- 27 you
- 28 Beth: ((slight laugh))
- 29 Ann: afterwards (1.0) which'll probably shock you
- 30 (1.0)
- 31 Beth: I mean (.) did you see that thing about Tesco's?
- 32 Ann: no? (2.0) what thing?
- 33 Beth: it was um that (1.0) ((inhales)) they went into a factory erm where (.)
- 34 they (1.0) er do something with the meat that goes to Tesco's and like they
- 35 dropped it on the floor and picked it back up and stick it back on the (thing)
- 36 Ann: hm!
- 37 Beth: and um (1.0) there was a big hoo ha about it
- 38 (5.0)
- 39 Ann: ((brightly)) well (.) now you've said that [laughs] right (.) I've got a
- 40 friend (.) who works in Sainsbury's (1.0) as a a deli (.) as a deli manager
- 41 (2.0) and um (1.0) I don't know one of his um (.) butcher (.) colleagues
- 42 (.) right (.) was having s- some trouble (.) with a customer?
- 43 Beth: mhm?
- 44 Ann: and erm this customer was like really she wasn't happy with (.) like the
- 45 steak (1.0) but er (.) no it wasn't a she a he (.) he wasn't happy with the
- 46 steak that he served (.) it's just ((laughing slightly)) ((sniffs)) erm (.) you
- 47 know (.) saying that he wanted an another bit bit of steak
- 48 Beth: mhm
- 49 Ann: so ((slight laugh)) this customer pissed this bloke off s- (.) this er butcher
- 50 ((laughing slightly)) °so much (.) that° (.) he went out the back (.) pre-
- 51 tending to go and get that steak ((laughs)) got his willy out ((laughing))
- 52 °and (.) wiped his ((laughing)) willy across the steak (.) and gave out the
- 53 same bit of steak° (.) served it to the customer
- 54 Beth: ((shocked)) oh my God!
- 55 Ann: mm (.) s-disgusting
- 56 Beth: ((high-pitched laugh))
- 57 Ann: this is true ((laughs))
- 58 Beth: I was (.) I'll tell you it now cos have you g- (.) ((sniffs)) we were there
- 59 was this (.) girl when we used to work in a Wimpy (1.0) it was in area
- 60 where ((brief laugh)) (1.0) it was quite rough (.) used to get those (.) like
- 61 chopsy teenage ki-girls yeah
- 62 Ann: mhm
- 63 Beth: and there was this one girl waiting for a (.) cheeseburger or something
- 64 like that (2.0) and she was (.) staring at (.) one particular girl?
- 65 Ann: mhm
- 66 Beth: ((giggling slightly)) °really giving her evil looks°
- 67 Ann: mhm

- 68 Beth: and of course (.) the Wimpy girl couldn't like go up to her and start on
 69 her and say why are you staring cos she was in work
 70 Ann: mhm
 71 Beth: so she took her (hambu-) burger (.) went outside and spat on it
 72 Ann: ((giggles))
 73 Beth: ((laughing slightly)) °and took it back and give it to her° (.) and we
 74 watched the girl eat it
 75 Ann: ((hearty laugh)) that's evil
 76 Beth: I ((breathy laugh)) °know°
 77 ((9 seconds silence while they continue to eat))
 78 Ann: you know Daniel my friend
 79 Beth: mm
 80 Ann: he did some (.) like (.) temporary wo- (.) while he was at university this
 81 temporary work for (.) for (.) Wright's Pies have you ever heard of
 82 Wright's Pies?
 83 Beth: no
 84 Ann: well they make things like pies and sausage rolls and that sort of thing
 85 Beth: ((slight laughter)) yeah ((laughs))
 86 Ann: ((laughs)) he said that the blokes who (.) operated like the sausage (.)
 87 ((laughing slightly)) °roll machine° disgusting they'd like (.) they'd flick
 88 off their plasters and things (.) in the ((laughing slightly)) °sausage mix°
 89 Beth: ((horrified)) OH
 90 Ann: ((laughing))
 91 (5.0)
 92 Beth: UGH (7.0) that is so grim
 93 Ann: ((blasé)) this sort of thing goes on all the time

In terms of transgressive acts in telling stories, extract 1 refers to four key reported events: when “they dropped [meat] on the floor and... stick it back on the thing [presumably the preparation counter]” at lines 34 and 35; when “this... butcher wiped his willy across the steak and... served it to the customer” at lines 52 and 53; when “[the assistant] spat on [the customer's hamburger] and we watched the girl eat it” at lines 71–74; and when “the blokes who operated the sausage roll machine ..[woul]d flick off their plasters (band aids) into the sausage mix” at lines 86–88. This sequence of stories is tightly parallel: Each event is located in a different store or restaurant outlet, and each involves concealment of an unhygienic and disgusting practice with meat from a victim who eats it (eating is implied in the first and last story). The four narratives are told in alternation by Beth and Ann.

The first intimations of improprieties in the discourse are highly oblique. Ann's laughter in line 9 indicates she is thinking of some entertaining or embarrassing practice—perhaps potentially embarrassing for Ann and Beth in the telling world, if she were to recount them—in connection with “the way

[the tomatoes] were collected and processed” (lines 9 and 10). The thought-of event to which the laughter is attached is marked to be in some sense bad (“I hate to think sort of like”). So, as early as line 11, and with no reference to an actually transgressive event, Ann has established a theme of “potential invisible food improprieties” and introduced a rhetorical footing—levity or embarrassment—on which it might be brought into the current conversation. She also establishes that thinking about an open-ended set of such events is a possible future activity, for Ann and Beth as for everyone—“I suppose you can think that the same thing about wine and stuff” (lines 10 and 11). At line 12 Beth then posits a fund of knowledge (everybody...knows), presumably about food improprieties, available to insiders in the catering industry, which implies that there may be tellable tales even for the present interaction.

Thus far there has been no direct metalinguistic reference to Ann and Beth’s doing transgressive food storying, although, between them, they have established it to be an obliquely inferable possibility. At line 24 (“I won’t tell you now”) Beth “does” make explicit metalinguistic reference to “telling,” but negatively—to the effect that she will not tell. Notice that this follows line 17 where she has appeared to open up a personal narrative. “I used to work for Wimpy” functions discursively in at least two ways—to position Beth as a member of a category of insiders with tellable tales just referred to and as a conventional scene-setting first move in a narrative of personal experience. Beth is quite explicit about her reason for not continuing: it is because “It’s really quite grim when we’re eating” (lines 24 and 25). That is, she is quite explicit, metalinguistically, about the impropriety that telling the Wimpy story would constitute at this point in the talk. But now transgression is in the air as a negotiable possibility, even though both participants’ first positions are ones of apparent reticence to transgress. At lines 26–29, Ann mentions her “story about Sainsbury’s...which I’ll tell you afterwards (1.0) which’ll probably shock you.” This is Ann’s trailer for her own story, which will be “shocking,” just as Beth’s will be “grim” and thus not for telling just now. Note too how Beth’s slight laugh at line 28 mirrors Ann’s earlier laughter at the prospect of narrative transgression. The speakers have engineered a state of delicious anticipation of improper talk. They have established they have the experiential and narrative resources or capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Eckert, 2000) to deliver such talk [e.g., Ann’s “I’ve got a um (1.0) story about Sainsbury’s actually” at line 26] around an agreed theme. The stage is set for one of them to begin cashing in this capital.

The sequence of four stories of transgression is opened by Beth, and the fact that it is the most bland of the four again supports the claim that the

speakers are opening up with some reticence. After all, the Tesco's story is a mass media report ("did you see that thing about Tesco's?", line 31) of an alleged breach of hygiene at a factory. Affectively, the story merely elicits "hm!" from Ann at line 36. But Ann takes it that its telling is to provide a warrant to tell her the much more risqué and visually striking Sainsbury's story—of the butcher who allegedly "wiped his willy across the steak" he was serving to a choosy customer. The warrant is explicitly referred to when Ann says "now you've said that" (line 39). She thereby maintains the string of metacomments about the tellability of transgressive stories, implying the shared nature of the responsibility and possible blame for the story she is about to tell. After reporting the core events, in lines 39–53, her next turns continue the reflexive appraisal of the story ("s-disgusting," line 55; and "this is true," line 57). So the participants continue to move referentially back and forth between their worlds of transgressive storied events and the transgression they are themselves involved in; in recycling the stories; and, as witnessed by repeated laughter, enjoying doing so.

Beth reinstates her trailered Wimpy story at line 58, again with a metacomment and what seems to be a further warrant ("I'll tell you it now cos have you g-"). As she tells the Wimpy story, and as Ann develops the alleged events at Wright's Pies, the frame of transgressive enjoyment is now firmly established as a working consensus and footing for the interaction (Goffman, 1959). Response tokens of shock and laughter pepper the accounts. But Beth's "UGH (7.0) that is so grim" seems to be moving out of the footing and Ann's next turn acts as a kind of transitional coda. We might interpret these as moves to restore more conventional normative standards of judgment and a setting aside of the stories sequence where Ann and Beth have flirted with transgression.

GRAPHIC AND HYPERBOLIC STORYTELLING; MARKING TRANSGRESSION AS PLAY

The second extract involves three male friends exchanging retrospective accounts of the effects of drinking alcohol, leading to one principal narrative by Dan about the aftermath of "the worst hangover I've ever had."

Extract 2 ("The suitcase and the dog")

Three male students, close friends from high school, at one of their parents' homes in North Wales, while the men were drinking beer and eating snacks before going out together for the evening.

- 1 Jon: ... Ann gets huge hangovers doesn't she
 2 Huw: yeah
 3 Jon: absolutely enormous
 4 []
 5 yeah? (.) I've stopped getting hangovers (they almost
 6 2 sylls)
 7 []
 8 Jon: so have I (.) I
 9 haven't had I haven't had a single one
 10 []
 11 Huw: I get completely wrecked
 12 Jon: this this (.) this this
 13 []
 14 Huw: and I get a kind of
 15 []
 16 Dan: I go through stages (.) sometimes I have stinkers
 17 Jon: yeah=
 18 Huw: =yeah
 19 Dan: but other times I'm like (.) I can er
 20 Huw: if I drink bitter yeah I don't get a hangover at all
 21 Dan: I don't like
 22 []
 23 Huw: Stella if I drink Stella or something like that I get it
 24 []
 25 Dan: I used to be the same (.)
 26 I used to be the same
 27 []
 28 Jon: oh Stella (.) Stella is the
 29 worst
 30 Dan: I used to (.) drink bitter (.) and I'd be fine (.) I wouldn't (.) feel ill like
 31 after I wouldn't feel bloated cos it's not as gassy as lager is it like
 32 []
 33 Huw: no
 34 Dan: and I'd be like um (2.0) and er (.) and I wouldn't have hangovers but
 35 (.) I can't drink bitter anymore I just don't like the taste of it I've
 36 drunk so much lager it's just
 37 []
 38 Huw: yeah (.) I can drink whatever (1.0) don't mind it
 39 (.) dr- if there's Caffreys anyway then I will (.) definitely buy that=
 40 =Holstein Pils is good yeah cos (.) all you get yeah is like (.) really
 41 really really big headache in the morning
 42 Huw: yeah
 43 Jon: and you don't get you got (.) with Stella yeah I get sort of shakes and
 44 stuff (.) not being able to breathe properly
 45 []
 46 Huw: yeah

- 47 Dan: get like hot and cold
 48 Jon: yeah
 49 Dan: [slight laugh] just like (.) oo ((makes a loud puffing noise))
 50 []
 51 Huw: bad that yeah °oh bad°
 52 ((loud belching))
 53 Jon: ((brief laugh)) and you just can't eat anything all day
 54 []
 55 Dan oh I (.) worst er (.)
 56 worst hangover I've ever had like was um (.) Easter? (.) last year (.)
 57 and (.) we'd gone out (.) we'd only had about went to town (.) last day
 58 like before I was going back the next day was a lift having [laughing
 59 slightly] a lift back with Rhiannon's mum like
 60 Jon/Huw: ((slight laughter/groan))
 61 Dan: Rhiannon from ((place name)) yeah anyway oh I I swear yeah I was
 62 in a minging state
 63 Huw: yeah
 64 Dan: but (.) the thing was we went out we had about six or seven pints (.)
 65 ((laughs slightly)) went and had a kebab then like
 66 Jon: ((giggles))
 67 Dan: and er (.) went home? (.) Ieuan Rees and Daniel and Gareth
 68 []
 69 Huw: (oh grief) ((brief laugh))
 70 Dan: came up came up ((slight laugh)) came up to my house right? (1.0)
 71 and er (.) we had about (.) I think it was these actually these Stellas
 72 a (.) few of these like (.) and Daniel and Gareth went then (.) and er
 73 (.) I thought Duw! Ieuan Rees was still there like ((laugh)) having a
 74 fag like (.) watching the Mask or something like this
 75 Huw: (oh that's) ((noise of disgust))
 76 Dan: I know (.) and um (1.0) I go cracked open a bottle of Ouzo (.) and me
 77 and Rees was drinking this Ouzo and I swear (.) I I
 78 []
 79 Jon: ((groans))(.)
 80 (and it's)
 81 Dan: couldn't get up (.) the ((very quietly)) °fucking stairs° afterwards
 82 []
 83 Jon/Huw: ((delighted
 84 laughter))
 85 Dan: y'know? ((laughs)) so anyway I got to bed so I woke up the next
 86 morning I'm like went (.) went to the (.) bathroom I thought (.)
 87 not bad considering that Ouzo like (.) I looked over my shoulder
 88 there's a chunk of spew on the floor I thought oh!
 89 []
 90 Jon: ((giggles))
 91 Huw: oh my word
 92 Dan: ((laughing)) can't remember being sick y'know (.) it's like I can't

- 93 remember going to the toilet as well and I went to my bedroom yeah
 94 (.) and my case ready to go back to college (.) ((laughing)) big pile of
 95 spew on top of my case ()
 96 []
 97 Jon/Huw: ((shouts of laughter))
 98 Dan: kebab kebab () (.) I was like
 99 Huw: ((incredulously)) on your case?
 100 []
 101 Dan: I said aww and I went downstairs and I
 102 didn't know I I just []
 103 Jon: ((laughs))
 104 Dan: did not know what to do cos I knew my Mum was going to go ab-
 105 solutely (.) berserk like (.) so I went down °oh Mum er I think the
 106 dog's been sick on my° suitcase ((laughs)) AND THE AMOUNT OF
 107 SICK WAS MORE THAN THE DOG ((laughs))
 108 []
 109 Jon/Huw: ((prolonged laughter))
 110 Dan: and she said ((RP accent)) DON'T BE SO SILLY PROBABLY
 111 MORE []
 112 Jon: and the dog's eaten a whole kebab?
 113 ((laughs))
 114 Dan: LIKELY TO BE YOU THE AMOUNT YOU HAD LAST NIGHT
 115 °I said oh yeah I suppose° ((sniffs))
 116 []
 117 Jon: ah (1.0) the worst (one) I've had yet (.) oh nightmare
 118 (.) is definitely [name of pub] (.) one where where I (.) just (.) I
 119 bought (.) loads of bottles of Stella and cans of Stella when when (.)
 120 all Ann Parry and all them were down (.) and I I was really
 121 []
 122 Huw: when's that (.) on er (.)
 123 this year?

As the extract develops we find a crescendo of affective response tokens more intense than those in the earlier extract. The strongest laughter is triggered by Dan's account of the "big pile of spew" (vomit) (lines 94 and 95) that he discovers on top of his suitcase the morning after a particularly heavy night's drinking. As the extract opens, the conversational exchanges are already focusing on, by some standards of judgment, transgressive drinking practices. The speakers, who are all students, project themselves as incumbents of drinking culture and, over lines 1–19, it is difficult to assess whether they are claiming status for getting (Huw's position) or not getting (Jon's position) bad hangovers. Status claims become easier to read from the data over lines 20–53, where the participants develop "technical" physical accounts of the

effects that different brands of beer have on them, based on their experiences. The catalog of effects is “feel[ing] ill” (line 30), “feel[ing] bloated” (line 31), a “really big headache” (line 41), “shakes and stuff” and “not being able to breathe properly” (lines 43–44), “get[ting] hot and cold” (line 47), and “you just can’t eat” (line 53). The evaluative lexis imputes degrees of “badness” to hangovers in general and to states linked to specific brands. Huw’s “I get completely wrecked” (line 11) and Dan’s “I have stinkers” (line 16) seems to be coreferential with Jon’s “huge hangovers” in line 1.

In these exchanges, these friends certainly do not directly represent heavy-drinking culture, or their own talk that embeds them within that culture, as transgressive. On the contrary they represent drinking and hangover effects as what they routinely do. The element of reflexivity is that, while characterizing drinking and its effects in their talk, they are engaged in recreational drinking—at home, prior to going out to a pub or a club. It might be that they are celebrating their habitual transgression, but there is no mark of this in the text up to this point. Huw’s loud belch at line 52 briefly marks the coming together of the world of practice and the world of representation with Huw marking, on behalf of the triad, that they are currently practicing as well as debating drinking culture.

However, Dan’s narrative, from line 55, takes the conversation into much more openly acknowledged transgressions—Dan transgressing even the group’s drinking norms—judging by the audible reactions of amusement, disgust, and enjoyment from the recipients. After a relatively “sober” account of the technicalities of hangovers, Dan introduces his story as “the worst hangover I’ve ever had” (lines 55 and 56). The first laughter token is at line 58, embedded in the contextualizing detail that Dan’s drinking episode was taking place on the night before he was due to have a lift back to university in a friend’s mother’s car. Jon and Huw pick up on this laughter at line 60, presumably endorsing Dan’s implication that the drinking event was incompatible with, or a threat to, the normative world of parents. Dan’s narrative summary (lines 61 and 62) is “I swear yeah I was in a minging state” (slang used mostly by young people: terrible state), claiming that the upcoming events are true, extreme, and disgusting. Huw and Jon both laugh or giggle over their next few turns (lines 66 and 69), shifting to noises of disgust and groaning over following turns in response to Dan’s detailing of eating kebabs and drinking Ouzo.

Although the vomit outcome is yet to be mentioned, the footing of the narrative has been established, once again, as enjoyable transgression. Judged from receipt tokens in the data from this point onward, the highspots

of Dan's narrative are "couldn't get up the °fucking stairs° afterwards" (line 81), "there's chunk of spew on the floor" (line 88), "big pile of spew on top of my case" (lines 94 and 95), and especially "THE AMOUNT OF SICK WAS MORE THAN THE DOG" (lines 106 and 107). According to Bauman's (1977) overarching criterion for discursive performance—the intensity of the communicative act—these sequences are the most intense in the visual imagery, but also in the ways that Dan formulates narrative development. "I thought oh!" (line 88) dramatizes the moment of his recognition that his earlier assessment, that the outcome of the drinking session was "not bad" (line 87), is markedly wrong. The pared-down syntax of "my case ready to go back to college" and "big pile of spew on top of my case" (lines 94–95) re-creates the sequence of Dan's noticing of the vomit, as if it were two frames from a comic-book story. Huw's "on your case?" at line 99 confirms the striking visual effect and the perception of incongruity that lies at the story's heart. Dan's utterance "kebab kebab," at line 98, is possibly his verbal "pointing" to lumps of food visible in his vomit.

Even within the local norms constructed by the group, detailed verbal descriptions of vomit seem to succeed as sufficiently transgressive to engender humor and disgust. When Dan reports his vain attempt to blame the dog he introduces another visual incongruity. The dog has hypothetically vomited up more than his own body mass. In Bateson's (1972) terms, Dan's graphic and presumably hyperbolic account signals "this is play," a frame within which special premises and rules operate. We can conjecture that, for the group's purposes at this point in their talk, there is no particular requirement or expectation that the truth will be strictly adhered to. Veracity claims, like Dan's at the outset of his narrative, can therefore be treated as "phatic"; exaggeration is part of the ritualized element of transgressive storytelling, and the overriding value for talk, locally, is to share in celebrating tellable transgression.

ESCALATING TRANSGRESSION

Extract 3 provides us with a further example of play in taboo stories in small talk, centering on a minimal transgressive story that is then recycled and reworked by the group in complex playful ways.

Extract 3 ("The pigs from the train")
MWL 12

Three female student friends; two of the women live together in a shared house and are aged 20. The other woman, age 21, lives across the road and frequently pops around for chats, to share meals, and to relax. The conversation takes place in the evening in one of the women's bedroom, where the participants catch up on the events of the past weekend.

- 1 Amy: yeah we used to have rugs made out of goatskin
 2 [
- 3 Jane: there's one there (1.0) yeah
- 4 Cath: really?
 5 [
- 6 Amy: but we threw out (.) we threw them out years ago
- 7 Cath: well I tell you what my Auntie's bringing me back a sheep I
 8 think ((sniggering))
- 9 Jane: they don't kill sheep though do they?
- 10 Amy: I don't know
 11 [
- 12 Jane: they don't skin them do they?=
 13 Amy: I hope not (.) cos she's bringing me back a rug
- 14 Cath: well it'll probably just be shaved
- 15 Jane: yeah it'll be a shaved one they won't skin it
 16 [
- 17 Cath: shaved (.) shaved a- a- shaved
 18 a sheep (.) sheared
- 19 Jane: they love their sheep over there they wouldn't do
 20 [
- 21 Amy: oh I know
- 22 Cath: they love to eat them (.) that's what they love
 23 [
- 24 Amy: oh can I tell you
 25 something funny? ((laughing)) (.) coming up on the train
 26 today this is so rude but it's so funny
 27 [
- 28 Jane/Cath: ((lots of
 29 loud, squealing laughter))
- 30 Jane: who was he?
- 31 Amy/Jane/Cath: ((laughter))
- 32 Amy: oh no! (1.0) no no no (.) there was couple of pigs (((laughing
 33 slightly)) going for it
- 34 Amy/Jane/Cath: ((loud and lengthy shrieks of laughter))
- 35 Cath: you saw two pigs?
- 36 Amy/Jane/Cath: ((shrieks of laughter))
- 37 Amy: ((rapid, high pitched)) I WISH I HAD MY CAMERA THEN
 38 (.) I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT IN MY LIFE
 39 (3 syllables)
- 40 Jane/Cath: ((squeals of disbelief))
 41 ((lengthy, loud shrieks of laughter))

- 42 Jane: where does your train pass through that you see two pigs
 43 humping?=
 44 Cath: =it's too er
 45 [
 46 Amy: (it looked) and I saw deers and everything it was really lovely and
 47 everything it was really lovely
 48 [
 49 Jane/Cath: ((shrieks and
 50 cackles of laughter; 7.0))
 51 Cath: ((laughing)) Animal Farm!
 52 Amy/Jane/Cath: ((laugh))
 53 Amy: God (I feel) so sick no
 54 Cath: ((in an exaggerated Welsh accent)) it's lovely it's lovely
 55 - -

The principal narrative we focus on in this extract is first told in a form even more restricted than what Cheshire (2000) characterized as the “bare skeleton” of a narrative—“at least two temporally ordered clauses following the order in which the real world events could be inferred to have taken place” (p. 237). In this extract we find a mininarrative represented by a single main clause, Amy’s “there was couple of pigs going for it” (lines 32 and 33), contextualized in an earlier turn, “coming up on the train today” (lines 25 and 26). Just as we saw in the first extract, Amy has trailed the story metalinguistically for her listeners with “oh can I tell you something funny?...this is so rude but it’s so funny” (lines 24–26). This, then, is a further clear instance of Goodwin’s (1986) generalization that:

[t]ypically speakers provide their recipients with an initial characterisation of a story they are about to tell which *acts as a guide for their understanding of those events*. In addition, throughout the telling, the speaker, through his/her gestures, intonation word selection and arrangement of events, *proposes a certain alignment to the story being told* [italics added]. (p. 283)

Amy characterizes the story to follow as “rude but funny” in a turn that includes laughter. The listeners respond with squeals of loud laughter (lines 28 and 29) showing their receptiveness to the footing Amy is offering for her narrative. Note how Jane immediately constructs a candidate narrative theme for a “rude but funny” personal story (“who was he?” [line 30]), suggesting this could be a story about Amy’s transgressions with a man. Amy corrects the suggestion and delivers the mininarrative that on her journey she saw two pigs copulating. This is not transgressive per se, but the lexical choice, “going for it,” perhaps blurs the boundary between

animal and human sexual acts, if it implicates a degree of sexual abandon and enjoyment. Also, Amy's foregrounding of her own witnessing of it as a "rude but funny" event suggests the transgression of enjoying watching animal sex. The strong communal laughter at line 34 supports this reading, as does Amy's next-turn elaboration that she wishes she had her camera to record the event as a putative photograph. Amy's participation in the two strong laughing turns at lines 31 and 36 positions her as both recipient and teller of the transgressive story. She is amused not only by the event but, it would seem, her own risk taking in telling it.

The story is quickly told, but Cath and Jane reprise it, first in the form of Cath's ostensible confirmation request "you saw two pigs?" (line 35) and then in Jane's oblique slur "where does your train pass through that you see two pigs humping?" in line 42, perhaps to the effect that Amy must live in some bizarre place; a wild and even surreal suggestion, but it serves to recap the essential theme of Amy's story. Cath seems to be about to evaluate the story at line 44, "it's too er:."; perhaps she is planning "disgusting" or "kinky." But Amy's simultaneous turn constructs an alternative visual scene, one associated with bucolic charm and innocence: "and I saw deers and everything it was really lovely and everything it was really lovely" (lines 46 and 47). The repeated "lovely" is such a starkly noncohesive descriptor that, in its own way, it also revivifies the original transgressive image, as the renewed exuberant laughter of lines 49–52 shows. Again as we saw in the first extract, Amy moves to conclude the transgressive sequence by reverting to a more normative reaction to the scene, "God (I feel) so sick no" (line 53), where we can hear "no" as a denial that she was actually interested in and amused by the humping pigs, or even that she is unwilling to talk any more on this topic. Amy is retrospectively recasting the narrative as entertained nonseriously on a footing that is now lapsing.

DISCUSSION

Earlier in the article we cited Jefferson et al.'s (1987) claim that the introduction of rudeness, profanity, or obscenity can serve to construct increased intimacy in conversation, and our analysis appears to confirm this function well enough. On the other hand, the specific narratives of transgression we have considered seem in all cases to be contextualized in talk that already qualifies as "relaxed, unguarded [and] spontaneous" and, to a degree, "intimate." The male friends in extract 2, for example,

are exchanging quite detailed personal histories of their drinking experiences before the “suitcase and the dog” story is told. Although it is possible, in each extract, to identify one particular speaker who makes the first discursive move to open up a “transgression-tolerant” footing, we have stressed the coconstruction of such footings. Therefore, rather than seeing one speaker as offering an “improper” footing for talk, which others will then accept or refuse, it is truer to the data to argue that individual speakers’ first initiatives are undertaken against the background expectation that improper talk will not only be accepted but will be relished by the dyads or groups in question. Initiators seem, in all three cases we have considered, to be trading off existing understandings that transgressive talk can and does work for these participants, in somewhat ritualized ways. The risks attaching to transgressive narratives are therefore relatively low in these contexts and have more to do with whether a particular theme and sequencing of transgressive talk can be made to pay off in its specific narrative constitution rather than whether there might be moral censure. No doubt there are far more transgressive themes to be sustained conversationally. The transgressive acts that are thematized in our student data are relatively conventional ones. Food being contaminated by bodily fluids breaks the normative requirement that food and the body should interconnect only in prescribed ways—when food is ingested. Food should remain invisible after ingestion, hence the “dog and the suitcase” transgression is in many ways the obverse of the “meat treatments” ones. The “pigs and the train” transgression infringes the norm that we can go about our everyday business without encountering the sex act (whether between animals or humans). The students’ stories are therefore constructed around rather classical domain blurrings. It is the incongruity that results from domain crossing that, according to conventional morals, triggers surprise and laughter.

However, the intended point of our analysis has been to explore the discursive processes by which individual transgressive narratives are made possible and salient, and then made to “pay off,” in the discursive moment and perhaps in other ways. There remains a quality of experimentation with all the narratives we have examined, a testing out of what the group’s discursive and moral tolerances actually are. This returns us to Blum-Kulka’s (1993) claim that narratives in general—but, we would argue, transgressive narratives more particularly—test out the boundary between the exceptional and the ordinary. We might even interpret these episodes as “ritualized transgression” in that stories about sex and

drinking might routinely allow young friends to explore societal tolerances, and the food processing stories are somewhat reminiscent of urban myths.

As a group dynamic this sort of boundary testing is surely a prime means of achieving new intimacies. These are intimacies in performance, ways of being intimate recreationally and, at least on the surface, nonseriously. Of course there are quite different relational bases for intimacy that might matter more in terms of trust and enduring friendship. Eggins and Slade (1997) argued for a wider social functioning of humor in talk: It “enables interactants to do serious work while distancing themselves from it” (p. 167). Transgressive episodes may well function to reset the boundaries of a dyad or social group or to redefine the position of an individual within it. After all, much of the discursive movement in the data we have considered involves speakers and listeners shifting their alignment to transgression—for example, the female friends in extract 1 initially endorsing the “untellability” of transgressive food stories while eating, conspiring to permit and to enjoy four specific such narratives, and then marking that they are ready to set aside the transgressive footing. Achieving shared footings is, we assume, part of the constitution of relational intimacy (Tannen, 1995).

In small talk as part of the casual and recreational domain of social interaction, what we could call *discursive license* itself has a special importance. When doing talk as recreation, close conversationalists need not be restricted to the discourse ethics and the modes of representation that define “formal” and public modes of talk. We are accustomed to defining conversation itself as a freely coconstructed, spontaneous, and emergent social reality. However, there are evidently degrees of freedom and creativity that need to be distinguished under this heading. If we approach conversation as an “ordinary” or “mundane” communicative medium, we are in danger of losing perspective on those ways of contextualizing talk as *anything but ordinary*—for example, as deviant; playful; and, as in the data here, transgressive. The transgressive footing is one where invisible moral assumptions become visible in the breach. This line of interpretation again opens up possibly wider significance for transgressive talk—as a form of moral development for individuals and groups achieved through interactional play (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett & Sherzer, 1976).

A recurrent theme in the growing small talk literature is to “challenge the presumed ‘smallness’ of small talk” (Coupland, 2000, p. 22). This is

again the case with these data, if we can convincingly argue that transgressive talk opens up new avenues for relational intimacy and group redefinition. Perhaps the most distinctive facet of transgression narratives, seen as part of small talk, is how they problematize our view of what is conversationally “safe.” The conventional account of phatic communion, with which we opened the article, excludes transgressive talk—in fact it seems diametrically opposed to it. From another point of view, transgressive talkers are precisely involved in negotiating “what is safe for them.” They are certainly pushing at the public boundaries of “the safe” but, because the transgressive elements of their talk are discursively limited—here in the form of first-person or third-person narratives often framed as play—they can also be seen to be simultaneously establishing, endorsing, and ritualizing local norms of acceptability within their own social collectives. The intimacy achieved may ultimately be thought of as a form of relational “safeness.”

NOTES

- 1 The data are part of a corpus of 68 audio-recorded conversations collected in 1998 by undergraduate students, enrolled in the course “Men, Women, and Language” taught by Adam Jaworski. The students were asked to audio-record one or more of their own conversations with their friends, housemates, or family members in the context of their student or family home, initially to be used for their own analysis in their assignments on gender-related communication. They then donated their recordings (with all participants’ permission) to make up a corpus of young people’s recreational talk. Only one student withheld permission for us to use her recording. The students were predominantly female and between ages 18 and their early 20s. All three of our extracts are of speakers in this age group. Most of the recorded encounters, like the ones we reproduce here, involve dyads or triads of friends talking during their leisure time, over drinks, cooking or eating, watching television, or getting ready to go out. Once we got to know the data well, transcriptions of 10 of the tapes were made, and 3 were selected for this study. All names used here are pseudonyms.
- 2 Reminiscence would be described as either an A-B event (known to at least one other) or O-events (generally known). Cheshire (2000) added a new category, ?-events, to describe stories where it was impossible to tell whether the events being described were familiar to other speakers.
- 3 A number before “sylls” within parentheses (e.g., 3 sylls) indicates the number of syllables of indecipherable talk heard by the transcriber.

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