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Flirting: A designedly ambiguous action?

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Abstract

Flirting is typically regarded as an ambiguous social action, which, in the absence of members' orientations, is subject to multiple interpretations and hard to pin down analytically. This article demonstrates a methodological technique for identifying the interactional practices that constitute vehicles for 'possible flirting' by examining instances that contain (i) 'endogenous' orientations to flirting; (ii) orientations to flirting that are 'exogenous' and post-hoc, and (iii) no orientations. Analyses suggest that flirting practices are often *not* ambiguous to members, and involve the flirting party claiming epistemic rights to greater familiarity or intimacy with the flirt recipient than the interactional context, or the status of the speakers, might otherwise make procedurally relevant. Data are in British English.

Introduction

Social psychologists have long recognised the importance of studying the mechanisms that drive interpersonal attraction, mate selection and relationship formation, including flirting (Fugère, Leszczynski, & Cousins, 2014). Research has focused on identifying the verbal and non-verbal behaviours that are considered flirting by men and women, the gendered perceptions of, and motivations attributed to flirting behaviours (Henningsen, 2004), and the degree of congruence between flirtatious ‘intentions’ and ‘perceptions’ (Ranganath, Jurafsky, & McFarland, 2009a).

This research has been overwhelmingly experimental or variationist in its design, or uses self-report measures, including interviews, to collect participants’ recollections of past flirting episodes, or views on how they think they behave during hypothetical flirting scenarios (Bernarte et al., 2015; Whitty, 2003). Where researchers have tried to identify the prosodic, dialogue and lexical features that constitute flirting (e.g.; Ranganath, Jurafsky, & McFarland, 2009), they have used coding schemes to classify ‘discourse features’ that can be labelled and ‘automatically extracted’ from the data (Jurafsky, Ranganath, & McFarland, 2009). These methods are limited because they ignore the interactional and sequential context of the coded features, producing an artificially narrow, disembodied view of flirting.

Where flirting has featured in discourse and conversation analytic work on naturalistic interactions, it tends to be discussed indirectly, as a constituent feature in the doing of something else. For example, Korobov and Laplante (2013; see also Korobov, 2011) examine how potential romantic partners in speed-dating interactions use improprieties, including insults, to affiliate with one another and pursue intimacy. They suggest that the recipients of such improprieties often treat them, not as adversarial, but ‘rather as an indirect means of establishing repartee or as a flirtatious bid’ (2013; 18; see also Glenn, 2003).

Two studies focus specifically on flirting interactions: Kiesling uses discourse analysis and ‘perception experiments’ to study interpretations of two interactions where the ‘alignments shown’ might be considered flirting. He concludes that ‘whether an interaction is deemed to be an instance of flirting depends on the assumed genders of the interactants’ (2013: 106). Finally, Hopper dedicates a chapter of his book, ‘Gendering Talk’ (2003), to an analysis of flirting in fiction, field notes and real life interactions. He suggests that in flirting situations ‘the partners create an unusual situation and turn the situation toward the playful pursuit of sexual innuendo’ (2003: 40).

These studies have advanced our understanding of the range of interactional practices that might be considered flirting, including flattery, insults, playful banter, sexual improprieties or innuendo and teasing. However, to my knowledge, there is no research that sets about identifying, in a systematic way, the interactional practices that constitute flirting in real life interactions. There may be several reasons for this: First, it is unclear whether flirting, as a vernacular members’ category, is a social action in its own right at all. Unlike routine and pervasive social actions like invitations, offers and requests, for example, which tend to be delivered via discrete and clearly demarcated utterances, members often characterise flirting as an elusive, multimodal *encounter* involving a combination of talk, gesture, and gaze. The existing literature appears equivocal on the matter: Whereas Korobov and Laplante (2013) describe actions like insults as flirtatious and discuss the flirtatious ‘frame’ or ‘environment’ of an interaction, Kiesling suggests ‘there is no ‘flirting’ speech act in the sense of Searle (1969)’ (2013:106). Second, flirting is often regarded as ambiguous and deniable, relying for its effect on the existence of multiple possible interpretations of the same action (Kiesling, 2013: 106).

Indeed, it may be characteristic of flirting that it is ‘designedly’ ambiguous¹ and hence not meant to be pinned down. Finally, it is commonly assumed that, in the absence of members’ uptakes or explicit orientations to flirting (e.g., ‘you big flirt!’, ‘are you flirting with me?’), or existing research describing the interactional practices that constitute flirting, it may be analytically inaccessible. Kiesling notes that acquiring examples of ‘authentic flirting interactions are rather difficult’ (2013: 107). Similarly, Stokoe (2010: 267) hypothesises that actions like compliments could be potentially ‘interpreted as flirting’ but found a ‘noticeable absence of flirting’ in the speed-dating interactions she analysed (2010: 263).

The argument I make in the rest of this paper is that, despite these challenges, since members of a culture *do* identify discrete social actions, as well as broader ‘interactional projects’ (Levinson, 2013) or ‘courses of action’ (Schegloff, 2007) as vehicles for possible flirting, the problems assumed to render flirting unstudiable may have been over-played. Instead, the interesting empirical question is ‘how might we go about identifying the interactional practices that make possible flirting recognisable to us as such?’ What kinds of collections might we make, and what analytic approach might we adopt, to render flirting studiable? Conversation analysis (henceforth CA) provides some useful methodological resources in this respect.

Conversation analytic resources for validating claims about social action

It is a common misunderstanding of CA that we can only validate a claim that an utterance is a possible instance of a certain action with reference to its uptake –often conceptualised as the ‘next-turn proof procedure’ (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974: 728-9). Using uptake as a source of validation is straightforward when you have members explicitly orienting to a prior

¹ I am grateful to Liz Stokoe for referring me to Derek Edwards’ notion of ‘designedly ambiguous’ actions (Edwards, personal communication, cited in Stokoe, 2012).

turn as possibly doing flirting. However, it cannot account for instances where the participant's displayed understanding constitutes a 'misunderstanding', or where a turn may prompt a particular next action but that action does not materialise (Schegloff, 1996a: 173: n6). Both of these things (misunderstanding and lack of uptake) may be rife with flirting. Finally, members themselves do not have the benefit of access to uptake as a resource in deciding whether or not someone is flirting with them.

Taking this into account, and following Schegloff's (1996a, 1996b) writings on identifying a 'possible X', in order to provide an empirically grounded account of the social action of flirting, I take it that we need to do three things:

- (1) Identify instances that contain evidence in the form of orientations or uptakes that the parties understood the prior utterance or conduct, as 'possibly doing' flirting (Schegloff, 1996a: 172).
- (2) Provide an account 'of what about the production of that talk/conduct provided for its recognisability as such an action' (Schegloff 1996a: 173), by examining, for example, the linguistic design of the flirting turns, which may have an 'objective import' on formal grounds (1996a: 173 n6).

It is only once we have completed these steps that we will be in a position to:

- (3) Identify possible flirting (and failures to recognise flirting) in instances where there are no orientations or uptakes treating it as such – and '*whether or not it was so understood by its recipient on any particular occasion*' (Schegloff, 1996a: 173 emphasis in original, see also Schegloff, 1996b: 116-17, n8).

This paper has two aims: First, I identify the interactional practices that participants treat as possible flirting in real life interactions. Second, I contribute to the CA literature on action formation by demonstrating a method for grounding our analyses of apparently ambiguous and inexplicit social actions.

Method

I draw on three sets of data:

- (1) Instances containing ‘endogenous’² (interaction internal) orientations to flirting in which one or more of the parties explicitly orients toward and labels a prior action as flirting during the interactional episode. These instances help us to locate what in the immediately prior interaction (and proximate social context) members characterise as flirting. I identified three instances (so far) from publicly broadcast media data.
- (2) Instances that contain no such orientations but which someone has categorised as flirting post hoc, outside the interactional episode. Such categorisation often occurs in a recorded interview about the flirting episode, or in a written title someone has applied to the instance after posting a clip of it on youtube (commonly headed ‘so and so flirting with so and so’ – evidence reproduced in the relevant extract headers below). I call these ‘exogenous’ (interaction external, post hoc) orientations to flirting, and have identified about 30 instances so far from publicly broadcast media data.³ These examples provide a less proximate form of evidence of members’ orientations to flirting. However, they constitute a ‘next best’ kind of evidence to supplement data set 1.

² I am grateful to Ruth Parry for suggesting I use the terms ‘endogenous’ and ‘exogenous’ here.

³ This broadcast data ensures access to the ‘original’ interactional episode containing the action(s) that have been categorised as flirting post hoc.

- (3) A handful of less transparent cases (see Schegloff, 1996a) from a range of settings, that contain no explicit orientations to flirting, but which I think *are* possible instances of flirting. This set are qualitatively different from the exogenous orientations examples in set two, because I do not have any independent, quotable, evidence of orientations to validate my claim that these data contain flirting. I am very grateful to Liz Stokoe for allowing me to use the two instances I include here, from her corpus of 30 audiotaped ‘speed dates’, recorded by participants with their consent at a speed-dating event in the UK (Stokoe, 2010).

I divide the analyses into three sections that map onto these different kinds of evidence. Across the analyses I consider the composition and design of the flirting turns, their sequential environment, and the responses they engender. I discuss the implications of the analyses for our understanding of flirting as a social action, and the problems and possibilities of the methodological approach I have outlined.

1. Endogenous (interaction internal) orientations to flirting

Extracts 1-2 contain explicit, endogenous orientations to flirting. Here, either the flirt recipient or a co-present party name a prior action as flirting during the interactional episode (these orientations are marked in bold on the transcripts). Extract 1 comes from the British companion show to the X Factor, the Xtra Factor. Olly Murs is the presenter and Melanie the contestant:

- (1) [Xtra Factor ITV2 Sept 1, 2012]
1 Olly: So Melanie where are we now.
2 Mel: Pt We are in the Mum’s loung[e, and uhm, this is where I=
3 Olly: [Mm hm,
4 Mel: =do .hh uh:: some gigs an’ things here?
5 Olly: Do you sing here right?

6 Mel: Yeah, yeah [I do.
7 Olly: → [D'you know what I'm now gonna call it the
8 → Yummy mummy lounge.
9 Mel: → .Hhhhhh ((open mouthed, turns away))
10 → I like tha::t.
11 Olly: It's better isn't it.
12 (.)
13 Mel: Pt **>are you flirting with me.<**
14 Olly: Just a little [bit.
15 Mel: → [*Ahhhhh!* ((open mouthed, squeaking, raises
16 → shoulders, turns away, looks down))
17 Olly: .Hhh Uh::m but d'you know what I've seen you as
18 Fairy Flutterby, (0.2) but d'you know what, I wanna
19 see Melanie Masson as the artist Right now, sing me a song
20 please.

Extract 2 is from the British talent show, 'Superstar'. Amanda Holden hosts, Dawn French and Andrew Lloyd Webber are on the judging panel:

(2) [Superstar ITV1 Jul 20, 2012]
1 Amanda: Thanks Jason, Da:wn?
2 Dawn: .hhh Well it's very tense tonight but it's very exciting,
3 .hhh I: might BURST with excitement [t actually.
4 Amanda: [Ooh!
5 Audience: ((----Laughter-[---])
6 Amanda: [Eh [heh he
7 Dawn: [And- and that would be very messy
8 because I'm full of soup.
9 Audience: ((----Laughter-[----])
10 Dawn: [So watch ou:t Andrew.
11 Amanda: Uhhh Heh [heh heh. [.hhh [Andre(h)w!
12 Audience: [((---Laug[hter-----))
13 Dawn: [Heh heh heh [heh.
14 Andrew: → [No Dawn
15 → [you're all: w:arm and runny inside, [it'll be fine.
16 Andrew: [((Touches Dawn's shoulder))
17 Dawn: → [heh heh heh [Oh thank you!
18 Audience: [((----Laughter----
19 Dawn: [((Places hand to chest))
20 Audience: [--clapping [-----))
21 Amanda: → **[Oh my good[ness there's all kinds of flirting=**
22 Dawn: → [Eh heh heh heh .hhh ((fans face))
23 → [Hih heh heh heh heh ((fans face))
24 Amanda: → **=going on now.**
25 Audience: [((----Clapping---[---Cheering--))
26 Andrew: [Do you know uh: Amanda [this is a very=
27 Dawn: [Hehih heh heh
28 Andrew: =important night because we're going to lose two boys.

Although these flirting sequences differ in many respects, they contain four common features:

(i) The flirting party compliments the flirt recipient's appearance or character ('yummy mummy' [extract 1, line 8], and 'you're all warm and runny inside' [extract 2, line 15]).

Compliments, like questions, can be vehicles for multiple actions (Hudak et al., 2010: 778, Schegloff, 2007: 9), and can themselves be delivered using another action as their vehicle: Here 'Yummy mummy' (extract 1) is delivered indirectly via an *announcement* about the renaming of the 'Mum's Lounge', while 'you're all warm and runny inside' (extract 2) is delivered directly via a *disagreement* with Dawn, giving reassurance about the potential mess caused by the soup.

The compliments appear to be treated as flirtatious by recipients, for two main reasons: First, compositionally, they are playfully sexualised, containing assessments that index the attractiveness, or the speaker's intimate knowledge of, the flirt recipient: 'Yummy mummy' (extract 1) is a slang term used in the UK to refer to mothers who are attractive and wealthy. Literally translated as 'tasty mother', the assessment invokes sensual pleasure. Hence, by using this descriptor, Olly is playfully declaring that he finds Melanie attractive in a sexualised way. Similarly, in extract 2, the compliment 'you're all w:arm and runny inside' is a double entendre that playfully indexes Andrew's intimate knowledge of Dawn.

Flirting is interesting epistemically: When a speaker compliments their recipient, they are claiming (i) sufficient *knowledge* of, and (ii) *rights* to do so (Heritage, 2012; Stivers, Mondada & Steensig, 2011). Although the two utterances entail different forms of epistemic access (Olly does have epistemic access to the assessable [Melanie's appearance is clearly visible to him], whereas Andrew, by virtue of his status as Dawn's colleague on a judging panel, presumably

does not), both claim *rights* to assess their recipient in a sexualised fashion –rights which neither of them automatically possess (Heritage, 2012; Stivers, Mondada & Steensig, 2011): Olly is the host of the show on which Melanie is a competitor. His institutionally prescribed role is to engage in professionally based activities relevant to hosting – introducing and interviewing competitors. He therefore has rights to assess Melanie’s skills and talents as a competitor, but not necessarily her attractiveness. Similarly, Andrew is Dawn’s colleague on a judging panel. His role is to assess the skills and talents of the competitors; he does not have automatic rights to assess Dawn’s insides in a sexualised manner.

Therefore, a second reason why these compliments appear to be heard *as* flirtatious by recipients, is because they involve the flirting party claiming epistemic rights to assess their recipient in a way that indexes a greater level of familiarity or intimacy between them than the interactional context, or the statuses of the parties (as host and competitor (extract 1) and colleagues on a judging panel (extract 2) might otherwise make procedurally relevant.

Even though playfulness and ‘near-the-knuckle’ comments may be encouraged in broadcast media settings, these sexualised compliments can be heard as epistemically *presumptuous* (about what is ‘safely sayable’ in this context) or *incongruous*, and designedly so. Indeed, it is the more presumptuous nature of sexualised compliments and the way in which they appear designed to playfully push the boundaries of intimacy, which may account, in part, for the affective, ‘shocked’ reactions of the flirt recipients that we see here.

(ii) As Pomerantz has shown, compliments typically make relevant responses in which the recipients show their appreciation of, or else (more commonly) downgrade, disagree with, or reject the compliment owing to a ‘system of constraints’ that ‘involves speakers’ minimization of

self-praise' (1978:81). A second feature that characterises the flirting sequences, and may provide further evidence that the recipient orients to the compliment as flirtatious, is that the flirt recipient routinely responds to the compliment with a combination of an affective, embodied display of surprise or shock (a form of 'flooding out' to use Goffman's (1974) terminology), and appreciation or approval. These affective reactions display the speaker's stance toward the prior assessment, and are exemplified via a mix of response cries (Goffman, 1981), surprise or reaction tokens (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006), laughter (Glenn & Holt, 2013), and other affective or embodied displays (Peräkylä & Sorjonen, 2012). For example, in extract 1 (line 9), Melanie reacts to the compliment open mouthed, with a sharp intake of breath, and quickly turns away from Olly:

Figure 1: Olly: 'I'm now gonna call it the Yummy mummy lounge' (lines 7-8).



Figure 2: Melanie opens mouth and turns away (line 9)



Figure 3: Line 9, cont'd



Following her initial reaction, Melanie shows her approval, positively evaluating Olly's proposed new venue name ('I like that', line 10).

Similarly in extract 2 (line 17), Dawn reacts to Andrew's compliment with a change of state 'oh' (echoed by Amanda, line 21, Heritage, 1984)), shows her appreciation ('thank you', line 17), places her hand to her chest (line 19), and modulates her own actions and responds to those of others, by laughing. At the same time, Dawn fans her face (lines 22-23) as if cooling herself down from embarrassment.

Figure 6: Andrew: 'It'll be fine' (lines 15-16).



Figure 7: Dawn places her hand to her chest (line 19)



Figure 8: Dawn laughs and fans her face (lines 22-3)



Figure 9: Lines 22-3, cont'd



(iii) Melanie (as flirt recipient) and Amanda (as co-present observer) offer metalinguistic comments in which they orient toward, and name, the just prior action as a possible instance of flirting: >Are you flirting with me.< (extract 1, line 13), and ‘Oh my goodness there’s all kinds of flirting going on now’ (extract 2, lines 21 and 24) do two main things: First they show which interactional practices participants treat as flirting, irrespective of whether they were designed to be heard in that way. Second, as Local and Walker have shown in their analysis of utterances like ‘you sound tired’, which have no necessary phonetic correlates, metalinguistic comments about the interaction also do interactional work. In these two instances, the explicit orientations to flirting index different epistemic stances toward the flirting activity, and perform rather different actions.

Melanie’s ‘are you flirting with me’ is a yes-no interrogative (Raymond, 2003) which defers to Olly’s epistemic authority to confirm or disconfirm flirting. As such, it places Melanie in an epistemically weak position. However, since it is built grammatically to prefer a confirmation that Olly is flirting, it ‘turns the tables’ on Olly, requiring him to admit to

something that is routinely left implicit. It is perhaps for this reason that ‘are you flirting with me?’ could itself be characterised as flirtatious.

Although Olly’s non-type-conforming response ‘Just a little bit’ (line 14) minimises flirting, Melanie *treats* it as an admission of flirting (lines 15-16), exhibits a similar affective reaction as before, and looks down and away in a display of bashfulness:

Figure 4: Melanie: ‘Are you flirting with me?’ (line 13)



Figure 5: Melanie: Open mouthed, squeaking, raises shoulders, turns away, looks down (lines 15-16).



In extract two, Amanda provides a declarative commentary on the current interaction for the audience: she echoes Dawn's 'shocked' reaction ('oh my goodness', line 21), before making an announcement that claims both epistemic access and rights to name the just prior action as flirting (lines 21 and 24) – which meets with audience approval (line 25).

(iv) The flirting sequences represent opportunistic expansions of a sequence, whose progress is temporarily suspended while the flirting sequence is underway. The compliments resourcefully exploit, and build on, the flirt recipient's prior comments about the 'Mum's lounge' (extract 1, line 2) and being 'full of soup' (extract 2, line 8) respectively (in extract 2, Dawn explicitly invites Andrew to participate [line 10]). Finally, the turns that contain participants' orientations to flirting mark the last actions initiated in the flirting sequence. Once the flirting episode is complete, the party responsible for progressing the sequence (Olly as host and Andrew as next judge) resumes business as usual.

2. Exogenous (interaction external, post hoc) orientations to flirting.

The second set of data contain more distal, 'exogenous' orientations to flirting. These post-hoc orientations demonstrate the wider recognisability of sexualised compliments as flirtatious, and how other practices, including self-compliments (or 'self praise'), and certain kinds of teasing, serve as vehicles for flirting.

Extract 3 is a compilation clip of the Xtra Factor and a post-hoc interview about the show on the Magazine programme, This Morning. The compilation was labelled as an example of flirting by someone who loaded it onto Youtube, as 'James Arthur & Caroline Flack - A *Flirting* Master-Class' (shown in the extract header, below). The interactions in the compilation are also

labelled as flirting by Holly during the interview ('I mean he's been doing a lot of flirting with you Caroline', lines 2 and 4):

(3) ['James Arthur & Caroline Flack - A Flirting Master-Class' YouTube]
((This Morning interview))
1 Holly: Uhm:: pt (.) y-y-you loved- you think you love him but
2 → din't- coz he- pretty much- loves you. **I me[an he's been=**
3 Caro: [Heh heh heh
4 Holly: → **=doing a lot of flirting [with you Caroline.**
5 Caro: [.Hhh
6 He's- he's admitted that I'm his 'celeb(h)rity(h)
7 cru(hh)sh(hh)'.
8 Phil: [Really.
9 Holly: [.Hhhh [And how-
10 Caro: [Which I find very flattering.

((Cuts to Xtra Factor))
11 Caro: James Arthur congratulations, first of all for just being
12 brilliant. (Clapping))
13 James: [(Mou~~th~~s something like 'thank you'))
14 Olly: [Brill[iant (tonight).
15 Audience: [((---[Clapping and jeering -----))
16 Caro: [(And secon::d for GETting-
17 for getting a standing ovation from all four judges,
18 how did that feel?
19 James: → °Hih° I can't really think straight coz (0.6) this is the
20 → most beautiful I've seen you look ((Looks Caroline up and
21 down)).
22 All: [OHHHHH:::~::~:
23 Caro: → [Ahh:: hah hah [ha((turns away, open mouth, arm to chest))
24 Olly: [(Turns away, open mouth, points at Caro))
25: ? : [What's going on!
26 ? : ()
27 (Voiceover):GET A ROO::[M!
28 James: → [Seri- seriously you look stunning.
29 Caro: → [>*↑↑Oh my God!*< Thank [you so: much,
30 Olly: → [Ah : : : : : [that's a great
31 → comp[liment that one.
32 Caro: [But it is about YOU tonight,

((Cuts to This Morning interview))
33 Phil: Wha:t is [going on there.
34 Holly: [How:: swee::t is tha::t.
35 (0.4)
36 Caro: → **He has this way of just making you .hh like touch your**
37 → **hai:r and go all gir:ly .hh when he gives you compliments**
38 an' .hhh I dunno. He's just very charming=but he is like
39 that with a lot of girls.
40 (0.4)
41 Phil: Real[ly?
42 Caro: [So- Yeah.
43 (.)
44 Phil: Not ↑just you.
45 Caro: It's- I don't think it's ju[st me.

46 Phil: [<Heh
47 Caro: ['Coz he's very good at it.
48 Holly: [Oh:::
49 (0.8)
50 Caro: I dunno. >I'm not sure.<
51 Holly: *(>°It's ever so sweet°<)*

The opening of this extract is compliment rich. Caroline congratulates James for 'being brilliant' (lines 11-12), which is echoed by Olly (line 14). There is nothing particularly unusual about this compliment: It is clearly 'fitted' to the setting, and, as hosts, Caroline and Olly have epistemic access to, *and* rights to assess, James's performance. The action accomplished by the compliment is affiliative, and it generates an appreciation from James, who mouths something like 'thank you' (line 13), which demonstrates that he 'both accepts the compliment and treats it as having bestowed a benefit' (Shaw & Kitzinger, 2012: 221).

A few lines later, the flirting party, James, issues a reciprocal compliment regarding Caroline's appearance: 'this is the most beautiful I've seen you look (lines 19-20)'. Unlike Caroline and Olly's unremarkable compliment, this one is hearable as flirtatious because it is playfully sexualised: It indexes Caroline's physical attractiveness, and, by implication, suggests that James *finds her* attractive. Indeed, he is so unsettled by her beauty that he declares he 'can't really think straight' (line 19). Further evidence for the sexualised nature of the compliment comes from the voiceover man's 'Get a room' (line 27).

As I have already noted, a key reason why these compliments appear to be treated as flirtatious by participants is because they involve the flirting party claiming rights to assess their recipient in a way that indexes a greater familiarity or intimacy between them than the interactional context, or the status of the speakers, might otherwise make procedurally relevant. In this extract, James clearly has epistemic access to the assessable (Caroline is right in front of him). However, as competitor on a talent show, who presumably does not know the host,

Caroline, on intimate terms, he does not have automatic rights to assess her appearance in a sexualised manner, for an audience. For this reason, the compliment can be heard as epistemically presumptuous or incongruous, and designedly so.

As before, the flirt recipient, Caroline, responds to the sexualised compliment with an affective display of surprise or shock: She says ‘aaahhhhhhhh’, laughs and looks away, open mouthed, raising her arm to her chest (line 23). Olly echoes Caroline’s embodied actions (line 24), before pointing at her, drawing attention to, and mocking her reaction for the audience:

Figure 10: Caroline: ‘A standing ovation from all four judges’ (line 17)



Figure 11: James: ‘This is the most beautiful I’ve seen you look’ (lines 19-21)



Figure 12: Caroline and Olly turn away with open mouths (lines 23 and 24)



Figure 13: Caroline places arm up to chest, Olly points at Caroline (lines 23 and 24)



James upgrades his compliment to ‘seriously you look stunning’ (line 28). By prefacing it with ‘seriously’ James may be displaying some orientation to the affective manner in which Caroline responded to the original compliment, to shift things from a hearably playful or non-serious frame, to a serious one. Caroline further exclaims ‘Oh my God’, this time showing her appreciation - ‘thank you so much’ (line 29).

Interestingly, Olly and Caroline independently pinpoint the compliment as the cause of their affective reactions: ‘that’s a great compliment that one’ (Olly, lines 30-31), and ‘He has this way of just making you .hh like touch your hair and go all girly .hh when he gives you compliments’ (Caroline, lines 36-7: note that Caroline does not actually touch her hair in response to the compliment).

Finally, James’s compliment is initiated in second position to Caroline’s question - ‘how did that feel?’ (line 18). It therefore opportunistically hijacks the sequence in a more explicit fashion than we’ve seen previously, by displacing the second pair part response to the question (which he never answers), so underwriting his claim that he ‘can’t really think straight’ (line 19). In this extract Caroline, as the recipient of the flirting, resumes business as usual: As interviewer she is responsible for progressing the sequence that was hijacked by James, which she does by turning the focus back onto him: ‘But it is about YOU tonight’ (line 32).

The evidence discussed so far strongly suggests that participants can and do orient to discrete actions, like sexualised compliments, as vehicles for flirting. These kinds of compliments figure prominently across the corpus. However, they are frequently not isolated, unexpanded phenomenon: A large proportion of the second data set containing exogenous orientations to flirting, demonstrate the ways in which a flirtatious environment, ‘project’ (Levinson 2013) or ‘course of action’ (Schegloff 2007), can be built through the combination of sexualised compliments, including variations on complimenting, like self-praise, with other actions, like particular kinds of teases.

Extract 4 comes from the US *Tonight* show, where Piers Morgan interviews the former secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice. This sequence is reportedly labelled as flirting by Piers in a

subsequent New York Post article about the interview, reproduced under the extract header, below:

- (4) [Piers Morgan Tonight, Interview with Condoleezza Rice, aired Jan 19, 2011]
'The meeting was barely underway, and already talk had turned from scheduling to flirting. "There was proper flirtation - I was flirting with Condoleezza Rice and Oprah on Week One," Piers Morgan declared' (New York Post, Jan 17 2011).
- 1 Morgan: → Dr Rice, you are (0.4) and rema:in (.) one of the most
2 eligible women in Washington.
3 Rice: → Uhh huh huh ((shuts eyes, moves head down and away,
4 smiling))
5 Rice: [.Hhhh
6 Morgan: [How have you: avoided being snared in thē
7 marital tr[ap.
8 Rice: [Well, actually I live in California now=
9 Morgan: [Eh HEH HEH HEH HEH hah hah hah hah hah] .hhh
10 Rice: =[but uh : : : Hah ha h h .h h h h h]
11 ('kay) I've always said that I expected to grow up and get
12 married like any nice Southern girl,
13 Morgan: °Mm°,
14 Rice: But the fact is you don't get married in the
15 a:bstract (.) you find someone that you'd like to be
16 married to:: [and hhhh
17 Morgan: [How close have you come.
18 (0.2)
19 Rice: Uh::- ↑I've come close.
20 (0.2)
21 Morgan: How many times.
22 (.)
23 Rice: Pt I'm not going there ((Shakes head))
24 Morgan: Ehh[h
25 Rice: [Eh heh heh [heh ah heh heh I'm(h) no(h)t=
26 Morgan: → [You nearly ↑did.
27 Rice: =goi(h)ng the(h)re [.hhhhh
28 Morgan: → [You didn't think you'd go there to
29 → ↑start [with.
30 Rice: [I know:: but- but the fact is I- >you know I've
31 just never found anybody that I was going to (.) spend my
32 life with.=↑But I think it's a wonderful thhing marriage
33 and uhh::m you know, who ↑kno:ws, [maybe some day.
34 Morgan: [Do you- do yo- do you
35 hold out hope?
36 Rice: Sure (.) why no:t?
37 Morgan: Did you dream of a fairytale wedding still?
38 Rice: No. No no no I think I'm well beyond the
39 [fairytale we(h)l- we(h)ddin(h)g sta(h)ge(h).
40 Morgan: [Ehhhhh
41 Morgan: → .Hhhh But you're quite a catch are[n't you.
42 Rice: → [.Hhh
43 → Well ↑thank you ((Nodding, smiling)).
44 (0.6)
45 Morgan: Are you romantic.

(.)

47 Rice: Of ↑course.
((Two lines omitted))

48 Morgan: [>But if I<] was gonna woo you,
49 (0.4)

50 Rice: Yeah,

51 Morgan: Which isn't, y'know,
52 (.)

53 Rice: Y[eah,
54 [completely crazy, but if I was going to:,
55 (0.4)

56 Rice: Con- [convince con- [convince me-

57 Morgan: [How- how- [how would I

58 Rice: Convince me that you'll spend Sunday afternoons watching
59 foot[ball.

60 Morgan: [Ehehhhhh
((41 lines omitted in which discuss what they'd do on a 'hypothetical date'))

61 Morgan: → You sound like the dream ↑woman!

62 Rice: Eh h h h he[h heh

63 Morgan: [You eat fried chicken, you watch
64 [football all day,]

65 Rice: [.h h h h h] ↑Yeah,

66 Morgan: This is perfect!

67 Rice: Yeah.
68 (0.4)

69 Morgan: [Hehhhhhhhh [Heh heh heh .hhhh

70 Rice: [I just haven't found the dream ↑man, [but, you know we

71 Rice: [all keep trying.]

72 Morgan: [.h h h h h] What ambitions do you have left?

This extract contains a cascade of sexualised compliments: ‘Dr Rice you are and remain one of the most eligible women in Washington’ (lines 1-2 - an assessment that is developed in the subsequent metaphor of Rice as prey (lines 6-7)), ‘you’re quite a catch aren’t you’ (line 41), and ‘You sound like the dream woman (line 61). As before, these compliments are hearable as flirtatious because they index Rice’s desirability as a potential partner, and, by implication, suggest that Morgan himself may *find her* desirable - a possibility that Morgan topicalises later by raising the prospect of him hypothetically ‘wooing’ Rice (lines 48, 51, and 54).

Even though Morgan has epistemic access to the assessable, as interviewer on a news programme, he presumably does not know the former secretary of state very well (he uses the formal address term ‘Dr Rice’, line 1). Hence he does not have automatic rights to publicly

assess her desirability for an audience, and in a manner that presumes a greater level of familiarity or intimacy between them than they share. The presumptuous nature of these compliments therefore generates an incongruity that contributes to their hearability as flirtatious.

Rice responds to the first compliment with an affective, embodied reaction in which she laughs, shuts her eyes and moves her head down and away, smiling (lines 3-4):

Figure 14: Morgan: ‘you are and remain one of the most eligible women in Washington’ (lines 1-2).



Figure 15: Rice (line 2)



Figure 16: Rice laughs and shuts her eyes (line 3)



Figure 17: Rice moves her head down and away, smiling (lines 3-4).



She undercuts Morgan's claims to epistemic access by noting 'actually I live in California now' (line 8) – a move which is itself playful and generates laughter (lines 9 - 10). The second compliment, 'you're quite a catch aren't you' (line 41) is grammatically tilted toward an agreeing response, which it gets: Rice shows appreciation – 'Well thank you', nods and smiles (line 43). She responds to the third compliment, 'You sound like the dream woman' (line 61), which is not so strongly tilted, with a further affective reaction - a brief burst of laughter (line 62).

Morgan teases Rice when, following the first compliment, she resists his line of questioning pushing her to disclose how many times she has ‘come close’ to finding someone she would like to marry, by stating that she is ‘not going there’ (line 23). Drew defines teasing as ‘mocking but playful jibes against someone’. In Drew’s data teases occur in an environment where the tease recipient has been ‘complaining, extolling, bragging etc., in a somewhat overdone or exaggerated fashion’. They therefore represent ‘a form of social control of minor conversational transgressions’ (1987: 219). By contrast, the teases in my data involve the speaker opportunistically drawing attention to, and playfully mocking, the *current interactional behaviour or appearance* of the recipient in order to flirt with them.

Morgan teases Rice by mocking her resistance: ‘You nearly did’ (line 26) and ‘You didn’t think you’d go there to start with’ (lines 28-9). In response to the first tease Rice restates her position, her interpolated laughter acknowledging the humour in the tease (line 17). She responds to the second tease by stating her serious, bottom line position on marriage (lines 30ff) – a somewhat defensive, ‘po-faced’ response (Drew, 1987).

Drew notes that teasing usually occurs in informal settings amongst participants who are closely acquainted with one another and can be a means of displaying and assessing ‘informality’ and ‘intimacy’ or ‘what they take their relationship currently to be’ (1987: 220). The teases in my data appear distinctively flirtatious, because they represent a further means by which the flirting party seeks to display a greater level of familiarity and intimacy with the flirt recipient than their respective statuses as (otherwise unacquainted) news interviewer and secretary of state, make relevant. By teasing her, Morgan presumptuously treats Rice *as though* they know each other well.

Finally, in this extract the flirting sequence does not represent an opportunistic expansion of a prior sequence. Rather, the topic of Rice's desirability is initiated by Morgan at the start of a new sequence, and repeatedly invoked through a cascade of sexualised compliments and teases, in a flirtatious course of action.

Extract 5 comes from the British reality show, *Big Brother*, and provides further evidence for the way in which teasing can be used as a vehicle for flirting. This extract also demonstrates an important variation on complimenting - flirtatious *self-praise*, in which the flirting party *compliments themselves in a sexualised fashion* and seeks the agreement or approval of the flirt recipient (Speer, 2012a). Through this practice, the flirting party mischievously attempts to manipulate the flirt *recipient* into flirting.

Luke and Rebecca's interactions were widely characterised as flirtatious in the media at the time, and this particular sequence was categorised as flirting by a journal reviewer of an earlier paper, who wrote that Luke was 'teasing' and 'flirting with Rebecca':

- (5) [Big Brother Uncut E4 12.07.08 1:04 mins, Speer, 2012a]
- 1 Luke: >Big Brother< I never understood the whole Goth thing
2 → worshipping death and stuff but I must
3 → admit [I think I'm pulling slim black off=
4 Rebecca: [Yeah.
5 Luke: → =and Rebecca it's making me look uhm::
6 → ((Puts tongue in cheek, nodding ---0.4---))
7 → .hhh more enti:cing to other ↑people
8 → I would say.
9 Rebecca: → ((Pushes Luke's head away, smiling))
10 Rebecca: → Luke wants me now.
11 Luke: → U:h huhhh [she WISHES.
12 Mikey: [[Hehh
13 (0.4)
14 Rebecca: → Luke wants me.
15 (0.9)
16 Luke: Apparently, Big Brother I'm a cute goth.
17 (0.8)
18 Rebecca: Said the new housemates.

Luke compliments himself directly with ‘I think I'm pulling slim black off’ (lines 2-3), and ‘it's making me look uhm:: .hhh more enticing to other people I would say’ (lines 5-8). This self-praise is flirtatious because it represents a playful, sexualised assessment of Luke's appearance similar to those we have seen in other extracts (note also the ‘tongue in cheek’, line 6). It is also strongly tilted toward an agreeing response: Luke invites Rebecca to agree with him: ‘Rebecca it's making me look’ (line 5), nodding to encourage agreement (line 6). However, if Rebecca agrees that Luke's appearance makes him ‘more enticing’ to others, she simultaneously declares a possible sexual interest in Luke.

Luke's self-assessment is especially problematic epistemically: First it violates the norm against self-praise which holds that, terms, praise about speaker A should be delivered by someone else, as a B-event statement, that is, as something ‘which B knows about but A does not’ (Labov 1972: 254; Speer, 2012a). Second, it violates the preference for noticing by others over announcement by self (Schegloff, 2007: 82).

Unsurprisingly, Luke's efforts to recruit Rebecca into flirting with him, are apparently playfully resisted by Rebecca, and provoke an affective, embodied, reaction: She pushes Luke's head away from her, smiling as she does so (line 9):

Figure 18: Luke (sat on right): ‘Rebecca it's making me look (tongue in cheek, nodding) more enticing to other people I would say’ (lines 5-8)



Figure 19: Rebecca Pushes Luke's head away, smiling (line 9).



Instead of indexing Rebecca's 'shock' or 'embarrassment', Rebecca's push away and subsequent response turns the tables on Luke to flirt with *him*, by teasingly intimating that his actions are motivated by his sexual attraction to her: 'Luke wants me now' (line 10) - something Luke also teasingly resists with 'she wishes' (line 11).

Unlike the participants in the previous extracts, Luke and Rebecca are already closely acquainted status equals by virtue of their role as housemates. In this respect one would expect the reciprocal teasing to trade on, and serve as a display of, that relationship. However, the cascade of reciprocal teases are hearable as flirtatious because they claim first hand knowledge of, and epistemic access to, the other's sexual feelings and wishes in order to mock their current

behaviour - a knowledge that they do not possess. Ultimately, the sexualised teases serve to embellish the work done by the sexualised self-praise in building a flirtatious course of action, even while (for Rebecca at least) they apparently resist it.

So far, the analysis of the first two sets of data that contain endogenous and exogenous orientations to flirting respectively, have allowed us to begin to identify the range of interactional practices that are oriented to by participants as vehicles for possible flirting. We now have the analytic resources to begin to recognise and unpack similar practices that might constitute possible flirting in the third set of instances that represent less transparent cases containing no explicit orientations to flirting.

3. No explicit orientations to flirting

Extracts six and seven come from speed dating interactions:

(6) [Speed dating 2, Stokoe]

1 Jan: I li:ke to go to a dance club.=I [like dance music.
2 Lee: [Yeah ()]
3 'Cos you look quite young- an' you look very young
4 actually.=are you like in yer: late twenties::,
5 (0.2)
6 Lee: Early thirties?
7 Jan: Early thir:ties. Ye:ah.
8 Lee: Y'look latetwenny.
9 (0.4)
10 Lee: You lo:ok very young.
11 Jan: [Thank you.
12 Lee: [>I mean< I'm actually um::, (0.6) twenty
13 ni:ne actually.
14 Jan: Ri:ght.
15 Lee: → But I tend to go for women that are a- (.) fe::w years
16 → older than [me actu]ally, 'cos (.) >I'll be honest=
17 Jan: [Okay,]
18 Lee: → =wiv' ya< I find older women::, a lot more se:xy, a bit
19 → [more,
20 Jan: [Uh- a bit more,
21 (0.2)
22 Jan: bit fmore mat[u:re.f .hhh
23 Lee: → [A bit more fCLASSsy.f[()]

24 Jan: → [.Hh ↑↑heh ↑heh ↑he
25 → ↑heh heh heh
26 Lee: → I mean ↑you're obviously very pretty.
27 → =A[nd you seem like you've got a nice=
28 Jan: → [Aw::: thank you.
29 Lee: → =personality but, (.) but I think (0.4) speed
30 dating, I've learned that- I think the main
31 thing is y- you have to have that connection,
32 Jan: Yeah.
33 (0.4)
34 Lee: When you sit down with someone.

During Jan's response to Lee's question about what she likes to do on good night out, Lee opportunistically shower's her with a cascade of compliments about her youthful appearance (lines 3-4, 7, 8, 10). Although these compliments suggest that Lee may be working to build affiliation with, and flatter her, they are not specifically sexualised or treated as flirtatious by Jan: She apparently resists the flattery, and does not treat them (vocally, at least), as having bestowed a benefit, until line 11 ('thank you').

Having established that he is younger than Jan (see lines 7, 12-13), Lee declares that he tends to 'go for' women that are 'a few years older' than him (15-16). This situates Jan perfectly within Lee's desirable age-bracket, and in the context of a speed-date, brings to relevance the possibility that Lee may 'go for' Jan.

Lee accounts for his preference for older women using the sexualised, trailed off assessment: 'I find older women, a lot more sexy, a bit more' (lines 18-19; note it is prefaced with 'I'll be honest wiv' ya' (lines 16 and 18), cf. James's 'seriously', extract 3). Although built as a generalised assessment about 'older women', since Lee has already established that Jan is a member of this category, then the assessment works indirectly as a sexualised compliment of Jan, similar to the kinds of compliments we have seen in other extracts.

Jan's candidate completion, 'bit more mature' (lines 20 and 22) somewhat 'de-sexualises' Lee's compliment, focussing on the characterological benefits of age, rather than appearance. By contrast, Lee's completion, 'a bit more classy' - meaning 'chic' and 'stylish', somewhat re-sexualizes it. Jan responds to the (now complete) sexualised compliment with an affective burst of laughter similar to that seen in previous extracts (lines 24-5).

Lee's subsequent compliment 'I mean you're obviously very pretty' (line 26) is a direct assessment of Jan's appearance that sustains the possibility that Lee may be interested in her. As such it is receipted by Jan with a further affective response plus appreciation ('Aw::: thank you', line 28).

As before, although flirting may be expected in a speed-dating context, these sexualised compliments appear to be treated as flirtatious by Jan, because they involve Lee claiming rights to assess her in a sexualised fashion when they are previously unacquainted strangers who do not ordinarily possess such rights.

Extract 7, from a different speed-date, contains several instances of self-praise and teasing:

(7) [Speed dating 25, Stokoe]

1 Mik: I'm also [qualified as] a masseur as well.
2 Fio: [I might go to-]
3 (0.4)
4 Fio: You're qualified as [a-
5 Mik: [As a masseur, (yeah).
6 (1.4)
7 Mik: → >So £I'm good with my hands.£<
8 Fio: .Hhh ↑heh ↑heh ↑heh ↑heh ↑heh ↑heh ↑heh ↑heh
9 → ↑heh ↑heh heh heh heh heh heh .hhh ↑↑You could
10 → be a bric[kie.
11 Mik: → [(Look at 'em 'ands.) I could be.
12 Fio: → You could [be a bri(h)ck(h)ie huh
13 Mik: → [>Can you feel those hands you
14 → tell me those hands are a £brickie.£<
15 (0.5)

16 Fio: → They don't look like mass:eur hands:[:.
17 Mik: [Wanna feel
18 them.
19 (.)
20 Fio: → ↑They ↑↑actually look quite feminine.=
21 Mik: =Yeh exa:c[tly. Quite small.]
22 Fio: [To be honest.]
23 Fio: Ye::ah.
24 (1.0)
25 Fio: An' that's what works is it: them
26 [being sma:ll.]
27 Mik: [No it doesn-] n:o,
28 (0.6)
29 Mik: (It's [j(h)u(h)s(h)t-)
30 Fio: [So what's the trick to being a good
31 masseur then.
32 Mik: Just having the right ha:nds.
33 (0.2)
34 Mik: The [right touch.
35 Fio: [W(h)ell t(h)h(h)e(h)r(h)e y(h)o(h)u g(h)o

After telling Fiona that he is a masseur, which gets no (vocalised) response (line 6), Mike announces the upshot, playfully complimenting his own hands: 'So I'm good with my hands' (line 7). Apparently mentioned here as a feature that may be positively valued by Fiona, Mike's self-praise is hearable as flirtatious because it is an idiomatic innuendo that hints at his sexual skill.

Like Luke (extract 5), Mike's comment violates the norm against self-praise and the preference for noticing by others over announcement by self (Speer, 2012a; Schegloff, 2007), and provokes an affective reaction, in the form of laughter (lines 8-9). This laughter could, in light of prior analyses, itself be regarded as an inexplicit orientation to flirting.

Fiona, like Rebecca (extract 5) apparently resists positively acknowledging Mike's self-praise (line 6): She turns the tables on Mike by teasing and gently mocking aspects of his appearance, suggesting that his hands could be those of a 'brickie' (lines 9-10). Since Fiona's comments presumptuously treat Mike *as though* she knows him well enough to tease (when in fact they met moments ago), they could also be regarded as flirtatious.

Just as Luke had invited Rebecca to agree with his sexualised self-praise in extract 5, Mike invites Fiona to ‘look at’ and ‘feel’ his hands, challenging her to retract her view (lines 11 and 13-14, 17-18). Instead of backing down, Fiona continues to tease Mike’s appearance (lines 12, 16, and 20).

When Fiona tries to pin down what makes him a good masseur (lines 25-26, and line 30-31), Mike embellishes his earlier, sexualised self-praise: ‘having the right hands’ (line 32), ‘the right touch’ (line 34), which Fiona reacts to in a similarly affective fashion, with laughter (line 35).

Discussion

Analyses suggest that participants sometimes treat flirting and the (serious or playful) intentions that are presumed to underlie it, as ambiguous and deniable. For example, in extract 3, in her post hoc comments on James’ flirting, Caroline reports uncertainty about whether he’s singling her out for special treatment: ‘I don’t think it’s just me’ (line 44), and ‘I dunno. >I’m not sure.<’ (line 49). Likewise, in extract 1, Melanie asks Olly *if* he is flirting with her (line 13) and Olly minimises flirting (line 14). I do not have any examples where a participant readily accepts that they have been flirting.

Numerous contextual factors may figure in whether participants classify an utterance like ‘you look stunning!’ as flirtatious or, for example, ‘just a compliment’. Levinson suggests that ‘the process of attributing an action to a turn is a fallible, negotiated, and even potentially ineffable process’ (2013: 104). Flirting, like other, similarly deniable actions (e.g., kidding, manipulating, wheedling, and so on), need not be considered unique in this respect. As Schegloff

notes, inexplicitness and indexicality are ‘omnipresent’ in interaction, and ‘in the nature of the case, requires ‘solving’ by hearers’ (1996a: 209).

Despite this, the evidence suggests that the practices of flirting are perhaps not as inexplicit or ambiguous to participants as we have ordinarily rushed to assume: Members can and do treat possible flirting as an identifiable social action. It has long been recognised that ‘a single TCU can embody more than one action’ (Schegloff, 2007: 9, see also Levinson 2013: 127), and analyses suggest that participants can ‘find’ flirting in single turns containing discrete actions, like sexualised compliments. However, I have also demonstrated that these are frequently not isolated, unexpanded phenomenon, but that a flirtatious project or course of action (and sometimes a reciprocal one), can be built through the combination of sexualised compliments or self-praise, with other actions, like particular kinds of teases.

We attribute an action to a sequence on the basis of a range of factors, including ‘format (linguistic shape), content ...position in a sequence..., by detecting the underlying project..., and by tracking epistemic authority and other aspects of context’ (Levinson, 2013: 127). The sequences analysed here appear to be treated as flirtatious by participants for two main reasons: First – they are playfully sexualised, indexing either the attractiveness, desirability, or the speaker’s intimate knowledge of, the flirt recipient. Second, they are epistemically presumptuous, or incongruous (and designedly so), involving the flirting party claiming rights to assess their recipient and sexualise the encounter in a manner that indexes a greater actual or potential intimacy between the parties than is otherwise procedurally relevant. Indeed, it is this more presumptuous nature of sexualised compliments, self-praise and teases, and the way they appear designed to playfully push the boundaries of intimacy, which may account, in part, for the affective, shocked reactions of the flirt recipients and observers that we see here. Moreover,

contrary to popular belief, which suggests that flirting consists commonly or even primarily of non-verbal signals (Givens, 1978), in the majority of cases, it is the flirt *recipient's* embodied conduct (exemplifying their affective reactions) that is most notable. When it comes to the practices that characterise the flirting turns, 'in important respects nonverbal conduct is subordinate to the verbal conduct with which it is intermeshed' (Drew, 2005: 78).

Of course, the apparent lack of ambiguity - and the 'recognisability' of flirting in the data, may be an artefact of the instances I have had to depend on here: All of the extracts in the endogenous and exogenous data sets derive from interactions broadcast in the media for entertainment. Though naturally occurring, this broadcast setting may be procedurally consequential for the phenomenon of flirting, because in contexts recorded for a mass audience, the flirting may be designed specifically for entertainment value, to shock, and provoke reactions. Hence, flirting explicitly or in an exaggerated fashion (and naming the activity *as* flirting) may be interactionally safer in this context than in non-broadcast settings, and lead to the identification of an artificially narrow range of 'setting specific' flirting practices. However, the third set of data *not* broadcast in the media, and which contains no explicit orientations to flirting, demonstrates that while the precise way the flirting interactions run off in each case may be setting specific, the range of practices identified are relatively generic, or context free (Drew, 2003; Speer, 2012b).

I want to reflect briefly on the extent to which the visibility and nameability of these sequences as flirting is located in participants' assumptions about the sexual orientations, relationship status or interactional role of those involved. While I am not advocating a variationist, variables-and-effects style of analysis, it is interesting to note that of the 15 strongest instances in the corpus, 12 are initiated by men to women, two by women to men, and one by an

openly gay man to an openly heterosexual man who has a partner. Of the six instances that take place during a televised interview, two are initiated by the interviewer to the interviewee, and four by the interviewee to the interviewer.

The greater proportion of male-female initiations of flirting may reflect a pattern that one would expect given cultural stereotypes about advances in heterosexual dating encounters. However, the breakdown above suggests that flirting is not limited to those of assumed heterosexual or single status, or to those in positions of interactional power (e.g. interviewers). Hence, the *practices* that participants identify (exogenously or endogenously) as flirting, and its hearability as such, seem to be independent of demographic factors, roles and statuses. The data suggests that flirting can, in principle, be initiated *by* anyone *to* anyone.

I want to end by discussing the limitations of the methodological procedure advocated here, and specifically the use of the second set of data containing exogenous orientations to flirting. Do these data constitute a valid source of evidence for this kind of project? Or is their use vulnerable to the suggestion that I am simply importing the interaction external *macro context* by the back door?

These exogenous orientations are, by their very nature, post hoc and hence less proximate forms of evidence for uptake than the endogenous orientations in the first data set. It is therefore harder to know *exactly* what in the prior spate of talk the speaker is characterising retrospectively as flirting (is it the compliment specifically, or the compliment and the tease, combined with indeterminate other contextual factors?) It is widely understood that participants' retrospective comments on interaction may not map neatly onto what actually took place during that interaction. Pomerantz (2012: 504) suggests that 'depending on the aims of the study, there may be good reasons to seek participants' reports, perspectives, and versions of events in addition to

capturing interactional data' (see also Ehrlich's (2002) work on 'nonspeaking reciprocity'). I support this view, and have made a methodological case for the inclusion of these other kinds of 'less transparent' and less proximate orientations. Further work is needed conducting comparative analyses of flirting interactions across data from widely varying settings to tease apart the precise ways in which the exogenously oriented-to practices identified here relate to or embellish each other.

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