Driven by a Social and Interactional Routine: Responding to a Mobile Phone Summons in a Car

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ABSTRACT

The article reports findings from a qualitative study that draws on the methods of conversation analysis and on audio-video recordings of ordinary, real-life, non-experimental driving situations. The article shows what happens in a car after a mobile phone summons, i.e., the initial ring or beep of a car occupant’s phone. It identifies three phases (i.e., orienting to, locating and handling a phone) that follow the summons and lead to an attempt at verbally responding to the summons. It is shown that the ringing of a phone (indicating an incoming call) or the beeping of a phone (indicating an incoming text message), as a socially and interacionally significant action, is treated as requiring a more or less immediate response. It is argued that this routinization of responding to a summons explains drivers’, and possible passengers’, use of a mobile phone while traveling in a car.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, Driving, Mobile (Cellular) Phones, Social Interaction, Summons–Response Sequences

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the use of a specific mobile device in a particular setting that involves movement: the use of mobile (cellular) phones in cars. It connects to and complements prior studies, conducted especially in research on driving and traffic safety, by providing detailed analyses of real-life, real-time instances of the use of mobile phones in cars and by highlighting the social and interactional aspects related to the use.

A mobile phone is a technical artifact that sets various physical and mental demands on the user and thus in many ways serves as a potential source of distraction in the context of driving a car (see, e.g., Caird, Willness, Steel, & Scialfa, 2008; Trick, Enns, Mills, & Vavrik, 2004, for reviews). In line with this observation, Lamble, Kauranen, Laakso, and Summala (1999) note that in evaluating the effects of the use of mobile phones on driving, all aspects of it should be considered: not only the manual
and visual (i.e., holding a phone and looking at it), but also the auditory and vocal (i.e., listening and talking to a co-interactant). Indeed, many studies have considered these separate aspects of using a mobile phone while driving and made a division in their experimental set-ups between the manipulation of a phone and having a conversation on the phone (see, e.g., Consiglio, Driscoll, Witte, & Berg, 2003; Kubose, Bock, Dell, Garnsey, Kramer, & Mayhugh, 2006; Matthews, Legg, & Charlton, 2003; Nunes & Recarte, 2002; Redelmeier & Tibshirani, 1997; Strayer & Johnston, 2001). The manual operation of in-vehicle equipment in itself has been shown to have a negative impact on driving (Briem & Hedman, 1995; Brookhuis, de Vries, & de Waard, 1991; Lamble et al., 1999; Matthews et al., 2003; McKnight & McKnight, 1993), and a growing number of studies argue that it is the cognitive requirements of conversing on the phone that most critically affect driving (Amado & Ulupınar, 2005; Beede & Kass, 2006; Consiglio et al., 2003; Kubose et al., 2006; Matthews et al., 2003; Patten, Kircher, Östlund, & Nilsson, 2004; Rakauskas, Gugerty, & Ward, 2004; Strayer & Johnston, 2001).

Observations about the potential hazards of conversing while driving have led researchers to focus on and examine the actual moment of conversation, rather than the initiation or termination of calls, even if such data were available to them (Nunes & Recarte, 2002; Patten et al., 2004; Törnros & Bolling, 2006). Moreover, although many have touched upon the issue, few studies have analyzed what happens before a mobile phone conversation in cars (see, e.g., Haigney, Taylor, & Westerman, 2000; Lerner, 2005; Lerner & Boyd, 2005, Reimer, Mehler, Coughlin, Roy, & Dusek, 2011, Törnros & Bolling, 2006). Nevertheless, the placing and receiving of calls represent different kinds of tasks, the initiation of which involves various steps: whereas outgoing calls can be initiated fairly flexibly, incoming calls set a social, interactional and temporal constraint that requires a more or less immediate response (Haddington & Rauniomaa, 2011; see also Lerner, 2005, who distinguishes between incoming and outgoing calls). Indeed, reporting on the results of their naturalistic driving study, Stutts et al. (2005) note that there were 15 incoming calls in the 207.2 hours of video data and that “[a]ll but one of the incoming cell phone calls were responded to within one or two rings, and none was ignored” (p. 1097). It seems important, then, that researchers take into account the social and interactional routines and practices that participants may not be aware of but that guide their conduct also while traveling.

Aspects of the so-called social pressure or social imperative in initiating mobile phone use are best explored by relating this use to the wider context of activities in which it occurs. Experiments that have drivers perform a given task at a particular point in time, or perform it repeatedly throughout a trial, present drivers as being at the mercy of various distracting activities. This view has been critically reflected upon (Consiglio et al., 2003, p. 498; Shinar, Tractinsky, & Compton, 2005, p. 316; Törnros & Bolling, 2006, p. 305) and called into question with new experiment designs that recognize drivers’ “active role in the initiation and management of these activities” (Horrey & Lesch, 2009, p. 115). For instance, Horrey and Lesch (2009) let the drivers in their study perform a set of tasks at moments of the drivers’ own choosing while driving on a test track. However, they found no evidence of drivers timing the tasks relative to the demands of different driving conditions. Similarly, Lerner (2005) asked the drivers in his study to drive a specified route and rate their willingness to initiate certain activities in different driving conditions, without actually engaging in the activities (see also Lerner & Boyd, 2005). Lerner (2005) argues that whereas the type of driving condition did not affect the drivers’ willingness to initiate certain activities in different driving conditions, without actually engaging in the activities (see also Lerner & Boyd, 2005). Lerner (2005) argues that whereas the type of driving condition did not affect the drivers’ willingness to initiate activities, the type of activity did, drivers considering mobile phone conversations riskier than conversations with co-present participants but less risky than keying in or looking up a destination in a navigation system, for example. By contrast, analyses of ethnographic materials of driving in real traffic in real time have shown that when drivers do engage in potentially distracting in-
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