Unanticipated Topic Continuations

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There is nothing more obvious than a topic's continuity, which we are ordinarily aware of, that is, only insofar as there occurs an event that alters the texture of relevance. This sense of continuity is of a uniform consistency in the relevance of remarks over their course in which each one transparently perpetuates the topic. We have access to this sense "criterially": we know of events that recognizedly alter this sense such that "extra" work is required to continue the topic, but to continue it in a constitutively different sense. This latter sense is, characteristically, of a continuation vis-à-vis an event which "intervenes" between itself and the previous state of topical relevance.

The special work of achieving such continuations consists, of course, of whatever it takes for members to recognize that a topic is continuing vis-à-vis an intervening event, and that varies from case to case. Here we are concerned with a particular instance of a continuation that clearly took work to achieve its recognition but, as will be discussed in due course, that recognition is not quite the phenomenon. What it is not, remains to be described, after seeing what it apparently "is."

The instance under study occurred in a conversation among coworkers in the company cafeteria of a large business firm in February, 1968,1 in which I participated:

1. Tony: They better start talking pretty soon boy.
2. ( ): ((cough))
   (pause)
3. Tony: —or yer gonna have a civil war in this country. ((At the "time,"
   negotiating an end to the Vietnam war and civil strife over the war

*This study developed from one with the same title written in 1976, which served as a resource for this one rather than the one "revised."

1Transcript notations: single parentheses include items over which there is some uncertainty; double parentheses include commentary about the data; the point at which a speaker's talk is overlapped by another's is indicated by obliques (/); double brackets ([ ]) designate that speakers "start" simultaneously; colons indicate extent a syllable is prolonged; stressed utterances are underscored; short dashes express hesitation.
were generally recognized as matters of major concern.))

(pause)

4. Al: We'll, I've als—Like I use to—tell some friends of mine, who—wantiduh go, over en fight fer Israel, during the—Israeli Arab crisis—We// ( )—

5. Tony: They really did wanna go over there?

6. Al: Well I hadda few guys deh—// deh—deh—

7. Stan: They didn' need 'em/

8. Al: "Don't Go There. The War's Right Here Man—Right Here—In L.A." ((Los Angeles))

9. Tony: Sure we gotta war right here.

(pause)

10. Stan: They didn' need them.

11. Manuel: ( )

12. Stan: They had more than th//et, then they uh,

13. Tony: Were they—were they of Jewish descent?

14. Stan: —then// they needed.

15. Al: Uh::: actually there were three guys,

16. ( (cough))

17. Al: Only one of them was Jewish. The other two, one was—Irish 'n the other was uh—Swedish.

(pause)

18. Al: And all three—//uh, wantiduh go.

19. Tony: I hate those Arabs they're always picking on that poor li'l Israel fur chrissakes. It's time they left 'em alone.

20. Manuel: Yeh I//think ( )

21. Al: But, in any case uh,

22. Tony: Liddle country like that fuh crissake.

23. Manuel: They're jealous, that's all,

24. Tony: Hm?

25. Manuel: They're jealous.

26. Tony: Jealous ( )//they're jealous a' something thet Israel has, I d'know what the///hell it is but it's something,

27. Manuel: ( )

28. Manuel: ( )

29. Manuel: Th—they're real uh—moderni://zed. (Right?)

30. Tony: They've only been—they've only been en independent nation fer whatizzit/// ten fifteen years now?

31. Manuel: Yeh but they're—they're (more) modern, they're real modern uh—compared t' the other countries aroun' it.

(pause)

32. Al: In any case, the real Vietnam war is right here. Not in Vietnam.

It is the last remark (32) that we are concerned with in particular. In making it, I intendedly treated the ones on Vietnam as a topic that was now being "continued," i.e., regarding remarks on the Arab-Israeli (A-I) issue. And, indeed, there followed several remarks which could be heard for their relevance to that topic. The work that it took to achieve the continuation, most manifestly, consists in the preface, "In any case," and the paraphrased