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## **Bionote**

Frances Rock is Reader in the Centre for Language and Communication Research at Cardiff University. She investigates the mediation of experiences in social worlds by analysing how people make meaning together. Her research examines language and policing, workplaces and multilingual cities. Her publications include the edited collection *Legal-Lay Communication: Textual Travels in the Law* (Oxford University Press, 2013). She is one of the editors of the *International Journal of Speech, Language and the Law* and is currently working on the project “Translation and Translanguaging: Investigating Linguistic and Cultural Transformations in Superdiverse Wards in Four UK Cities.”

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines how risk communication features in telephone calls to one British non-emergency police number. Using a collection of naturally occurring telephone calls to a police non-emergency line the paper takes an approach grounded in qualitative discourse analysis. The work illustrates that callers discursively construct risk through categories which enable them to make sense of, and meaning around, the dangers they perceive. Through this discursively constructed risk, callers warrant their calls. In doing so, they draw on categorisations of crime types, then upgrade their categorical alignments which serves to connect the incidents they are reporting to increasingly serious crime type categories. The paper shows how this process of construction and categorisation of risk is bound into wider discursive strategies. The work has applications in call handling contexts where an understanding of ways that risk can be appropriated has diagnostic potential.

**Keywords:** Telephone calls, police, risk, warrant, upgrading, scaffolding, categorisation

# **‘Apparently the chap is a bit of a rogue’: Upgrading risk in non-emergency telephone calls to the police**

**Frances Rock, Cardiff University**

## **1 Introduction**

*“Projecting a risk situation is a complex process of multiple framing and reframing of information, reports, and narrative. The risk communicator not only has to make sense of all of the relevant pieces of often disparate ‘intelligence’, they must then collate it together and produce a credible account of the risk situation at hand and then convey it to an audience which is more than likely geographically and temporally removed.”*

*(Firkins and Candlin 2016:328).*

It has long been assumed that when members of the public telephone the police, they aim to solicit urgent police attendance and they employ various strategies to this end. This paper tests this assumption in a relatively under-researched context, the non-emergency call, using a theoretical lens which is new to calls, that of risk and its categorisation. Data are from a large, UK police authority. The study asks how and why callers talk about risk during these calls and considers what, discursively, this might achieve. Using short examples and longer case studies, it situates risk communication, considering its career throughout calls.

Consider the predicament of the young male caller (C) in the excerpt below. He has telephoned his local non-emergency number because he is concerned about his ex-partner’s conduct. His tale describes a series of disputes over custody of their child. Recently, the ex-partner physically attacked him such that he reported the incident to police. Now she claims, he says falsely, that he subsequently attacked her. She will drop the charges if he agrees to do the same. It emerges that the caller sees this as only one in a series of incidents in which she

apparently tried to frame him. He concludes his account using the words in excerpt 1a. A full transcription key is provided in the appendix.

Excerpt 1a: I could lose everything

1       C:     I could get into trouble I could get arrested f- I could  
2             even go to prison for that- for assault and I haven't  
3             done nothing wrong like (2.1) so it's quite frustrating  
4             really because she's going to get me into an awful lot  
5             of trouble like she doesn't realise what she's doing (.)  
6             I could lose my job I could lose everything

(From: Call 24)

“Risk communication is principally about communicating; *who* is at risk from *what* and in *which situations*” (Firkins and Candlin 2016: 326, my italics). In excerpt 1a, the caller presents himself confronting risk from his ex-partner. *He* is at risk from what he calls *trouble* (lines 1 and 5) which takes two forms. Firstly, personal legal consequences: arrest (line 1), and prison (line 2). Secondly, personal social consequences: losing his job and losing *everything* (line 6). Elsewhere in the call, he comes at the notion of risk differently, when situating the slurs by his ex-partner not as presenting a risk to him personally but to society. These socio-legal consequences recast risk by invoking legal categories. This is exemplified in excerpt 1b, from the same call.

Excerpt 1b: Justice

1       C:     she's perverted the course of justice and nothing's  
2             getting done about

(From: Call 24)

By assigning the label *perverted the course of justice*, the caller latches into a legal framework of crime types; a framework designed to classify risk replicably and one familiar

to the call handler. His drawing on this classification is diagnostic in that it suggests a way of understanding the risk presented. It is prospective in suggesting this diagnosis and simultaneously retrospective in reviewing the events he claims occurred. Thus, the two excerpts both relate to the same events but orient to, and represent, risk differently; they realign arrangements of *who* is at risk, from *what* and in *which situations*. This paper focusses on these processes, through which callers ‘translate’ their concerns, by encoding risk within the legal framework when calling for help.

## 2 Conceptualising Risk

Risk concerns what “we don’t, and we can’t, know” (Giddens 1999: 2) and risk communication occurs when we grapple with this uncertainty. These are productive concepts for the analysis of telephone calls to the police for several, interweaving reasons. These reasons centre on risk’s concern with the future, with converting danger through talk, with its constitutive properties and resulting potential to facilitate situated decisions as I explain, below.

Risk, like that exemplified in excerpts 1a and 1b, indicates “(considerable) probability” of something developing “in an unfortunate or undesirable way” in the *future* (Linell *et al.* 2002: 196). An “active engagement” with this idea of the future is essential to discriminating talk about danger, which is externally attributed, from talk about risk, which can be managed through decisions (Sarangi *et al.* 2003: 159). During calls to the police, callers and call handlers *convert the danger* which callers report *into risk* which can be addressed with police action. Risk is therefore not ‘out there’, in the world, to be observed rather it is “communicatively and jointly accomplished through interpersonal interaction” (Candlin *et al.* 2016: 2) and “managed through situated negotiation” (Sarangi and Candlin 2003: 119). These rhetorical, rational and relational aspects of risk communication foreground its *constitutive*

potential: *Through risk talk, risks are made*. In telephone calls to the police, this involves both lay and legally trained actors who may, like the caller above, invoke institutional frameworks to represent risk. Constructing risk in talk “enables and legitimates” *decisions* about institutions’ involvement (Stanley 2016: 141) in response to the *uncertainty* (Myers 2003: 215), urgency and difficulty (Myers 2003: 216) of risk talk.

The excerpts above showed a caller orienting to risk. This was a smart move in that risk is an institutional imperative for call handlers. Police forces are “professionally concerned with risk management” and accordingly seek to “constrain and govern the assessment of risk” particularly in decision-making contexts (Candlin and Candlin 2002: 128) like proceduralised police control rooms (e.g. Garner and Johnson 2006; Pettersson and Rouchy 2002). This constraining and governing is achieved, in control rooms in England and Wales, through factors expressed in the mnemonic THRIVE, of which Risk is a key element. THRIVE intends to structure practitioners’ assessments of “the appropriate initial police response” (Palmer 2016) and to minimise complaints (Traynor 2016: pc). Risk, in the model, is “the possibility of something occurring” (Devon and Cornwall Police 2017). Through this model, risks, discursively created by callers, are recontextualised by call handlers and dispatch staff (Traynor 2016: pc) just as risk is recontextualised from lay people to trained, experienced institutional actors in other contexts (cf. Jones and Candlin 2003; Firkins and Candlin 2006). Yet this trajectory begins with the caller. Increasingly institutions are shifting responsibility for considering the “circumstances, responsibilities and entailments of risk” to the public (Candlin *et al.* 2016: 7) and this has long been a feature of calls to the police which rely on those on-scene to identify and evaluate risk.



### 3 Telephone calls to the police

“Not all professions, or sub-categories within a profession, rely on language to the same degree” (Sarangi and Candlin 2011: 3). For police call handlers, reliance on language is great due to both the rapid, technical, high-stakes context of call-handling and the use of only the spoken mode during calls. Accordingly, a vigorous body of research examines such calls in which caller (C) and call handler (CH) coordinate and collaborate (e.g. Landqvist *et al.* 2012).

As far back as Zimmerman and colleagues’ classic work on calls to the police in the 1980s, researchers have generally assumed that emergency callers’ intend “not to tell a developed story about ... recent personal experience, but to elicit a response” (Imbens-Bailey and McCabe 2000: 277), specifically to “make sure that help is dispatched” (Cromdal *et al.* 2008: 932). Emergency callers concertedly evidence and warrant their claims for help (Larsen 2013: 207) over multiple turns (Imbens-Bailey and McCabe 2000: 286), for example, by positioning themselves strategically in relation to people they call about (Tracy and Anderson 1999: 218; Garcia 2015: 105, 116).

In comparison, non-emergency calls are less clear-cut in this respect. Callers are more likely to want a response other than police attendance such as contact from a particular officer or a crime number to share with insurers. They may merely seek reassurance, advice, information or to register concerns. They may even have no apparent aim beyond, perhaps, off-loading. Callers may not be “aware of what qualifies as a ‘real’ need for police assistance” (Rønneberg and Svennevig 2010: 281) and may be unsure about how to make sense of, and accordingly make meaning about, what they are reporting so that the “legitimacy for the call [is] at risk” (Kevoe-Feldman 2016: 558). The callers (Cs) in the data presented here are from the set who do require police action but are not entirely clear what. This places them under

pressure to cast the incidents they report with as much gravity as possible, to secure the most substantial response. This task is, by definition, more nuanced than that for callers who are reporting an emergency making the dedicated non-emergency line a good focus for further work on callers' strategies.

The non-emergency line is revealing about call handlers (CHs) too. Emergency CHs will assume that callers require help, usually dispatch, even if they do not explicitly request help (Larsen 2013: 206). Accordingly, CHs "will be first and foremost concerned with finding out whether or not an emergency response is relevant" (Cromdal *et al.* 2008: 931) and they may have to work hard to this end (Tracy and Anderson 1999; Larsen 2013: 207) acting as gatekeepers to service (e.g. Kevoe-Feldman 2016: 558) or street-level bureaucrats, making institutional sense (Gilsinan 1989: 329-330). Non-emergency CHs, on the other hand, do not assume that callers seek the dispatch of officers or indeed any response beyond talk during the call itself. Without the weight of emergency expectation, selecting to call the non-emergency number can offer callers an opportunity. They can show deference to, and respect for, institutional arrangements and present themselves as reasonable and compliant by having selected to dial the most appropriate number given the severity of the incident. Selecting the appropriate number thus becomes a "normative precondition for asking for help" (Edwards and Stokoe 2007: 10). Yet selecting this number also presents discursive drawbacks for callers. It flags their enquiry as not urgent or important, even by their own assessment. Thus, having positioned themselves as reasonable by selecting the non-emergency number, during the call itself they may need to scale up the seriousness of the matter of concern if they are to receive a response. We will see that such presentation of self as reasonable and cautious, yet as having well-founded concerns, connects intimately to representation of risk in the data here.

## **4 Data and methods**

### **4.1 The data**

The data used in this study were collected from a busy call centre in a British police force, one of almost 50 predominantly geographical police authorities in England and Wales. The force serves over 1.5 million people. The unit's stated purpose is to handle non-urgent calls from the public and officers. Public calls are the focus in this paper, concerning matters such as neighbour disputes, non-violent thefts and reports of noise, littering and vandalism. The wider data-set includes twenty-five calls; participant observation in a non-emergency and two emergency call centres as well as conversations with call handlers, supervisors and managers. The police force and all individuals and situations have been anonymised. All callers and call handlers were told that their calls would be recorded and ethical clearance was gained on this basis, from two university ethics committees and one police force. The data provide access to the "informal, everyday, often 'irrational' ways real people work together to negotiate risk in real-life situations" (Jones and Candlin 2003: 200).

### **4.2 Analytic framework: An approach to examining realisations of risk**

This paper develops a framework which examines how risk is brought into being during non-emergency calls to the police through legally recognisable categories which are used strategically to warrant calls. It also considers how risk transforms during calls through upgrading. This framework for making sense of calls is developed below by briefly exploring its constituent parts, categorisation, discourse strategies, upgrading and scaffolding.

Giddens proposes that "the concept of risk becomes fundamental to the ways that lay actors and technical specialists organize the social world" (1991: 3). This organising relies on *categorisation* which, in legal contexts, classifies risky behaviours as criminal offences. To

assert that a crime is or might be taking place is to talk about risk. Likewise, to categorise human action as a possible crime is to talk about risk. This categorising specifies and encodes risk in legal terms and subsequently allows it to be recognised and reviewed. Legal categories become, for lay people reporting crimes, a make-shift short-hand for explaining what is at issue, how serious it is and what kind of response might be proportionate. “Categories are spectacles through which we routinely, albeit largely unconsciously, observe and classify events and experiences” (Sarangi and Candlin 2003: 117). In the data presented below, callers put on spectacles which categorise risks according to their understanding of the legal framework and present the offences they see to call handlers.

The analysis, below, uses the term “*strategies*” to refer to discourse strategies or ways that speakers’ communicative choices translate into actual or potential social action. Thus, unlike the everyday use of “strategies” to denote learned techniques of, say, a champion negotiator, the technical use here does not entail that speakers who use strategies are necessarily doing so in deliberate or calculating ways. Sarangi *et al.* (2003: 159) explain how this sense of “strategies” operates in relation to risk:

‘Discourse strategy’ does not assume conscious manipulation or even intent on the part of the speaker. Instead ... participants’ utterances ... [have] ‘strategic’ effects in the sense that they construct and frame risk in certain ways, thereby foregrounding a particular perspective. Depending on what perspective is adopted, risk might be escalated or de-escalated through ... discursive moves.

This notion of escalating or de-escalating, or as they put it elsewhere, “risk relativizing” (Sarangi *et al.* 2003: 167), avoids speculating on speakers’ motivations whilst allowing consideration of risk communication’s situated potential.

Risk relativizing, particularly through escalation, is explored in the analysis below using the notion of *upgrading* which involves achieving or invoking increase, expansion and uplift.

Through upgrading, speakers turn up the metaphorical volume on a range of social actions such as agreeing (Pomerantz 1978: 93), requesting (Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1985: 119), issuing

directives (Craven and Potter 2010: 438), committing to utterances' truth value (Kallen 2005: 59-60) and making knowledge claims (Clift 2016: 198). My analysis focuses on callers' strategies for upgrading risk to more convincingly warrant their calls for help. Callers' upgrading does not happen out of the blue, rather the framework used here sees it being prepared for or scaffolded. *Scaffolding*, in educational research, refers to specific ways that adults can support children to take on cognitively demanding tasks which they could not quite manage alone (Mercer 1994: 97). In my analysis I use the notion metaphorically. In calls, a conceptualisation of risk is supported in order that it can do something that it could not otherwise quite do, in this case warrant the case being made. "Scaffolding" draws attention to the way that callers build up to upgrading categorisations.

In order to pin down the analytic approach, I draw on two frameworks previously applied to risk. These are from Linell *et al.* (2002) and Richardson (2003). Both were originally used in medical contexts but below they provide for illuminating themes. I will now briefly present these frameworks as they relate to the analysis.

Linell *et al.* (2002: 210-213) suggested that at least seven factors influence degrees of explicitness in risk talk:

Linell <i>et al.</i> 's factors influencing risk talk	The realisation of this factor in calls
1. Whether the patient is high risk	In calls, being high risk comes from, for example, personal characteristics and location.
2. Whether any negative outcome is temporally remote	In calls, whether the caller is reporting an incident which is prospected, ongoing or concluded.
3. Whether risk talk is on the agenda.	In this varies according to crime type.
4. Whether the professional is expected to determine and communicate risk.	In calls, whether CHs are expected to provide a police response.
5. Whether there is time available for the consultation.	Call handlers are pressed to deal with calls rapidly and callers might rush because they feel urgent need.
6. Whether the risk is attributed to the patient or to other, perhaps	Callers work hard to illustrate blamelessness.

unavoidable, causes.	
7. Whether the patient can reduce risks in the future.	Callers can reduce risk by, for example, leaving the scene of an impending incident.

(Expanded from Linell *et al.* 2002)

Richardson's framework arose through her investigation of warranting practices amongst newsgroup participants as they worked to boost credibility. The participants used four warranting strategies:

1. Referring to sources (such as publications)
2. Invoking personal experience (e.g. getting a headache in response to certain activities)
3. Invoking expert status (one's own or that of another with relevant expertise)
4. Drawing on technical register

(Adapted from Richardson 2003: 176 – 181)

Below, I draw on these factors which influence risk communication and strategies for their redress alongside other supportive features. I show how they combine to scaffold categorical upgrades.

## 5 Analysis

### 5.1 Overview

The caller at the beginning of this paper presented the matter he was calling about in relation to two representations of risk: personal risk (*I could get into trouble, I could lose my job*) and socio-legal risk which entailed encoding risk in relation to society using a crime category label (*she's perverted the course of justice*). The analysis section here focuses on the socio-legal dimension, the way that callers make meaning around risk in relation to types of crime.

The first section of data analysis presents three short examples from different calls which illustrate how callers appeal to the socio-legal framework by assigning or invoking crime categorisations, even using legally recognisable offence names. The second section presents two case studies to illustrate how recruiting risk through crime categorisation was woven into broader risk talk.

## 5.2 Invoking offence categorisation

Categorisation is exemplified in the call below in which a woman has telephoned the police to report that her neighbours have been cutting the hedge which divides their properties. The hedge is owned by her, the caller. She initially says that she is reporting *criminal damage to my property*, warranting through technical register (Richardson's (2003: 180-181) fourth warranting strategy). The technical register is an offence name through which the everyday activity of hedge-cutting is assigned to the legal category *criminal damage*. This legal category, through its institutional currency, conveys seriousness. However, the incident could be cast as much more serious if the risk could be upgraded through further categorisation which might "mediate between cause and effect" (Sarangi and Candlin 2003: 118) more persuasively. After a long explanation of the incident, C indeed offers an upgraded categorisation in excerpt 2:

### Excerpt 2: The hedge

C:     thing is we've got a little girl [CH: mm] and we want privacy in our garden  
         [CH: yeah that's right] and they are cutting the hedge down so they can see  
         over

(From: Call 3)

C presents her neighbours as motivated not by, say, getting more light into their garden but by achieving prime visibility over the hedge. In that way, she casts her neighbours' behaviour as risky to her family in permitting criminality relating to watching little children. Whilst C does not name any offence, she presents implied criminality, as a certainty, presumably already occurring, through tense and modality in *are* and *can* which avoids having to balance what Linell *et al* (2002: 197) see as inevitable uncertainties in risk talk. By introducing the motive of watching children, C invokes a more serious crime than might most obviously be in play and upgrades the seriousness of the incident being reported. This upgrading potentially lifts the urgency of a police dispatch.

In excerpt 3 below, no offence names are used but the same upgrading between legal categories occurs. Here, the caller reports having received emails purportedly from a young woman who had just been staying with her. The messages claim that the young friend has subsequently been robbed and needs money. C believes the messages are fraudulent. Many computer users have received hoax emails like this. Indeed, whilst sending them might technically qualify for legal investigation, their prevalence makes this impractical. In this instance, as in the previous call, however, the woman avoids her call seeming trivial by hooking her concern onto risk of a more serious offence. She begins, disarmingly, by expressing awareness that the emails may be *a scam*.

#### Excerpt 3: The email

- |   |     |  |
|---|-----|--|
| 1 | C:  | now obviously this is a scam but (.) what we're worried about is |
| 2 | CH: | how did they get her //password//                                |



- 3 C: //whether// the girl is safe
- 4 CH: yeah (.) but she's stay- do you know where she's staying in London
- 5 C: unfortunately I don't [ ... description of C's background knowledge omitted for brevity ... ]
- 6 CH: yeh
- 7 C: what I don't know is how to find out whether she's safe

(From: Call 10)

In turn 1, C asserts that she is not calling about the potentially fraudulent email itself or, implicitly, about risks to her online safety. This establishes her as tech-savvy but also reasonable in not seeking to waste police resources on trivialities. CH's collaborative completion in turn 2, *how did they get her password*, expresses his inference that she is calling, instead, about the young woman's data security. However, C interrupts to assert that her concern is whether the young woman herself is *safe* (turn 3), reiterating this in turn 7. Through *safe* C implies potential risks to her friend, hinting at abduction, and through present tense represents the incident as ongoing (echoing point 2 from Linell *et al.*'s framework, 2002: 210). This evidences risk being “discoursally and dialogically constituted” (Sarangi and Candlin 2003: 119): the caller's talk creates risk scaffolded by her self-presentation as reasonable and her foregrounding of safety. This discursively realised risk “comes to be presumed as a theme against which actions and their proponents are judged” (Candlin *et al.* 2016: 9) because this began a series of moves which shift CH from initially dismissing the call to ultimately dispatching an urgent response.

In both calls above, callers raise what initially appear minor or ambiguous crimes. In characterising these incidents, both of the callers upgrade, invoking more serious offences. These callers have what Sarangi and Candlin call “proprietary rights” in that “it is their

categorizations which make sense to them” and through which they warrant (Sarangi and Candlin 2003: 122).

Upgrading not only occurs early in calls when it might seem to be a strategy to secure a response. Rather some callers categorise and upgrade even after a response has been promised. This is the case in the next and final example of this opening section of data analysis, excerpt 4. Here, C has telephoned to report a road traffic accident: her garden wall has been demolished, seemingly by a heavy-goods vehicle which struck it overnight. The excerpt occurs late in the call.

#### Excerpt 4: The wall

- 1 CH: and we'll make enquiries to see if any- because  
2 what's happened- the offence that's been  
3 committed is failure to stop (.) after a road traffic  
4 accident =  
5 C: = yes =  
6 CH: = because they should report it  
7 um to the police as well  
8 C: and the thing is see that it- its- it- it's you know  
9 that it- it's a pavement so anybody could have  
10 ((um been)) walking you know it isn't as if it's an  
11 ((inside)) garden wall =  
12 CH: = mm hm no =  
13 C: = it is a main sort  
14 of wall on a pavement

(From: Call 8)

In excerpt 4, CH indicates what response she will arrange to C's call (making *enquiries*, line 1), what offence she is logging (*failure to stop*, lines 3-5) before translating the offence (*they should report it*, lines 6-7). Despite this assurance, categorisation and explanation, C revisits the incident (lines 8-14). Whilst she does not specify that a more serious crime has been committed, like C in excerpt 2, or might be underway, like C in excerpt 3, her hypothetical

scenario (lines 8-10) upgrades the seriousness of the incident being reported just as those earlier calls did. It is no longer simply a traffic accident but instead, through the extreme case formulation *anyone could have been walking*, it becomes a potential fatality. Possibly C felt that CH's categorisation *failure to stop* was insufficient and she upgraded in order to encourage CH to reassign. However, the upgrade's position, after a response has been allocated, raises the possibility that non-emergency callers' risk talk may not be merely transactional, designed to solicit police action.

This first part of the data analysis has examined key moments when callers label or characterise an incident before foregrounding its seriousness through categorisations which upgrade risk. The second part, below, analyses two calls in more detail to illustrate how categorising, characterising and upgrading can integrate into wider discursive strategies as callers gather and frame assessments of risk (cf. Firkins and Candlin 2007: 277). Candlin *et al* (2016: 5) note the influence of both "how risks are categorised and given priorities" and "how social and cultural interests and values affect the framing, interpretation, and presentation of risks". In what follows, we see how categorisation of risk and representing values in risk combine.

### **5.3 Scaffolding categorisations: Personal characterisations**

The first case study involves a man whose post (mail) has been mis-delivered to his neighbour before apparently disappearing. Whether any aspect of this can reasonably be seen as criminal is debatable and the caller may realise that he needs to do more than simply state bare facts if he is to secure any police response. Thus risk is very much at issue here. The analysis shows that the man draws on personal characterisations to scaffold his upgrade.

From his first turn, C foregrounds socio-legal risk, saying *good afternoon I wonder if you can help me um (.) I believe my neighbour has pinched some of my mail*. This appeals to risk in two ways: Firstly, by presenting C as needing *help* which implies danger that could be averted; and secondly, by encoding this danger through *pinched* which entails deliberate, negatively-intended intervention. In these ways he invokes stealing, rather than mere loss. Thus, like the earlier callers, he categorises the reported incident as a crime, a possible offence under Section 84 of the Postal Services Act 2000 though C presumably does not know this legal text. Having presented this crime categorisation, C does not move immediately to upgrading it like the previous callers did. Instead he sets about scaffolding this categorisation first by characterising the neighbour to whom his missing post was delivered (presented below as excerpt 5a), then the post itself (excerpt 5b) and finally his own response (excerpt 5c) in relation to risk. This scaffolding occurs when CH queries how the post was *pinched*, eliciting a narrative in Zimmerman's (1992: 438) terms which sketches history (excerpt 5a) before finally reaching the present incident (excerpts 5b and 5c). We turn, first, to C's work to scaffold his crime categorisation by describing his neighbour's colourful past:

#### Excerpt 5a: Account of the lost post

- 1       C:    I'm living in 48 Queen Street [*CH: mm hm*] and ur
- 2           last week the postman put our mail in 47 Queen
- 3           Street [*CH: right*] now he- this property and the
- 4           owner of it is known to you apparently because um
- 5           what happened is ur it was bought by a husband and
- 6           wife but they've been divorced for years um (2.0)
- 7           apparently he told me he bought it- the property um
- 8           with his daughter's money [*CH: mm hm*] from ur
- 9           from a house sale of his daughter's [*CH: yep*] that
- 10          was two years ago he rented it out to some unsavoury
- 11          characters anyway since then he moved into it [*CH:*
- 12          *uh hm*] and then he disappeared off to Spain for a

13 month [CH: right] in the meantime his wife has been  
14 trying to get the property back so she then gets a um  
15 (0.1) a locksmith to come along and [CH: oh right  
16 okay] and sort that out and she empties the house and  
17 locks it all up (.) um and then he comes back from  
18 Spain and he breaks in again

(From: Call 16)

Having stated that his post was mis-delivered in lines 1-3, C immediately casts the neighbour and his property as *known to you* (line 4). This suggests that both have already been evaluated, by the police, as presenting risk. Such appeals to authority are common in risk communication (e.g. Plough and Krimsky 1987: 9) and exemplify warranting through reference to expert status in Richardson's framework (2003: 179). Yet as Shrader-Frechette (1993: 149) points out, they are not necessarily sound bases for conclusions about risk because authorities can be wrong. Here, the expression *known to you* in any case permits vagueness about whether the police consider the man risky.

Nonetheless, this begins a powerful characterisation of the man, as a risky character, which is warranted through reference to C's personal experience (Richardson 2003: 178-179). The categorisation that follows is a combination of character work and event work (Hall, Slembrouck and Sarangi 2006:30-31). The man is described as having bought the neighbouring property *with his daughter's money* (line 8). This could suggest a warm family who share trust and resources. Yet, in combination with the other claims above, it might seem that the neighbour at best exploited his daughter but perhaps even has stolen her money. Next the neighbour's renting of the property to *some unsavoury characters* is mentioned (lines 10-11). Whilst again ambiguous, *unsavoury* at least implies that the neighbour exercised poor judgement in selecting tenants and its cotext, again, implies criticism of his ability to prioritise and protect his family's interests. The neighbour is thus presented as risky through association and affiliation.

In lines 11-12, C notes that the man himself then moved into the house, indicating a certain instability in his domestic arrangements. This is developed by the formulation of the man's departure for Spain in lines 12. Here, the man is not described as simply having *gone on holiday* or *left*, rather he *disappeared off* which connotes an unexpected or otherwise flighty exit which was not communicated in a neighbourly way. C's specification that this disappearance was *for a month* (line 13), whilst not essential to the narrative, implies a flexibility of lifestyle that is not apparently positively assessed. In the final episode of this opening drama, the neighbour's ex-wife (referred to here as his *wife*) tried to *get the property back* (line 14). Emphasis through volume and pitch on *back* implies that the home is most accurately seen as hers. This entailment is developed as he casts the husband as having forced entry into the property illegally, with the words *he breaks in* (line 20) adding *again*, which implies persistent risk.

Through this detailed, loaded characterisation, C presents someone who is risky in being: a possible previous offender (line 4); financially predatory even to his child (line 8); unprincipled in his choice of associates (lines 10-11); domestically unstable (line 11-12); flighty and uncommunicative (line 12), lazy (line 13) and willing to law-break repeatedly (line 20). In this way, he discursively locates risk as a property of the individual (Adelswärd and Sachs 1998: 200). Risks regarding individuals "are often deduced" (Linell *et al.* 2002: 196) like this. Deducing risk, through such powerful character and event work (Hall *et al.* 2006:30-31), permits persuasion.

C reinforced this characterisation, later in the call (not shown here), by citing the neighbour's ex-wife. He reported her observations that the man might try *breaking in* (lines 73-74) and, eventually that he had *broken in* (lines 80-81). Reported speech like this warrants through reference to sources in Richardson's framework (2003: 176-178). It lends authority to C's observations by indicating that an independent observer, specifically an expert who knows

the situation well, also characterises the man's activities as criminal. Later, C notes too that the ex-wife has *been though yourselves [to report previous incidents]* (line 23-24 and 26) and even that *the police have been back and forth here looking at the property* (lines 27-28). These reiterations recruit authorisation from both the woman and the police force. Such personal knowledge and experience are, according to Atkinson (1995: 114), "normally treated by practitioners as ... warrants for certainty". Additionally, collating "multiple situations into a coherent account" provides for persuasively framing risk (Firkins and Candlin 2007: 276).

Having thus repeatedly suggested that the neighbour poses risks of unreliable even criminal behaviour, C finally returns to the mis-delivery of his letters in excerpt 5b, below. He describes going to search for his post, revealing that not only had the post gone missing in the house of a risky individual but that the post in question was itself risky:

Excerpt 5b: Discovering the missing post

C: I went and had a look through their front door and there it was now what's concerning me is if um my credit card statement (.) is in there amongst some of this mail

(From: Call 16)

Here, as C finally details the missing post, he reveals that one item may be financially sensitive. In this way, he flags risk to his personal financial security, presenting himself, according to Linell's framework, as high risk (2002: 210). By specifying this, he upgrades. He transforms a risk merely of petty theft of post to much more serious fraud. This upgrading serves as a punchline to the representation of the neighbour as risky, discussed above. C has undertaken "a process of constructing a plausible account of risk through the multiple framing of current, past and projected (future) situations surrounding risk of harm" (Firkins

and Candlin 2006: 274). “Complex” lay logic (Jones 2016: 356) scaffolds the upgrading of risk.

C does not stop at casting the neighbour and his post in terms of risk. Instead his upgrade is further scaffolded as he goes on to draw a contrast through self-presentation, noting his own meticulous orientation to risk. He explains, as background, that when the neighbours do not empty their bin *for months* he does it for them. By juxtaposing his community-minded actions in helping those nearby with the earlier mentioned actions of the neighbour who failed even to disclose his holiday plans, he introduces a moral dimension, which attaches to risk talk even from professionals (Scamell and Alaszweski 2016: 81). Having established this context, C specifies that, suspecting that his post had been removed from the doormat, he investigated whether it had simply been thrown away. Whilst emptying the neighbour’s bin, he found a telephone directory which he knew had been delivered after his post. He explains:

Excerpt 5c: Picking through the litter

C: I fished everything out of the bin using a little um litter picker thing (.) um the telephone directory was in there um but our mail had gone

(From: Call 16)

In this way, he self-presents as someone who avoids physical risks by using the right tool for the job, the *litter picker*, yet as someone pushed to confront this risk by the severity of the risk to his finances.



C continues to self-present as careful throughout the call. In excerpt 5d, below, he does so even once CH has allocated a response and accordingly begun to solicit and type C's details. Whilst CH types, C presents his carefulness, specifically in relation to the post.

Excerpt 5d: You have to be careful

- 1 CH: I'll just get those both on the system won't be a moment
- 2 C: certainly (2.0) only you know we- we- we- we're really careful with our mail and we shred everything that's got our name on yeh
- 3 CH: ah (0.1) you have to be these days don't you
- 4 C: yeah

(From: Call 16)

C revisits and expands his self-presentation as someone careful with post. Extreme case formulation (*we shred everything*) might leave his interlocutor sure of his thoroughness and indicate what Richardson's (2003) framework calls expert status in handling financial documents. Through these strategies, C also potentially establishes empathy in a hearer who might recognise his misfortune in being exposed to risk, despite normally being so very thorough and expert. Just as the litter-picker (excerpt 5c) indexed C's methodical, expert approach to trying to rectify the situation that has arisen, so the shredder here indexes the same characteristics in his approach to avoiding such situations. In these ways, C casts himself, in line with Linell *et al.*'s framework, as blameless. Unlike Jones and Candlin's (2003) study participants who, in diaries of their unprotected sexual encounters, constructed their accounts in ways that removed their apparent agency, this caller increases his agency in activities that would either avoid exposing him to risk (shredding bank statements) or would

minimise risk once exposed (seeking to locate lost bank statements). In this way, he presents himself as a good citizen-caller, by implication one worthy of help. This is reminiscent of the patients described in Sarangi *et al.* (2003) who, as Myers (2003: 217) puts it, play the role of good patient by responding “appropriately or admirably” to medical risk. Like the mediation clients observed by Edwards and Stokoe (2007: 10), mentioned in the literature review, these callers evidence their compliance. This counterpoint to his depiction of the neighbour scaffolds the crime category upgrade.

At this late stage in the call, interactional aspects of the call change in that CH becomes more actively involved in collaboratively constructing risk. In turn 3, above, CH agrees on the need to exercise care (*you have to be [careful]*). In doing so, he also ratifies the practice C describes of shredding identifying papers. In this way, they construct a scenario in which some post is risky enough to require special handling. Recognising and collaboratively creating this risky reality furthermore confirms the importance of the promised police response to C’s predicament.

As I noted in the previous paragraph and in discussing excerpt 4, in the first part of the data analysis, even once a police response has been promised, callers do not stop emphasising risk. As the call draws to a close, the caller (C) reiterates earlier themes, as the final example in this section illustrates:

#### Excerpt 5e: Taking the details

- |   |     |  |
|---|-----|--|
| 1 | CH: | right let’s just take all details from you [clears throat] (5.0) |
| 2 | C:  | ur if it was junk mail I wouldn’t be concerned you know          |
|   |     | ...  |
| 3 | CH: | and you live at number?  |
| 4 | C:  | number 48  |

- 5 CH: number 48 lovely oh (4.0)  
6 C: as I say if it was junk mail I would- I wouldn't bother  
7 CH: different isn't it yeh  
8 C: but it's my credit card statement  
...  
9 C: apparen- apparently the chap is um i- is a bit of a rogue and he's um ur not a very nice person and he's not afraid to um (1.7) apply for loans and all sorts apparently according to his wife  
10 CH: oh right  
...  
11 C: and as I said apparently the- the lady his wife has been to- to yourselves  
12 CH: uh  
13 C: um so (.) you should have some sort of //record that of that//  
14 CH: //yeah there should be// something on there

(From: Call 16)

This talk stretches the encounter and allows C to reinforce his points. This table summarises the themes and actions which are repeated in excerpt 5e:

What is reiterated?	In which turns?	How?	In which excerpt did this first occur?
The riskiness of the post and, implicitly, the crime category upgrade.	2, 6 and 8	By creating a contrast between risk-free <i>junk mail</i> and the risk-laden missing card statement.	5b
That C is reasonable and proportional in only telephoning with good cause.	2 and 6	Through his claims that he would not be <i>concerned</i> (turn 2) or <i>bothered</i> (turn 14) had only <i>junk mail</i> disappeared.	3 (section 5.2)
CH's collaboration in constructing risk.	7	By agreeing that junk mail is different.	5d
	14	By agreeing that police records should exist.	
That the man is risky.	9	Through labelling ( <i>a rogue</i> and <i>not a very nice person</i> ) and by characterising the man as open to financial risks around borrowing.	5a
That experts concur.	9 and 11	By citing the man's wife and appealing to her authority using <i>according to</i> (turn 17) and <i>apparently</i> (turn 19).	5a
	11 – 13	By citing police involvement	

As this table shows the caller ends his call by summarising much of what went before. Excerpts 5a-e have shown how upgrading of crime categorisations is embedded within a series of other activities which support that upgrading with a particular focus on personal characterisation of the possible suspect and of the caller himself.

#### **5.4 Scaffolding categorisations: Situational characterisations**

In the call below, rather than focussing on characterising the individuals themselves Hall *et al*'s (2006:30) character work, the caller characterises her situation as the scaffolding to her upgrade through event work (Hall *et al* 2006:31). The three excerpts below are from a call in which a woman telephones the non-emergency number to report a breach of bail conditions. She begins by stating this legal categorisation, in turn 2, both labelling and providing specific details of the conditions and their infringement:

##### **Excerpt 6a: Opening**

- 1 CH: hello Incidence Agency can I help you?  
2 C: yeah um a girl was been urm arrested today  
for harassment for me her bail conditions  
are she's not supposed to be in TownA or  
TownB or come near me and she's just  
passed me in the street

(From: Call 11)

Having introduced and explained the legal categorisation, breach of bail conditions, at the outset, it is not until turn 40 that C upgrades by detailing a more serious potential crime:

##### **Excerpt 6b: Down to our house**

- 40 C: there's a history going back with her and

my husband so I wouldn't be surprised if  
she's gone down to our house to see if he's  
there

(From: Call 11)

Risk is upgraded. No longer is there a risk inherent merely in the offence of breaching bail conditions, instead C specifies a risk of physical attack or intimidation on her husband. Had C simply presented this upgrade as her second turn, it might have lacked effectiveness. Instead C scaffolds so extensively that once the upgrade arrives, it is not questioned. This scaffolding is shown in excerpt 6c which returns to the beginning of the call.

Excerpt 6c: I'm shaking

- 1 CH: hello County Police can I help you?  
2 C: yeah um a girl was been urm arrested today for  
harassment for me her bail conditions are she's  
not supposed to be in TownA or TownB or  
come near me and she's just passed me in the  
street  
3 CH: ah right okay so //[inaud. 2 syllables]//  
4 C: // [gasps] and // I'm y-  
I'm shaking [nervous laugh]  
5 CH: okay let me take some details now alright uh  
she's not come to your house or anything has  
she or  
6 C: I don't know yet I'm just in the pub with my  
friends and I just seen her outside  
7 CH: right  
8 C: but she's not supposed to be in TownA or::  
TownB and they promised me that she  
wouldn't be  
9 CH: right okay ((bear with me for a second))  
where- where are you at the moment then  
10 C: I'm in the Bear and Staff Pub in StreetA  
TownA  
11 CH: StreetA and so s- she's seen in StreetA then  
was she  
12 C: yeah yeah just outside now I've just got- I've  
just told my friends as well they've gone out  
and seen her  
13 CH: right okay um::: (1.2)  
14 C: I can't believe this  
15 CH: she's been- she's been arrested today has she

16 C: then  
 17 CH: yes  
 18 CH: released of- with conditions  
 19 C: yes yes  
 20 CH: okay (.) because what are sh- what are her  
 specific conditions do you know  
 21 C: she's not supposed to be in TownA at all or in  
 TownB and- and she's not to come near me or  
 have any contact with me and she's just on the  
 opposite side of the road to me now  
 22 CH: right has she- has she approached you directly  
 or  
 23 C: no no but like I said she's not supposed to be  
 in the area at all  
 24 CH: okay okay can I take your details

(From: Call 11)

This excerpt features rapid, multiple and repetitive strategies through which C scaffolds to upgrade risk from that associated with breach of bail to that associated with personal attack. These strategies involve citing the bail conditions, noting how recently and proximately the incident has occurred, downplaying the woman's actions and providing evidence for the representation given. Examining them below shows their interweaving so that when the upgrade arrives it has impact.

C specifies the woman's bail conditions repeatedly, in turns 2, 8, 20 and 22. This repetition shows how simple the conditions are and, recalling Richardson's (2003: 180) framework, they warrant through technical register. Repeating the bail conditions also allows C to self-present as someone knowledgeable and well-informed about police procedures as well as conveying something of her panic. Through mention of the bail conditions, C also establishes a contrast in turn 2. The woman is, C says, not supposed to be in any part of TownA or TownB yet not only is she generally in the proscribed area but she has *passed* very close to C. Proximity is emphasised repeatedly through further references to location (*outside* turns 6 and 12; *the opposite side of the road* turn 20) which repeatedly combine with *just* which further emphasises how very close the woman is (turns 12 and 20). As well as proximity, *just*

emphasises recency of the sighting (*she just passed me* turn 2; *I just seen her outside* turn 6; *I've just told my friends* turn 12). Recency is further emphasised by combining *just* with *now* in turns 12 and 20. It is likely no coincidence that recency and proximity with their potential to bring drama to a report are so prominent in the news values framework (Bednarek 2016: 29) and here, they contribute to a sense that this incident is serious. *Just* also appears again, this time allowing C to indicate her innocuous presence, minding her own business (*I'm just in the pub with my friends*) – a common feature of ambiguous emergency calls (Zimmerman 1992) which here foregrounds C's blamelessness (Adelswärd and Sachs 2003: 137) (see excerpt 5d).

C sidesteps requests to establish whether the woman has done anything more than merely pass by. CH asks directly, in turn 5, whether the woman has *come to your house or anything* to which C does not say *no* but instead, full of possibility, *I don't know*. Adding *yet* implies that a visit is very much in play. This sense that the event is unfolding is important to C's success in eventually upgrading. Similarly, when CH asks directly, *has she approached you* (turn 21), C avoids simply admitting that the woman has not and through adversative *but* reiterates the woman's bail conditions (*she's not supposed to be in the area*, turn 22), implying that if she is willing to break these conditions she may present other risks. C hammers this point home by completing the turn with the extreme case formulation, *at all*.

Finally, C reaches beyond her own observations as she works towards upgrading. C calls on evidence to indicate the severity of the risky situation in which she finds herself in two ways. First, she presents evidence of her physical reaction to the woman's presence noting that she's *shaking* (turn 4), thus warranting through reference to "observable bodily reactions" (Richardson 2003: 178-179). This evidences that the woman is causing C physical harm even without physical contact and indexes the risk that C perceives. Second, C also invokes evidence from third parties, her friends, who authorise her account (Richardson 2003: 179)

having also apparently seen the woman (turn 12). Drawing in a further party, in turn 8, C implicates the police in the risk when she says that *they promised* that the woman would not be in Towns A or B, having opened the call with an assertion that the police had arrested the woman *for me* (turn 2). She follows this up in turn 14 with incredulity about the situation, saying *I can't believe this*, and, perhaps, the part of the police in it having arisen. These elements introduce a service frame and through it risk to the reputation of the police arising from risk to C and her husband.

Like the caller in excerpts 5a-e, this caller establishes a complex and protracted ground against which she upgrades risk, in this case, relating to situational factors.

## **6 Conclusion**

Risk might be expected to figure in calls to the police. It is certainly a salient institutional category being used both to process calls and to assign responses. Yet this paper has asked whether callers, too, draw strategically on risk. The analysis showed how callers categorise risky behaviours and upgrade the seriousness of the incidents they are reporting through these categorisations. It then indicated how this upgrading is integrated into calls through scaffolding using a range of devices such as extreme case formulation as well as eleven other devices previously identified as significant in established risk communication frameworks such as appeals to authority (Richardson 2003) and representing one's situation as high risk (Linell *et al.* 2002). The two extended analyses showed how this scaffolding can be organised around different themes, in the instances above, personal characterisations (character work) in section 5.3 and situational ones (event work) in 5.4. This paper has shown that embedded in the construction and communication of risk between non-emergency callers and call handlers are four notions:



- (1) Risk is strategically categorised through packaging into recognisable, (institutionally) meaningful units;
- (2) Risk can be used to justify calls for police help;
- (3) In order to warrant in calls, callers may upgrade risk categorisations; and
- (4) Callers' representations of risk are combined with other discursive strategies within calls.

Callers connect their experiences to risk as it is encoded in the legal framework when they warrant their calls to the police. Some callers go so far as to label the offence which they believe they are calling about whilst others evoke crime categories more loosely. Even though they may assign these crime labels and categories incorrectly, in invoking them callers transform events in the social world into potentially legally recognisable units which can be evaluated by call handlers, dispatchers and police officers in terms of the degree of risk entailed. By doing this, callers put risk on the agenda of their call (Linell *et al* 2002: 210).

Discussion here on discourse strategies has taken these as innocent in not being calculated and deliberate. Indeed, in excerpts 4 and 5, callers upgraded even when a response had already been allocated which supports a discourse strategies reading. Yet the literature review noted that many mainstream studies of emergency calls present callers as strategic in the lay sense of deliberately seeking to prompt police action. There is a blurring of discourse strategy and real-world strategy here which calls into question their neat distinction.

### **Transcription key**

- (.) A micropause of 0.9 seconds or less

(1.2) A pause of 1.0 second or more, duration indicated inside the brackets

// // Overlapping talk

= Latching on

- Self-correction or speaker breaking-off

(( )) Unclear speech (double brackets either contain deciphered speech or, where impossible, number of inaudible syllables)

? Rising intonation

< > Words said whilst laughing

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