Coffeetalk: Starbucks™ and the commercialization of casual conversation

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how so-called ordinary or casual conversational practices in the contemporary United States are constrained and structured in terms of where, when, how, and with whom people choose and are able to interact socially. The focus of analysis is the middle-class sociolinguistic practice of "coffeetalk" – a term borrowed from U.S. popular culture to signal the naturalized conflation of conversation with the commercialized consumption of coffee, space, and other commodities. The discussion of coffeetalk involves research methods including critical analyses of the marketing rhetoric of coffeehouse corporations; informal interviews with coffeehouse owners, employees and patrons; and the author's observations as a "native" participant in coffeetalk and other commodified modes of middle-class social interaction. By situating coffeetalk within its spatial, temporal and social contexts, this analysis challenges the claim of some sociolinguists that conversation is a "naturally occurring" phenomenon that is ontologically prior to other speech genres. A systematic investigation of the material and social dimensions of seemingly ordinary conversational practices demonstrates that these are inextricably implicated in the political, economic, and cultural-ideological processes of global capitalism, as symbolized by the increasingly ubiquitous Starbucks Coffee Company. (Conversation, social interaction, political economy, space, coffeehouses.)*

INTRODUCTION

In the 1997 Hollywood movie *Good Will Hunting* the (requisite) heterosexual romance that forms the backbone of the plot begins with the following flirtatious exchange in a bar in Cambridge, Massachusetts:

> Skylar, a wealthy British student at Harvard, approaches Will, an Irish-American janitor from South Boston, hands him a slip of paper, and says, "There's my number. So maybe we can go out for coffee some time."

Taking her number, Will replies coyly, "All right, yeah, or maybe we can just get together and eat a bunch of caramels."

"What do you mean?" Skylar asks.

Will, whose natural, unpretentious intelligence is the film's primary conceit, explains, "Well, when you think about it, it's as arbitrary as drinking coffee."

Although Will's characterization of coffee-drinking as an "arbitrary" signifier of social interaction is indisputable from a synchronic, Saussurean point of view, in this essay I will discuss how the indexical associations that Skylar invokes among coffee, "going out," and conversation are both culturally and historically motivated. These associations are encoded in the plot of *Good Will Hunting*, for the relationship between coffee and conversation in the contemporary United States is inextricably tied to the same forces of class, race, and geography – of capitalism and the legacy of colonialism – that make Will's and Skylar's romance problematic and (for some viewers, at least) dramatically compelling.

Skylar's statement, "So maybe we can go out for coffee some time," is implicitly understandable to Will and the movie's audience as a proposition for a particular kind of social interaction: a scheduled, informal, face-to-face encounter between ostensible social equals in a coffeehouse or other commercial catering establishment. The conversations that take place in such settings are what many Americans – including many sociolinguists[1] – would characterize as "casual", "ordinary" or even "natural." I seek to interrogate these characterizations from an anthropological perspective, starting from the insight that whatever people deem ordinary is neither inherently nor naturally so, but rather seems that way because it conforms with their HABITUS, the practices, norms, and expectations that constitute customary lived experience (Bourdieu 1977).

As a "native" participant in coffeehouse conversations, I can attest that they often do feel quite ordinary, yet my experiences in a number of cultural settings remind me that the ways in which I and other Americans organize our schedules to combine casual conversation with the consumption of food and drink in a commercial retail space are by no means natural or universal. In my father's hometown in rural Italy, for example, casual conversations are at least as likely to take place on sidewalks and in the central piazza as in the coffee bars that, according to Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, inspired his corporation's wildly successful expansion in the 1980s and 1990s. And in the urban areas of northern Nigeria where I have lived and worked, it is customary for people to visit each other's homes unannounced and to stay and chat for indefinite periods of time, with men congregating out of doors while women remain inside. The concept of scheduling a rendezvous at a restaurant is virtually unheard of, even for those who can afford it, though some men and a few women do frequent bars and nightclubs. (There are no coffeehouses.) In light of widespread poverty and locally dominant Islamic prohibitions against alcohol and mixed-sex socializing,

however, these commercial locales can hardly be thought of as simply ordinary or casual.[2]

In the historical context of the late 1990s, when *Good Will Hunting* was produced and Starbucks and other coffeehouse chains were proliferating in upscale commercial districts across North America, it can be safely assumed that there were no Starbucks-style coffeehouses in the working-class area Will comes from. His gently mocking response to Skylar's proposal ("maybe we can just get together and eat a bunch of caramels") can thus be read as an incipient critique of the class- and place-specific nature of "going out for coffee" as a social practice. This critique is not realized as the plot unfolds, however. After accepting Skylar's offer to meet her for coffee in Harvard Square, Will subsequently invites her to the local bar in his "Southie" neighborhood, where his friends' vernacular Irish-American style throws Skylar's upper-class Harvard/British identity into sharp relief. By contrast, Will shows no trace of awkwardness or discomfort in the Cambridge coffeehouse. According to the cultural logic of the filmmakers, coffeehouses located in upscale shopping districts – unlike "ethnic," working-class bars – are an unmarked space of social interaction in which all people are supposed to feel effortlessly at ease to drink, eat, and talk.

In this essay I seek to follow up on Will Hunting's forestalled ideological critique – and, simultaneously, to broaden the scope of sociolinguistic theory – by demonstrating how seemingly ordinary conversational practices in the U.S. and other industrialized English-speaking societies are constrained and structured in terms of where, when, how, and with whom people choose and are able to interact socially. There are four sections. The first section reviews the scholarly literature (in English) on conversation, paying close attention to the ways scholars have and have not accounted for the material and ideological dimensions of such talk. My critique of this literature supports McElhinny's (1997) claims about the ideological bias of sociolinguistic theories that implicitly (if imperfectly) map the neoliberal political distinction of public vs. private realms onto so-called institutional vs. casual or ordinary modes of talk. The second section considers the historical roots of this bias, drawing on Habermas's (1989[1962]) discussion of the role played by coffeehouses in the emergence of a democratic "public sphere" in early modern Europe, and Burke's (1993) account of the cultural elaboration of a bourgeois "art of conversation" in that same era.

The final two sections explore the legacy of these historical processes in the contemporary middle-class American practice of "coffeetalk" – a term I have borrowed from U.S. popular culture to signal the naturalized conflation of casual conversation with the commercialized consumption of coffee, space, and other commodities. My discussion of coffeetalk involves a number of research methods, including: critical analyses of the marketing rhetoric produced by Starbucks and other coffeehouse corporations; informal interviews with coffeehouse owners, employees, and patrons in Tucson, Arizona; and my own observations as a "native" participant in coffeetalk and other commodified modes of middle-class

social interaction in Tucson and other North American cities. My aim is to demonstrate how seemingly ordinary, casual conversations are inextricably implicated in sociohistorical processes associated with global capitalism, such as the commodification of leisure (Shields 1992), the commercialization of public space (Sorkin 1992), and the role of consumption in reconfiguring class-based social identities (Bourdieu 1984, Ley 1996, Roseberry 1996) – phenomena that are jointly symbolized by the ubiquitous and increasingly global Starbucks Coffee Company.

LOCATING CASUAL CONVERSATION IN SPACE, TIME AND SOCIETY

The inextricability of conversation from political, economic, and ideological processes is a function of its materiality: It requires participants to occupy the same physical or communicative space for the same period of time, and to be both cognitively and physically able and willing to attend to the interactional exigencies that conversational participation entails. The fact that many conversations are today conducted by means of telephone, Internet, and other technologies only underscores the extent to which conversation is subject to political and economic forces. These forces are no less strong in the case of face-to-face interaction, and they can be discerned by looking at the contextual information that accompanies – if only in an ad hoc fashion – the conversational data analyzed in the scholarly literature. This information typically includes some description of one or more of the following: (i) the speech situation, including participants' reasons for engaging in conversation and the nonverbal activities that accompany their talk; (ii) participants' social identities and preexisting relationships; (iii) participants' geographical location; and (iv) the temporal boundaries that mark conversational beginnings and ends. This section reviews the sociolinguistic literature on conversation with respect to how scholars have and have not taken these contextual facts into account. My aim is to show how both the material practice of conversation and participants' understandings of it reflect and reproduce the political, economic, and ideological hierarchies that inform social life in the contemporary United States and other industrialized, capitalist, English-speaking societies.

What is "conversation"?

To speak of conversational "contexts" is to presuppose the existence of conversational "texts," and indeed, the criteria whereby sociolinguists characterize certain linguistic data as "conversational" often remain unstated. This discursive unmarkedness is underscored by the widespread, but rarely explained, use of adjectives such as *ordinary* or *casual* to modify the term *conversation*. Though such collocations implicitly posit the existence of unordinary or uncasual conversation, in practice they index a conceptual conflation of "ordinariness" and

"casualness" with conversation itself. Given the semantic elusiveness of these labels, they are frequently augmented by negative examples that define conversation in terms of what it is not. Thus, Duranti (1997:250) equates "conversational interactions" with "everyday talk" and "mundane exchanges," and distinguishes these from "interviews, debates, press conferences, trials, religious ceremonies, and so on" (cf. Levinson 1983:284). The relative unmarkedness of (ordinary) conversation in both popular and scholarly discourse can be interpreted in at least two ways. On one hand, it could be seen to index a notion of conversation as one speech genre among many, albeit one that is more frequent, more ubiquitous, and less overtly structured than others. Though this view is compatible with an anthropological approach to the study of language, especially with the ethnography of communication, it is usually implicit rather than stated outright.

On the other hand, the unmarkedness of conversation could index a view of it as an automatic default – the way people talk when they don't have to talk any other way, or for any particular reason. This perspective is associated most notably with certain practitioners of Conversation Analysis (CA) who view (ordinary) conversation not as a genre but as a "naturally occurring" phenomenon that is ontologically prior to other modes of talk. According to C. Goodwin & Heritage,"ordinary conversational interaction ... constitutes the primordial site of language use in the natural world" and is thus "the point of departure for more specialized communicative contexts (e.g. the legal process, the educational system, the medical encounter), which may be analyzed as embodying systematic variations from conversational procedures" (1990:289). A more explicit endorsement of conversation's "natural" essence comes from Sidnell, whose comparison of turn-taking by American English speakers and Guyanese speakers of Caribbean English Creole leads him to argue that "it is not impossible to suppose that, in fact, there are some aspects of talk-in-interaction (e.g., its orderliness) which are not culturally variable but are part of a species-specific adaptation to the contingencies of human interaction" (2001:1286). It is such "species-specific" (and species-wide) features that lead Sidnell to define "conversation" as a fundamentally ahistorical, acultural mode of human behavior, and "not ... as a 'genre' (such as prayer, lecture, sermon) in the sense of having a conventionalized, culturally-historically particular character" (1269, fn. 7).

Although Sidnell takes pains to mitigate the biological-determinist force of his argument, the universalism to which he and many of his CA colleagues subscribe has important theoretical and methodological implications. In particular, practitioners of what Cameron (2001:88) calls "strict" CA eschew contextual descriptions and sociocultural interpretations of linguistic data as not analytically "relevant" unless participants can be shown to pay "specific attention" to these categories in their talk (C. Goodwin & Heritage 1990:287). Thus, Schegloff & Sacks argue against characterizing the ethnolinguistic specificity of their conversational data as follows: "That the materials [analyzed in their article] are all 'American English' does not entail that they are RELEVANTLY

'American English', or relevantly in any larger or smaller domain that might be invoked to characterize them" (1984:71, n. 4; emphasis in original). On the assumption that (ordinary) conversation is naturally ubiquitous and structurally constant, strict CA theorists have typically framed their findings – as Sidnell does – as having potentially universal implications for the way "conversation" works, in all places and at all times. Though Sidnell acknowledges that his comparison of turn-taking in Caribbean English Creole and American English is not sufficient to support such sweeping claims, his invocation of a "species-specific adaptation" to explain a limited set of cross-cultural commonalities confirms this universalist bias.[3]

Sidnell's characterization of conversation as distinct from culturally and historically specific genres of language use echoes the neat dichotomy drawn by Schegloff (1999:564) between "nonconversational" talk in formal, institutional settings and (ordinary) "conversation" that occurs wherever and whenever institutional norms and hierarchies are absent. As McElhinny 1997 notes, this ordinary/institutional dichotomy, which is central to much sociolinguistic theorizing beyond strict CA, fails to account for the many conversational interactions that combine some structural informality with adherence to ritual or institutional constraints. In Blum-Kulka's (1997) study of the dinner-table conversations of middle-class American and Israeli families, for example, she found that these ostensibly private, informal interactions were structured by a clearly discernible social hierarchy and ritual norms. By contrast, McElhinny 1997 focuses on talk in institutional settings – welfare agencies, medical clinics, and law enforcement – where the participants shifted between bureaucratic and informal ways of speaking. For McElhinny, this "interpenetration" of interactional styles belies not only the ordinary/institutional dichotomy in sociolinguistics, but also the distinction made in neoliberal[4] political theory between private and public spheres. Although the interactions she studied took place in "public" settings, the subordinate parties (welfare recipients, medical patients, legal complainants and defendants) were subject to a coercive scrutiny of their "private" lives by institutionally powerful agents. These interrogations frequently involved the use of deceptively familiar, casual ways of talking, with disadvantageous results for those scrutinized. As a result, McElhinny views both distinctions – public vs. private and institutional vs. ordinary – not as objective descriptions of society but as ideological constructs that obscure social inequalities.

Another problem with the ordinary/institutional opposition (as with any dichotomy) is that it obscures diversity within each category. Under the label "casual conversation," for example, Eggins & Slade (1997:67) include a wide array of conversational situations: adult friends at a dinner party; workers on coffee breaks; an adolescent socializing with her grandmother and great-uncle in the grandmother's home; and a mother, father and adult son who were "filling in time" while sitting in a parked car. To use a distinction formulated by Hymes 1972, these are all diverse SPEECH SITUATIONS within which a particular SPEECH

EVENT – ordinary or casual conversation – is presumed to take place. The unity of this category is called into question, however, by Blum-Kulka's (1997) observation that even many "ordinary" speech situations (e.g., family dinners) can be uniquely identified with a particular speech event or genre ("dinner talk").[5] This leads her to reformulate the ordinary/institutional dichotomy as a continuum on which "dinner talk" is located somewhere between "mundane, day-to-day informal encounters" and "formal public events" (1997:8). Yet even this reformulation leaves the ontological status of such "mundane" encounters unclear: Where and when do they occur? Accordingly, it is appropriate to ask whether and how workers' conversations during coffee breaks represent the same speech genre as, say, the talk that occurs among family members sitting in a parked car, and in what ways they differ.

For all their shortcomings, both Sidnell's (2001) and Schegloff's (1999) notions of "conversation" are similar in important ways to nonscholarly participants' understandings of the term. Cameron (2001:9–10) notes that most speakers of English use the word *conversation* as a label for a type of linguistic interaction that is relatively informal and spontaneous, and that involves speakers who consider themselves to be (or are willing to act as if they were) social equals. Whereas strict CA practitioners – and presumably many native participants – typically assume such equality as an a priori condition of ordinary or casual conversation,[6] Eggins & Slade 1997 describe it as a constituent element of the "casualness" that speakers in (at least) certain contemporary, urban, English-speaking settings actively seek to achieve through talk. According to Eggins & Slade, a defining principle of this casualness is that all conversational participants are normatively supposed to enjoy equal rights to hold the floor and to direct the topic of conversation. Like "casualness," this "equality of speaker rights" is an idealized goal that cannot be simply assumed but requires ongoing interactional "work".

Although in some parts of their text Eggins & Slade uncritically echo a popular tautology that construes casual conversation as talk engaged in "for its own sake" (1997:7), their analysis suggests that a main function of casual conversation is precisely to create and reproduce the bonds of equality that participants desire. To say that this equality requires "work" calls attention to the factors that militate against it, such as generational asymmetries within families or ethnic differences among workers (to cite specific examples from Eggins & Slade's data). Sociolinguists have identified these and other inequalities, especially gender, as contributing to speakers' experiences of miscommunication and conflict in a variety of conversational settings (e.g., Edelsky 1993[1981], Gumperz 1982, Tannen 1984, 1994, 1999). Not all speakers, it seems, have similar ideas about what an "equality of speaker rights" entails, and some in fact seem to have little or no interest in equality. Furthermore, as Tannen 1993 points out, equality – or the general issue of power relations – is not the only salient dimension of the social bonds that are constructed through conversational interaction; another dimension is affective, or what Tannen terms "solidarity." These two dimensions

are by no means isomorphic, and they can even work at cross-purposes. Using Tannen's insights to expand on the definition provided by Eggins & Slade, casual conversation can thus be seen as an interactional forum, or genre, through which participants negotiate both the political and affective aspects of their social relationships.

Another reason that conversational equality requires "work" is that it entails a conceptual interpenetration of private and public realms that neoliberal political theory, and the popular and scholarly ideologies deriving from it, are ill equipped to handle. In particular, although casual conversations are supposed to occur outside institutional contexts (i.e. "in private"), they are also (with one notable exception) supposed to involve participants who think of each other, at least provisionally, as equals or "peers" – a fundamentally political concept pertaining to the status of social actors within a given interactional domain, be it the family, the law, or society at large. Because political equality is an implicit criterion whereby certain kinds of verbal interactions are deemed "conversational," researchers in CA and in other schools of sociolinguistics have often focused on pairs or groups of speakers that are at least tacitly homogeneous with respect to age, class, rank, physical ability, sexual orientation, and other attributes. Where social heterogeneity is acknowledged – for example, in terms of gender, ethnicity, or rank – it is often identified as the source of actual or potential conflict precisely because it hinders normative expectations of conversational equality and the easy mutual understanding that is supposed to characterize "casualness."

One type of casual conversation that does not presume egalitarian social relationships is family talk, for within the "private" realm of the normative heterosexual family, age- and gender-based inequalities have traditionally been both culturally assumed and legally protected. Today, however, in many middle-class American families (and elsewhere) these traditional asymmetries coexist and contend with contemporary ideologies of informality and egalitarianism. This contradictory state of affairs generates predictable tensions that many CA practitioners have tended to avoid insofar as they have focused on talk involving only adults or only children. Those scholars who have studied multigenerational family talk have generally seen fit to combine conventional CA methods with at least some critical consideration of the political, economic, and linguistic asymmetries that structure family relationships (e.g. Heath 1983, Ochs & Taylor 1995, Blum-Kulka 1997). Such research notwithstanding, the uncritical inclusion of both peer talk and family talk under the rubric of "casual conversation" confirms McElhinny's (1997) argument about the ideological function of the ordinary/institutional dichotomy in sociolinguistic theory.

The conflation of conversational casualness with participants' presumed social equality must therefore be seen as a culturally and historically specific language ideology. Eggins & Slade acknowledge this specificity when, in a chapter devoted to the analysis of gossip, they note that their research "reveals a great deal about the social role and function of gossip IN OUR SOCIETY" (1997:310,

emphasis added), where "our society" consists primarily of contemporary, middle- and working-class, Anglo-Australian adults who live and work in urban areas, and who sometimes converse with adolescents or adults of other ethnic backgrounds. The cultural specificity of this ideology is underscored by research in other cultural settings, such as Samoa, where everyday talk is reportedly structured by speakers' attention not to equality but to sociopolitical hierarchies (Duranti 1994, chap. 6).

The material dimensions of casual conversation

Just as Will fails to specify a time and place at which he and Skylar could "just get together and eat a bunch of caramels," sociolinguistic theories are largely inattentive to the spatiotemporal dimensions of casual conversation. In CA this has been a principled decision, according with an idealized notion of conversation as an autonomous "speech exchange system" (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974) that can be analyzed in isolation from – or at least prior to – other social processes. In the early CA literature, therefore, references to speakers' geographical locations are minimal and sporadic. This is not because conversation analysts were unaware of the connections between geography and talk; Schegloff 1972 devotes an entire article to analyzing how speakers do the conversational work of "formulating place." He identifies two principal types of place-formulations, one involving the use of "geographical" or "absolute" expressions such as names of streets, cities, states, provinces and countries, and the other making use of "relational" terms (i.e. shifters), such as *Al's house*, *outside*, *at work*, or *in the dining room*. Most of the data Schegloff analyzes come from telephone conversations and are either unspecified with respect to place (e.g. "Phone conversation") or only minimally specified ("Phone conversations in a western city"); the fact that they were all recorded in the United States is implicit. Given the close attention Schegloff pays in this article to the social implications of other people's place-formulations, the fact that he does not explain the variability of his own place-formulations is striking (1972:134–135).

The paucity of Schegloff's place-formulations is understandable if one considers telephone conversations – as many early CA theorists did – to be a paradigmatic case of talk "for its own sake." Because the speech event of a telephone conversation is conceptually and temporally coextensive with its speech situation, it is not uncommon in this literature for analysts to make no mention whatsoever of conversationalists' locations and nonverbal activities. Such information arguably could be deemed irrelevant; it may also have been difficult or impossible to obtain. Yet even in the context of telephone conversations, which relieve interactants of the need to arrange the sharing of physical space, the data suggest that speakers do attend to the temporal and cognitive-kinetic constraints impinging on their interlocutors' ability and willingness to talk. Hopper (1992:77), for example, has identified *What are you doin* as a normative opening in U.S. telephone conversations, for which the unmarked response is

nothin. (In the era of cellular telephones, a caller's first question is now likely to be *Where are you?*) Similarly, Schegloff & Sacks cite numerous examples of speakers beginning telephone conversations with opening questions such as *Are yih busy?* and *Am I taking you away from yer dinner?* (1984[1973]:88; spellings as in original), and closing them with offerings such as *Okay, I letcha get back tuh watch yer Daktari* (1984[1973]:85). Their analysis of these conversational moves is implicitly predicated on the idea that speakers have only limited amounts of what is commonly known as "free" time, during which they do not have to attend cognitively or kinetically to activities that would prevent them from engaging in casual conversation.

Both CA practitioners and other sociolinguists tend to overlook the temporal constraints that impinge on many casual conversations. Yet in the following excerpts from telephone conversations analyzed by Schegloff & Sacks 1984[1973], speakers pay considerable attention to the need to schedule their casual, face-to-face interactions. (Note that the original article provides no contextual information for excerpt 1; the contextual information for excerpt 2 is reproduced verbatim from the original.)

(1) From Schegloff & Sacks (1984[1973]:91), spelling and italics as in original.

B: *Al*righty. Well *I'*ll give you a call before we decide to come down. O.K.?

(2) From Schegloff & Sacks (1984[1973]:93), spelling and italics as in original.
A, who is visiting the city, and B, who lives there, have been engaged in an extensive making of arrangements to see each other.

A: I mean b'caus I-eh you're going to this meeting at twelve thirty, en I don't want to uh inconvenience *you*,
B: Well, even if you get here et abayout eh ten thirty, or eleven uh' clock, we still have en hour en a half,
A: *O*.K., *Al*right,
B: Fine, We c'd have a bite, en / / (talk),
A: Yeh, Weh– *No!* No, *don't* prepare any / / thing,
B: And uh– I'm not gunnah pre*pare*, we'll juz whatever it'll / / be, we'll ( ).
A: *No!* No, I don't mean that. I min– because uh, *she* en I'll prob'ly uh be spending the day togethuh, so uh::: we'll go out tuh lunch, or something like that. hh So I mean if you::: have a cuppa cawfee or something, I mean / / that uh that'll be fine. But / / uh-
B: Yeah

The "extensive making of arrangements" instantiated in these transcripts reflects the material temporal constraints faced by many working adults, whose jobs, errands, and even hobbies often take precedence over other activities, and who therefore have to schedule their casual, face-to-face encounters with friends, acquaintances, and sometimes even the people they live with. Although the time that individuals have to engage in such interactions is called "free," it is paradoxically a very limited resource that must be "spent" rather carefully. Thus, casual rendezvous are often arranged to allow participants to converse while they also do something else such as eating, drinking, shopping, or exercising. It is this multi-tasking that underlies the custom of many middle-class Americans not to specify the conversational nature of their proposed get-togethers. Instead, just as

the speakers do in (2) above, people often schedule a lunch or a "coffee," which is what they will officially be "doing" during the time allotted for their interaction, and which is not seen to detract from their ability to engage in casual conversation. Indeed, the collocation *doing coffee* (or *going out for coffee*) is often used to denote a casual social engagement even by people who don't drink coffee. By contrast, if someone mentions talk explicitly (e.g., *let's go have a talk*), it would be appropriate to assume that they have a particular topic they want to discuss – probably something serious. To the extent that conversations are implicitly expected or planned to co-occur with dinners, coffee breaks, or other scheduled activities, they are also temporally constrained. Even when the opening and closing times are not firmly fixed, participants rarely have unlimited amounts of time to chat.

In contrast to early studies in CA, the recent sociolinguistic literature contains generally ampler characterizations of the places and situations in which scholars' conversational data were recorded. Geographical place-formulations are used to identify national, regional, or municipal locations (an Australian city, the San Francisco Bay area, etc.), while relational ones describe the immediate contexts of talk. Although there is some variability with respect to these descriptions, certain regularities are discernible. Conversations involving adults – alone or with children – are most frequently recorded in people's homes, especially in dining rooms (Erickson 1982, Tannen 1984, Ochs & Taylor 1985, Morgan 1996, Blum-Kulka 1997, Eggins & Slade 1997); other settings include workers' lounge areas (Eggins & Slade 1997) and automobiles (Heath 1983, Eggins & Slade 1997). Children's conversations have been recorded while they were playing at home (Cook-Gumperz 1995), at school (Thorne 1993), and in the streets and open spaces of their neighborhoods (M. H. Goodwin 1990). Although all these venues were ones in which participants did not have to work, study, or engage in other "institutional" activities, it is also apparent that few if any of the conversations happened "naturally." Dining rooms and middle-class dining rituals, for example, both require and facilitate participants' ability to coordinate the tasks of eating, drinking, and talking in a particular manner. This ability is neither natural nor universal. Middle-class U.S. children, for example, are widely perceived as needing to be taught how to eat, drink, and talk at the same time, and are unwelcome in many adult conversational venues until they are sufficiently socialized. By contrast, in the Hausa-speaking region of northern Nigeria, social norms discourage conversation while eating, and traditional homes contain no rooms, areas, or furniture specifically devoted to dining (see Moughtin 1985).

Casual conversation in the land of the "free"

In the U.S. and other Western societies, scholarly and popular ideologies alike posit casual conversation as an activity that depends on various states of "freedom." Participants should ideally be (i) social equals, free of institutional hierarchies and constraints; (ii) free to talk, not busy with work or other tasks that

might limit their time or attention; and (iii) situated in a place where they feel protected, at least temporarily, from forces that might encroach on these freedoms. Just as Eggins & Slade 1997 have shown with respect to the interactional work people do to maintain an "equality of speaker rights," the freedoms that inform people's abilities to engage in casual conversation cannot be merely assumed but must be continually reasserted by both verbal and nonverbal means. These include the "work" of scheduling casual social interactions, as well as the physical construction and use of architectural spaces, such as dining rooms, in which such interactions can transpire. It is to a particular, commercialized configuration of these spatial, temporal, and political-economic factors that Skylar refers when she says to Will, "So maybe we can go out for coffee sometime."

CAFFEINE AND POWER: A BRIEF SOCIAL HISTORY OF COFFEETALK

The normative association of coffeehouses with egalitarian social interaction is by no means a merely contemporary phenomenon. Almost from the moment of their inception, the earliest coffeehouses of western Europe, founded in Oxford and London in the mid-seventeenth century, were characterized as places where commoners and aristocrats alike could meet and socialize without regard to rank. This image is typified in the following excerpt from a broadsheet displayed at the entrance of a London coffeehouse in 1674:

> THE RULES AND ORDERS OF THE COFFEEHOUSE
> Enter sirs freely, But first if you please, Peruse our Civil-Orders which are
>   these:
> First, gentry, tradesmen, all are welcome hither,
> And may without affront sit down together;
> Pre-eminence of place, none here should mind,
> But take of the next fit seat that he can find;
> Nor need any, if Finer Persons come,
> Rise up to assigne to them his room [...] (Ellis 1956:46)

According to this prescriptive invitation, the coffeehouse was regarded as a social oasis, a place of peace and order devoid of hierarchy and conflict. Friendly conversation was encouraged, while quarrelsome behavior, along with morally corrupt practices like swearing, gambling, and card-playing, would not be tolerated. This idealized image of harmonious social interaction has led a number of commentators, including Habermas (1989[1962]), to characterize the original English coffeehouses as a veritable birthplace of modern European democracy.

The fact that coffeehouse patrons needed to be reminded to behave themselves in the peaceful manner outlined above suggests that they did not always conform to those rules, and in fact, Pendergrast (1999:13) reports that early modern English coffeehouses were often "chaotic, smelly, wildly energetic, and

capitalistic." The egalitarian ideal is further contradicted by the documented demographic segmentation of the coffeehouse market (Pendergrast 1999:13; Habermas 1989[1962]:257); different establishments were known to cater to distinct occupational, political, religious, and ethnic groups, but not, as Burnett (1999:73) notes, to high-ranking aristocrats "and certainly not the labouring poor." As the coffee trade expanded, it became increasingly subordinated to large mercantile and colonial interests: the people and companies that supervised and profited from the cultivation of coffee by enslaved or indentured laborers in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America; the roasting and packaging of coffee beans by European factory workers; and their distribution and retail sale in Europe and European colonies around the world, including British North America.[7] In London, the metropolitan center of the coffee industry, certain coffeehouses provided space not just for casual socializing but also for high-powered commercial negotiations; Lloyd's is perhaps the most famous example of a coffeehouse that went on to become a global financial conglomerate (Burnett 1999:76).

The classic English coffeehouse was thus characterized not just by its lively conversation – such could also be found in pubs and taverns, after all – but by the sophistication of its clientele, who were increasingly literate and eager to read and discuss contemporary works of literature that had become widely available thanks to recent advances in printing technology (Heath 1997). Though originally of an artistic nature, this literature soon came to include newspapers, essays, and other journalistic texts, with some coffeehouses even publishing their own periodicals, such as *Lloyd's News* (Burnett 1999:76). According to Habermas (1989[1962]:32), the literary debates that took place in coffeehouses constituted a site of democratic political participation – a "sphere of public opinion" – in which the newly emergent bourgeoisie sought to translate their economic autonomy into political power. The English government responded to this democratizing threat by attempting periodically, with only limited success, to suppress the coffeehouses and to censor the literature that was discussed inside them (Habermas 1989[1962]:59).

One sign of the interest the new bourgeoisie took in cultivating their social distinctiveness was the literary genre known as "manners books" or "civility manuals." Circulated throughout western Europe, these manuals offered aspiring urbanites explicit instructions on how to conduct themselves in polite society, often paying special attention to "the art of conversation."[8] Burke 1993 finds a number of interesting parallels between the advice these manuals proffered and contemporary sociolinguistic theories of conversation. A notion of cooperative turn-taking, for example, is evident in manual writers' discussions of conversational "competition," which they condemned in its extreme forms while acknowledging many speakers' desire to "shine" (Burke 1993:92). A concept of conversational equality is manifest in the manuals' exhortations that speakers should endeavor to include all "the company" in conversation, though

PRIVATE REALM   **SPHERE OF PUBLIC AUTHORITY**

Civil Society   ***Public Sphere***   State, Court, Law
                          ("Sphere of Public Opinion")

Marketplace   Family   Politics, Letters, Urban Culture
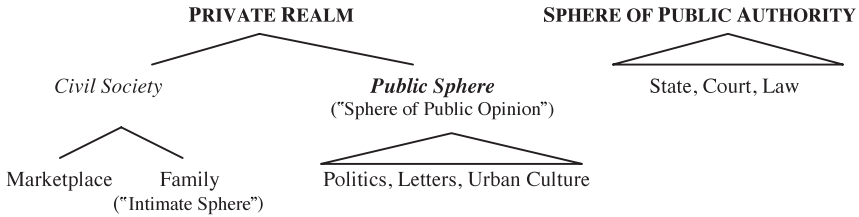   ("Intimate Sphere")

FIGURE 1: The private realm and public authority in the early modern period
(adapted from Habermas 1989:30).

of course "this company excluded some people physically present, notably ser-
vants" (92). In contrast to contemporary sociolinguistic theories, "the art of
conversation" as described in civility manuals was also explicitly spatialized,
with French salons and English coffeehouses representing idealized sites of
sophisticated conversational interaction (116–17).

Habermas locates the early modern "public sphere" of coffeehouses and sa-
lons within a broader "private realm," the members of which – property-owning
males – were self-consciously autonomous from (and increasingly restless in
relation to) the traditional "sphere of public authority," consisting of the crown,
the royal court, and the law (Fig. 1).

Over time, as the male bourgeoisie's political influence grew, the new "sphere
of public opinion" and old "sphere of traditional authority" became increasingly
intertwined. Through both evolution and revolution, by the late 19th century the
feudal states of western Europe (and some former European colonies) had been
replaced by nominally democratic republics or constitutional monarchies. The
social, political, and economic transformations that these states underwent in the
19th and 20th centuries are described by Habermas as the "mutual infiltration" of
public and private spheres, a term that clearly foreshadows McElhinny's (1997)
discussion of their "interpenetration." But this terminological similarity belies
important theoretical differences. In particular, Habermas views the mutual in-
filtration of public and private spheres as a regrettable historical phenomenon,
whereby the "true" public sphere was displaced by a contemporary notion of
"public opinion" that is tied not to informed debate but to the ephemeral cultural
trends of consumerist society. He blames this development to a great extent on the
growth of the bureaucratic nation-state and the hypercommercialization of social
life under capitalism.[9]

McElhinny does not share Habermas's nostalgia for a "true" public sphere;
rather, she views the very notion of a public/private distinction as a deceptive
ideology that masks the fundamental social inequalities upon which the bour-
geois liberal-democratic state was built. Her critique is supported by the over-
lapping (and confusing) juxtaposition of the labels "private" and "public" in

Habermas's model of early modern European society, and by the gender and class biases inherent in his definition of the "true" public sphere as male and bourgeois. To the extent that women and the poor can be located at all in the sociological model depicted in Fig. 1, both groups occupy subordinate positions outside the "public" realm: the poor as laborers and small-scale consumers in the market-place, and middle-class women as wives and mothers within the "intimate sphere" of the patriarchal family. Habermas even goes so far as to speculate that a dem-ocratic public sphere emerged earlier in England than in France because access to English coffeehouses was limited to men, while French salons were attended by both sexes (Habermas 1989[1962]:33; see also Burke 1993:117 and Heath 1997:200). Although Habermas's implicit characterization of women's and poor people's conversational concerns as nonpublic and nonpolitical is clearly prob-lematic, it is fair to say that the historical emergence of a liberal-democratic public sphere in England and elsewhere entailed both the enfranchisement of broad sections of the male bourgeoisie and the enforced exclusion of women and the poor.

Habermas's romanticized account of the democratic nature of coffeehouse interactions in early modern England also needs to be qualified by Burke's (1993) observations about the antidemocratic aspects of the bourgeois "art of conversa-tion." In particular, in the privately owned "public" spaces of the English coffee-house and French salon, where many sociolinguists would expect to find evidence of conversational cooperation and equality, Burke notes a tension "between the competitive and cooperative principles, between equality and hierarchy, between inclusion and exclusion, and between spontaneity and study" (1993:92). In ad-vising bourgeois readers on how to balance these contradictory forces, the au-thors of civility manuals – like the writer of the London coffeehouse broadsheet excerpted above – constructed an imagined space of egalitarian social relations that was surely as elusive as it was desirable. Distinct echoes of this ideology can be heard today not only in academic theories of (ordinary) conversational struc-ture, but also in discourses that represent coffeehouses as sites of casual social interaction that are accessible, affordable, and enjoyable for all.

CONVERSATION WITH CLASS: THE STARBUCKS "EXPERIENCE"

Although "going out" to drink, eat, and talk is a common social practice in many contemporary industrialized societies, the sociolinguistic literature is remarkably silent on the issue of conversations that occur in restaurants, bars, coffeehouses, and the like.[10] Though seemingly unintentional, this exclusion underscores McEl-hinny's (1997) claims about the ideological nature of the theoretical dichotomy between "ordinary" and "institutional" forms of talk. Like the private/public dichotomy in neoliberal political theory, this opposition obscures the complex interpenetration of the ordinary and the institutional, or the private and the public, realms that characterizes conversations in commercial catering establishments.

When two people "go out for coffee," for example, they arrange their schedules and pay money to conduct an ostensibly "private," casual interaction in a "public," institutional venue that is "privately" owned (sometimes, as in the case of Starbucks, by a corporation whose shares are "publicly" traded).

Coffeetalk is just one example of the commercialized mutual infiltration of public and private spheres in the contemporary United States. Other examples include the corporate privatization of heretofore public agencies and services (including some of the same institutions discussed by McElhinny), and government policies such as homeowners' tax breaks and the construction of public roads; though these policies are ostensibly designed to benefit private individuals and communities, they ultimately serve a specific set of powerful corporate interests, especially real estate developers, corporate retailers, car manufacturers, and oil companies. Over the course of several decades, such policies have had a major impact on where, how, and with whom U.S. residents live, work, and interact. In particular, they have subsidized the growth of sprawling, environmentally rapacious suburbs that are usually both socioeconomically and ethnically segregated (Jacobs 1961; Sweezy 2000). Such policies also gave rise to perhaps the best-known icon of late 20th century American social life: the shopping mall, a commercialized public space par excellence that has become a preferred venue of casual social interaction not only in the U.S. (Kowinski 1985) but also in other industrialized societies (Crawford 1992, Jackson 1998).

Although the academic study of casual conversation emerged in the same historical epoch that witnessed the rise of the shopping mall and the overall commercialization of American social life, sociolinguists have paid little attention to how these historical developments have both structured and been influenced by Americans' interactional practices. These practices have been amply studied, however, by the people and companies that seek to profit from them. In his bestselling book *Pour your heart into it: How Starbucks built a company one cup at a time* (1997; coauthored with business writer Dori Jones Yang), Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz attributes his company's success not simply to the quality of its coffee but also to the enjoyable social "experiences" awaiting those who visit Starbucks stores. Pine & Gilmore 1999 have identified the commodification of "experience" as a pervasive marketing strategy whereby positive aesthetic and emotional qualities are rhetorically linked not only with branded products but also with the act of consumption itself. Though this strategy has obvious roots in the centuries-old business of advertising, its growth in the late 20th century intensified the theatrical nature of corporate retailing, with armies of artists, consultants, and trainers being deployed to design product lines, retail spaces, marketing texts, and customer service interactions that are all organized around appealing themes.

Although Starbucks and other North American coffeehouse chains rarely pay for print or broadcast advertisements that invite customers to socialize in their stores (they do advertise their coffee), commodified coffeehouse "experiences" are described and marketed in a variety of other texts. In the case of Starbucks,

some of these texts – including Howard Schultz's business memoir, two "coffee cookbooks" (Olsen 1994, Townsend 1995), and a magazine called *Joe* – have been marketed as commodities themselves, while others, such as informational pamphlets and a website (www.starbucks.com), are distributed free of charge. The intended audience of these texts is professional, college-educated, and ideologically moderate to liberal with respect to social issues such as environmental protection and cultural diversity; it is also largely female, or at least concerned with the interests and welfare of middle-class women.[11] In critically analyzing the rhetoric employed in these texts, I will show how certain social and economic practices – especially coffeetalk – are delimited and commodified as part of an idealized coffeehouse "experience." I will also identify the people, places and social-interactional activities that are tacitly but strategically EXCLUDED from that experience. These exclusions contradict the neoliberal claims of both coffeehouse marketers and some sociolinguists, who, for different reasons, promote an image of casual conversation as politically and economically unconstrained.

Casual conversation is an explicit, integral part of the Starbucks experience. Consider the following excerpt from a page on the company's website describing the Starbucks line of music CDs:

> Your Starbucks experience is so much more than just coffees. It's the conversation you have with a friend, a moment of solitude at the end of the day, a quick stop on the way to the movies. And in the tradition of the coffeehouse, it's also the chance to immerse yourself in eclectic and enduring music while you sip your favorite coffee. (Starbucks 2000)

Friendly conversation is also mentioned as one of the coffeehouse experiences described by Starbucks vice president Dave Olsen in the introduction he wrote for *Starbucks passion for coffee: A Starbucks coffee cookbook.*

> Today, as they first did more than 700 years ago, coffeehouses offer a delightful diversity of experiences. You can chat with friends, join in heated discussions or read in solitude. You can study, sketch or write. You can listen to music or hear poetry recited. You can play cards, checkers, backgammon, chess. As an unsung Viennese wit once put it, a coffeehouse is "the ideal place for people who want to be alone but need company for it." All the while, whatever you choose to do, you can sip and enjoy one of the world's great pleasures. (Olsen 1994:8)

Both passages present menus from which potential customers are invited to select the commodified elements that will make up their own personalized Starbucks experience. Some of these commodities are physical objects – coffee beans, CDs – that customers can use to replicate that experience at home. Other aspects of the Starbucks experience, such as "the conversation you have with a friend," pertain specifically to the coffeehouse as a space of social interaction. It is interesting to note that it is only in the context of invoking the interactional aspect of the com-

pany's business that the terms *coffeehouse* and *coffee bar* appear in official Star-bucks literature, and even then the term is used generically, never juxtaposed with the company's name. One simply never reads of **Starbucks coffeehouses*, only of *Starbucks stores*. The inextricability of space and conversation as central elements in the Starbucks experience is reflected in Howard Schultz's construction of Starbucks as a "third place" where people can relax and socialize away from the pressures of work and home. Citing the work of American sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989), Schultz suggests that the need for such a commercialized place of leisure is motivated by vaguely specified historical changes in the "American social scene":

> In America, we are in danger of losing the kind of casual social interaction that is part of the daily routine for many Europeans. In the 1990s, coffee bars became a central component of the American social scene in part because they fulfilled the need for a nonthreatening gathering spot, a "third place" outside of work and home. (Schultz & Yang 1997:120)

Schultz's description of Starbucks as a "third place" entails a number of presuppositions about the people and places that are included in, and excluded from, the Starbucks experience. To start with, Schultz constructs contemporary Americans as a cohesive community of individuals (*we*) who have similar values and practices with respect to casual social interaction. This community is distinct from people in other times and places – especially Europeans – who supposedly did or do enjoy a kind of casual social interaction that "we" desire. The notion of "third place" presupposes that neither work nor home is suitable for the kind of casual social interaction desired by contemporary Americans. Finally, the representation of coffee bars like Starbucks (but not **Starbucks coffee bars*) as an ideal "third place" suggests that other potential gathering spots are "threatening" and therefore to be avoided.

   Schultz's cautionary narrative about "losing" a certain kind of social interaction echoes a concern voiced by a number of contemporary critics about the decline of "community" in American social life. Tannen 1998, for example, has written on the incivility that characterizes many contemporary social interactions, while the psycholinguist John L. Locke laments that new communications technologies and the spatial layout of American suburbs (among other things) have led to what he calls *The de-voicing of society: Why we don't talk to each other anymore* (1998). Without directly addressing any of the cultural or economic factors discussed by Locke or Tannen, Schultz offers Starbucks as a solution to America's interactional ills: "In some communities, Starbucks stores have become a Third Place – a comfortable, sociable gathering spot away from home and work, like an extension of the front porch" (Schultz & Yang 1997:5). According to Schultz, the commercial appeal of the "Third Place" concept is explained by marketing surveys in which customers reported that "just being in a Starbucks store, they felt they were out in the world, in a safe place yet away from

the familiar faces they saw every day" (120). The terms *safe*, *comfortable* and *nonthreatening* compare Starbucks stores to other potential venues of social interaction that are by implication unsafe, uncomfortable, and threatening, though Schultz never identifies those places by name, nor does he specify the factors that render them so dangerous and unappealing.

Research by cultural geographers identifies "safety" (and its correlate, "fear") as a recurring trope in middle-class discourses of place; "safety" finds its material expression in gated residential communities as well as in the widespread deployment of police, security guards, and electronic surveillance systems in malls, parks, and other public settings (Davis 1992, Jackson 1998). While the ostensible motivation for these measures is the prevention of crime, their practical implementation suggests that they are also often motivated by prejudice against (or discomfort around) poor and working-class people, immigrants, and people of color – especially men, who are seen to pose a particular threat to the middle-class white women whose patronage of such spaces is actively sought (see, e.g., Modan 2002). For example, in Tucson, a sprawling Sunbelt city with a large immigrant population and an economically struggling downtown, a law against sitting on sidewalks was passed in 1998 at the urging of downtown merchants who claimed their customers were being harassed by homeless people and teenage street kids; one merchants' association even sought to lease the sidewalks from the city, effectively privatizing them (Romano 1998). These legal efforts were clearly designed to regulate the socioeconomic heterogeneity of the downtown area in order to combat the impression that it is unsafe, uncomfortable, and threatening, and to attract middle-class customers from the city's many malls and shopping strips, where parking is easy and the sidewalks are rarely used. It is no coincidence that virtually all the retail businesses in downtown Tucson are small and independently owned; hardly any large retail corporations (including Starbucks) have deemed the area worthy of investment. (Two independently owned downtown coffeehouses closed during the period that I was writing this article.)

The portrayal of Starbucks as a "Third Place" and "an extension of the front porch" represents a shift in the company's marketing strategy that occurred in the mid-1990s. Until that time, Starbucks stores were designed to recall Italian coffee bars, where customers take their coffee standing up and leave as soon as they are finished drinking. Market research revealed that many customers wanted to use the space for longer periods of time, but that they found the stores' décor cold and uninviting. The company responded by altering the interior design of some of its stores to accommodate more leisurely patterns of use, so that "for those who wanted a Third Place, we added seating and introduced the concept of Grand Cafés, large flagship stores with fireplaces, leather chairs, newspapers, couches, attitude. Customers love them" (Schultz & Yang 1997:311–12). The commercial nature of the space remains highly visible, however, for a substantial area is always devoted to the display and marketing of products that cannot be consumed on the premises (coffee beans, espresso machines, CDs, etc.). Given the norma-

tive association of women with middle-class domesticity, the redesigning of some Starbucks stores to make them resemble "safe" middle-class living rooms, and the marketing of products – including the two coffee cookbooks – that allow customers to replicate the Starbucks experience at home, are both consistent with a marketing emphasis on middle-class women (or women with middle-class aspirations), whose occupational demands in today's economy often leave them little time to furnish, clean, or entertain guests in their homes.

   Starbucks is not the only company seeking to capitalize on the social-interactional desires of overworked middle-class consumers. A nostalgic narrative of "community" life as threatened by unspecified socioeconomic transformations but restored by coffeehouses is also invoked by Martin Diedrich, chairman of the Diedrich Corporation, a coffeehouse chain with outlets across the United States. In an essay entitled "Coffeehouse: A community tradition," which appeared on the company's website, Diedrich writes:

> In our day and age of rapid cultural transformation that often tends to isolate the individual, it is no wonder that coffeehouses have become so popular. They fulfill a deep need in all of us to socialize with one another harmoniously. This coffeehouse phenomenon is not just a short-term event – it is perhaps the world's oldest trend. (Diedrich 2000)

By describing coffeehouses as *the world's oldest trend*, Diedrich links the narrative of coffeehouse "community" with a trope of cultural exotica: the idea that people in other places and times have enjoyed a kind of genuine sociability over coffee that eludes contemporary Americans. Europe is the usual first stop on this global coffeetalk tour. Although Americans have been socializing over coffee in coffee shops, diners, and their homes for decades, if not centuries, and though the term *coffee break* itself is an invention of American capitalism,[12] upscale coffeehouses like Starbucks and Diedrich's largely ignore these homegrown antecedents in order to emphasize an imagined connection to the same bourgeois, early modern European coffeehouses celebrated by Habermas (1989[1962]). Whereas Habermas stresses the coffeehouses' role in fostering political consciousness and debate, however, the marketing rhetoric of today's coffeehouse chains has a depoliticized, aesthetic focus, recalling the Old World coffeehouse as a sociable gathering place for artists, intellectuals, and other urban sophisticates (recall Olsen's [1994] quotation of the "Viennese wit" above). Notably absent from contemporary marketing texts is the fact that some of those coffeehouses were off-limits to women.

   The trope of European cosmopolitanism is augmented by references to even more exotic, non-European locales. Both Olsen 1994 and Diedrich 2000, for example, recount the African and Middle Eastern origins of both the coffee plant and the earliest known coffee-drinking rituals. This trope also appears in other marketing texts. The menus and signboards in many coffeehouses, for example, turn coffee-drinking into a kind of imaginative cultural tourism by inviting cus-

tomers to choose from a list of coffee-producing countries and regions, as well as drinks with Italian and pseudo-Italian names like Frappuccino[TM]. For customers who want to make informed coffee choices, Starbucks even distributes free informational pamphlets describing the origins and qualities of different beans, roasts, and blends. Posters and other visual imagery complement this combination of exoticism and cosmopolitanism. At the Diedrich's "Coffee Plantation" that used to be located near the University of Arizona in Tucson (across the street from Starbucks), murals and other design elements recalled the architecture and landscape of an idealized Latin American hacienda, with a brightly-colored balcony, large thatch umbrella, and artificial palm trees.[13] For several months before the store closed in 2001, a laminated sign above the condiment counter featured the following quote from chairman Diedrich: "To drink Diedrich Coffee from around the world is to be touched by adventure and exploration. A dream of far-off lands and exotic cultures."

Roseberry 1996 has described the proliferation of "yuppie coffees" in the 1980s and 1990s as indicative of a desire by certain sections of the U.S. middle classes to distinguish themselves from the banality of technologically-mediated mass culture by consuming exotically "traditional" products that recall other, presumably more interesting, places and times. Forsaking the cheap, canned blends that monopolized the mid-20th-century U.S. coffee market, the members of these aspiring classes sought symbolic distinction (Bourdieu 1984) in the purchase and consumption of dark-roasted coffee beans imported from diverse far-off lands and packed in simple paper bags that recall an idealized preindustrial era. The urban-geographical aspect of this "reimagination of class" is described by Ley 1996 in his account of neighborhood gentrification in North American cities in the decades following World War II. Ley traces the roots of gentrification to the postwar counterculture – the artists, beatniks, and bohemians who gathered in the Italian-American coffee bars of San Francisco's North Beach and New York's Greenwich Village. The coffeehouse counterculture then spread to other cities and towns, finding an especially receptive market near college campuses and U.S. military bases during the politically tumultuous 1960s and early 1970s (Pendergrast 1999:300). With a particular focus on Toronto and Vancouver, Ley describes how countercultural enclaves in poor urban neighborhoods became increasingly gentrified and depoliticized as successively wealthier waves of newcomers took over apartments, houses, and retail and studio spaces from poor and working-class residents, entrepreneurs, and artisans. Ley uses the term "cultural middle class" to refer to the range of urban residents – from students, social workers, teachers, and shopkeepers to journalists, lawyers and architects – whose "countercultural" aesthetic and consumer tastes set them apart from other middle-class folk, whom they characterized as "suburban" and "boring."

The history of Starbucks parallels the stages of urban gentrification described by Ley 1996. The original Starbucks Coffee, Tea & Spice store was

founded in 1971 by three young men of the "cultural middle class" (a journalist/advertiser and two schoolteachers) who, after attending college in San Francisco, started selling dark-roasted coffee beans in what was then a deteriorating neighborhood in downtown Seattle. It was only after the company's founders teamed up with Howard Schultz, a plastics salesman with a penchant for espresso, that a small coffee bar was opened in the company's sixth Seattle outlet in 1984. Schultz acquired Starbucks outright in 1987 and immediately set about expanding the business, selling brewed coffee in all its stores and opening up 55 new outlets in several U.S. states (Pendergrast 1999:370–72). By century's end, Starbucks had become a major multinational corporation, bringing coffee-drinking sophistication not only to gentrified urban enclaves in North America but also to well-heeled masses around the world (Smith 2000). The extent to which Starbucks has come to be associated with the hegemonic powers of global capitalism became palpably apparent in November 1999, when rioters protesting the World Trade Organization vandalized the company's flagship store in downtown Seattle – now a gentrified tourist destination. Company spokespeople expressed frustration and indignation over the attack, pointing to the philanthropic projects Starbucks supports, including literacy education and relief for poor children in the Third World – the latter through a partnership between the not-for-profit Starbucks Foundation and the nongovernmental relief organization C.A.R.E.

Starbucks' ubiquity makes it difficult for the company to maintain the aura of "distinction" that Bourdieu 1984 identifies as crucial to the self-image of the aspiring middle classes, yet under Howard Schultz's leadership the company continues to target – if not always to attract – a cosmopolitan, cultural-middle-class clientele. (In the "artsy" neighborhoods near the University of Arizona, a number of people told me they purposefully avoided patronizing Starbucks, preferring instead the area's several independent coffeehouses. I have heard similar comments from other North American college towns.) In the terms offered by Habermas (1989[1962]), Starbucks' marketing strategies represent a complex mutual infiltration of private and public, intimate and commercial spheres. Consider the Starbucks-produced magazine *Joe* (*joe* is an old American English slang term for coffee). Published between 1999 and 2000 with a retail price of $3 (other prices are listed for Canada, the U.K. and Japan), *Joe* consists of an attractively edited mix of fiction, poetry, essays, and photography that is free of overtly political content but heavily commercial. Twenty-six out of 86 pages in the first issue are devoted to advertisements, with several more pages providing ostensibly helpful consumer tips for cultural products like books, videos, and websites. The lively, happy tenor of *Joe* – and of the Starbucks experience generally – is emblematic of the commercialized aesthetics of the cultural middle class, identified by Ley 1996 as a depoliticized appropriation of the postwar counterculture. Given its focus on female consumers, the Starbucks experience can also be seen as a commodified appropriation of feminism, for if feminist movements have called at-

tention to systemic social inequities by insisting that "the personal is political," Starbucks' emphasis on corporate philanthropy represents the depoliticization and privatization of what are traditionally seen as "women's issues." (Starbucks also engages in philanthropy at a local level; in early 2000 the store nearest my office was donating 10% of employees' tips to the Tucson Rape Crisis Center.[14])

CONTEXTS AND MEANINGS OF COFFEETALK

Starbucks' successes, and its sometimes brazen business practices (Pendergrast 1999:378–80), make it tempting to view the company as a prime mover of social trends, yet its marketing rhetoric could succeed only to the extent that it made sense in terms of prevailing social norms. The major elements of the Starbucks experience, for example – "yuppie" coffees, the commodification of leisure, and the tendency of cultural-middle-class consumers to congregate in fashionable yet casual catering establishments – already had well-established niches in the U.S. economy by the time Howard Schultz joined the corporation in the early 1980s. Schultz's genius lies in the way he expanded these niches by implementing and adapting well-known mass-marketing techniques. He certainly could not have designed a successful coffeehouse chain in a society where coffee was not already associated with sociability, or where it was not already common for social interactions to take place in commercial venues such as restaurants and bars. The addition of Starbucks stores to the retail mix of many elite commercial enclaves can thus be seen – as Schultz has defensively argued (Schultz & Yang 1997:279) – as enhancing both the "coffee category" in those areas and the choices available to middle-class consumers with respect to where they conduct their casual social interactions.

In the cultural-middle-class milieux I have observed in Tucson and other North American cities, where many if not most planned, casual social interactions take place in commercial catering establishments, the type of venue chosen – restaurant, coffeehouse, bar, or elsewhere – depends on a number of factors, including the time of day and the amount of "free" time that participants have and want to devote to a given interaction.[15] Choices of time and venue also co-vary with the kind of social and affective relationship that obtains among participants, particularly with respect to the degree of intimacy they either share or desire. Since the normative assumption among middle-class interactants is that everyone can afford to patronize a commercial catering establishment, the issue of cost is usually discussed only when people are choosing among differently priced restaurants.

A conversational exchange that I observed at a dinner party in a large eastern U.S. city illustrates the meanings that cultural-middle-class Americans frequently attach to the locations and settings in which casual social interactions take place, and to the activities that accompany them. All the participants, including myself, were adult academics: two professors, two graduate students, and a postdoctoral researcher. At one point, "Sharon", a graduate student in her mid-thirties who

supported herself in part by working as a massage therapist, reported that she had accepted an invitation from one of her male clients to go out on a date. This raised a few eyebrows at the dinner table because it seemed to represent a possible breach of Sharon's professionalism; she therefore went on to describe the exchange as it had transpired. By her account, she ran into the man at work a day after she had given him a massage, when he came back to the agency to retrieve something he had left behind. He greeted her and said, "This may be totally inappropriate, and I understand if you say no, but I wanted to ask if you'd like to have coffee with me on Sunday afternoon." With this Sharon's listeners agreed that she had not compromised her professional integrity, because the timing of the date (afternoon), its location (a coffeehouse), and the type of consumption it involved (drinking coffee or some other nonalcoholic beverage) constructed it as an eminently "casual" undertaking. By contrast, a lunch or dinner date would have seemed more "serious" because these entail a commitment to consuming an entire meal, while a nighttime rendezvous in a restaurant or bar would have had especially "intimate" and potentially "romantic" connotations. Sharon's listeners would have been most concerned in the unlikely event that she had agreed to "stay in" rather than "go out" – that is, to meet the man at either his home or hers, where there would be the perceived possibility not just of sex, but also of danger.

Coffeehouses and restaurants are seen as especially conducive to casual conversation for a number of reasons. First, as Howard Schultz suggests, they are widely perceived as cleaner, safer, and more comfortable than noncommercial "third places" such as parks and squares, which are publicly maintained and supposedly accessible to all, even to those who are poor, homeless, loud, or unwashed (though the legal principle of equal access is often contradicted by exclusionary laws and policing practices, as on downtown Tucson's sidewalks). Second, whereas bars and nightclubs are typically dark, noisy, and crowded, coffeehouses and restaurants are designed as dining areas (or, in the case of Starbucks' "Grand Cafés", like living rooms), with tables, chairs, lighting, and music orchestrated in ways that permit people to sit and chat comfortably in pairs or small groups. Third, as public establishments (in a modified Habermasian sense), coffeehouses and restaurants mitigate the physical and psychological intimacy of face-to-face interaction, allowing individuals who are not well acquainted (such as Sharon and her male client) to feel safer and less pressured to perform conversationally than they might feel in a private home or other secluded location. The open-ended nature of coffeehouse interactions, which do not necessarily involve the consumption of an entire meal and can therefore be either brief or long without being expensive, often makes them feel especially "casual."

Another reason that coffeehouses and restaurants are preferable to private homes is that, for many middle-class Americans, entertaining guests requires physical and emotional work. Accordingly, as indicated in (1) above from Schegloff & Sacks 1984[1973], it is rare in middle-class communities for people to drop in on each other at home without first obtaining permission and scheduling the time of

the visit. When invitations are extended, the nature of the visit is usually specified in advance in terms of a particular activity, especially – as evidenced in (2) – the consumption of food or drink. As noted by Speaker A in that excerpt, the provision of a meal is regarded as especially inconvenient because it requires the host to purchase provisions, prepare the meal, and clean up both before and after. Even the seemingly simple act of serving coffee invokes class-based expectations and cultural meanings. In the early 1970s, for example, Taylor 1976 noted a connection between coffee-drinking and middle-class norms of domesticity: "[I]n some communities in suburban America to fully participate in neighborship requires a home of your own, whether it be a split-level colonial or a high ranch, such that 'Come over to my house for a cup of coffee' also means 'I have a house, too'" (1976:146). Given their busy schedules and the social norms impinging on virtually all aspects of middle-class dining – the foods and drinks that are consumed, the manner in which they are prepared, the tableware and furniture on which they are served, and the overall appearance of one's home – many people simply do not have the time or the desire to perform such jobs on a regular basis and prefer instead to reserve their efforts for special occasions like dinner parties. That these domestic labors have traditionally been assigned to women is consistent with the special appeals made by Starbucks and other catering establishments to middle-class women who like to "go out" for food and drink, where they can pay other people to do the work. For people who are unprepared to entertain in their homes and who have sufficient resources of time and money, having a range of commercial catering establishments to choose from makes "going out" a convenient and enjoyable way to socialize.

In his response to criticisms about Starbucks' competitive business tactics, Schultz's claim about enhancing consumer choice in the "coffee category" draws on a neoliberal ideology that, like Habermas's theory of the public sphere, constructs society as a collection of private individuals who are equally empowered to choose and direct the course of their own actions. Schultz is not the only American to espouse this ideology, of course (though he has profited from it to an unusual extent); many middle-class Americans articulate a similar belief in the individuality of their aesthetic tastes and the autonomy of their consumer choices from the material and ideological forces of class, gender, race, and (dis)ability. This belief extends to the conduct of social interactions generally, and is reflected in sociolinguistic theories of ordinary or casual conversation as a naturally occurring, economically unconstrained (i.e., "free") activity of social equals. Yet the time we spend chatting in a commercial catering establishment is not at all "free": We pay for it. All the coffeehouses I have visited in Tucson and elsewhere have policies (e.g., charging for refills) that make paid consumption at least somewhat proportional to time spent in the space. Customers are also reminded of the imperative to consume by workers who come around periodically to remove empty cups and glasses; this encourages some people to refrain from finishing the last two or three gulps in their coffee cup in order to appear as if they are still drinking.[16]

A neoliberal ideology of consumer choice also obscures the geographic and demographic disparities that constrain commercialized social-interactional practices in contemporary U.S. cities and towns. In Tucson, for example, where the coffeehouse market was already highly differentiated by age, class, location, race, sexuality, and aesthetics before Starbucks appeared on the scene, Starbucks' presence since 1997 has reinforced the propensity of middle- and upper-middle-class Tucsonans to flock to establishments where they are unlikely to interact with people who are poor or working-class. All of the company's five Tucson stores are located in shopping areas in the wealthier, whiter north side of town, most of which – given inadequate public transportation, especially from the city's predominantly Latino south side – are difficult for poorer people to reach, and often unwelcoming toward those who do come. The demographic segmentation of the coffeehouse market is thus not simply a matter of choice, but also of economic, racial, and geographic constraint.

Class-based antagonism toward the Starbucks experience is expressed in a number of ways. A recent *New York Times* article, for example, cites complaints from working-class patrons at the Clifton Spa Luncheonette in Clifton, New Jersey, about the high price of Starbucks coffee, the confusing variety of coffee flavors, and the elitism of its clientele. One Clifton Spa customer, a security guard, is reported as saying, "A man making $300 a week could come in here and feel comfortable. If they go to Starbucks, they have to first look and see if they can afford it." Another customer declared, "It is a certain type of person who likes Starbucks. They like to sit and read their journals and do their laptops and have their coffee. You have to have a laptop" (Purdy 2000:B1). These comments echo a remark I heard from a downtown Tucson coffeehouse owner, who characterized the students who patronize the Starbucks near the University of Arizona as kids who pay for their espresso drinks using "Mommy and Daddy's credit cards." The racialized nature of Starbucks' class-based market appeal is highlighted in an example provided by Norma Mendoza-Denton (personal communication), whose sociolinguistic research among working-class Mexican-American teenagers in California involved spending a considerable amount of time "hanging" with the girls in commercial establishments like malls, department stores, and fast-food restaurants (Mendoza-Denton 1997). Once, when Mendoza-Denton asked one of the girls whether she wanted to "go out for coffee," the young woman dismissed the suggestion out of hand, declaring, "Coffee is for White girls." Although Mendoza-Denton's first impulse was to remind her young friend that coffee-drinking was a bona fide Mexican tradition, she refrained when she realized that drinking *café con leche* over breakfast at home is a different social practice from "doing coffee" at a place like Starbucks.

The *New York Times* article that quoted the patrons of the Clifton Spa Luncheonette also quoted Starbucks vice president Arthur Rubinfeld as saying, "We are the front porch of America" (Purdy 2000:B1). This claim, a clear echo of Schultz's "Third Place" rhetoric, constructs an image of American society (and

implicitly, as Starbucks keeps extending its global franchise, the world) where the kind of casual conversation that sometimes accompanies the commercial consumption of gourmet coffee in an upscale coffeehouse is affordable, accessible, and attractive to all. Yet the social, economic, and geographic parameters of coffeetalk belie this idealized image. In Clifton, New Jersey, for example, Starbucks rejected an invitation from political and business leaders to open a franchise in the city's struggling downtown. According to Arthur Rubinfeld, Clifton's Main Avenue did not "have the retail synergy to merit the investment we make in our stores". Front porch of America, indeed! Excluded from this image of Starbucks-style democracy are the many Americans who are either unable or unwilling to link their conversational practices with the kind of consumer lifestyle Starbucks promotes. Also excluded are the many workers, from Ethiopia and Indonesia to Boston and Beijing, whose labor produces the Starbucks experience, but who could barely afford to purchase a cup of the stuff, if they could even get to a Starbucks store.

CONCLUSION

As noted by Eggins & Slade 1997, neither "casualness" nor "equality" is a natural, a priori condition of conversation; rather, both are culturally and historically specific ideals that speakers accomplish (or avert) by means of particular conversational strategies. In this essay I have sought to extend Eggins & Slade's insights by situating the study of casual conversation within the political-economic context of the contemporary United States, where "equality" is a sacred (and elusive) political value and "casualness" refers to an intentional mode of social action that is materialized and commodified in speech, dress, eating, drinking, interior design and other practices. By attending to the material and ideological dimensions of a particular configuration of these practices – coffeetalk – I have been especially concerned to show how casual conversations are constrained in terms of where, when, with whom, under what conditions, and at what cost people get together to talk. I have also taken care to keep in mind the kinds of social and linguistic interactions (or "experiences") that some people – especially urbane, middle-class American adults and the corporations that serve them – tacitly seek to avoid or suppress. According to Habermas (1989[1962]) and Burke (1993), these exclusions have historical roots in the early modern era, when global merchants first brought coffee and coffeehouse culture to a middle-class, male, English-speaking "public".

The popularity of Starbucks and other coffeehouse chains among certain middle-class populations both reflects and reinforces a cultural habitus of commercialized sociability and social-interactional segregation that is widely taken for granted in the United States and other industrialized, capitalist societies. Recent (and not so recent) social movements, however, have inspired many people to question the fairness and desirability of a political-economic system that finds

its supreme expression in the socially sanitized shopping mall, where cultural diversity is reduced to an aesthetic commodity and political debate is actively suppressed. Though a similar consumerist habitus informs the lives of many sociolinguists (including myself), who "go out for coffee" at least as often as do other middle-class folk, sociolinguistic theories have, with a few exceptions (e.g., McElhinny 1997, Cameron 2000, Scollon 2001), remained largely impervious to the processes of commodification and commercialization that inform and constrain casual conversational practices. Yet, after more than a decade of research and wrangling over the relationship between "text" and "context" (Hanks 1989, Bauman & Briggs 1990, Duranti & C. Goodwin 1993, Billig 1999, Schegloff 1999), sociolinguists are well placed to contribute to wider academic and public-sphere debates about the role of conversation in contemporary social life. That such debates are going on is evident in the work of Oldenburg 1989, Locke 1998, and Tannen 1998 cited above, as well as in the recent publication of an edited volume entitled *Talk talk talk: The cultural life of everyday conversation* (Salamensky 2001), which contains chapters by such prominent scholars as Judith Butler, Homi Bhabha and Paul Rabinow, but not a single article by – or even a bibliographic reference to – a sociolinguist.[17]

This essay has focused primarily on the spatial, temporal, and political-economic processes that characterize the speech situations in which coffeetalk is practiced; further research might show how these same processes are manifest in the content and interactional structure of the talk itself. In addition to exploring the issues I have raised regarding conversational openings and closings, such research would build on the existing literature on language and inequality, and could address such classic conversation analytic concerns as topic management and turn-taking. For example, what kinds of topics are deemed appropriate in coffeehouses and other "casual" conversational settings, and what topics are excluded? How are middle-class children, adolescents, and other conversational participants socialized to negotiate such judgments? How do the temporal and cognitive constraints of speakers' jobs and other obligations impinge on the ways they manage turn-taking in casual settings and the amount of time they devote to particular topics? Questions like these call for careful attention both to the micro structures of verbal interaction and to the ways such structures are implicated in the political, economic, and sociocultural processes – e.g., commercialized leisure – that increasingly characterize life under global neoliberalism. Such questions also underscore the need for sociolinguists to continue reconsidering the elements that constitute the textual objects of our analyses. Locations, times, and the other activities that accompany talk – including the resources that are expended to make such interactions possible – need not be relegated to an extra-analytic realm of ("irrelevant") context, but can be critically and productively analyzed as constitutive elements of the conversational text itself.

NOTES

[1] I use the term "sociolinguists" broadly to refer to scholars of language as used in specific social settings. Particularly relevant to this essay is scholarly research on spontaneous, informal oral speech in English-speaking communities, especially the United States, England, and Australia, that has been done by people who can be characterized collectively as "discourse analysts": conversation analysts (e.g., Sacks & Schegloff 1984[1973]), interactional sociolinguists (e.g., Tannen 1984), linguistic anthropologists (e.g., Heath 1983), and critical discourse analysts (e.g., Billig 1999). These labels are not mutually exclusive, and I use them here for heuristic purposes only.

[2] With the recent introduction of cellular phones, the socializing practices of some elite northern Nigerians have begun to include occasional, planned nighttime rendezvous at bars, but this is still highly marked even among elites.

[3] Sidnell's (2001) appeal to biological determinism is especially striking given his detailed ethnographic understanding of the political, economic and sociocultural aspects of the Indo-Guyanese community he studied. Accordingly, before invoking biology to explain a limited set of cross-cultural similarities, it would be appropriate to consider other possible explanations. For my purposes, it is interesting to note that the data he analyzes come from an ethnically homogeneous gathering of working-class adult men enjoying their time off from work at a rumhouse – a commercialized and profoundly segregated interactional situation that is influenced at least as much by the forces of colonialism and capitalism as by the neuro-biological legacy of human evolution.

[4] I use "neoliberal" to describe theories and ideologies of politics, economics, and society that are based on the civil libertarian and free-market ideals of the European Enlightenment. In the United States, the closest synonym in popular usage is "libertarian"; "conservatives" tend to combine strong support for free-market economics with a weak commitment to civil liberties (largely because of orthodox or fundamentalist religious beliefs), while "liberals" generally support a neoliberal political and economic system that is mitigated by certain socialist or populist ideals of economic justice.

[5] I use the terms "speech event" (Hymes 1972) and "speech genre" (Bakhtin 1986) interchangeably.

[6] In a recent published debate on CA, Billig (1999:549–51) notes that one of the key criteria whereby CA practitioners have defined "ordinary conversation" (or just plain "conversation") is interactional equality. In his rejoinder, Schegloff 1999 rejects this claim, arguing that "[c]onversation . . . appears to be so organized as to allow virtually any overall distribution of turns, from a wholly equalitarian one to a highly skewed and asymmetrical one" (563), whereas "nonconversationally organized talk" is more rigidly structured according to "external" institutional norms (564). Although Schegloff's clarification on this point is well stated, a review of work by him and his CA colleagues generally confirms Billig's contention about the assumption of conversational equality; it is scholars working outside a strict CA paradigm who have profitably examined the interactional inequalities that characterize many informal/ordinary conversations.

[7] The political-economic history of coffee closely parallels, and is connected with, the historical rise of the global sugar market described by Sidney Mintz, whose brilliant book *Sweetness and power* (1985) inspired much of this section.

[8] Another area of concern to the writers of civility manuals was the socially appropriate use of bodily gesture; see Roodenburg 1991.

[9] Habermas 1989[1962] also sees this "mutual infiltration" at work, in different ways, in the interventionist social policies of socialist and social-democratic states.

[10] The one notable exception to this trend – Lindquist's (2002) linguistic ethnography of a working-class bar in Chicago – is by a scholar whose training and primary professional affiliation is in rhetoric rather than sociolinguistics. In addition, Scollon 2001 uses the example of two people drinking and talking in a Starbucks store to introduce his theory of "mediated discourse," in which political-economic processes are included as integral aspects of any linguistic interaction, though this is not the central point of Scollon's analyses.

[11] Some of Starbucks' free pamphlets and Web pages have a somewhat different target audience of potential investors and employees.

[12] The term "coffee break" was coined in 1952 by the Pan American Coffee Bureau, a promotional agency representing the companies that produced and sold coffee from Latin America (Pendergrast 1999:241)

[13] Thanks to Jane A. Hill for informing me of this Diedrich's store's demise, which was of course popularly blamed on the Starbucks across the street.

[14] Although employees are not compensated for this lost income, the store manager assured me that such donations were made only with the unanimous agreement of the employees, who were asked to suggest the particular charities to which donations would be made.

[15] Most of the people I have interviewed are adults who do not have to take care of young children, and who therefore generally have more "free" time and opportunities to "go out." Adults with young children are more likely than other adults to socialize together in their homes, public parks, or commercial play spaces, such as McDonald's "Playplaces" or Discovery Zone "Funcenters," where they can talk while their kids play. I thank Steve and Ethan Bialostok for alerting me to this.

[16] I would stress that most Tucson coffeehouse owners and employees – including those at Starbucks – are extremely solicitous of their customers and, especially when they are not too busy working, actually encourage them to stay by engaging them in friendly conversation, changing the music, or adjusting the volume to make the space more comfortable. A few independent proprietors also provide newspapers or other materials for customers to read free of charge, and allow local individuals and agencies to leave newsletters, advertisements and announcements on bulletin boards and countertops.

[17] The only remotely sociolinguistic references in Salamensky 2001 are a single quote each from Burke 1993 and Hill's (1978) review article "Apes and language," as well as several references to Walter Ong's notion of orality. There are also references to the theoretical writings of Erving Goffman, Julia Kristeva, Pierre Bourdieu, Mikhail Bakhtin, John Austin, and John Searle.

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