

# **The Micro-Organization of Taking a Break: Transitions Between Task and Non-Task Activities at Work**

Siri Mehus  
*University of Texas at Austin*

## **1. Introduction**

A general feature of all but the most oppressive of workplaces is that there are moments when work temporarily ceases. During these intervals, employees might read, converse, smoke cigarettes, or consume food or beverages; but whatever the form of leisure chosen, it is defined as leisure in its opposition to the work activities it momentarily suspends. It is the context of the workplace that constitutes these periods as *breaks*. Playing on the multiple meanings of the term *at work* (cf. Drew & Heritage, 1992), we can observe that an employee taking a break is no longer at work in the sense of being engaged in task activities, but usually is still at work in the sense of being spatially located in the work setting or its margins (with all that entails, crucially including being subject to the gaze of coworkers and supervisors). The institutional structure of the workplace continues to shape and give meaning to the activities of break-taking, just as surely as it governs the task activities they interrupt.

This paper is a preliminary investigation into the phenomenon of taking a break. My focus, however, is not on what occurs during breaks, but rather on how employees manage the transition between work and non-work activities. The study is based on microanalysis of five such transitions, recorded on two separate days in a small architectural studio. Examination of these instances immediately reveals that these breaks are social activities—in my data the employees did not take their breaks alone.<sup>1</sup> As social activities, they are socially coordinated, but I found that this coordination was not made explicit. Rather, the workers render their actions visible to each other and monitor one another for uptake. In so doing, they make only limited use of verbal resources, relying primarily on their bodies and material objects (such as a pack of cigarettes or a beer bottle) to accomplish the shift in activity.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is not to imply that employees never take breaks alone; rather, it is intended as a characterization of the particular interactional events that I examined.

In what follows I will discuss how these transitions are accomplished in a seamless manner. Further, I propose that managing breaks in this way is part of projecting a particular kind of professional identity. To be more precise, making these transitions appear to happen “naturally” allows the employees to present themselves as autonomous, self-motivated professionals, even while they simultaneously position themselves as subordinate within the hierarchical structure of the firm.

## 2. The Significance of ‘Taking a Break’ as a Workplace Activity

In recent years we have seen a great deal of new research on workplace interaction. Not surprisingly, the majority of that research has been focused on task-oriented activities.<sup>2</sup> I suggest, however, that the goal of “describ[ing] how particular institutions are enacted and lived through as accountable patterns of meaning, inference and action” (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 5) can be achieved by investigating non-task activities as well; and that in fact, the institutional frame may be thrown into particular relief at precisely those moments in which employees are moving between work and non-work.

Microethnographers such as Erickson and Schultz (1977) and McDermott, Gospodinoff and Aron (1978) have demonstrated the fruitfulness of attending to the junctures between activities, particularly the ways in which interactants adjust their postural configurations at such moments. In order to maintain a “working consensus” (Goffman, 1959; Kendon, 1990), participants must signal to one another their understandings of what it is that they are engaged in at any given time. At the boundaries between activities, there is a heightened need for such displays.

Issues of power, status and professional identity may be particularly salient at break-taking moments. Spending “the boss’s time” on anything other than work is potentially a transgression that must be managed, and the resources for doing so vary greatly for different classes and types of employees. Furthermore, the notion of the break as an activity sharply delineated from work assumes an ideology of work and leisure in which the two are clearly segmented—a view more likely to be held by occupants of labor and clerical positions than professional ones (see, for example, Nippert-Eng, 1996). Thus, whether, how often, and, as I will argue here, *how* one takes a break can have important implications for the construction of professional identity.

## 3. The Site

The data for this study were gathered as part of a larger project on interaction and design. I, along with two other researchers,<sup>3</sup> videotaped and observed work activities at JP Peters,<sup>4</sup> a small architectural studio consisting of principal JP Peters and his six employees.

JP Peters (the person as well as the firm that bears his name) embraces an informal, somewhat unorthodox style of work. The studio itself is set in a small older house on a wooded lot; it is not a typical office setting. Both the size of the firm and the setting probably play some role in influencing the style of work practiced by JP and his employees. However, more important are the interrelated design aesthetic and ideology of

<sup>2</sup> But see Holmes (1998, 2003) and Sunaoshi (2004) on small talk and humor at work.

<sup>3</sup> The original study was undertaken along with Chris Koenig and Miriam Sobre, to whom I am indebted for the many ways in which this paper benefits from their efforts.

<sup>4</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

architectural practice they espouse. According to the firm's website, the employees "bring ferociousness, rigor and truth to the practice of architecture. It is not just our profession; it is our vocation." The influence of these ideals is evident in the unconventional (and sometimes unpopular) modernist buildings they create, as well as in the way that they work. Within this ideal, motivation stems from one's love of the work, rather than external sources (whether they be money, praise, or a superior's demands).

#### **4. Taking Breaks at JP Peters**

This study is based on microanalysis of five moments at which employees shift between actively working and temporarily ceasing their work to smoke cigarettes (and, in one case, drink beer). Due to space limitations, in this paper I will focus on three representative transitions. In these examples, the central actors are Michael (the junior architect who has been at the firm longest) and Curtis (an architecture student and part-time employee).

These breaks are social activities, and as such some type of collaboration is required in order to bring them off successfully. However, I find that this does not involve explicit verbal proposals or invitations. Rather, they seem to "just happen." In what follows, I attempt to describe how this is accomplished. I will start by presenting one such transition, and then use this example to illustrate three general strategies for accomplishing break-taking. I will then examine a second example in which the transition is marked verbally and show that this occurs precisely where one of the aforementioned strategies is unavailable.

Finally, I discuss an example that differs from the previous two in terms of both its participants and its complexity. While the three general strategies are also employed in this case, I shift my focus in order to show how this transition to a break-taking activity is organized around the micro-actions of the principal architect.

##### *4.1. Transition 1*

The first example I will discuss begins at a point when Curtis and Michael, along with two other employees (Patricia and Warren), are engaged in discussing promotional packages that they need to compile and send out. JP, who is sitting outside, opens the door and directs a request to the group sitting inside (he asks if someone will bring him a beer). Curtis leaves the room to retrieve the beer; when he comes back, both he and Michael go outside to smoke a cigarette (and join JP).



**(1) Segment 1: JP requests a beer<sup>5</sup>**

1 C: I'd like to have a package also. Can we just make four? (2.0) I  
 2 want a different one. I want my own.  
 3 M: [uh huh huh huh  
 4 P: [And [then uh °(shut up)°  
 5 C: [hih hih hih u heh heh  
 6 M: I was a(h)bout to kill you man.  
 7 P: And then uh and [then we do one for  
 8 JP: [( ) Could you do me a favor [could you=  
 9 [(Curtis  
 10 pushes back and holds position looking at JP))  
 11 =get me one of those Kirin Ichibans in there? ( ) leave my  
 12 food or it will be gone.  
 13 P: >he he he he he he he<  
 14 M: [hu hu hu hu hu hu hu  
 15 ((Curtis gets up and leaves room))  
 16 P: And then uh we need to do one fo:r Pete McCall? (1.2) And then we  
 17 need to do one for us.  
 18 M: [Well (.) let's talk to JP about- [as far as what we are ( )  
 19 [((Michael stands up and grabs cigarette pack))  
 20 C: ((walks back into room)) [Yeah bring those outside.=  
 21 [((Curtis walks towards door,  
 22 points toward cigarette pack))  
 23 C: =(Patricia) do you have my lighter?

How does this transition occur? How do Curtis and Michael organize their behavior so as to make it happen, while preserving the sense that it happens effortlessly? Examination reveals that each of them acts in ways that are well designed to facilitate this smooth transition. Their actions can be described in terms of three general strategies that are employed in each of the segments I analyzed.

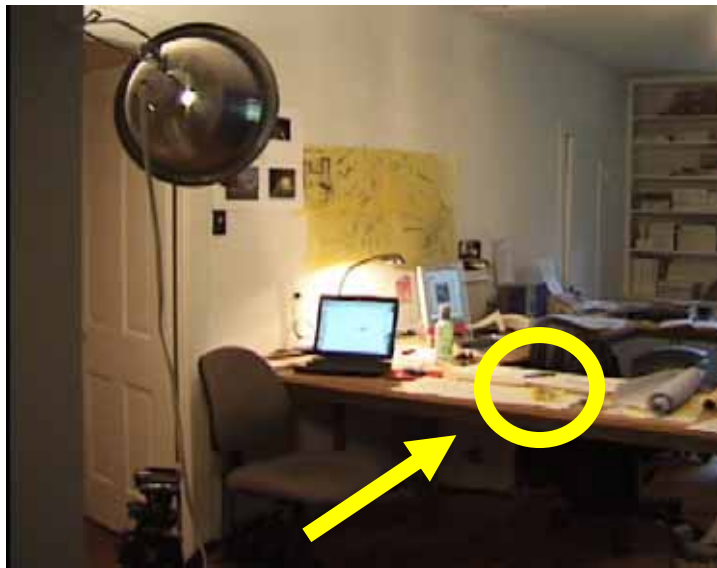
<sup>5</sup> Initials are used in lieu of names to identify speakers in the transcript.

#### 4.1.1 *Take Advantage of Interruptions*

First, the employees make use of previously established non-work frames to smoothly shift into break activity. In this example, we can see that Curtis and Michael are not forced to forge a transition out of raw material in order to make this smoke break happen. Rather, they are able to take advantage of a frame-shift already initiated by JP when he opens the door and utters “Could you do me a favor. . .”. (lines 8-12). This strategy appears to be an important one. None of the breaks I identified was initiated with an abrupt transition from an activity that was unquestionably task-related. Rather, in each case some type of interference with the work activity had already occurred, such as a technological problem or an interruption from another employee.

#### 4.1.2 *Use Material Objects in the Environment*

Another way in which coordination occurs in this example involves the use of material resources. In particular, as Curtis comes back into the room, Michael displays his intention to have a cigarette by taking one from the pack that lies on a centrally located table. He is removing the cigarette from the pack when Curtis passes with JP’s beer.



At this point, let us consider more carefully the placement of this cigarette pack and what this placement affords. On the days I videotaped, the cigarette pack was generally kept on this table. As a rule, Curtis sat on the side of the table closest to the camera (facing the laptop) and Michael sat on the other side of the table (facing the iMac and the wall).

Why would they leave the cigarettes on the table and not in the break area, or better yet, in one of their own pockets? It would not seem to be an ideal location, especially since the table is usually covered with drawings and plans under which the packs could (and sometimes do) get lost. However, there are some advantages to this placement. First, it affords *equal access* to the cigarette pack; both smokers can grab it and take a cigarette. If the pack were in one smoker’s pocket, it would be necessary to either ask or offer in order to make the cigarettes available to the one who was not holding them. Another

affordance of this placement is the *visibility* it lends. The position of the pack—located between the two workers and within easy reach—renders cigarette smoking ever-present as a possible next activity. But more importantly, the action of taking a cigarette is always visible to the other party.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.1.3 Synchronize Actions

Another strategy by which the participants manage these transitions in a seamless manner involves coordinating their embodied actions with one another. In this instance, Michael times his action of taking a cigarette so as to make it optimally visible to Curtis as he passes. Michael commences his movement and performs it at such a pace that he is reaching for the pack precisely as Curtis passes that spot (lines 19 and 20; see photo below).



Curtis then displays his noticing of Michael's action and signals his intention to join Michael for a cigarette break by uttering "bring those outside" to Michael and "do you have my lighter?" to Patricia (lines 20-23).

The timing of Michael's action makes it possible for Curtis to shift into a new activity *without altering the motion trajectory he has already established*. Thus, the transition is not only verbally unmarked, but is also physically downplayed. That a break between activities is occurring is obscured by the fluidity of Curtis's movement towards the door.

It would be tempting to explain the smoothness of Michael and Curtis's coordinated actions by asserting that they both simply know that it is time to take a cigarette break. It is indeed quite likely that prior knowledge plays some part. However, what I hope to have

---

<sup>6</sup> At the conference presentation of this paper, Elizabeth Keating pointed out that rifling through the paper on the table makes the action of taking a cigarette also *audible* to others present. Thus the apparent disadvantage of the desk being cluttered may actually be an advantage

shown is that the apparent naturalness of this moment is *interactionally orchestrated*; it is not simply a byproduct of their shared knowledge.

#### 4.2. Transition 2

It is not the case that participants never used language to coordinate their transitions. However, in the instances I found, this happens precisely where the strategies previously identified are not available or cannot do the work that participants need to do. In the following segment, one participant takes advantage of an interruption in his own work (strategy 1) and initiates a break by taking a cigarette from the centrally located pack (strategy 2), but because the other has experienced no such work interruption and is in fact actively engaged in a task, he is unable or unwilling to physically signal his interest in taking a break. Verbal means are used to deal with this dilemma and ensure that the two are able to take their smoke break together. While this is done (partially) through language, it is still done in a highly inexplicit manner.

##### (2) Segment 2: “Smoke?”

```

1  M:  Coo:l. Are we testing it out first?
2  J:  Oh yes:=
3  M:  =Oh yea[:h
4  J:  [↑Tuesday the guys coming over ((gets up))
5  M:  Oh yeah? All right. ((claps twice)) What time?
6  J:  >I don't know< he's gonna call back I'll let you know. ((leaves
7      room))
8  M:  sh::: uyu:((stretching)) ((turns toward computer))
9  C:  °what the fuck are you° ((taps keyboard)) °are you on crack?°
10 M:  What (.) what (.) ↑what crack. ((stands up))
11      (8.1) ((Michael shuffles through plans on desk, pulls
12      out pack of cigarettes, takes cigarette))
13 C:  Smoke?
14 M:  Yeah. ((puts cigarette in mouth))
15      (32.0) ((women talk in background)) ((Michael walks around desk,
16      stands behind Curtis, fingers plans on desk, walks back around
17      desk, takes sip of tea, looks at computer screen))
18 M:  °bu bah°
19 C:  ((pushes back in chair, picks up and marks plan))
20      Oh so now you want me to just a↑pproximate the cut line huh? (.)
21      hi: h: (h)I see a (.) it's a [li-
22 M:  [Well I mean if you [if you can
23 C:  [little
24      subtle note there
25 M:  hu hu yeah(h)[hu
26 C:  [uhu)[he
27 M:  [uhu hu hu ((walks towards door))
28 C:  S(h)o y(h)ou don't- You just don't wanna do it do ya(h) hu
29      that's fine. That's cool. (that's a) ((gets up and gets coat))

```

As in the first segment discussed, the break is initiated at a point when there has already been an interruption of work (strategy 1). At the beginning of segment, Michael and Jake are discussing some new technology that the firm plans to acquire. As Jake walks away at the conclusion of this exchange, Michael is faced with the choice of returning to work or beginning a new, more leisurely activity. He displays to Curtis that he is between activities (and thus available for a break) by stretching audibly and spinning in his chair (line 8). In line 9 Curtis responds, in a sense. However, by directing his utterance (“are you on crack”) to his computer, rather than to Michael, he shows that he is engaged in a different activity: struggling to solve a problem encountered while working

on his computer. As mentioned earlier, a disruption of work caused by a technical difficulty can open up an opportunity for a break,<sup>7</sup> and Michael may be orienting to this possibility when he responds by recycling the potentially humorous aspect of Curtis' utterance: "what. what. what crack." (line 10). As Michael speaks, he stands and begins to shuffle through the papers on the table, looking for the pack of cigarettes (see photo below).



When Curtis responds it is not to Michael's question, but rather to Michael's action. Without directly looking at Michael, Curtis has been able to determine what Michael is doing and its significance. His next utterance "Smoke?" functions as a candidate assessment and request for confirmation as to the significance of Michael's actions. Michael confirms this assessment in line 14, but Curtis offers no response. This minimal adjacency pair ("Smoke," "Yeah.") is apparently enough to convey Curtis's interest in the activity while simultaneously displaying that he is currently engaged, and thus it serves to "hold" Michael in the room for 30 seconds (until Curtis stands to get his coat, line 29).

In this example, verbal means are employed in the process of negotiating the transition to a smoke break. However, the question "Smoke?" is not used to initiate the break; arguably, Michael's actions (shuffling through the papers on the desk and taking a cigarette) have already done this. The verbal modality becomes necessary precisely because Curtis is not able, or does not choose, to physically signal his willingness to engage in the smoking activity by getting up and joining Michael.

#### 4.3. *Transition 3*

The last segment I will discuss also involves Curtis and Michael, as well as two other participants: Warren (another junior architect) and JP (the owner of the firm). The nature of the break is also different; some participants do go outside to smoke, but beer-drinking

<sup>7</sup> In fact, in both of the examples that I analyzed but did not have space to discuss in this paper, the break was immediately preceded by a technological problem.



rather than smoking appears to be the relevant leisure activity. This transition, like the others I have analyzed, is accomplished in a tacit manner. In this case, the presence of the lead architect adds another social constraint to the break-taking activity. Microanalysis of the moment of transition reveals that the shift between work and break hinges on the actions of the principal architect. Thus the hierarchy of the firm is subtly manifested in the way this break is taken. However, the implicit manner in which this happens serves to mask the relevance of organizational hierarchy in this moment. It allows the junior architects to show deference to their supervisor without appearing to require his permission to take a break, thus continuing to present themselves as self-directed professionals.

JP had previously arranged for Jake (the general contractor who works with JP Peters) to purchase beer and Jake has brought the beer back to the office. When he arrives, Curtis, JP and Michael are discussing a design problem and how it might be solved. Warren is working at another computer with his back to the other three. (These earlier events are not represented in the transcript below, which includes only the moments surrounding the transition to break-taking.)

Jake walks in behind Curtis and lowers the case of beer. Curtis takes out five bottles and puts them on the table. For the next three minutes, the men remain in the same basic configuration. (Although Michael walks away from the group and back at several points, throughout the three minutes a core group of three participants maintain a stable formation, as represented below.)



This persists until JP opens a beer bottle. At that point, Warren, Curtis and Michael all initiate shifts to new activities.

### (3) Segment 3: Opening the Beer

- 1 J: ((steps into room and hands credit card to JP))
- 2 JP: Merci beaucoup
- 3 J: [((leaves room))]
- 4 C: [((sips beer))]

5 JP: ((turns back, looks down at drawing, puts card in pocket))  
 6 M: °goddamn (it)° ((holding up tape and looking at it))  
 7 JP: THANK YOU JA:KE  
 8 ((picks up opener with left hand and reaches for beer bottle  
 9 with right hand))  
 10 J: ((out of room)) Yeah.  
 11 C: Thanks Jake ((turning head towards door to other room))  
 12 JP: ((turns bottle to read label, bottle makes ringing sound as it  
 13 knocks against another, JP returns it and picks up another one))  
 14 W: ((turns toward JP, holds gaze))  
 15 JP: [((opens beer))  
 16 C: [((stands up, [starts walking behind JP))  
 17 W: [((stands up))  
 18 JP: [((turns head toward Michael)) °Michael°  
 19 W: [((gets up and walks over to JP))  
 20 W: I uh [I found a uh aircraft refinisher, in Longview,  
 21 JP: [((turns gaze toward Warren))  
 23 JP: [Oh yeah ((smiling))  
 24 W: [( ) I I told him a little bit about it, they they might be  
 25 able to help us.

From the moment Jake entered the room, and especially since Curtis placed five bottles on the table, beer-drinking has become relevant as a possible next activity. There have been at least two potential initiations of a shift to the activity of beer-drinking. First, immediately after placing the beer bottles on the table, Curtis opened one for himself and subsequently drank from it. This did not, however, lead to others similarly opening beers or to a shift to a break-taking activity. Second, approximately 1½ minutes after the delivery of the beer, Michael glanced at the bottles and said: “↑Beer. ↓Bea:r.” (the latter seemingly in imitation of a Texas accent). JP responded with a stock expression of excitement (pulling the corners of his mouth back and showing his teeth), but rather than making any move towards consuming the beer, he immediately returned to his previous topic. In both cases, there was no uptake from the others and the activity being engaged in proceeded.

However, when JP moves to open a bottle of beer, a flurry of activity is set off: Warren stands, turns and addresses JP about a new topic; Curtis stands, walks around the table to retrieve a cigarette from the pack, and gets his coat to go outside; Michael follows Curtis outside.



Close examination of Curtis's and Warren's actions reveal that they carefully monitor JP from the commencement to the completion of his opening of the beer. Warren turns in his chair immediately after JP picks up a beer bottle and fixes his gaze on him until JP opens the beer. Curtis, because of the way he is physically situated, must monitor JP with his peripheral vision. Evidence that he is in fact doing so is provided by the way that his movements mirror JP's. (For example, as JP brings the beer bottle toward his body with left hand, Curtis brings his left hand towards his own face. JP's and Curtis's left hands reach the end point of their movement at the same moment.)

It is not just that JP's bottle-opening licenses beer-drinking on the part of his employees; the fact that Curtis has already begun to drink indicates that the consumption of beer was possible all along. Rather, JP's bottle-opening *sets off a complete shift in activity* in a way that others' drinking (and displays of interest in drinking) did not.

The way this transition transpires suggests that hierarchical power arrangements continue to operate on the micro-level even in an environment in which employees have considerable autonomy. At JP Peters there are no rules governing when employees must start and stop working. Nor do the employees need JP's permission to have a beer, as we can see from the fact that Curtis helps himself as soon as they are delivered. Yet, in this instance we find that it is in fact the actions of the principal architect that control when his employees take a break.

Ultimately, however, it is not the boss, but rather the employees, who effect this transition. Beer-drinking has been possible since the delivery of the beer, but drinking beer does not necessarily require a complete activity shift of the kind that takes place here. Curtis and Warren (and Michael, to a lesser extent) treat JP's bottle-opening as an *opportunity* to transition into new activities. They use JP's actions as a resource for the pursuit of their own agendas.

Thus we are not seeing the operation of a repressive form of power (Foucault, 1980). JP is not actively constraining the actions of his employees. Rather, we are witnessing power operating in what is arguably its most pervasive form. By hinging their actions on

the actions of their superior—using the hierarchical structure of the firm to achieve their own ends—Curtis, Warren and Michael reinforce and perpetuate that structure. This replicates a pattern found by Keating (1998) and Ochs and Taylor (1995), in which it is the lower status participants who perform the interactional work of reproducing asymmetrical power relationships.

## 5. Conclusion

I have suggested that in this workplace, and perhaps in any workplace, part of acting like a professional consists in the ways employees go about *not* working. In this case, by initiating their breaks in an inexplicit manner, these workers produce a sense of naturalness about when and how they are taken and in so doing project an attitude of nonchalance towards the management of their time at work. This contributes to the display of a professional identity in this setting. At the same time, I have shown that even in a loosely structured workplace such as this one, and even at these seemingly casual and inconsequential moments, constraints on professional behavior and the hierarchical structure of the organization continue to matter.

In this paper I have focused on one type of workplace practice and analyzed it in detail. Ultimately, these actions should not be isolated but should rather be understood within the web of interactions in which they are embedded. These break-taking moments represent but one of a complex of practices both work-related and not by which members produce institutional structure and position themselves within it.

## References

- Drew, P. and Heritage, J. (Eds.). (1992). *Talk at work: Interaction in institutional settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Erickson, F. and Schultz, J. (1977). When is a context? Some issues and methods in the analysis of social competence. *The Quarterly Newsletter of the Institute for Comparable Human Development*, 1(2), 5-10.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. Ed., Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Holmes, J. (1998) No joking matter! The functions of humour in the workplace. *Proceedings of the Australian Linguistic Society*. Retrieved April 11, 2004, from <http://www.cltr.uq.edu.au/als98>.
- Holmes, J. (2003). Small talk at work: Potential problems for workers with an intellectual disability. *Research on Language & Social Interaction*, 36 (1), 65-85.
- Keating, E. (1998). *Power sharing: Language, rank, gender and social space in Pohnpei, Micronesia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kendon, A. (1990). *Conducting interaction: Patterns of behavior in focused encounters*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- McDermott, R., Gospodinoff, K., & Aron, J. (1978). Criteria for an ethnographical adequate description of concerted activities and their contexts. *Semiotica*, 24(3/4), 245-276.
- Nippert-Eng, C. (1996). Calendars and keys: The classification of “home” and “work”. *Sociological Forum*, 11 (3), 563-583.

- Ochs, E. and Taylor, C. (1995). The “father knows best” dynamic in dinnertime narratives. In K. Hall and M. Bucholtz. (Eds.) *Gender articulated: Language and the socially constructed self*. New York: Routledge.
- Sunaoshi, Y. (2004) “This is what we have in common”: Use of humor between Japanese and American factory workers. In W. Chiang, E. Chun, L. Mahalingappa and S. Mehus (Eds.) *Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium about Language and Society Austin, Texas Linguistic Forum*, 47, 209-218.

Siri Mehus  
The University of Texas at Austin  
Department of Communication Studies  
1 University Station A1105  
Austin, TX 78712-0198  
smehus@mail.utexas.edu