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Analyzing language in interaction: the practice of *never mind*[1]

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Based on micro-analysis of a set of British English telephone calls, seven different uses of the phrase *never mind* are distinguished in terms of (a) sequence type, (b) speaker role, (c) sequential position, and (d) prosodic configuration. It is argued that the methodology employed here is widely applicable not only for ready-made expressions but also for less idiomatic forms such as 'lexicalized sentence stems' and other prefabricated chunks of language. Through such a methodology analysts can lay bare what it is that speakers 'do' with language and thus come to understand what it is they 'know' about its procedural deployment in interaction.

1 Introduction

In their introduction to the collected volume *Interaction and Grammar*, Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson argue that the meaning of single grammatical constructions is 'interactionally contingent, built over interactional time in accordance with interactional actualities' (1996: 40). More recently, Clift (2001) has shown that the meaning of a single lexical item, *actually*, is interactionally variable, in the function of its position in a turn and that turn's position in a particular type of interactional sequence. The present article is situated in a similar framework: it advocates treating linguistic objects as interactional devices (Drew & Holt, 1998) and thus makes a contribution to the growing body of knowledge in the field of 'interactional linguistics' (Selting & Couper-Kuhlen, 2001). It sets out to describe how a single fixed phrase, *never mind*, can be used to construct turns at talk, and under what circumstances it is appropriate to do so. At the same time, the article is an exercise in the study of language as methodic practice – as the embodied use of verbal and paraverbal resources for implementing social actions. Albeit the study of a single expression, it demonstrates a methodology which is argued to be widely applicable in the study of language in interaction – not only for ready-made expressions like *never mind* but also for less idiomatic forms such as e.g. 'lexicalized sentence stems' (Pawley & Syder, 1983a), 'precompiled chunks' (Bybee, 1998), or 'prefabs' (Erman & Warren, 2000). It is through such a methodology that analysts can lay bare what it is that speakers 'do' with language and thus come

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to understand what it is they 'know' about its procedural deployment in action and interaction.

According to traditional grammars and dictionaries, *never mind* is a fixed expression with negative imperative form[2] and the colloquial meaning of 'don't let it trouble you', 'it doesn't matter' or (offensively) 'it's none of your business' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). These lexicographical glosses are not wholly wrong, yet they treat meaning as if it were independent of context and neglect to tell us what speakers do with *never mind* in real situations.[3] If we wish to approach *never mind* as a resource for action and interaction, we must conceptualize it as a piece of (sedimented) grammar-cum-prosody which is methodically deployed in the construction of a turn at talk. This means that *never mind* should be thought of as a turn-constructional unit, specifically a phrasal TCU (Schegloff, 1996: 63) – one which is used to accomplish some action within a larger sequence of actions on a particular occasion of social interaction.

TCUs implement actions.[4] Thus, one of the first questions which needs addressing with respect to *never mind* is: what action or kinds of action can it be used to accomplish? And, since turns can consist of more than one TCU: where in the turn can a *never mind*-TCU occur, should it be part of a multi-unit turn? Finally we must enquire, at what point in a sequence is a *never mind* TCU/turn deployed and by which party? It is answers to questions such as these that will enable us to establish how this selected bit of language 'works' in conversation.

As a resource for interactional tasks, *never mind* is not just a set of words. It is at once a verbal *and* a prosodic structure – and indeed intrinsically so. Whenever *never mind* is used in spoken interaction, it automatically has some prosodic configuration (pitch, volume, and duration) and it always has some position in time with respect to prior discourse. So the resource we are talking about must be thought of as a grammatical *and* prosodic form which holistically constitutes a way of doing something in verbal interaction. As a consequence, it may be necessary to recognize several different verbal–paraverbal pairings if they are deployed in the service of distinct interactional goals.

The present study is data-driven: it examines the occurrence of *never mind* in an estimated eight-hour corpus of everyday British[5] telephone conversation, meticulously transcribed by Gail Jefferson.[6] Although I have worked directly with the tapes myself, I have intentionally retained Jefferson's transcriptions because they reflect unmotivated

[2] *Never* is a frozen (obsolete) marker of negation. The expression would translate in Modern English as 'Do not mind'.

[3] In fact, because the lexical meaning of an expression represents a crystallization of what real speakers use that expression to do, lexicographical entries of this sort could be said to be putting the cart before the horse.

[4] These actions should not be thought of as exact equivalents of speech acts. Although there may be some terminological overlap, the actions which TCUs accomplish are always embedded in turns, which themselves are part of larger courses of action and activity sequences.

[5] The study was motivated in part by the casual observation that *never mind* is used more frequently in British English than in American English and to a certain extent in different circumstances.

[6] The corpus is a collection of calls made to and from the telephone of a single family in southern England in the late 1980s. I am indebted to Elizabeth Holt and Paul Drew for making this material available to me.

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noticings of many details in the production of *never mind* which I shall show to be analytically relevant and systematically made use of by participants in everyday conversation.

To get a first feeling for the work which *never mind* does, let us start by examining a fragment of talk taken from a rather lengthy telephone conversation between Lesley Field, at whose home this data set was collected, and her mother (Mum). Lesley and Mum live in separate towns but have an agreement to talk to each other regularly by phone in order to keep in touch.[7]

(1) Holt X (Christmas) 1:1:1

```
1       Mum:    ↑Eh:m (.)↑What wz I g'n to sa:y↑ um:: .p.t (0.2) uh:m
                Ann: wz he:re on: Fridee evening 'n she wz talking about
                (0.2)
        Les:    .t
5       Mum:    Christmas presents she didn't know what t'get f'r
                everybody,
                (1.4)
        Mum:    So I s'd w'l I'm sure Lesley 'n- (0.2) the children
                wouldn't mind if they had money becuz I know Gordon's
10              saving f'r a guita:r,
        Les:    ((prosaically)) Yes.
                (0.5)
        Mum:    An' I said I know and I know Katharine always wants s'm-
                wants s'm books
15              (0.3)
        Les:    Yes. That's[righ]t
        Mum:                [So: ]she said we:ll (0.2) she probably would
                do that
                (0.2)
20      Les:    .hh Yes but when she sends Mu:m
                she only ↑se:nds a very little
                .hh I m' ↑all that talk about (0.2) generosity:
                (0.6) .t.hhh (.) eh-:-:m
                she hasn't been at ↑all generous to th'm in that way.
25              (0.3)
        (M):    °°(Really:)°°
                (1.2)
        Les:    .p.hh (.) Anyway we sh'l see.
                (0.4)
30      (M):    °(Mm:)°
                (0.4)
        ( ):    (.t)
                (0.2)
        Les:    .tc[h.hhh (0.2) What we sh'll ((nasal)) see:,
35      (M):       [°(      )°
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[7] For an explanation of the transcription conventions used in this and all following transcripts, see Schenkein, 1978.

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          Mum:    Well, (.) you know the: thih- these days things're ↑so
                  ex:pensive aren't they.
                  (.)
          Les:    ↑Oh ↑ye:s u-but she ex↑pects it the ↑other ↑wa:y.=
40        Mum:    =Mm:. H[m:.
          Les:           ['r you wouldn't ↑mi↓:[nd.
          Mum:                                 [Hm.
                  (0.2)
          Mum:    [Mm,
45        Les:    [.hh An' she gets ↑↑it the other way.
                  B't she['s ne- ih-
          Mum:           [°(   )°
          Les:    but we get nasty remarks about not being able to affo:rd
                  uh: ↑Christmas ↓presents.
50                (.)
          Mum:    ↑Ah hah↑
                  (0.2)
          Mum:    Dear dear dea:r hn
                  (0.6)
55        Mum:    ↑Hm::
                  (.)
->        Mum:    Never ↓mind,
          Les:    .hhhhhh
          Mum:    °Oh ↑now w't wz I goin' t' sa::y eh°
60                (1.0)
          Les:    .kh[hhhh
          Mum:       [I went there las' night cz they went out to dinner
                  at (0.3) Canterbury
```

In this part of the conversation Mum announces to Lesley that Ann, a close relative who lives in the same town, has been wondering what to send Lesley's children for Christmas and that she (Mum) has suggested sending money. Lesley responds to this news with some rather openly disparaging remarks about Ann: *Yes but when she sends Mu:m she only ↑se:nds a very little* (lines 21–22) and *↑all that talk about (0.2) generosity: (0.6).t.hhh ( ) eh-:-:m she hasn't been at ↑all generous to th'm in that way* (lines 22–24). Such negative descriptions contribute to the hearing that Lesley is complaining, in this case about Ann's miserly gift-giving. Why and where does *never mind* prove useful in complaint sequences and for whom?

2 *Never mind* in complaint sequences and troubles talk

Conversational complaints about nonpresent third parties – especially if they involve moral indignation as here – place special conditions upon the type of response which is relevant next (Drew, 1998; Drew & Holt, 1998; Günthner, 2000). Basically, recipients have a choice of response types which are related to one another preferentially. The preferred type of response is to agree with the prior negative assessment and to display affiliation with the complainer. In (1) Mum chooses, however, to respond in the dispreferred way – she alternates between withholding a reply (line 23) and producing

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only a weak, noncommittal one (line 26). Lesley orients to this minimal support when she moves to close the sequence and curtail the topic with the formulaic *Anyway we sh'll see* (line 28) (see also Drew and Holt, 1995, 1998). Mum, however, does not immediately second this move (lines 29–33), which prompts Lesley to recomplete her turn with the add-on *What we sh'll see:*: (line 34), delivered with stretching and strong nasality suggestive of exasperation.

Following a closure-implicative summary assessment such as the one Lesley has just produced, a minimal ratifying second would be expected next if her interlocutor were also ready to close. Yet Mum chooses to pursue topical talk and extend the sequence with: *Well, (.) you know the: thih- these days things're ↑so ex:pensive aren't they* (lines 36f). Given its sequential location, this assessment suggests that Ann's apparent lack of generosity may actually be due to the high cost of living. Lesley produces only a weak agreement *↑Oh ↑ye:s* and quickly rushes into a further condemnation of Ann *but she ex ↑pects it the ↑other ↑wa:y* (line 39). Once again Mum's uptake is minimal (line 42) and Lesley recompletes her turn with: *'r you wouldn't ↑mi ↓:nd* (line 41). Thus, in response to Mum's attempt to account for Ann's behavior and thereby exonerate her, Lesley reaffirms her criticism and at the same time indicates in various verbal and nonverbal ways that she *minds* about Ann's behavior.[8] Minding then is on the table at this point.[9]

Once again, following Lesley's renewed complaint, Mum remains noncommittal, offering only neutral minimal responses (*Hm* line 42, *Mm* line 44). It may be this lack of congruent uptake that now prompts Lesley to become even more pointed and contrast her own gift-giving *An' she gets ↑ ↑it the other way* (line 45) with Ann's, which she construes as miserly: *but we get nasty remarks about not being able to affo:rd ↑Christmas ↓presents* (lines 48–49).

At this point Mum has given repeated indication – through delaying, withholding, and providing only noncommittal responses – that she does not agree with Lesley's condemnation of Ann nor share in her indignation. Mum's attempt to present the high cost of living as something neutral on which she and Lesley might agree has also fallen flat. So it is clear that no agreement will be forthcoming. Mum's dilemma then is how to extract herself from a complaining sequence in which she cannot affiliate with the complainer. And it is here that *never mind* comes in handy. But how exactly is this resource put to use?

Mum first registers Lesley's reiterated complaint with a rather generic display of empathy: she delivers a high-pitched *↑Ah ↑hah*, which can be heard as affiliating in form, if not in substance, with the affect of Lesley's prior *↑Christmas ↓presents*

[8] *She expects it the other way or you wouldn't mind* conventionally implies 'if she didn't expect it the other way, you wouldn't mind'. But since Lesley has stated that Ann does expect things the other way, she can be heard as saying that she *does* mind.

[9] It may well be the choice of precisely this verb (*care, be bothered*, and *matter* would all do equally well) which primes Mum's *never mind* several turns later.

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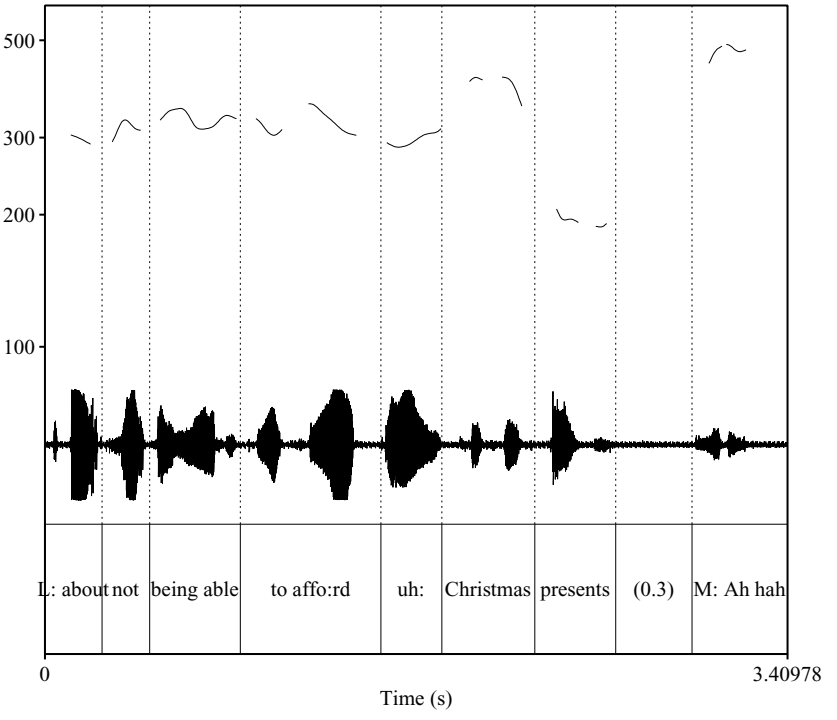


Figure 1. The prior complaint turn in (1)

(line 49): see figure 1.[10] This formally completes the small sequence opened by Lesley's prior turn without, however, committing Mum to any kind of substantial agreement. Following her form-only affiliation Mum now extends the sequence by producing a series of tokens suggestive of empathy: *dear, dear, dear* – delivered, however, with considerable restraint. When no response from Lesley is forthcoming (line 54),[11] Mum produces a soft high-pitched *↑Hm*:: (line 55), foreshadowing an imminent topic shift and, after a short pause, the phrase *Never ↓mind* (line 57). Mum's *Never ↓mind* has a rising–falling pitch accent on *never* and is delivered with compressed pitch range (figure 2). What does *never mind* with this style of delivery accomplish at this location in a complaining sequence?

2.1 Complaint recipient's resource (freestanding)

Note, first of all, that the producer of *never mind* in (1) is the *recipient* of criticism and complaint about a third party. The phrase comes relatively late in the complaint

[10] This and all following acoustic analyses were made with PRAAT, courtesy of Paul Boersma of the University of Amsterdam. Displayed in the middle of each figure is the unanalyzed waveform; above that, and aligned with it, is a curve derived from algorithmic pitch extraction. Here the x-axis represents time and the y-axis displays Hertz values on a logarithmic scale.

[11] Lesley may rightfully be expecting a somewhat stronger display of congruent affect from Mum at this point.

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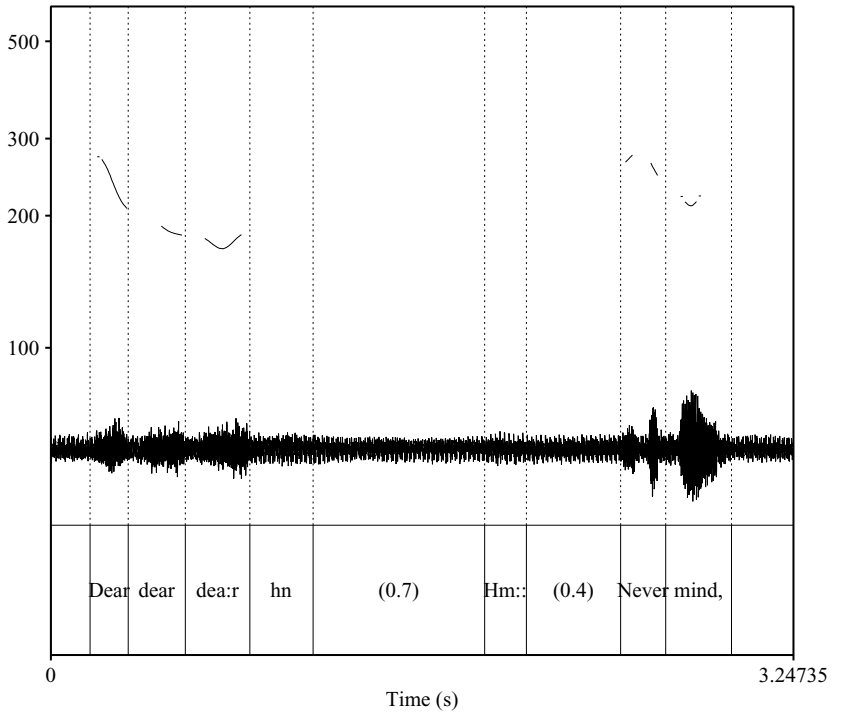


Figure 2. The *never mind* turn in (1)

sequence, following multiple references to the topic of complaint, and it is produced as a freestanding expression, turn-initially.[12] In comparison to Lesley's foregoing turn, Mum's prior *Dear, dear, dea:r* and her *Never ↓mind* are lower in pitch and both are said with soft volume. In this respect they are alike in toning down the strong indignation of Lesley's complaints.

Yet Mum's *Never ↓mind* does more. In this position it functions like the figurative expressions used as summary assessments which Drew and Holt (1995, 1998) describe: it is strongly closure-implicative. This is attested to by the participants' subsequent behavior. Lesley gives it only minimal uptake in the form of audible inbreathing and Mum immediately moves to initiate a new sequence and a new topic in her next turn (line 59). *Never ↓mind* in (1) thus functions to initiate a sequence-closing sequence (Schegloff, 1995) which at the same time proposes to close down the complainable topic. When it is followed by a floor pass from another participant, its producer has a warrant to move on to other topical matters. *Never ↓mind* accomplishes sequence and topic closure in part by proposing a summarizing assessment, the matter is not worth concern ('Don't let it trouble you'), but also by displaying prosodic disengagement.

[12] *Never ↓mind* is turn-initial on the assumption that the prior *↑Hm::* is an independent contribution to the floor.

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Produced following a pause and with lower and softer prosody, it iconically indexes the topical disengagement in process.

Why might *never mind* with this delivery be a useful resource for complaint recipients in a position like Mum's? First, *never mind* serves to display concern for the other participant. Complaint recipients who use it come off as being other-attentive, responsive to complainers' woes. But at the same time *never mind* is minimal in terms of substance. It does not engage specifically with the complainable situation nor make any concrete proposal as to how that situation might be improved. Consequently it offers little in the way of material for potential further topical development. (Contrast this with e.g. 'Just ignore her remarks!', which would provide for responses such as 'But I can't' or 'I try but it doesn't work'.) Because of its fixed syntactic form, *never mind* is not open to challenges of the sort 'Why not?' or 'Why shouldn't I mind?'. Its obsolete syntax naturally precludes next turns which might try to play off its form, as for instance 'But I do' or 'But anyone would'. Therefore it is ideally suited to the task of curtailing complaining topical talk.

Second, with delayed timing and subdued delivery, this version of *never mind* does prosodically what the speaker would like to accomplish topically, namely disengage. At the same time, however, it proposes a stance towards the interlocutor's situation over and above not minding: the rise–fall peak on *never* in (1) models an upbeat, look-on-the-positive-side attitude. Yet this stance is not negotiable or accountable. It does not require, or get, reciprocation in the next turn. Instead, the next speaker is called upon to ratify sequence and topic closure. When, as here, the complainant passes the floor back, the *never mind* speaker is in a position to initiate a new sequence and propose a new topic of talk.

2.2 Troubles recipient's resource (with optimistic projection)

When complainants construct themselves as suffering from complainable behavior, complaint sequences as in (1) can become a kind of troubles talk (Jefferson, 1984, 1988). It should come as no surprise then that *never mind* is also found in troubles-telling sequences, of which the following is a typical example. Here too *never mind* occurs after a sequence and topic-closing summary assessment, one surprisingly similar to that in (1). Yet its interactional effect is quite different. This conversation is between Lesley and a fellow school supply (substitute) teacher, Robin. The topic of talk is recent staffing developments at their school.

(2) Holt May 1988 1:5

```
1     Rob:    And ih- (0.2) did you know) (under the-) (.) th't (0.3)
              yee I'm sure you di:d, (0.4) very:: (0.5) hush hush th't
              they're (.) prob'ly losing a class? did you know tha[t?
      Les:                                                        [.tl
5     Les:    Oh ↓yes:. Yes[:.
      Rob:                [That's (alright) but th[a(.)t uh[you know.]
      Les:                                         [Ye:s:.  [ Yes yes.]
              (.)
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       Rob:   That's not c'm out'n the open so: obviously there won't
10             be 'n opening f'me there any↓way (h[eh!)
       Les:                                       [No:. Sha:me.=
       Rob:   =( [          ),
       Les:      [I ↑didn't realize that thou:gh until:: towards th'
              end of the term,
15     Rob:   Mm:,
              (0.6)
       Les:   [Hm.
       Rob:   [W'l this is it.=you know they talk about things in th'
              cla:ss (.) in the sta:ff room you don't like to sa:y (.)
20            uh pardon ↓what (0.4) you know hhh[heh ↑huh]
       Les:                                    [ M m : .]
              (.)
       Les:   Mm:,
       Rob:   But there we are w°°(so I'll just have stay a[          )°°
25     Les:                                                [Mm:.
       Rob:   °°Mm[:,°°
       Les:      [.tch.hhh Well I ↑think they: they're bound t'lose a
              class aren't they cuz if Bob Porter goes they're not
              going to replace him[:,
30     Rob:                        [↑Oh no↓:. No:. becuz uh the
              ↑num↓bers uh:r uh there's a[bout (     ) fif]ty=
       Les:                               [a r e dwindling.]
       Rob:   =some[thing (          )
       Les:        [Ye:s that's ri:ght,
35            (0.2)
       Les:   Ye:[s.
       Rob:      [That's th'same si:ze as uh: as Portal Sage.
       Les:   ihYe[s::. Yes::.
       Rob:       [(Ye:s.)
40            (0.2)
       Rob:   So we sh'll see: wh't ↓happens[ you kno::w,   ]
->     Les:                                 [ih↓Ye:s never]↓mind
->            ↑one day,
              (0.5)
45     Rob:   Well I hope so yes I just get a bit despondent sometime
              'n think always a bri:desmaid never th'bri(hh)de heh
              [huh ↑huh
```

It is Robin who is the complainer, or troubles teller, here. The piece of news which precipitates her troubles telling is constructed as a secret (*very:: (0.5) hush hush*, line 1) which, however, both parties are privy to (lines 1–2): their school is *prob'ly losing a class* (line 3). From the supply-teacher perspective, this means that there is not likely to be a need for a full-time teacher, something Robin is ostensibly hoping for: *so: obviously there won't be, n opening f'me there any ↓way* (lines 9–10) and, somewhat later, *But there we are °°(so I'll just have (to) stay a* [presumably: *supply teacher*])°° (line 24).

In response to Robin's troubles telling Lesley positions herself as troubles recipient by offering expressions of sympathy: *Sha:me* (line 11), and by modelling a rational

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stance towards the inevitable: *Well I ↑think they: they're bound t'lose a class aren't they* (lines 27–28). In a collaboratively constructed turn the two of them now agree that *the ↑num ↓bers* (Robin, line 31) . . . *are dwindling* (Lesley, line 32), about which they display not only agreement (cf. the token *yes* in lines 34, 36, 38, 39) but also – through congruent sound stretchings and long falling glides – regret. Robin now produces a turn which serves as a summary assessment of the situation from her perspective: *So we sh'll see: wh't ↓happens you kno::w* (line 41). It is to this turn that Lesley responds, in terminal overlap, with *ih ↓Ye:s never ↓mind* (line 42).

Similar to fragment (1), *never mind* is produced here late in an extended sequence, after multiple references to the complainable topic or trouble. Yet in contrast to (1) *never ↓mind* in (2) is not a freestanding phrase, nor is it turn- or sequence-initial. It is preceded by *ih ↓Ye:s*. Together the two are directly responsive to Robin's prior turn *So we sh'll see: wh't ↓happens*. Furthermore, *never ↓mind* is followed by a new TCU, *↑one day*, an unattached noun phrase (Ono & Thompson, 1994) referring to an indefinite time in the future. Following the affiliative *never ↓mind* ('Don't let it trouble you'), this second TCU optimistically adumbrates a future moment when Robin's present situation will take a turn for the better.

Lesley's troubles-talk response in lines 42–43 thus has two parts with a two-fold thrust and this is reflected in its prosodic formatting. The first TCUs – *ih ↓Ye:s* and *never ↓mind* – are delivered prosodically in a manner congruent with the troubles teller's prior turn. Just as Robin's *So we sh'll see: wh't ↓happens* is delivered with stretching on *see*: and overall low pitch and soft volume, so Lesley's *Ye:s* is drawn out in a long glide (figure 3) and her following affiliative *never ↓mind* is low and soft. Via its matching prosody Lesley's turn thus far is fully responsive to the woeful display in Robin's prior turn. It does 'heart-work' in a way that is sensitive to and shows empathy with the troubles teller's predicament. Yet *↑one day* breaks with this: it has noticeably higher pitch, a sudden increase in loudness and a sharp rising–falling peak on the first word (figure 4). In contrast to *never ↓mind*, which affiliated with Robin's display of despondency, the phrase *↑one day* comes off as upbeat – modelling an optimistic stance which the troubles recipient is now advocating as a reason for *not* resigning oneself to one's misfortune. Interestingly, the *never ↓mind* turn in fragment (2) is not closure implicative for the ongoing sequence and topic the way it was in (1). This is due in part to the appended TCU *↑one day*, which is of a nature and in a position to engender further talk about a more rosy future. In fact, in (2) Robin's next *Well I hope so yes* (line 45) is specifically responsive to Lesley's *↑one day*. By proposing that things will get better in the future, the optimistic projection not only introduces an element of hope – it also provides for a new shift in topical focus to that moment in the future when a new and improved situation will come to pass.[13]

[13] Subsequent talk by Lesley and Robin in fact concerns which teachers are likely to leave in the future and thereby create an opening for Robin at the school (see fragment (3) below).

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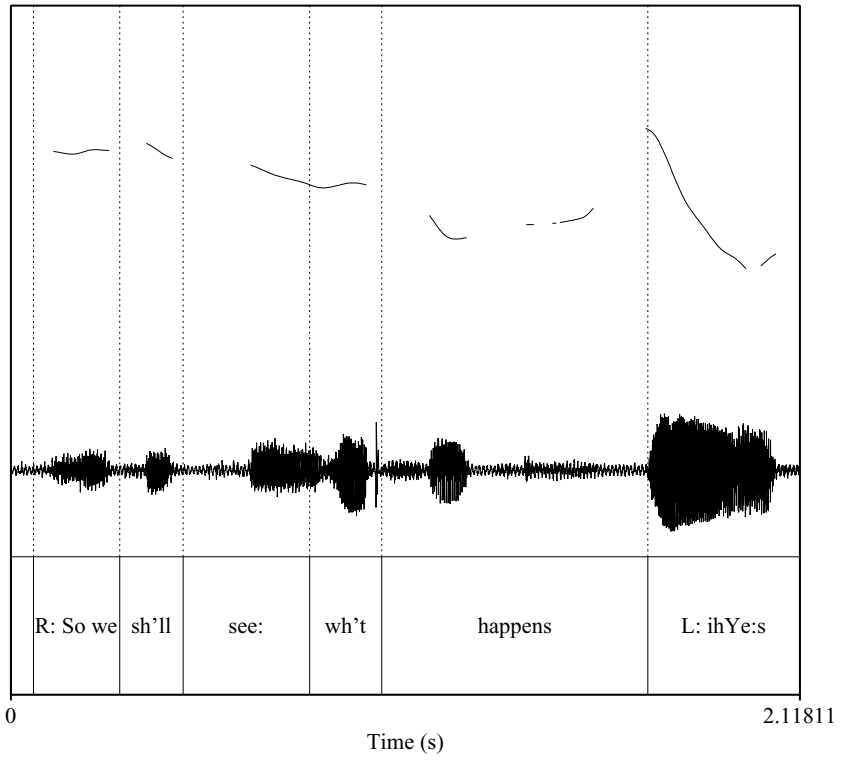


Figure 3. The prior summary assessment of troubles in (2)

Compared to (1), Lesley's *never ↓mind* in (2) is also timed differently with respect to prior talk. Whereas Mum's *Never ↓mind* in (1) is one of a series of tokens signalling readiness to close down the topic of conversation so far and is only produced once her interlocutor has had ample opportunity to either ratify closure or relaunch the topic, Lesley's *never ↓mind* in (2) is produced in terminal overlap with the prior turn. Its timing cues it as being directly responsive to the prior turn rather than detached from it. In contrast to (1) it does not propose closure of the whole of the foregoing sequence and topic.

Note that following Lesley's *never ↓mind ↑<u>one</u> day*, Robin the troubles teller reverts to the prior topic in the rest of her next turn: *<u>I</u> just get a bit despondent sometime* (line 45), using a figurative expression to assess her feelings concerning the hopeless job situation: *'n think <u>a</u>lways a bri:desmaid never th'bri(hh)de* (line 46).[14] By hearably producing an account for why she <u>does</u> mind about the present situation, Robin adds another round to the troubles talk. In contrast to (1) then, *never ↓mind* in (2) does not curtail topical talk – instead it leads to further talk in the next turn about the reason for minding.

[14] As Drew and Holt (1998) have pointed out, figurative expressions like this often adumbrate an upcoming topic shift, which indeed ensues here: see fragment (3) below.

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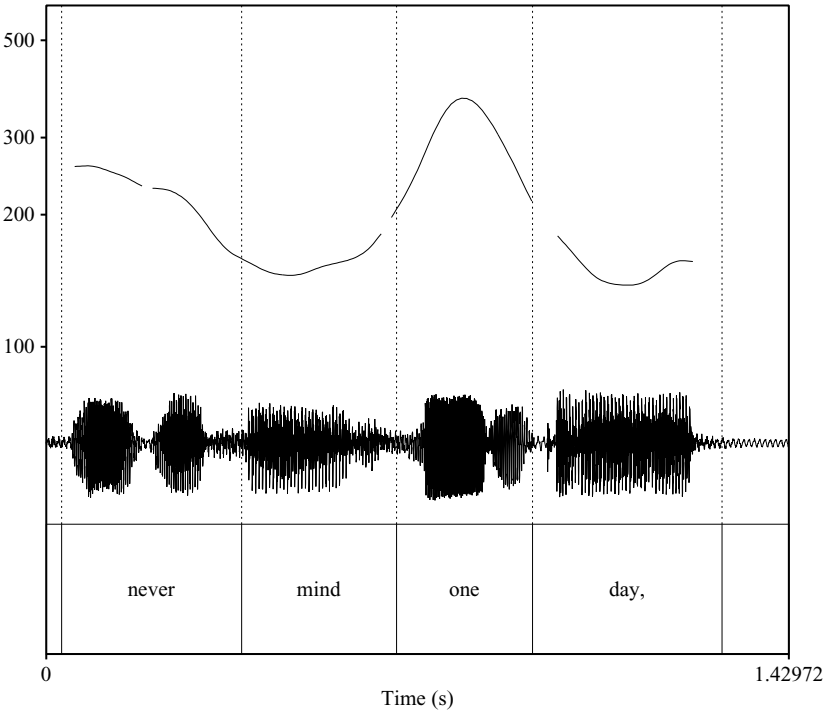


Figure 4. The *never mind* turn in (2)

2.3 Trouble teller's resource (freestanding)

As talk evolves following this episode in Lesley and Robin's conversation, *never mind* crops up again – this time in a use which is related to that in (1), but with a crucial difference: the phrase is produced by the troubles teller, not by the troubles recipient. The fragment below begins where (2) left off:

(3) Holt May 1988 1:5

```
1       Les:    [.t.hhhh ↑Well at Lord Ryding I don't think you've got
                a lot of hope f'r awhi:le
        Rob:    No.
        Les:    .hhhh Unless of course she tries t'get rid of someb'dy
5               e::lse:?
        Rob:    I don't see who she ↑can becuz nob'dy's near re↑tiring
                age an' nob'dy's goin't' mo:ve unless Lave:rne, become:
                (0.8) goes on t'become a deputy head or[:
        Les:                                            [Well this ↑is
10              what I wz wondering might happen. But it- no I don't
                mbut Laverne is too nervy I think=
        Rob:    =Mm:,
                (0.4)
        Rob:    I don't know the only other person would be:: ↓well
```

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```
15                  Freddie Masters will never go,
                    (.)
          Les:      No::.
                    (.)
          Les:      She- well she ↑mi:ght e-actually eventually: physic'ly:
20                  uh: br- ruh have a physical breakdown: pension mightn't
                    she .hhh[hhhh
          ( ):              [°°(     )°°
          Les:      But I don't think she wa[nts that. b'cause she's bored
          ( ):                               [°°(          )°°
25        Les:      (.) t'tears at ho:me,
                    (0.3)
          Rob:      Really?
          Les:      Mm:.
                    (.)
30        Rob:      Y'know she's very .hh ↑sometimes she's quite helpf'l'n
                    other times I feel: you know I don't know where I ↓stand
                    with her.↓
          Les:      No:.
                    (0.2)
35        Les:      No no:.
->        Rob:      Never mind,
                    (.)
->        Rob:      Never ↓m[ind.
          Les:              [No:.
40                  (0.3)
          Rob:      ↑Anyway, (.) I w'let you, (0.2) [go
```

The topic of talk has now shifted to the question of which teachers might leave their teaching posts in the future and create the opening which Robin is hoping for. Robin suggests that Laverne might take on an administrative post (lines 7–8), but Lesley, after some initial hesitation, excludes this possibility on the grounds that Laverne is *too nervy* (line 11). The next candidate is Freddie Masters, about whose possible departure Lesley and Robin now begin to speculate (Robin: *Freddie Masters will never go*, line 15; Lesley: *well she ↓mi:ght e-actually eventually: physic'ly: uh: br- ruh have a physical breakdown: pension mightn't she*, lines 19–21). Talk then focuses on Freddie Masters' current state of mind (Lesley: *she's bored t'tears at ho:me*, lines 23, 25), followed by a more general assessment of her as a person and colleague. Robin: *↑sometimes she's quite helpf'l'n other times I feel: you know I don't know where I ↓stand with her ↓* (lines 30–32).

The latter assessment by Robin is quite remarkable in terms of its production features. Whereas its first, positive part sounds bright and cheery (cf. the high pitch peak on *↑sometimes)*, the second, more negative part is produced as a woeful complaint: its pitch drops suddenly on *stand* from what was earlier a mid-high plateau to a low plateau and is then held low until the end of the utterance (figure 5). With this prosody Robin in essence converts a positive assessment of Freddie Masters into a complaint, which because it affects her negatively comes off as troubles talk. Lesley does affiliative work in the next

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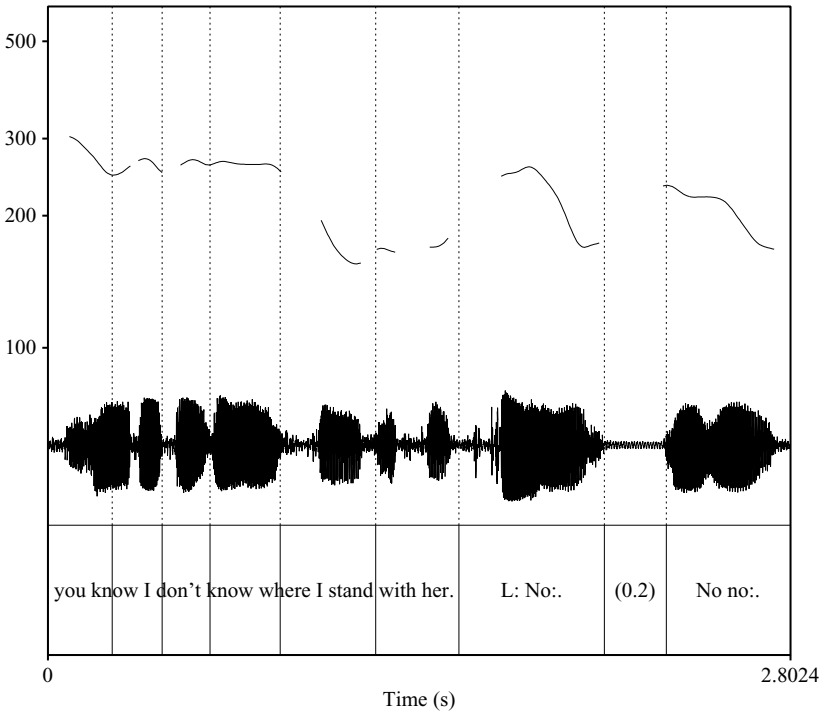


Figure 5. The prior complaint turn in (3)

turn by agreeing with a stretched *No*: (line 33), repeated again twice following a short pause: *No no*: (line 35) (figure 5). Assessments, as Pomerantz (1984) has argued, require independent access to the object being assessed and Robin's assessment of Freddie Masters is ostensively grounded on personal experience. Lesley's first agreeing *No*:, however, is equivocal: is she merely confirming Robin's assessment or is she assessing Freddie Masters herself? It is her second set of *no*'s which resolves this equivocality: because they agree more strongly, doubly in fact, with Robin's assessment, they suggest that Lesley has a 'congruent understanding' (Goodwin, 1986), namely that one doesn't know where one stands with Freddie Masters.

It is at this point that the phrase *never mind* occurs. As in (1) it constitutes a first pair-part, seconded in line 39, of a sequence-closing sequence. The sequence-closing sequence leads to a disjunctively marked topic shift *↑Anyway,* and to the opening of closings: *I w'let you, (0.2) go* (line 41). But in contrast to (1), *never mind* in (3) is produced by the complainant or troubles teller herself, not by the recipient. Moreover, it is produced twice in a row, the first starting with a pitch step-up compared to prior talk and the second falling audibly to low (obscured in the acoustic graph by Lesley's overlapped incoming) (figure 6). On first take, it may seem surprising that it should be the troubles teller rather than the troubles recipient producing *never mind*. Who is Robin the troubles teller telling not to be concerned? On one interpretation, because Lesley

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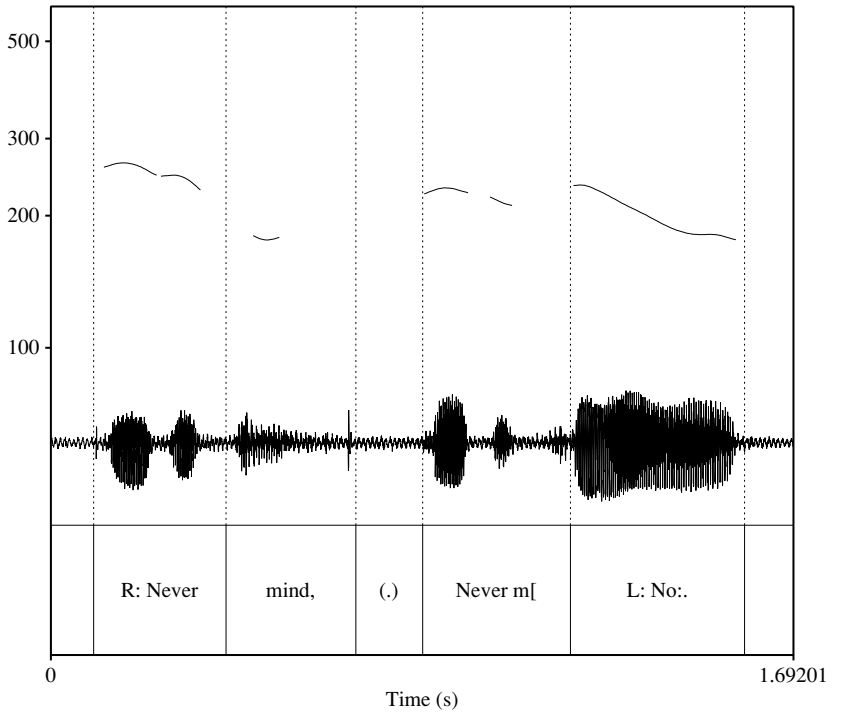


Figure 6. The *never mind* turn in (3)

has shown an understanding of Freddie Masters' behavior which is congruent with Robin's woeful complaint, Robin's expression might be taken as a form of consolation addressed to Lesley ('Don't let it trouble you'). But this would be a sudden and therefore rather unlikely reversal of the roles of troubles teller and troubles recipient. An alternative and perhaps more convincing explanation is that *Never mind* in (3) is an 'aloud', a bit of self-talk glossable as 'It doesn't matter' or 'I'll not care' (American English). As such it would be a particularly appropriate way for a troubles teller to initiate closing down the topic. By displaying resistance to her troubles, the troubles teller removes further grounds for pursuing the topic. If and when the troubles recipient passes up an opportunity to continue in next turn, as here, the sequence and topic can be closed down. In (3) it is the second production of *Never ↓mind* which accomplishes this.

The prosody of the two *never mind*s in (3) supports this interpretation. The step-up in pitch on the first *Never mind* models an upbeat stance towards the trouble, while the low falling pitch of the second *Never ↓mind* displays iconically the closure that is transpiring sequentially and topically.

Lacking an overt subject, *never mind* is a particularly flexible device in complaint sequences and troubles talk. It can serve *recipients* of complaints and troubles telling as a means of saying to their interlocutors 'Don't let it trouble you', and – depending

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on delivery – can model either empathy and resignation or an upbeat, look-on-the-positive-side stance which complainers and troubles tellers are implicitly encouraged to adopt. But *never mind* can also serve the *initiators* of complaints and troubles telling as a means of displaying resistance to their troubles by conveying 'It doesn't matter' or 'I'll not care'. This display can also be given a resignatory or an optimistic tone depending on its prosodic formatting.

2.4 Troubles teller's resource (turn extension)

Yet, when employed by troubles tellers, *never mind* is not invariably closure-implicative. Under the proper circumstances it can instead prompt more talk concerning the teller's misfortune, as the following case demonstrates. Before this fragment Susan has been telling her friend Gordon about how she has just failed her driving test.

(4) Holt Sept.–Oct. 1988 1:5

```
1       Sus:    [I wz juh I wz js really nervous in my test I think
                an' my nerves js took over.
                (0.2)
        Gor:    .p.t[.kl .mpt    ][.tk[l          [.tk
5       Sus:        [.hhh I think][   [that's some[thing which really
                h[appen' to me (I wz taking) the firs' ]time=
        Gor:     [.p .hh-.hh-.h h h h h h .h h h h h h ]
        Gor:    =Did you think that (.) you were gunna fail.=at the end.
                (0.4)
10      Sus:    Mm:,=
        Gor:    =.hh-
                (0.4)
        Gor:    You knew you we[re
        Sus:                   [I knew you had bec'z I .hhhhh there were
15              road works 't th'bottom, (.) 'n then (.) an:d uh
                .hh I didn' kn(h)ow what the hell the traffi(h)ic
                hhwhhard'n wz (.) doing[↑.hehh
        Gor:                           [.tl ehhh he
                [↓O h - : n o - :↓ ]that's=
20      Sus:    [hhAn' (.) s(h)o I th]ought
        Gor:    =a rea:l dhhown[(h)e(h)er].huhhh hehhh .huhhhh [hh
        Sus:                   [ eh ↑heh ]huh heh huh ↑.huhhh [hhAnd I
                thought oh-ooo:: ↑.he:hh °I fai:led you know°
->              (.) Never mind
25              (0.5)
        Gor:    e-: (.) ooWhat did 'ee fail you on.hh-hhh
                (0.3)
        Sus:    .khhh It wz actually uh:m: (.) what I thought it was
                you know not: (.) not looking at the traffic ward'n
30              bhhut I wa[s
        Gor:              [ehhh heh-h[e-eh
        Sus:                         [tryin' to figure out what 'ee
        Sus:    [wz doin' ((smile voice))
        Gor:    [.ffhhh he-he-[eh
```

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```
35      Sus:                    [↑.hhhh hhuh
        Gor:        .klhhhhhh[h bwp
        Sus:                 [That wz funny,h oh well
                    (0.5)
```

In response to Gordon's enquiry *Did you think that (.) you were gunna fail.=at the end* (line 8), Susan describes the situation in which she made the fatal mistake: *there were road works 't th'bottom, (.) 'n then (.) an:d uh.hh I didn' kn(h)ow what the hell the traffi(h)ic hhwhhard'n wz (.) doing ↑* (lines 14–17). Gordon's response is appropriately attuned to this dramatic scenario: *↓O h - : n o - : ↓* (line 19), produced concurrently with Susan's projected sequel *hhAn' (.) s(h)o I th]ought* (line 20).

As Goodwin and Goodwin (1987) have pointed out, assessing speakers often allow concurrent assessment responses to continue into the clear. This is what happens in (4): Susan temporarily suspends her telling *hhAn' (.) s(h)o I th]ought* (line 20) to make room for Gordon's sympathetic *that's a rea:l dhhown[(h)e(h)er* (lines 19, 21). After a phase of joint laughter (lines 21–22) she then continues her telling, reenacting the moment at which she knew she was going to fail: *hhAnd I thought oh-ooo:: ↑.he:hh °I fai:led you know°*. As is so often the case, this bit of direct reported speech (or thought) is the punchline of Susan's story and makes some uptake from her interlocutor relevant next. Yet there is no immediate response from Gordon. It is now that Susan extends her turn with the expression *Never mind*, which she delivers with a rising–falling pitch peak on *Never* (figure 7). As in fragment (3) above, it is the troubles teller here who produces *never mind* in a turn ostensibly addressed to the troubles recipient. Yet with this turn extension Susan is not likely to be telling her interlocutor not to worry. Instead, here too *never mind* is best analyzed as a bit of self-talk which displays troubles resistance. The reading then is closer to 'It doesn't matter' or 'I'll not care', glossed as somewhat upbeat by a rise–fall pitch peak on *Never*.

Contrary to (3), however, *Never mind* in (4) does not close down the topic of failing the driving test. Quite the opposite: through its production as a turn extension, i.e. following a moment in time when a response from the interlocutor could have come but did not, it indirectly solicits uptake on the talk prior to it. And this is how Gordon treats it in his next turn: his response is attentive not to Susan's *Never mind* but instead to the TCU which precedes it, *I fai:led you know,* as shown by his extension of the sequence and topic with *ooWhat did 'ee fail you on* (line 26).

Troubles tellers' *never mind* TCUs, if they are produced as turn extensions, thus do not close the prior sequence nor curtail the troubles topic. Because they pursue a contribution from another participant, they serve indirectly to keep the sequence and the topic open. This observation underscores the importance of considering both the trajectory of the troubles-talk sequence (are there signs that the topic is ready for closure?) and the placement of the expression in the turn (is it freestanding? turn-initial? a turn extension?) in determining the interactional meaning of *never mind*. A troubles or complaint recipient's freestanding *never mind* following an interlocutor's floor passing as in (1) is more likely to be topic-curtailing than is one which is produced in terminal overlap and accompanied by a phrase projecting into an optimistic future as in (2). A freestanding *never mind* offers little material other than itself for further

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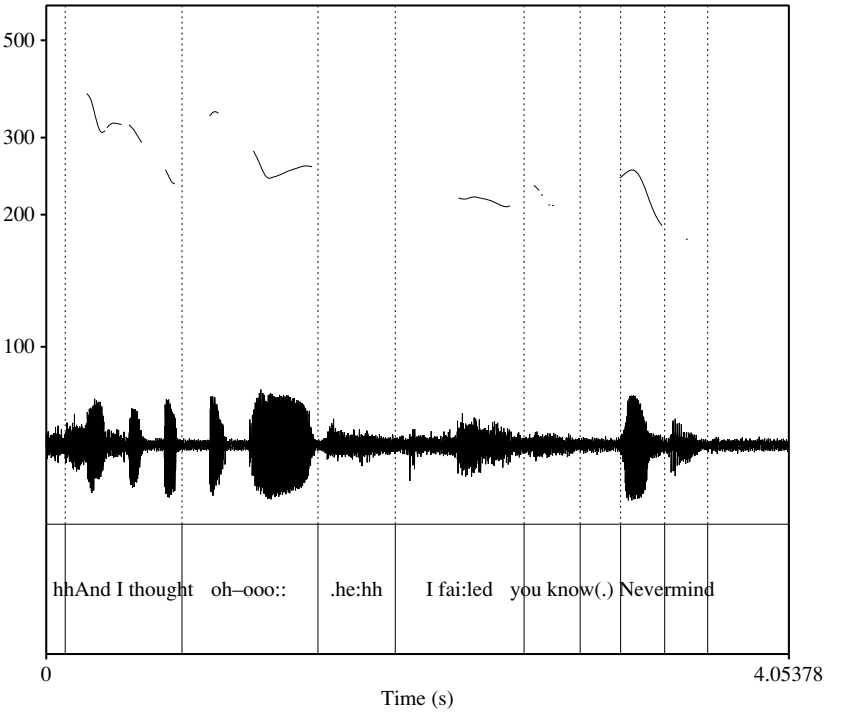


Figure 7. The *never mind* TCU in (4)

topical development. An optimistic projection about the future on the other hand provides multiple possibilities for engendering more topic-related talk. A freestanding *never mind* by the troubles teller as in (3) can propose to close down the sequence and topic at hand, but used in turn extension as in (4) it is more likely to prolong topical talk because one of its main jobs is to pursue a response to what was said before.

3 *Never mind* in news deliveries

3.1 News recipient's resource (other-addressed)

Never mind is not only a device which lends itself naturally to complaints and troubles talk. It is equally well suited for use in news reports and other tellings, especially when the news or telling is bad. As in troubles talk, *never mind* is flexible enough to allow usage by both teller and recipient. We begin by discussing sequences in which the *recipient* of bad news addresses the expression to the teller. Such is the case in the following telephone call between Lesley and Mum, where the subject of talk is a box of biscuits Mum has asked Lesley to buy for her so that she can give it as a gift to a mutual friend on her upcoming visit to Lesley:

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(5) Holt X (Christmas) 1:2:7

```
1       Mum:    (Oh: (gee ↑don') mind getting the biscuits for me do you.
        Les:    I've got them: o[ne  pou:]:nd ten pee or something is=
        Mum:                    [Oh good.]
        Les:    =that alright,
5               (0.9)
        Mum:    ↑ Pard'n luv?
        Les:    ABOUT ONE POUND TEN pence[  is that alr-  ]
        Mum:                              [Oh ↑ that's o ↓ k]a:y yes
        Les:    Yes.
10              (0.6)
        Les:    THAT wz ABOUT the cheapest you could ↑ge:t.
                (.)
        Mum:    ↑Oh my goodness.
                (0.5)
15      Mum:    ↑Oh you should'n- I: didn't mind about cheapness but I
                wanted.hh a pound in weight.
        Les:    YES WELL THEY'RE not QUITE A POUND in weigh[t.
->      Mum:                                               [↓ Oh well
->              (.) °never mind°. ↓
20              (0.2)
        Mum:    ((sniff))
                (0.2)
        Les:    Yes.
                (.)
25      Les:    But I thought that wz.hhh a ↑lot'v money but (.)
                that wz the cheapest we could get at the International
        Mum:    Oh well that didn' matter
                (0.3)
        Les:    ((prosaicly)) Mm [:.
30      Mum:                     ( 'T's)[alright
```

Mum's enquiry *(Oh: (gee ↑don') mind getting the biscuits for me do you* (line 1) initiates an informing sequence, during the course of which Lesley announces not only the price of the biscuits: *o[ne pou:]:nd ten pee or something* (line 2) but also displays some concern that Mum might think this too expensive: *is that alright* (lines 2, 4) and *THAT wz ABOUT the cheapest you could ↑ge:t* (line 11). But Mum, it turns out, has other concerns: *I: didn't mind about cheapness but I wanted.hh a pound in weight* (lines 15–16).[15] This clear expression of Mum's wish creates a dilemma for Lesley, because the box of biscuits she has bought actually weighs somewhat less than a pound. The way she describes her purchase confirms that it doesn't meet Mum's expectation: *YES WELL THEY'RE not QUITE A POUND in weigh[t* (line 17). In fact, other more positively formulated descriptions would have done as well. Lesley could have said 'Well they're almost that' or 'Well that's what they are for all practical purposes'. Instead through

[15] Note that the verb *mind* is present once again in prior discourse and may prime the subsequent use of *never mind*.

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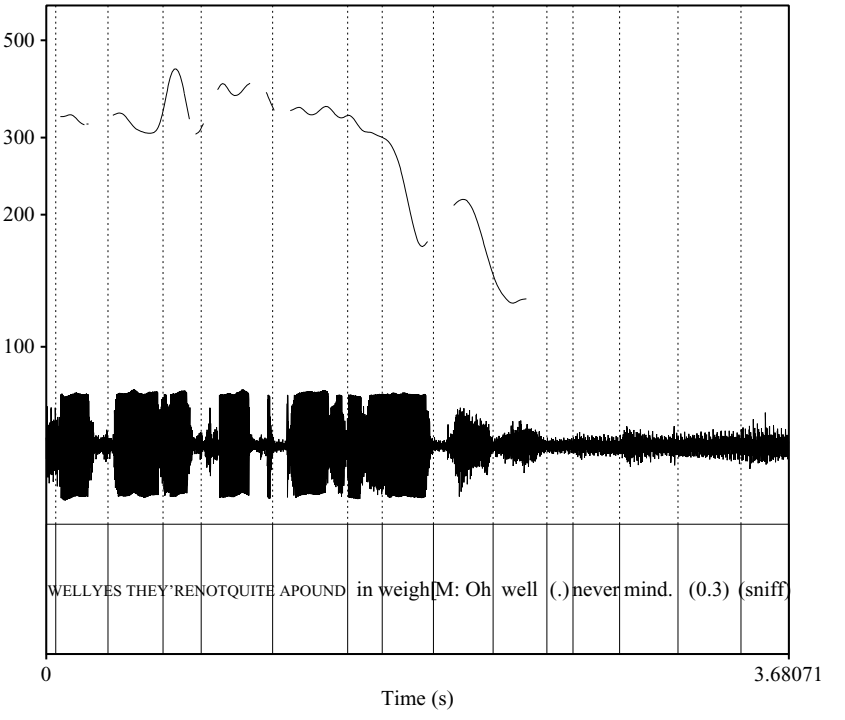


Figure 8. The *never mind* turn in (5)

her negative formulation, she constructs the weight of the biscuits as deficient and her informing as disappointing.

Mum registers Lesley's informing as bad news by beginning her next turn with *↓Oh well* (Heritage, 1984; Freese & Maynard, 1998). Yet Lesley has not only delivered a piece of bad news – as the purchaser, she is also at least partially responsible for it. It is this circumstance which warrants Mum's now producing *°never mind°↓* (line 19). By appending this phrase, Mum can ostensibly absolve Lesley of accountability for the underweight purchase. Yet the prosody on *↓Oh well (.) °never mind°↓* tells more: *↓Oh well* is significantly lower in pitch and softer in volume than Lesley's prior turn. In relation to *↓Oh well*, the phrase *°never mind°↓* is even lower and is said so softly that it doesn't register acoustically at all (figure 8). Together, the prosody of these two TCUs creates a continuous line of declination, ending at the bottom of Mum's pitch and loudness range. With this delivery and in this sequential location *never mind* comes off as indexing the news recipient's disappointment.

Yet despite its break with the prosody of prior turn, *↓Oh well (.) °never mind°↓* in (5) does not propose topic or sequence closure. Rather than occurring in first position, it is a second pair-part to Lesley's prior news delivery turn and is timed to begin in terminal overlap. In fact, a topic shift – were it to occur in this sequential location – would be quite noticeably amiss. This is because *↓Oh well (.)° never mind° ↓*, by construing

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Lesley as responsible and cueing Mum's disappointment at Lesley's not having met her expectations, has laid bare a problem which requires working through in next turns. Lesley tackles this problem when, following a confirmatory *Yes* in line 23, she reverts to the price of the biscuits, again constructing it as *a ↑lot'v money* (line 25) but *the cheapest we could get at the International* (line 26). In the face of Mum's expressed disappointment, this may be hearable as a way to explain why she purchased the biscuits despite their being underweight. Mum's next turns *Oh well that didn' matter* (line 27) and *'T's alright* (line 30) register Lesley's turn as an account and once again convey exculpation, this time without the affect-laden tone suggestive of disappointment.

When used as a receipt token in response to a (bad) news delivery, *never mind* – addressed to the news bearer as in (5) – conveys on one level 'Don't let it trouble you'. Yet *eo ipso* it also implicates the other party as the one who is responsible for the bad news and thus is now in need of exculpation. Delivered with subdued prosody as in (5), the message of *never mind* can be a very complex one: it can convey pardon on one level but disappointment on another. It is this complexity which contributes to the prolongation of the sequence and topic in (5).

3.2 News recipient's resource (self-addressed)

Just as in complaint sequences and troubles talk, *never mind* in news delivery sequences is not only addressable to the teller but also to oneself. That is, the device is available for responding to bad news even if the bringer of the news is not construable as a responsible party. Consider the following fragment, which comes from another telephone conversation between Lesley and her mother. Once again Ann is the subject of conversation.

(6) Holt 1:1

```
1       Les:    .hh Oh ↑by the wa:y Ann hasn::'u-sent Gordon anything,=
        Mum:    =Yes she ha:s,
        Les:    Well it hasn't co:me,
        Mum:    Oh well probably get it t'morrow.
5               (0.3)
        Les:    Oh: yes.=↑What is she sendin d'you know,
                (.)
        Mum:    (Well guess)
                (0.3)
10      Les:    Oh not one a'tho:se whi:te tee shirts,=
        Mum:    =Well I don't know what sort'v tee shirt it is b't it
                i:s,
        Les:    ↓Oh:: Mu::m::
                (0.4)
15      Les:    It's just a waste of money.
                (1.8)
        Les:    .h ACTually IF YOU ↓can drop the hint (.)
                tell'er not tuh send any more becuz.h (0.2)
                they don't wear them an'I: can't give'm awa:y.
```

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```
20                  (1.6)
          Mum:      Can't give'm away,
          Les:      Well no:- Yuh see: um (0.4)
                    I can't give'm as presents to anybody:,
                    (0.9)
25        Les:      Bec'z they've got J.P. Five Hundred written all over
                    them.
          Mum:      Well it's a good adver:t.
                    (0.5)
          Les:      Yeh but ↑nob' ddy wants £them uh huh huh.hh
30                  (0.3)
          Les:      eh-u- So: (.) if you ↓can drop'er a hin:t,
                    (0.6)
          Mum:      We::ll (.) I'll try:hh!
          Les:      Ye:s.
35                  (1.2)
          Les:      Oh ↓blo:w
                    (0.5)
->        Les:      Oh well never mi:nd,
                    (0.5)

40        Les:      °(Okay.)°
                    (0.3)
          Mum:      Might be a ro:ll (.) think it's a roll neck o[ne.
          Les:                                                    [YES that's
                    ↑ri:ght:.
                    (0.4)
45        Les:      Ye:s ↑↑awful ↓thin:gs.
```

In this episode Lesley initiates an informing by enquiring of her mother what Ann is sending her son Gordon for his upcoming birthday: *↑What is she sendin d'you know* (line 6). By asking her mother this question, Lesley constructs Mum as a knowing party, a role which would normally entail her now telling Lesley what she knows. Yet in her next turn Mum suggests instead that Lesley try to guess (line 8), thereby positioning herself as a party who knows but is not willing to tell. Indeed when Lesley does make a guess in her next turn *Oh not one a'tho:se whi:te tee shirts* (line 10), Mum responds by confirming only as much as Lesley has guessed but no more: *Well I don't know what sort'v tee shirt it is b't it i:s* (lines 6–7). In doing so, Mum presents herself as not wanting to give away the surprise which typically accompanies birthday gifts, thereby showing herself to be in alignment with Ann the gift-giver.

Lesley's next turns display not only that this is a piece of news (cf. the use of *oh*) but also that it is bad news. Her *↓Oh:: Mu::m::* (line 13) has strong prosodic marking with stretching and lamentation-like portamento. Following a brief pause her next turn now verbalizes the objection: *It's just a waste of money* (line 15). Yet, as the following lengthy pause indicates, Mum is noticeably reticent to join in with Lesley's lamentation. Lesley now asks Mum to tell Ann not to send any more teeshirts (lines 17–19), justifying this request with the fact that she has no use for them: *they don't wear them an' I:*

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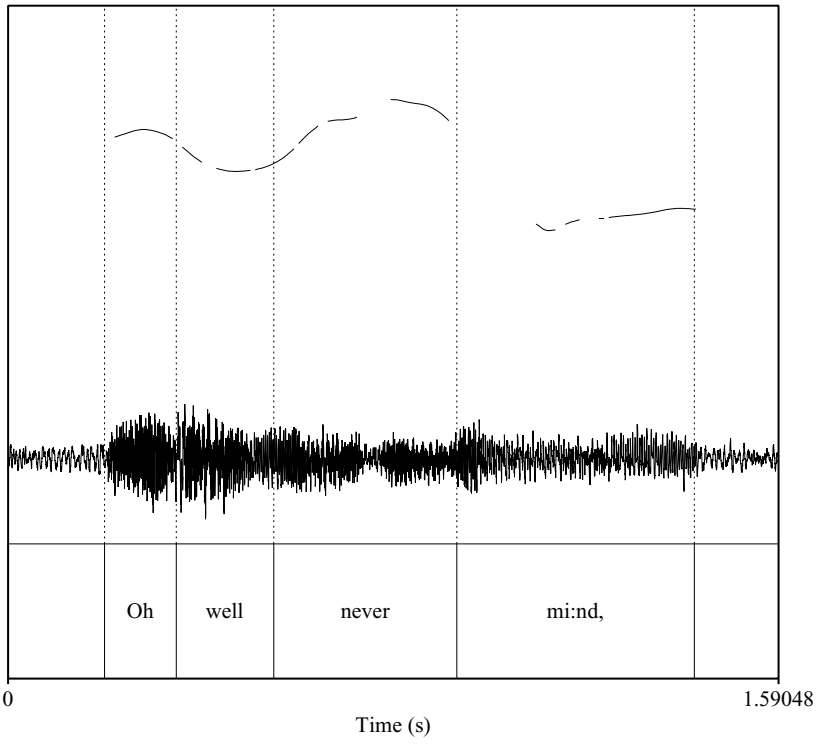


Figure 9. The *never mind* turn in (6)

can't give'm awa:y (line 19). But rather than promptly granting Lesley's request, Mum initiates repair, foreshadowing an upcoming rejection: *Can't give'm away* (line 21). In response to Lesley's explanation that the teeshirts don't make good gifts, Mum disagrees that their logo makes them undesirable: *Well it's a good adver:t* (line 27). In sum, by not aligning promptly with Lesley's evaluation of the news as bad, by not agreeing immediately to tell Ann to stop sending teeshirts, and by rejecting Lesley's accounts for not wanting the teeshirts, Mum subtly disaligns from her. Yet she does not fully align with Ann either.[16] Rather, her remarks are carefully calibrated to display neutrality.

It is at this point that Lesley produces an affect-laden exclamation *Oh ↓blo:w* (line 36) and following a brief pause, extends her turn with *Oh well never mi:nd* (line 38). Because Mum has positioned herself as a neutral relayer of news in this sequence, Lesley's turns are not heard as talk addressed to the news bearer (Mum) but rather as alouds produced for her benefit. In other words, the phrase *Oh well never mi:nd* does not construe the interlocutor as an agent responsible for the misfortune, as in (5), but rather as an observer of its negative effects. This is reflected in its striking prosody (figure 9).

[16] Later she does agree, at Lesley's renewed bidding, to drop Ann a hint (line 31) – if with noticeable reluctance.

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Whereas *↓Oh well* and *°never mind°* create two separate intonation contours in (5) with a micro-pause between them, *Oh well never mi:nd* in (6) forms a single uninterrupted contour, with *Oh well* delivered as a rhythmic upbeat to *never mi:nd*. Instead of being noticeably lower and softer than prior talk as in (5), *Oh well never mi:nd* in (6) begins significantly louder and higher than the prior turn *Oh ↓blo:w*. *Never* has high pitch compared to *mi:nd*, but in contrast to all other types discussed so far, both syllables of *never* are stressed and the pitch is held high over both of them, the second being a little higher. This high plateau is followed by a sudden, sharp drop to *mind*,[17] whose pitch is held at a relatively constant level over its full length. In terms of pitch configuration *never mind* in (6) is sing-song – or, in prosodic terminology, it has 'stylized' pitch, loudness, and rhythm.

The prosodic stylization of *never mind* creates a TCU whose interactional meaning is distinct from anything observed so far. *Never mi:nd* in (6) clearly does not have the reading 'Don't let it trouble you'. If anything, its reading – as a self-addressed aloud – is closer to 'It doesn't matter' or 'I'll not mind', as in (3) and (4) above. Yet following an expression of disgruntlement (*Oh ↓blo:w*) and with sing-song prosody, *never mind* appears to undergo a reversal of meaning (Haiman, 1994) such that Lesley comes off as displaying that she does indeed very much *mind*.

This impression, an external analyst's interpretation, is corroborated by Mum's behavior in subsequent talk. Following a rather substantial pause with little or no further audible talk from Lesley, Mum reverts to the teeshirt which Ann is sending, now volunteering more information about it, arguably in an attempt to make it appear more desirable: *Might be a ro:ll (.) think it's a roll neck one* (line 42). Mum is thus visibly concerned in subsequent talk to find a palliative for the exasperation and disgruntlement which Lesley's *Oh well never mi:nd* displayed.[18]

With this use of *Never mi:nd* a further characteristic of the expression becomes apparent which makes it particularly apt for signalling affect. Because it is a fixed phrase, the individual parts of the expression lack full semantic content and create a 'bleached' carrier for the affect being signalled. Yet not just any set of fixed words will do. Ones that can have the reading 'It doesn't matter' are clearly more appropriate than others. In (6) this reading serves as a foil for the ironic twist brought about by stylized prosody.

As self-addressed talk, the phrase *Oh well never mind* in response to a delivery of bad news displays the speaker's stance towards the news just received. Yet the reading 'It doesn't matter' – as (6) shows – is merely one component of its conversational meaning. Its prosodic configuration, here loud and stylized, can indeed lead in the appropriate circumstances to a reversal of effect such that the displayed meaning becomes 'I do very much mind'.

[17] The interval difference between the pitch levels on *nev-* and *mind* is approximately that of a musical sixth.

[18] As Lesley's response makes clear, she is not particularly successful in her endeavor. In fact, Lesley uses Mum's sequence and topic expansion to produce another expression of disdain for the teeshirts.

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4 *Never mind* in other-repair sequences

4.1 Other-repairer's resource (increment)

Complaints, troubles tellings and bad news sequences all have a moral dimension which becomes relevant when parties who are negatively affected by an event or piece of behavior position themselves as sufferers or victims due to it. *Never mind* then serves either as a means for recipients of the sufferers' talk to advise them not to care/bother/worry, or as a means for the sufferers themselves to show resistance by proclaiming lack of concern. In both cases, prosodic delivery can model a resignatory or an upbeat, on occasion even defiant, stance. There is, however, a third kind of situation in which moral implications are at issue and *never mind* is a useful resource. This is other-repair. The following fragment from a telephone conversation between Gordon and his girlfriend Dana shows how *never mind* can be put to use in other-repair sequences. At the beginning of this excerpt Gordon, the caller, is moving to open up closings:

(7) Holt 1988 Undated 1:9

```
1       Gor:    [.t O:kay..h I: sh- I sh'l leave you..h to get on with
                your hard studying. that I know I interrupted.
                .hhhhhh rather[rudely
        Dan:                  [(Oh yes.)
5       Gor:    .hhhhh hu-Uh:m
        Dan:    Actually it wz Mother: saying (.) d'you think I'd look
                right in this swimming costume .hh on the Clothes Show.
->              b't never m[i(h)n[d,
        Gor:               [e- [u-Wha'do you think.
10              (0.5)
        Dan:    Ah:m (0.2) n:No.hh!
```

Gordon opts for a rather standard strategy to open up the closing section of this call: he announces that he will let Dana get back to what she was doing before the call. On this occasion he playfully constructs her as having been engaged in hard studying and himself as having interrupted her (line 2). When no immediate response from Dana is forthcoming, Gordon recompletes his turn with the self-critical increment *rather rudely* (line 3). Dana now agrees weakly with *Oh yes* (line 4), however in overlap with Gordon's *rudely*, so that her response arguably does not address the self-deprecation implicit in his turn. Yet, coming well after the completion of Gordon's *your hard studying. that I know I interrupted*, it does appear to confirm both that Dana was studying hard and that Gordon interrupted her. This may account for Gordon's hesitation in line 5, which in turn appears to prompt Dana to revise her prior TCU in her next turn.

Heralded in by a turn-initial *Actually* signalling an informing which runs counter to prior talk (Clift, 2001), Dana now claims that it was her mother who interrupted her and she re-enacts the interruption, humorously staging her mother as wondering how she would look in a swimsuit that she had seen on a TV fashion show. This turn accomplishes two things. First and most immediately, in deploying the format

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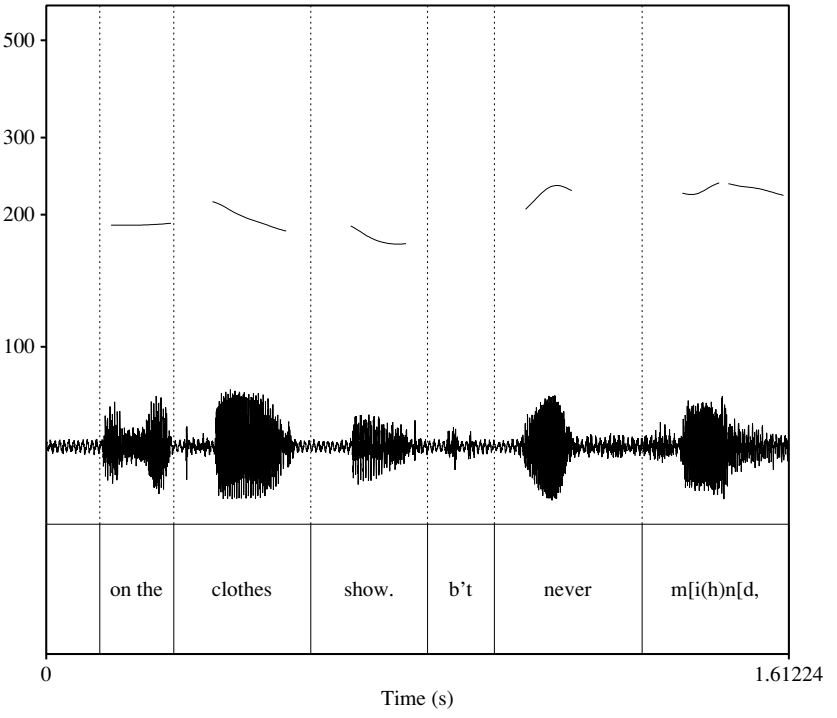


Figure 10. The *never mind* turn in (7)

Actually it was X, Dana corrects Gordon by implying *it was not Y*. In other words, her turn accomplishes other-correction, a form of repair which is typically dispreferred (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977), and it does so in an exposed fashion (Jefferson, 1974). The fact that Dana corrects Gordon openly here is, however, warranted by the second action her turn accomplishes: in correcting Gordon, Dana is also taking exception to the self-disparagement in his earlier turn when he claimed to have *rudely* interrupted her.

Although Dana's turn is potentially complete at the end of the story concerning her mother, she appends a final phrase: *b't never mi(h)nd*. This phrase is produced as an increment to her turn, which has reached a point of possible syntactic, prosodic, and semantic/pragmatic completion with *on the Clothes Show* (line 7) (Ford and Thompson, 1996). The increment starts with the coordinating conjunction *b't*, a nonbeginning (Schegloff, 1996), signalling a link to prior talk. Rhythmically the increment continues immediately prior talk, the accent on *never* prolonging the regular pattern established by the prior stresses on *swimming* and *Clothes*. In terms of pitch *never* begins slightly higher than the level at which prior talk left off (figure 10). The use of *never mind* in this context is warranted by the other-correction which the first part of Dana's turn has carried out. With the reading 'Don't let it trouble you', it takes the error correction

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as its point of reference and proposes a mitigation of the potential damage this might do to the interlocutor's face. In turn-final position, *never mi(h)nd* in (7) has much in common with the use in (4): in both cases the expression follows a scenic re-enactment involving reported speech or thought and marks a shift back to the reporter's perspective. Moreover, in both cases the action component and the stance-modelling of the expression remain unaddressed in subsequent talk. That is, just as in (4), so also in (7), the next speaker does not address the *never mind* component of the prior turn but reverts to material which preceded the extension/increment.[19] Likewise, *never mi(h)nd* in (7) can be heard as modelling a stance with respect to the moral implications of the negative event – in the event upbeat as in (4). Yet, there is one major difference: *never mind* in (4) is self-talk, whereas in (7) it is addressed to the interlocutor. This is reflected in the timing of the next turn: in (4) there is a pause, suggestive of sequential disjunctivity, before Gordon comes in next, whereas in (7) Gordon's next turn begins in terminal overlap, cueing its close ordering to the prior turn. In (4) *never mind,* deployed by the sufferer and addressed to self, has the reading 'It doesn't matter' or 'I'll not care', whereas in (7) it is deployed by the agent responsible for the correction and has the reading 'Don't let it trouble you'.

5 Summary and conclusions

The uses of *never mind* discussed above are all documented – for the most part on multiple occasions – in the materials at hand.[20] Yet this is not necessarily an exhaustive set and further uses of *never mind* may emerge in a different or larger corpus.[21] However, the discussion as such already provides compelling evidence for a range of factors which enter into determining the interactional meaning of this simple phrase.

Table 1 gives an overview of the types identified.[22] All documented uses of *never mind* are found in situations where caring, worrying, or being concerned about something is a relevant reaction. The reason for the care, worry, or concern can be a trouble, a complaint, a piece of bad or disappointing news, or an error correction. Yet speaker roles vary significantly: the producer of *never mind* can be an initiator or a respondent, a troubles teller or a troubles recipient, an agent of (other) correction or a recipient of bad news. Generally speaking, when *never mind* is deployed by a recipient or respondent, it has the reading 'Don't let it trouble you'; when deployed by a teller or initiator, it tends to have the reading 'It doesn't matter' or, more defiantly, 'I'll not care'. The uses illustrated in (6) and (7) remind us, however, that this distribution is not

[19] Gordon's next turn *Wha' do you think* is manifestly doing work on Dana's depiction of her mother saying '*d'you think I'd look right* . . . ', as witnessed by Dana's emphatic *h:No .hh!* in line 11.

[20] Fourteen examples altogether were found in the calls transcribed. The numerical breakdown is as follows: Type (1) 3, Type (2) 3, Type (3) 1, Type (4) 2, Type (5) 2, Type (6) 2, Type (7) 1.

[21] Although not documented in the materials examined, I suspect that *never mind* can serve not only as a resource for a correcting party but also for a corrected party. If so, this would parallel its use as other-addressed and self-addressed talk in complaint and news delivery sequences.

[22] FPP = First pair-part, SPP = Second pair-part.

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Table 1. Types of *never mind* identified

Sequence type (Position)	Teller/Initiator	Recipient/Respondent
(1) Complaints and trouble talk (FPP)		**Never ↓mind,**
(2) Complaints and trouble talk (SPP)		[ih↓Ye:s **never] ↓mind** ↑one day,
(3) Complaints and trouble talk (FPP)	**Never mind,**(.) **Never ↓mind.**	
(4) Complaints and trouble talk (Turn extension)	°I fai:led you know° (.) **Never mind**	
(5) News delivery (SPP)		↓Oh well (.) °**never mind**°.↓
(6) News delivery(FPP)		Oh well **never mi:nd,**
(7) Other-repair (Turn increment)	Actually it wz Mother:... b't **never m[i(h)n[d,**	

mechanical: in (6) *never mind* is a recipient's resource with the reversed display 'I *do* mind' and in (7) it is an initiator's resource with the meaning 'Don't let it trouble you'.

Never mind is a highly flexible expression with respect to sequential position, sequence structure, and topic control. It can be used as a first pair-part to initiate a sequence-closing sequence and propose topic closure [(1) and (3)], or as a turn extension/increment to keep the sequence open and engender more topical talk [(4) and (7)]. On other occasions it serves to complete sequences and to pursue the topic as a second pair-part in the receipt of troubles telling and bad news [(2) and (5)]. Likewise, *never mind* is flexible with respect to affect display. It can be made to match interlocutor's prior talk prosodically, which in the proper environment comes off as displaying empathy. On the other hand, through pitch step-ups or step-downs with respect to prior talk, it can be used to model an optimistic or resignatory stance. Finally, through prosodic stylization *never mind* can be given an ironic reversal so that it comes to index the presence of exasperation and bother rather than the absence thereof.

The fact that *never mind* is a standard phrase with fixed words lends it numerous advantages as an interactional device. In terms of content, for instance, the phrase is 'bleached' and allows for displays of quite different kinds of affect. And it is minimal in form, i.e. it leaves unexpressed what it is that is a ground for concern. This makes it useful for doing 'heart-work' without the speaker having to commit to the actual empirical facts. Moreover, as an imperative form with an unexpressed subject, it does not specify who is supposed to not mind. This means it can be used flexibly for addressing either another person or oneself. In the latter case the interlocutor is made privy to internal 'private' processes.

For the seven distinct uses of *never mind* in table 1, certain prosodic features are recurrently observable. As a freestanding, topic-curtailing expression in complaint and troubles sequences, *never mind* is produced – often following pauses and gaps – with

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noticeably lower overall pitch and volume compared to the prior turn, as in (1) and (3). In conjunction with a following projection into the future, as in (2), *never mind* can be produced with either a pitch step-down (↓) or a step-up (↑), glossing resignation or defiance respectively. The accompanying optimistic projection, however, invariably has an iconic step-up in pitch. Used as a turn extension in complaints or troubles talk, *never mind* displays troubles 'resistance' and can have either integrated or exposed prosody (Auer, 1996), depending on which stance is being modelled – resignation or, as in (4), (attempted) optimism. In news delivery sequences, *never mind*, regularly produced following *oh well*, is typically said with low pitch and volume when used as a second pair-part addressed to another (5), but can be given loud, stylized prosody when used as a self-addressed first pair-part, as in (6). In other-repair, *never mind* tends to be produced as an increment with integrated prosody, as in (7). Thus, each of the types of *never mind* discussed here is distinct from all others in terms of (a) sequence type, (b) speaker role, (c) sequential position, and/or (d) prosody. The sevenfold classification seems justified because attempts to collapse one or more of the types into more general categories would obscure their distinctiveness.

A final question concerns the generalizability of the approach adopted here to the analysis of other phrases and constructions in talk-in-interaction.[23] Can less ready-made phrases together with their prosodic configuration also be considered resources for turn construction with specific contextual constraints placed upon them? I would like to argue that they can, to the extent that they are holistic entities and recurrent in talk. As the work of Pawley and Syder has shown, much of what we say when speaking spontaneously consists of memorized phrases and semi-productive sentential expressions which through frequent use have become conventionalized to varying degrees (1983a, 1983b). Hopper's 'recurrent partials' of grammar (1998), precompiled chunks such as 'I don't know' (Bybee & Scheibman, 1999), and the prefabs which Erman and Warren (2000) describe – although not necessarily idiomatic or wholly fixed – are all candidates for the type of analysis being proposed here.[24]

The present discussion suggests, however, that these lexico-syntactic patterns are not disembodied or decontextualized bits of language structure but instead have typical ways of being said and of being used, i.e. recurrent prosodic configurations and sequential functions. As pieces of patterned lexico-syntax, they are said repeatedly in similar ways and are used repeatedly to do similar things. Just as lexical and grammatical structure is emergent in discourse, so, it can be suggested, is prosodic embodiment and sequential deployment – in the sense that differing degrees of sedimentation are encountered depending on frequency and consistency of use. The present article has shown that the deployment of *never mind* has reached a level of sedimented praxis which

[23] Some of the work on discourse markers has been framed in similar terms, e.g. Schiffrin, 1987; Lenk, 1998; Clift, 2001. Yet discourse markers are not usually phrasal and little has been said about their prosody.

[24] It is an open question whether this methodology can be brought to bear on utterances compiled more compositionally.

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it is meaningful and revealing to describe analytically – and one that has theoretical implications for an understanding of how language works in interaction.

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