Closing of Turns in the Meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous: Members’ Methods for Closing “Sharing Experiences”

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This article studies ways in which closings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) turns contribute to the organization of sharing experiences. AA meetings are composed of extended, monological turns. This sharing format generates a task to show an acceptable completion of each turn so that the subsequent speaker can take a turn. In their closings, AA members orient both to the formal type of interaction and to its moral nature. The term rhetoric of gratitude describes speakers’ efforts to achieve closings through expressions of thankfulness. Furthermore, interactional contingencies arising from the use of a time signal to mark the end of time are studied.

In this article, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) members’ techniques and methods for accomplishing closings for their turns of talk in AA meetings

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are studied. I show that participants’ management of the temporal boundaries of “sharing experiences” is part of an interactional mechanism through which giving and receiving mutual help is organized. Closings of AA turns are a challenge for AA members because sharing experiences is an extended, potentially endless, verbal activity, that meets a time limit in the AA meetings. Consequently, AA members design recognizable closings related to and appropriate for the AA activities, thereby displaying both the completeness of their own sharing and their understanding of the nature of mutual help in AA.

The specificity of closings of AA turns is reflexively related to the formal arrangement of turn taking in the AA meetings. Through the suspension of ordinary conversation (i.e., the exclusion of direct conversational exchanges between participants), AA meetings are organized around a series of lengthy personal monologues (Arminen, 1998; Mäkelä et al., 1996). To participate in sharing, AA members have to sufficiently account for and elaborate on their experiences so that the recipients can recognize their experiences and identify with them. On the other hand, the turns have to be made short enough to allow others to participate in sharing. In this manner, the sharing format generates the task of showing and mutually displaying an audibly acceptable completion of each turn for the participants so that the projected subsequent speaker can initiate the next turn (the next in a series or the closing of the meeting; cf. Schegloff & Sacks, 1974). In some large AA meetings—at least in Finland—the members have invented technical solutions for the dilemma to allow time enough for all the speakers. In the materials studied here, a stopwatch is used for dividing the meeting time evenly among participants.1

The material for this study comes from the large, open2 speaker meetings of AA in Helsinki, Finland (see the Appendix for the floor plan of the meeting hall). This study concentrates on closings of commentary turns that follow a lengthier opening turn (about 20 min) in each meeting. After the opening turn, the chairperson very briefly summarizes, thereby formulating the topic of the meeting, and subsequently takes the names of those who want to share comments. The commentary turns are up to 3 min long, after which time their closing is signaled by an alarm clock. There are about 20 commentary turns in each meeting, and the total number of participants in these meetings is usually well over 100. Altogether 11 hr of meeting time, that is, seven meetings including 139 extended commentary turns of talk, have been analyzed for this study. The audio taperecordings3 were made by the group members themselves, and they are publicly available through the Finnish AA service office.
A part of the fascination of the closings of AA turns derives from the fact that in AA the technical problem of arriving at a point that is readily discernable to others as completion relevant intertwines with the moral dilemma of finding appropriate words to terminate a turn so that it is an index of the turn’s sufficiency (its completeness at that point for all practical purposes). The closing words of AA members’ turns of talk display the members’ orientation to acknowledging in their own turn the nature of the occasion, which is their idea of giving and receiving mutual help. As such, this moral embeddedness of the closings of interactions is not specific to AA meetings. Schegloff and Sacks (1973–1974) noted that a one-sided departure from interaction (i.e., if a party says “goodbye” and does not give the other the opportunity to respond) may easily be taken as a sign of “anger” or “brusqueness.” Closings stand for and mark the outcome of social activity (Clayman, 1989; Wakin & Zimmerman, in press). Thus, a one-sided departure may be seen as a marker of failure; something in the ongoing interaction has angered one party into leaving abruptly. This strategic relevance of closings permeates a variety of institutional settings (Davidson, 1978; Hutchby, 1996; Rostila, 1995; Sacks, 1992). In AA, speakers carefully design their closing to display their moral relation to the group. The term rhetoric of gratitude is used to describe speakers’ efforts of achieving closings through expressions of thankfulness to support for solving their personal problems.

A further contingency in AA arises in the organization of the meeting interaction as being composed of expanded, complex turns with time limits. The speakers’ ways of managing the time limit for their turns in AA could be compared with other temporally constrained expanded speech activities, such as giving papers at conventions. This particular AA group’s use of a stopwatch, however, opens some new interactional contingencies. These interactional contingencies are accentuated in those cases in which the time signal (to mark the end of time) is given while the speaker has projected a compound unit that takes more than one utterance to be completed. Furthermore, these cases can be compared with other instances in which a speaker tries to produce new, nonprojected utterances after the time signal. We observe that the participants not only allow but also expect the speaker to complete a projected unit even if the completion carries the speaker far beyond the time signal. In contrast, the recipients rapidly become active to force a speaker to stop speaking if the speaker tries to produce new units that have not been projected before the time signal. In this fashion, I show that parties orient to interactional units of vari-
ous lengths, some of which are longer than a sentence, and that may delay the emergence of a possible completion point after which a recipient might legitimately take a turn. This observation adds to a discussion about the role and relevance of multiunit turns for the syntax of interaction (Lerner, 1991, 1996; Schegloff, 1996).

The article starts from the analysis of the rhetoric of gratitude, which is discussed both in terms of how it contributes to the achievement of closings and to the atmosphere of the gatherings. I begin with the closings for turns shorter than their preallocated length, and address the speaker’s moral work to display that they have arrived at a suitable point for closing already there and then. Then I study the various ways in which speakers orient to the expected, preallocated length of their turns. After the discussion about the accountability of short turns, I demonstrate how the speakers orient to the time signal as marking the turn as being closing relevant. Then I discuss how the interactional unit in progress is completed after the signal. It is shown that various types of compound units, such as “at first I thought, but then I realized,” have a specific meaning in the AA context. Finally, recipients’ reactions to speakers speaking over time is discussed as the defense of order at AA meetings.

FORMULATING ACCEPTABLE COMPLETIONS: THE RHETORIC OF GRATITUDE

Speakers’ orientation to offering recognizable closings for their turns can be seen in their rhetorical work. All the closings of AA turns convey participants’ gratefulness to AA for the resolution of their personal problems. Furthermore, speakers recurrently emphasize the reciprocity of mutual help, to give and receive relief and, in so doing, convey both their gratitude and also point out their own contribution in helping others. This rhetorical work we may call the rhetoric of gratitude, which has many forms (cf. applause inviting rhetorical formats; Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986). Often it is expressed in a three-part construction of the type “once you receive help, and give help, then it is OK,” or “if you have problem Y, you may find that X helps, and so you are fine.” Through this kind of rhetoric, speakers display their approval of the outcome of the meeting interaction, thereby also suggesting that their turn is ready to be completed. This rhetoric gets an especially pointed expression in those closings that
are initiated before the full time of a turn, as the speakers seem to orient to the closings of short turns as being accountable. The rhetoric of gratitude is strongly taken on board in Extract 1. The speaker, Deekis (D), notes that he has many close associates in AA who always support him in case of need, but he also supports those in need.

Extract 1 (V3Deekis0990)

1 D: .hh minulla on ↑hyvin hyvin paljon .hh I have ↑very very many
2 .hhh <AA tovereita?> (0.3) ystäviä (.) .hhh <AA fellows?> (0.3) friends (.)
3 kavereita?, (.) läheisiä?, .hhhhh buddies?, (.) intimates?, .hhhhh
4 ↑jotka ↑aina ↑tukevat, hhh sellaisella ↑who ↑always ↑support me, hhh at the
5 hetkellä kun minä (.) tukea tarvitsen. (1.4) moment when I (.) need support. (1.4)
6 .h myöskin vastaavasti luonnollisesti annan .h also respectively naturally I give
7 myöskin minä tukea, h (.) jos joku tarvitsee. (0.3) also support; h (.) if someone needs. (0.3)
8 tämänhan on jakamisen ohjelma. (.) kiitos. this y’know is a program for sharing. (.) thank you.
9 (0.2)
10 A: tt tt tt tttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttt ((6.0))
11 C: [kiitos Deekis. thank you Deekis.]

In and for the closing of his turn, Deekis states that he has many intimates who always support him when he has need (lines 1–5). He then moves to declare his own willingness to give support (lines 6–7). Finally, he formulates the mutual nature of giving support by characterizing AA as a program for sharing (line 8). In this fashion, Deekis has not only expressed his gratitude, but also conveyed his willingness to act. Therefore, this closing itself has brought up the speaker’s understanding of what AA is about, thereby accomplishing mutual help as conceived by the speaker himself. Notice also the speaker’s use of extreme case formulations: “very, very many (friends)” (line 1) “who always support me” (line 4). Pomerantz (1986), who coined the term extreme case formulations, analyzed them as
a rhetorical resource in persuasion, especially in complaints. Here, the speaker uses extreme case formulations to mark and to intensify his own personal viewpoint (see Arminen, 1996). The extreme case formulations and the rhetorical repetition “fellows, friends, buddies, intimates” (lines 2–3) paint the account emotionally: The speaker feels that he has “very, very many fellows, friends, buddies, and intimates who always support him.” This intensification of a personal viewpoint also works here toward the closing. The opening of one’s heart is a felicitous outcome of interaction, which is an auspicious environment to occasion a closing.

Generically, some “dialectical” rhetoric in the closings of AA turns place. The speakers tend to take up both sides, giving and receiving help, or proposing the problem and its resolution. In Extract 1, the speaker brings up his gratitude for support but also his willingness to give help. In Extract 2, the speaker, Miki (M), accomplishes the closing for his turn with the help of the dialectics of the problem and its resolution. Miki claims that AA actually is not that complicated. You simply have to experience some “alcohol whiplashes” to get rid of your pride, and thereafter all is simple.

Extract 2 (V7Miki0491)

1 M: ↑Monen? a:l<s? raiittiina? (0.4) pysyneen alkoholistin
    ↑M_any? a:l<s? sober? (0.4) _alkoholics have experience
2 kokemus et ei tää nii↓kauhee jhmeellistä oo ollu et
   that this hasn’t been so ↓terribly miraculous th
3 että?, .hh jonku verrä se on ehkä ↑vaatimu? (.)
   that?, .hh to some degree it may have ↑demanded? (.)
4 A: (cough))
5 M: .hh niitä nisanottuja alk:oholi?, (0.5) Ruoskaniskuja
   .hh those so called alc:ohol?, (0.5) Whiplashes
6 ja sittä kautta saavuttanu jonkulaise Nöyryyde
   and through them you’ve gained some Humility
7 että se, .hh Ylpeyde viiminenki? (1.0)
   so that the, .hh last Resistance? (1.0)
8 VAstarinta on murentunu ja ↑sen jälkee
   of Pride has broken down and ↑after that
9 ↑kaikki on ollu oikeestaa aika ↓yksinkertasta,
   ↑all has actually been quite ↓simple,
10 ↑kiitos ei muuta.
   ↑thanks that’s all.
Miki has learned from the experience of many sober alcoholics that recovery is not so complicated as long as you have experienced alcohol whiplashes, which humble you. Here humility is presented as a resolution (lines 3–6) to the problem of pride (lines 7–8). In this fashion, Miki makes heavy use of the rhetoric of AA literature. We can note that the speaker himself marks the foreign origins of the term alcohol whiplashes with the modifier “so-called” (line 5). Miki shows that he uses a terminology that is borrowed from somewhere, namely from the AA literature. Subsequently, he continues to speak about pride and humility, which are among the central notions of AA’s beliefs (Anonymous, 1950/1939; Anonymous, 1952/1986; cf. Mäkelä et al., 1996). After Miki’s depiction of the victorious outcome of the battle between pride and humility, the turn is ready to be completed. Here, the locally produced relevance for central notions of AA contributes toward the felicity of turn and occasions an auspicious environment for closing.

ORIENTING TO THE EXPECTED LENGTH OF TURNS IN AA

The big AA meetings, especially, face occasional difficulties in allocating enough time for all the volunteered speakers while keeping the duration of the meeting reasonable—usually not more than 2 hr (Mäkelä et al., 1996). Some large groups have started to apply technical measures to divide time evenly among participants. In the Vuori group, the end of time is signaled with an alarm clock (bell). The time signal is normally given automatically after the preallocated time has come to an end (if the speaker has not already closed his or her turn), but the signal can also be switched on or off manually by the timekeeper. In this manner, the allocation of the meeting time is organized formally and technically.

This technical solution for division of time has an interesting corollary, perhaps counter to the original idea of setting a maximum limit for the turn length. By far, most turns (lines 2–3) in the Vuori group last until the time signal. Not only do two thirds of the turns last until the signal, but
also the inability to fill the allowed maximum time is considered accountable. Extract 3 provides an example. Masa (M) suggests that you need to have some discretion, but usually it is rewarding to be frank (the rhetoric of gratitude). Then, however, he becomes concerned that 3 min, the time reserved for a commentary turn, does not seem to come up (lines 7–8).

Extract 3 (V4Masa1190)

1 M: ↓ ei tietysti ↓ ihan (0.3) voi ↓ of course you simply (0.3) can’t
2 toisen naamasta nyt sanoo iha että (.)
   say straight to somebody’s face that (.)
3 ↓ se nyt on sen ja sen näköne.
   ↓ y’know you look like such and such.
4 → .hh mut yleensä siis semmonen rehellinen ja
   .hh but so usually the kind of honest and
5 → avoimen- (1.2) #a:::# avoin (. ) eteneminen
   sort of o- (1.2) #o:::# open (. ) advance
6 → ni on (. ) niinku kannattanu (0.8)
   has (. ) y’know paid off (0.8)
7 → @eiks kolme minuuttia rupee menemää vai
   @don’t these three minutes go or
8 → mikäs@ (0.2) £no ni i£ ( . ) kiit(h)os
   what’s@ (0.2) £oh ye ah£ ( . ) that(h)nk-you
9 B: →                                            //
10 A: →                                            //

In lines 4 through 6, Masa has summarized a central moral point of his turn and expressed his gratitude. As such, this could pass as a moral summary, a coda (see Labov & Waletsky, 1967) that would count as a close-implicative component, thereby making the closing relevant. However, the speaker’s moral statement is not followed with a recognizable completion of the closing, such as thanks, and a pause of 0.8 sec emerges. At this point, a potential next speaker could come in and take a turn if the moral statement would have been heard as a closing. Nobody, however, takes the turn, which demonstrates that the recipients still, then and there, count Masa as being the ratified speaker and the turn as being not closed yet. Subsequently, Masa’s remark in line 7 shows that he is indeed considering closing his turn but that he takes the turn length as the criteria for the closing relevancy of a turn: “don’t these three minutes go or. . . .” By coincidence
(or by the timekeeper’s manual operation,)8 the stopwatch goes off just after the initiation of an addition to this inquiry “or what is” (lines 7–8). This coincidence invokes some smile into Masa’s voice, “£oh yeah£” (line 8), which, in turn, invites some laugh tokens from the audience just before they start to applaud (line 10). The applause, which follows immediately after the speaker’s “thanks” (line 8), marks the recognition of the closing. This case shows that the speaker is strongly oriented to the preallocated length of the turn and that the recipients also orient to the preallocated turn length so that they do not come in until the closing is recognizably completed.

These orientations are also revealed by the next extract, but this time they are further confirmed by the chair of the meeting. In Extract 4, Veijo (V) may be heard as initiating a closing track for his turn by his moral statements about the development that has taken place (lines 4–5); he then states that he has no more to say and thanks the audience (line 5). However, subsequently he starts to add thanks to the timekeeper from line 6 on.

Extract 4 (VIVeijo0686)

1 V: .hh mutta ↑heti jos- (.) jos minun vanha Veijo ja
   .hh but ↑as soon as- (.) as my old Veijo and diabolic
2   pirullinen luonteeni .hh pääsee (0.2) ilmi minun
   character .hh come (0.2) to the surface in my life,
3   elämässäni, mä tiedän mitä tulee <↓tapauhtumaan.> .h
   I know what’s going to <↓happen.> .h ↓.yes° ↑Well
4   ↓.joo° ↑No nyt kun on .kch huomaan etta ke
   now then there’s .kch I notice that progress has been
5   tapahtunut, et sanat loppuu? kiitos et kuuntelit°te°=
   made, that I run out of words? thanks for listen°ing°=
6   =ja myöskin tälle- talle yhm kellonsoittajalle,
   =and also to this- this yhm bell ringer,
7   =ett ei tarvinnut nyt sitten yh-ö:h soittaa kelloa, vaan
   that now he didn’t need to yh-u:h ring the bell, but
8   minä lähdin pois, ja seuraa va ↑mies
   I’ll take off, and the nex[t ↑man gets in n.
9   pääsee ti ↓alle.
10  B: →
11  A: → TTTheTTTTTT
12  C: → ((some buTTTTtt tt t t tt
       rsts of laughter besides clapping))
    Jämptiä homaa, kiitos Veijo,
    Right on the dot, thanks Veijo,
After the proper closing “thank you for listening” (line 5), Veijo starts to thank the timekeeper (bell ringer; lines 6–8). He latches (as indicated with =) these “additional” remarks onto the conventional closing thanks (beginning of line 6). In so doing, he preempts the audience’s chance to come in and take over by thwarting the initiation of the applause. Then Veijo has time to thank the timekeeper, but when he starts to state that now the next member can come and start, the bell goes off. Again this coincidence is responded to with some bursts of laughter by the audience, and this time the chairperson also accounts for this punctuality “right on the dot” (line 12). This account is noticeable because usually the chairperson only laconically thanks the speaker and asks for the next to start.

In all, the previous extract shows the full length of the closing sequence, of which we can distinguish at least five elements. Not all of these elements need to be present in every case, and their order varies, in particular, according to the timing of closing. First of all, the speaker has to produce some close-implicative utterance before or after the time signal. The completion of closing is further sanctioned with a closing phrase, such as “thank you for listening.” The time signal to mark the end of the time is part of the institutional arrangements that bring alive for the participants the setting-specific constraints concerning the length of turns. The participants’ adherence to the time signal—that they initiate the closing track of their turn, at the latest, after the signal—is part of their orientation to institutionally characteristic features of the occasion, thereby forming the bedrock to achievement of mutual help in this setting. The closing is further recognized by the audience with applause and finally confirmed by the chair’s thanks. These elements, in various combinations and in which not every element is always present, form the procedures to accomplish turn allocation in the Vuori group.

Finally, the speakers in the Vuori group are not only oriented to the duty to fill in the time slot, but also treat it as their right. In Extract 5, Rapa (R) has been talking about the color of his skin (which, in passing, he used to think was too light) when suddenly, and to the speaker’s great surprise, the time signal starts.

Extract 5 (V4Rapa1190)

1 R: (.) nut nyt mää oon opetellu sen?, (.) butt now I’ve taught myself?,
After Rapa had been talking about the color of his skin (line 4), a micropause is opened (line 5) before the bell starts to ring (line 6). Subsequently, after about 0.4 sec of ringing, Rapa gives off an interjection “ohoh” (line 7), which shows his surprise at the nonanticipated change of situation. At this point, somebody in the audience claps once or twice as if to recognize the closing (line 8), but Rapa, himself, has not given up yet. He comes in and produces an utterance that can be heard as a complaint “short minutes” (line 10). Subsequently Rapa says “thanks” laconically, at which point the applause starts (line 13). Now the closing is already almost ratified, but once more Rapa comes back to correct the impression he has given “no sure it was right time” (line 12). The complaint and its correction portray the salience of these minutes for the speaker and the legitimacy that is felt toward the arrangements to divide time evenly. Still, after the thanks that complete the closing, Rapa felt that he could not close his turn immediately after his criticism, but he has to correct the negative image, and the potential damage to AA, his remark might have implied. In this way, the speaker participates in a moral work that maintains the integrity of interaction order of AA meetings. The speaker displayed that a complaint cannot be offered as a closing-relevant utterance but that meeting arrangements are legitimate and to be treated respectively (cf. Arminen, 1996).
In all, the previous extracts display both the speakers’ and the recipients’ orientation to the expected turn length and thereby to the format of this AA meeting. This orientation to the turn length and to the format of the meeting is the basis for organizing the sharing of experiences in this context. The AA members embrace the use of extended turns both as a duty and as a subjective right, which respectively has to be recognized by others. Consequently, the format of the meeting is collaboratively maintained and locally managed, thereby providing an intersubjective basis for sharing of experiences.

ACCOUNTING FOR SHORT TURNS

Despite seeing the preallocated time slot as a subjective right, the speakers in the Vuori group can also use turns shorter than the 3 min allotted: About one third of the turns in the Vuori group are terminated before the time signal. However, in these cases the speakers have to do some extra work to build a close-implicative environment. In addition to the rhetoric of gratitude, the speaker may give the excuse of not having anything else to say as a way to make a closing relevant. In Extract 6, Raimo (R) has been talking about the defects in his character that keep coming back (lines 1–4). Then he states that, perhaps, there has not been much point in what he has been talking about (line 6).

Extract 6 (V7 Raimo0491)

1  R: .hh ja:#? (1.0) luulisin että ni:n? (1.0) .mth (.)
   .hh a:nd#? (1.0) I’d think that e:rm? (1.0) .mth (.)
   ↑aika ↑ajoin? ne tulevat kuitenkin? #ö=↑takaisin
   ↑time to ↑time they do come? u#h=↑back
2  A: ((cough))
3  R: → ja?#ee# (1.0) niitä vajavaisuuksia kai ↑TARvitaan.
   and?#ee# (1.0) perhaps you ↑NEEd those defects.
4  A: ((coughing))
5  R: → no? mä nyt? (.) tässä hölöttelen mitä sattuu,=
   well? now I? (.) babble here about whatever,=
6  → =$khiitoksia ↑vaan$
   =$than(h)k-you ↑so much$
After stating that his character defects are something he needs (the rhetoric of gratitude; line 4), Raimo declares that the status of his present talk is “babble”: “well now I babble here about whatever” (line 6). With his utterance, Raimo depicts in a slightly pejorative tone the value of his contribution at that point. In this vein, he invokes a norm and recognizes the fact that the audience deserves more than just mere babble. This recognition of a norm also preserves the speaker’s integrity as it portrays the speaker as a person who at least knows the code of conduct. Furthermore, the phrase “babble whatsoever” has some idiomatic quality, which underlines the closing relevancy of the talk at that point (Drew & Holt, 1995). Then Raimo latches thanks, with some smile in his voice, onto his statement that he no longer has anything proper to say, which shows that running out of talkables has not been deadly serious for him. After a short gap (a micropause at line 8), the audience starts their applause, and the closing becomes confirmed.

However, it is not so easy to get confirmation for a closing of a short turn from the audience. In Extract 7, Tommi (T), who in the opening of his turn identified himself as a person who is in the treatment program (i.e., he is a newcomer who has just sobered up), expresses at a later stage of his turn his gratitude to AA (lines 3–4). Then a lengthy gap is opened, as the audience does not come in until it recognizes that a suitable closing has been accomplished.

Extract 7 (V5Tommi0191)

1 T: ↑tällä lailla mä olen#: öh# (1.5) °ymh° kokenut: .hh
   ↑in this way I’ve#: uh# (1.5) °ymh° experience:d .hh
2 ↑tehokkaaks tän: tän tota ohjelman ja mä oon suunnat-
   ↑the efficacy of thi:s this erm program and I:’m enor-
3   suur- ↑suunnattomastih?, olen kiitollinen siitä et (.)
   grea- ↑enormouslylyh?, I’m grateful to the fact that (.)
4   että tää on yleensä olemassa ja (.) on ↑löytäy ↑MUT,
   that this exists in general and (.) has ↑found ↑ME,
5   (4.0)
In lines 1 through 3, Tommi conveys his appreciation of the efficacy of the program. Subsequently, he expresses his gratitude to the existence of AA and to the fact that it has found him (lines 3–4). In many respects, this expression of gratitude could be heard both as a closing-relevant moral statement and as a completion of the closing. Note that the expression “I am grateful” (olen kiitollinen; i.e., I am thankful) derives in Finnish from the same root as “thanks” (kiitos). At least in some contexts, the expression olen kiitollinen could be heard as a way to express thanks and, thus, as a way to complete the closing. However, here a 4-sec pause takes place after the statement. At this point, the audience has not recognized or accepted the statement as a sufficient closing. Tommi, then, comes back by saying: “words, words” (line 6), which is a metacommunicative gesture. The speaker seems to recognize his inability to produce mere words, as if he were asking for help to find the right words (to exit). After this outcry, Tommi makes an attempt to initiate a new utterance: “bu:t?” (line 6), which is followed with a second pause (line 6). Not until after two pauses and an outcry, does Tommi manage to produce a new closing-relevant statement about the importance and salience of these words (lines 6–7) and then a conventional closing phrase: “thanks for the sober day” (line 8). After a short gap (line 10), the audience and the chairperson confirm the closing.

Thus, members of the Vuori group allow long pauses to emerge even in an environment that could be heard as closing relevant. However, there is some evidence that the speaker himself was not oriented to the completion in line 4. The speaker’s rising inflection “↑found ↑ME” (↑löytäny ↑MUT) does not signal completion, but instead anticipates a continuation that may forestall a response by the audience. Unfortunately, the absence
of a videotape makes it impossible to know whether the speaker’s posture (motion of the hand, meditative gaze, frozen posture, etc.) also reserves the floor for the speaker (Heath, 1985). Nevertheless, what we can see is that the audience does not take an initiative to close a turn before the full time. There exists an intersubjective orientation to the format of AA meetings so that both the speaker and the audience expect the turns to last the time reserved. Therefore, the task to close a turn, before the full time limit, is granted to the ratified speaker alone. The audience’s withholding from initiating closings (before the full time of a turn) makes the current speaker alone responsible for producing a recognizably appropriate and sufficient closing. In Extract 7, Tommi, a newcomer, has some difficulty formulating a proper closing that passes both for him and for the audience. Both the lengthy delays in lines 5 and 6 and the metacommunicative gesture after the first closing initiation speak of this difficulty. However, both the chairpersons and the audience still orient to Tommi as a ratified speaker who has to do the job to close his turn.

**THE TIME SIGNAL MARKS THE TURN AS BEING CLOSING RELEVANT**

The AA members’ orientation to the format of meetings is the bedrock for the organization of sharing experiences. This orientation is not only perspicuous from the fact that short turns are marked and accountable, but also from the unmarked closings after the time signal. That is, speakers not only try to delay the initiation of turn closing until the time signal, but they also get ready to terminate a turn immediately after the bell. In so doing, they indicate an ongoing orientation to turn allocation. Speakers avoid both turns that are shorter than 3 min and turns that exceed the time length more than necessary. In fact, about one half of the turns end within the first two utterances completed after the bell has started to ring. In more technical terms, the closing is realized through the completion of the ongoing turn-constructional unit (TCU), or if that does not provide an opportunity for closing, the turn is closed with the next TCU (for TCUs, see Ford & Thompson, 1996). This shows that speakers in the Vuori group try to close their turns as soon as possible after the signal of the stopwatch. This itself is proof that the members sanction the setting-specific constraints of their interaction order.
The fastest possible way to terminate a turn after the time signal is to end it with the ongoing TCU (the TCU in progress when the time signal is given); that is, the speaker completes the ongoing TCU after the beginning of the signal so that this same unit will form the closing that further, will be sanctioned with a closing phrase, such as thanks. A case of this type is shown next. In Extract 8, Seija (S) is talking about the fact that she has gotten free of problems such as shyness and fears during her involvement with AA and then the time signal goes off (line 6).

Extract 8 (V4 Seija1190)

1 S: .hhh eika ujouteen o:ttaa noita aineita
   .hhh nor do you need to ta:ke that stuff for shyness
2 ett on ↑kyenny niinku vapautumaan <niistä>.
   that you’ve ↑been able to like get free <from them>.
3 → .hh ja tää on hienoo ollu tää raitis elämä
   .hh and this has been great this sober life
4 → ett ↑kaiken aikaa niinkun, .h ↑vähemmän on (.)
   that all time like less is
   that ↑all the time like, .h the ↑less you are (.)
5 → niinkun ↑omien pelkojensa vank i.
   like own fears’ pris oner
   like the prisoner of ↑your own fear
6 B: → rr
7 S: → (0.3) >↓kiitos raittiista päivästä ä.<
    (0.3) >↓thank you for the sober da y.<
8 B: rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
   tt ttTTTTTTTTTTT/
9 A: tt

In Extract 8, the bell indicates that the speaker’s time is over. The time signal starts during the last item of the speaker’s unit or, more precisely, during the last syllable of the last word of the ongoing utterance: “and this has been great this sober life that all the time like, the less you are like the prisoner of your own fear[s” (lines 3–6). The unit is prefaced with the connective “and” (line 3). The connective suggests that this unit belongs to a larger unit or activity (cf. Heritage & Sorjonen, 1994). Here the unit started with “and” elaborates and reformulates the preceding unit, in which the speaker has stated that she has gotten free of shyness (lines 1–2). In that sense, the unit in question is an addition to the preceding talk.
Both units as such could be heard as closing relevant. Here the time signal goes off near the end of the second unit, subsequent to which the speaker does not initiate a continuation but closing thanks (line 7). However, there is still a 0.3-sec pause of between the final TCU and the closing thanks. This pause shows that the speaker was not yet committed to closing her turn while producing the TCU that was to be the last. Namely, if the speaker had been predisposed to terminate her turn exactly at that point, she would have latched her thanks immediately after the close-implicative utterance (see Extracts 2, 4, and 6, in which the thanks are latched onto the close-implicative utterance; in Extracts 1 and 7, there is a micropause between the close-implicative utterance and the thanks). This 0.3 sec may be understood to be the speaker’s monitoring space (see Davidson, 1984) during which she reflects whether the utterance provided was suitable for closing. In line 8, the speaker, after a brief monitoring, accepts her previous utterance for a closing and rushes to thank with a conventional phrase: “thank you for the sober day.” The audience applauds immediately after the thanks and confirms the closing.

This same organization for closing can also be seen in the next extract. In Extract 9, Pipe (P) speaks metaphorically about his past in terms of school grades. In lines 2 through 3, he states that even “6” is adequate (the second lowest acceptable degree in the Finnish school grading system). He concludes his metaphorical talk by expressing his satisfaction (line 4). Then a pause occurs, and thereafter Pipe continues that he does not even dream about divinity when the bell rings.

Extract 9 (V6Pipe0391)

1 P: Mä oon sen niinku kutosen ja ysin välillä ku seilaa
   That’s like when you sail between six and nine
2 ni se on tavan Hyvää. hh se y<? kutone tarkotta
   so that’s quite Good. hh the uh six means
3 Välttävää?, .mhh ja tuota? krh
   Adequate?, .mhh and well crh ((hawk))
4 → mä oon siihen Hirvee Ilonen. (1.5) ja
   that’s Terrific for me. (1.5) and
5 → mä en Mitää Jumalausoppia täällä? (.)
   I (neg.) any divinity here even-dream-about
   Haa:veilekaa?,
I don’t even dre::am about? (.)
6 B: → Divinity?,

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Here, after a closing-relevant statement “that’s terrific for me” (line 4), first a gap of 1.5 sec is opened, and then a new statement is initiated with the conjunction “and” (line 4). The bell rings after the speaker has produced the subject of his utterance, “I” (mä), the negation verb “don’t” (en), and a determiner for the object “any” (mitäään); “I don’t even ((bell starts))” (lines 5–6). Subsequently, the speaker completes his utterance with a verb and an object that were already projected by the beginning of the utterance. In addition, the speaker adds a place adverb “here” (täällä) in the completed utterance (line 5 in gloss). This adverb specifies the context of the utterance that may be heard as an attempt to work for the closing relevance of the utterance. Following this minimalistic completion, Pipe says thanks (line 7), and the audience and the chairperson ratify the closing (lines 9–10). Again in this case, the turn is terminated as soon as possible after the time signal.

We get further evidence of members’ strong orientation to the turn allocation format from the fact that occasionally speakers may give up the ongoing TCU for a completion-relevant unit. In those cases, the speaker prefers to give the turn away in time rather than build a syntactically well-formed utterance. In Extract 10, Mirku (M) is speaking about her experiences in the AA telephone service. She is just about to formulate the gist of her experiences when the signal goes off.

Extract 10 (V6Mirkku0391)

1 M: .h eilen muumuassa? ↓Auttavassa puhelimessa .h yesterday among others? in ↓TTelephone service  
2 kun joudun kuuntelemaan nai, salkoholistien, .hhh when I had to listen to female alcoholics’, .hhh  
3 A: ((sniff; coughing))  
4 M: vaikeuksia ni mä >ajatteli et<↓Mä oon problems then I >thought that< ↓I’m  
5 → ↑Noist ↑Vapaa et kyl ne sillä tavalla from-those free that sure them in-that-way  
↑Free from ↑Those so sure in that way the
In lines 2 through 5, Mirkku is saying that the female alcoholics’ problems she heard gave her the thought that she herself is free of such problems. In line 5, she starts to reformulate her reaction: “so sure in that way the field brings them very close to me.” Here the pronoun “them” refers to the problems of female alcoholics. However, after the signal has started, the speaker begins a syntactic redirection that makes use of the later part of the construction already formed to accomplish a new and different utterance: “the field brings (them) very close to me (and) the fact that I may stay here today” (lines 6–8).10 In this way, the speaker has produced two different utterances that share the middle part of their construction. The former continues the speaker’s account for female alcoholics’ problems, and the latter brings up a conclusion of these experiences.

We can still ask why the former utterance, “the field brings (them) very close to me” (line 6), which referred to the problems of female alcoholics, was not itself completion relevant. This raises a generic feature of these closings. Namely, unsolved problems, or talk about troubles without a hint of the solution, do not seem to provide a felicitous environment for a closing in AA turns of talk. Of course, this is simply another way to state the fact that closings stand for the outcome of interaction. As in service encounters, in general, the agent is oriented to prevent closings of interaction prior to the client’s acceptance of the service; in AA, the members are oriented to display that they have received the help they have been seeking before they initiate a closing. In Extract 10, the former utterance does not indicate any resolution to the problem but states that these problems are very close to her, whereas the latter explicitly recognizes AA as a solution. The resolution relevance of the latter utterance is further displayed by its modality: Through the modal verb “may” (saada) being in AA is formulated as a positive outcome—that is, as a place in which the speaker may
stay (line 8). In this way, the shift from problems to resolutions builds up the turn’s closing relevance. Here, the shift away from the troubles talk has happened with the help of syntactic redirection, which was occasioned by the time signal. This, in its turn, shows the speaker’s ongoing orientation to the turn-allocation format, which itself is the basis for the organization of experience in this context.

CLOSINGS IN WHICH COMPLETION TAKES MORE THAN ONE UTTERANCE: ORIENTING TO THE PRAGMATIC COMPLETENESS OF TURNS

So far, we have seen that speakers in AA are oriented to terminate their turns in as close conjunction as possible with the time signal that indicates the time being out. However, there are a number of cases in which the closing takes more than the ongoing TCU after the time signal. However, even this may not be so much a question of a speaker’s deliberate willingness to speak overtime than simply an inability to provide a closing within one construction unit. That is, the time signal may coincide at a point, when the ongoing utterance is designed to be a part of a larger unit in which the completion is built to take more utterances to come. These cases are interesting from the point of view of the syntax of interaction in that they demonstrate speakers’ orientation to units larger than a TCU. Furthermore, they also pinpoint a crossroads of the generic institution of talk-in-interaction and the setting-specific constraints (cf. Clayman, 1989; Manzo, 1996). The time signal makes relevant the closing of a turn, but the inherent organization of talk-in-interaction makes relevant a continuation of a turn. The speakers, who are caught by this dilemma, systematically produce the continuation projected but as briefly as possible. Nevertheless, the speakers’ choice to offer the continuation, as projected, proves that when the institutional constraints set by the talk-in-interaction and mutual help setting twist the speaker in alternate directions, the speaker may have to take the direction offered by the talk-in-interaction and, in so doing, show that the talk-in-interaction, then and there, is the primordial institutional reality also inside formally organized interactions, such as AA meetings. Finally, these closings also exhibit speakers’ orientation to the rhetoric of gratitude. To sum up, the talk-in-interaction provides speakers
with context-free resources, such as various types of compound interactional units, that speakers use in context-sensitive ways so that the setting-specific institutional tasks are realized.

Extract 11 offers us the first case in which the completion point of the first TCU after the time signal does not meet the pragmatic criteria for the closing of the ongoing turn, and therefore the speaker may need to produce one or more new TCUs to satisfy the pragmatic completeness of the ongoing turn. In Extract 11, Peitsi (P) talks about how he used to be annoyed at what another member of the group had said. When Peitsi is explaining what annoyed him the bell rings.

Extract 11 (V6 Peitsi00391)

1 P: .hh mua ↑Ärsytti usein ku ↑Tee Miki
   .hh I was often ↑vexed when ↑T: Miki
2 aikoinaa puhu tääl et ↑oppis elämää
   used to say that he ↑should learn to live
3 ↑ikäiselleen kuuluvaha Tavalha,
   in a proper manner ↑for his age,
4 .hh >mä aatteli< et mitä tuo äijä ↑lässyttää?,
   .hh >I thought< that the guy talks ↑gibberish?,
5 mua otti päähän se sen takii ku mä
   it pissed me off because I
6 → kuvi< ↑kuvitteli et se? .hh tarkottaa
   ima< ↑imagined that he? .hh means
7 → jotai semmost ↑yleisesti ↑hyväksteyy
   somethin' like ↑generally ↑accepted
8 → ↑tgpa. (0.5) mut se oli ↑ha Muuta.
   ↑manner. (0.5) but it was somethin' Else.
9 B: =ttttttttttt//
10 A: =ttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttt
allocation proceeds further. Here the speaker does not end his turn with the ongoing utterance at the point of the beginning of the time signal but produces a new utterance. However, the utterance the speaker was producing during the start of the signal was a first part of a compound unit, which is composed of several components (cf. Lerner, 1991, 1996). First, the clause initiation “I imagined” is an expressive that projects as its second part the description of the item imagined, or more generically, a description of psychic content. This description is then here provided in order. However, this initiation also projects a further action. Namely, it implies the speaker’s epistemic skepticism toward the stance projected. In that respect, it works like the device called “first I thought . . . but then I realized” (Jefferson, 1984; Sacks, 1992; Wooffitt, 1992). Therefore, “I imagined” not only projects a second part (the description of the imagined object), but also a third part that would provide the epistemic correction projected. In Extract 11, Peitsi makes a contrastive formulation, “but it was completely else” (line 8), thereby producing the epistemic correction, albeit in a very truncated form. We can conclude that the speaker is oriented both to closing relevancy of his turn and to the pragmatic implications of the turn construction initiated prior to the time signal. In this fashion, the speaker produces only units that had been projected by the earlier parts of the turn before the time signal, and, in so doing, he completes his turn as close as possible to the time signal within the limits of the pragmatic completeness of his ongoing turn.

We may still add that here the AA meeting is a relevant context for the accomplishment of this type of closing, at least, in two senses. On one hand, the time signal has built up the closing relevancy of the turn; on the other hand, the formal system of turn taking has precluded the recipients’ responses. In general, the devices that project the speaker’s skepticism toward the forthcoming description, such as “I imagined” or “at first I thought,” provide a “limited access” for a recipient to acknowledge that the speaker knows or implies “more” than what he or she actually says at that point (cf. Pomerantz, 1980). In this vein, these devices orient the recipient toward a “knowable” to which the recipient has only limited access. In ordinary conversation, there are probably several ways for interactants to manage the interest that has been elicited in knowables to which the recipients have only limited access (even if we cannot go into an empirical demonstration of this here). However, in the context of AA in which the speaker is the sole author and the recipients cannot take the
floor, the pragmatic implication of the recipient’s limited access strongly compels the speaker. Consequently, the speakers in AA who cannot conversationally allocate a turn for the next speaker face the implication of the recipient’s limited access and, therefore, have to produce the explication themselves, as shown in Extract 11.

There is a similar kind of an organization of closing in Extract 12. Matti (M) is comparing the severity of his experiences to those of the opening speaker (lines 1–4). He concludes that he had a “hell of a lot of pain” at one point, and then he starts to state what he was thinking at that point when the bell rings (lines 7–8).

Extract 12 (V3Matti0990)

1 M: hhh ehkä: (.) luoja on armahtanut mua
   .hhh perha:ps (.) god has had mercy on me
2 mun (.) heiveröisyyteni takia että
for the (.) sake of my slenderness
3 .hhhhh menihän se ihan hh .hhh (0.5)
   .hhhhh it went though quite hh .hhh (0.5)
4 ihan niinkun ei hhhh niinku läpi, (.)
   quite e:rm almost hhhh erm through, (.)
5 mutta kuitenkin mulla oli ↓helvetillinen
   but still I had a ↓hell of a lot of
6 → tuska silloen ja minä aattelin että
   pain then and I thought that
   pain then and I was thinkin’ that
7 → miksi mulle piti ↓tommonen onnettomuus (.)
   why to-me had-to such-an misfortune
why I had to ↓such a misfortune (.)
8 B: 
9 P: ↓ OLLA kunnes tajusin naineha pelasti minun
   face until I-realized the-woman(intens.) saved my
   have until I-realized the-woman saved my ↑life
10 B: 
11 P: ↑ henkeni koska ymmärsin .hhh ahkaa hoitaa itseäni.
   life because I-realized to-start to-treat myself
cause I became aware .hhh to start to treat myself.
12 B: 

In line 6, Matti starts to say what he was thinking during the extreme strain, thereby projecting not only a description of his thought, but also its epistemic correction. Subsequently, these elements follow, as projected: “and I was thinkin’ that why I had to such a misfortune face” (lines 6–9), “until I realized that the woman saved my life” (lines 9–11). Here the talk is truly organized through the contrast pair “first I thought, then I realized” (Jefferson, 1984). This contrast pair is still followed by an account that explains the sense of the contrast: “’cause I became aware to start to treat myself” (line 11). Again no closing thanks are added, but the chairperson and the audience come in briefly after the account to ratify the closing. Here, the contrast is sufficient as a closing: It invokes the speaker’s thoughts before and after AA, thereby displaying the progress and the relief the person has gained through AA.

The prevalence of different types of contrast devices in the closings of AA turns of talk does not seem to be random, but it is part of what we have called the rhetoric of gratitude. In Extract 11, the speaker provided a negation, which displayed the speaker’s frustration to what another member had said had been immature, to say the least. In Extract 12, the contrast portrays the realization and the development of the speaker’s train of thought. In the environment of closings of AA turns of talk, the contrast devices are a method to display and indicate the positive changes that have actualized for a member in AA. They are a methodical procedure to invoke and publicly display the local relevancy of AA, and, in doing so, they occasion a suitable environment for a closing.

Furthermore, the speaker’s descriptions of problems gain an additional meaning in the context of closings. The problem descriptions are not possible closings, but they consequently become the first parts of contrast structures. The speaker’s orientation to provide a contrast to problems described, even if that makes relevant the speaker’s continuation over the time signal. In Extract 13, Mirkku (M) tells how she has tried to help one of her “sponsees” (a newcomer whose sponsor, or support person, is the speaker in question; lines 1–3). The signal starts when she is drawing the
conclusion that it is distressing to observe another person working against her best interest (lines 5–7).

Extract 13 (V5Mirkku0191)

1 M: .hhh et mä oon ↑viime viikolla yrittäny ↓tukee .hhh y’know ↑last week I’ve tried to ↓support
2 mun yhtä kummitytööni ja: ja: hän on vähän a sponsee of mine and and she has
3 niinkun samoja jälkiä kulku ↑ku mina,=ja like taken a bit of the same path as I,=and
4 A: y’know
5 M: → se on <↑KAUheeta nähdä sivusta> ku toinen it is <↑HORrible to see from the side> when another
6 → <ei anna periks. (.) ↑e i ↑millään.> (1.0) <doesn’t give up. (.) ↑n o: ↑way.> (1.0)
7 B: → 
8 M: → et ↑mä oon antanu pe riks ja teiän avulla y’know ↑I’ve given up p and with your help
9 → ↓saan olla ↓raitis?,=kiito ↓I may stay ↓sober?,=than s.
10 A: ttttt//

In lines 5 through 6 Mirkku announces her feelings about the fact that her sponsee does not give up. The bell rings during the initiation of the idiomatic expression “no way” (ei millään; line 6), which summarizes the speaker’s assessment of the predicament of her sponsee. Subsequently, a pause of 1 sec follows, during which the audience might start the applause, or the chairperson might thank the speaker. The recipients’ withholding of these actions shows that, for them, Mirkku was still the ratified speaker at that point—a sufficient closing was not yet completed. After the pause, the speaker turns away from the troubles of her sponsee and states, in direct contrast, that she herself has given up (line 9), and she further states her gratitude toward the other members (line 10). Finally, Mirkku latches her thanks on her expressions of gratitude (line 10). Thereafter, the closing is immediately confirmed by the applauding audience (line 11). Here, the speaker (or the recipients) did not treat her assessment concerning her sponsee as a proper way of closing her turn. By continuing her turn after
the time signal, the speaker showed her understanding of what counts as a closing for her. In lines 9 through 10, the speaker draws a contrast between her sponsee and herself, thereby displaying her understanding of the appropriate action in AA. In and for her closing, Mirkku points toward the resolution (giving up) and expresses gratitude for others’ support.

In some cases, the closings end up becoming a long series of modifications that only finally satisfy the speaker’s understanding of the appropriate closing. In Extract 14, Riia (R) says that she has been struck by Mari saying that she would not want to change a day in her life. At the point when the bell rings, she is addressing her audience and is about to start to explain how the audience should not take her words.

Extract 14 (V3Riia0990)

1 R: ↑tää oli mulle hhh sellanen hyvin hhh hyvin hhh ↑this was for me hhh so very hhh very hhh
2 sykähdyttävä mitä: Mari kerto .hhhh ja ku- se (.) heart-stirring what Mari told .hhhh and whe- she (.)
3 mitä Mari myöski sano että ↓hän ei vaihtais, what Mari also said that ↓she wouldn’t change,
4 → ↑telämäänsä (0.3) .hhh joku luulee n yt että mä her life (0.3) .hhh you may now thi nk that I’m
5 B: →AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
6 R: → ↑TITKEN TÄSSÄ ja sanon että mun elämäni CRYING HERE and sayin’ that my life’s
7 B: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
8 R: → ollu hirveeta .hhh ↑kyllä siellon hyviäki ↓aioko been horrible .hhh ↑sure there’ve been good ↓times too
9 B: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
10 R: → .hhhh mä en (.) vaihtais myöskään (.) ↑päiväväkään .hhhh nor (.) would I change (.) a single ↑day
11 B: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
12 R:→ elämästäni koska mä en vois olla?, (0.2) of-my-life because I (neg) could be
of my life cause I couldn’t be?, (0.2)
13 B: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
14 R:→ jossei mul tässä tänä päivänä if-not I here this day hadn’t I here and now tod
15 B: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
Here, the speaker again projects skepticism toward her next element of talk, thereby making relevant the continuation, which goes beyond the first projected element. In line 4, Riia indicates her distrust of the recipients’ understanding of her turn “you may now think.” Exactly during the last item, which projects the continuation, the signal goes off. The speaker orderly proceeds to produce first the description of belief and then its epistemic correction. The speaker states that the audience may believe that she is crying and complaining how horrible her life has been (lines 6 and 8). In contrast, she points out that “sure there have been good times too” (line 8). Interestingly, however, the speaker does not accept this contrast as being closing relevant but starts to build it anew. With the help of several remodifications and self-repairs (lines 10, 12, 14, and 16), the speaker finally succeeds, stating that she would not want to change a day in her life because she would not have joined AA without her experiences. Thus, the speaker suggests that the horrible parts of her life have also been worthwhile because they have led her to AA.

In analytic terms, we can note the difference between the former and the latter contrast. The former contrast does not single out the salience of AA to the speaker, whereas the latter explicitly recognizes AA as the ultimate source of meaning for the speaker. Therefore, the latter contrast provides an auspicious environment for a closing unlike the former. In all, here the speaker continues for some time after the beginning of the time signal before the closing is finished. However, even the speaker here makes several remodifications of her talk after the time signal—she does not produce new talkables. Here, as in previous cases in this section, the speaker has only completed a closing as being composed of more than one utterance that was projected before the time signal. In line (14), the speaker’s search for an appropriate expression to complete the closing amounted to a long chain of remodifications, but no new talkables were introduced after the time signal. Despite the lengthy closing segment, the
speaker had not continued any further than what the previous part of her talk had made relevant. Finally, we can note that the speaker’s lengthy continuation was ratified by the recipients who allowed her to continue. In contrast, in the next section, we deal with the speakers’ attempts to introduce new talkables after the time signal that may be met by the recipients’ objection as they take actions to terminate a turn that they feel is continuing too long.

TROUBLESOME CLOSINGS: RECIPIENTS’ ACTIONS AS THE LAST DEFENSE FOR FORMAL TURN-TAKING ORDER

We have shown that both the speakers and the recipients are oriented to the format of AA meetings. Normally, speakers try to fit their turns as closely as possible to their expected length as indicated by the time signal. Respectively, the recipients avoid initiating closings prior to the normative length of turns. Both of these roles are transformed if a speaker does not give up the turn and indicate willingness to concede the floor after the time signal. When a speaker starts to speak overtime, then the recipients, both the chairperson and the audience, may take an initiative to terminate the turn of a speaker who does not respect the meeting format. The recipients’ responses, thus, form the defense line for the intersubjective, institutional orderliness of AA meetings.

In Extract 15, all this is in action. Pete (P) has been talking about his prison experiences; in lines 1 through 4 he says that he was released by the then-president’s amnesty. At this point, the time signal goes off (line 5). Then Pete starts to construct a contrast structure that might be closing relevant (lines 6, 8, and 10). However, instead of terminating his turn, he, from line 10 on, starts to elaborate again on the lesson he has learned.

Extract 15 (V3Pete0990)

1  P: .hhh ja pääsin pi:enen tuomion
   .hhh and I was discharged after I had served
2  .hh kärsittyäni nii: vielä pienemmällä
   .hh a small sentence so:: even with a smaller
3  tuomiolla silloisen presidentti (0.3)
   sentence the then president (0.3)
After the beginning of the time signal, Pete completes the ongoing utterance and then produces a contrastive, resolution-relevant description of his present state: “but here I have been allowed to grow and today I have not needed to use those substances” (lines 6, 8, and 10). Instead of completing the closing with a suitable phrase, such as, “thank you for the sober day,” he takes up a new angle to elaborate the teachings of his life. First, Pete states, “so the fault is not in the narcotics” (lines 10 and 12) and adds,
“nor in bottles.” Second, he states, “but is in the structures of my soul and emotional life” (lines 14–15) and makes an addition, “like Olli said” (line 15). Third, Pete produces an idiomatic complement to his description, “here between the ears” (line 16). At this point, after three utterances (and two additions), the chairperson comes in, overlapping with the last item of Pete’s idiomatic expression, and starts to thank Pete (lines 17–18). However, Pete still comes in and produces a new utterance, “but that is what I am treating” (line 19), to which the audience latches its applause, thereby sanctioning the completion of Pete’s turn. Thus, the speaker’s attempt to talk overtime has here activated the recipients—both the chairperson and the audience. They took the turn away from the speaker, who continued to introduce new talkables after the time signal. The recipients show that they carry their responsibility to maintain the institutionally specific interaction order of AA, if the speaker him- or herself does not do so. We can conclude that the recipients’ responses are the second defense line for the intersubjective orderliness of AA meetings.

In Extract 16, we see recipients defending the order at meetings. This time the reaction is started by the audience. Rapa (R) is talking about the AA spirit when the bell starts to ring. After the time signal, he goes on introducing new talkables.

Extract 16 (V1Rapa0686)

1 R: >ˈtyleensä: mä olen havainnu sen että:< (.) .hh tämän >ˈtusally: I’ve noticed the fact that:<(.) .hh the
2 ryhmän (0.3) henki: (.) ja nämä ryhmän jäsenet (.) spirit (0.3) of this group C.) and the members
3 niinkun (.) pitävät hyvin (.) selvästi niinkun of this group (.) like (.) take care like very (.)
4 huolta siitä, .hhhMun ei niinku tarvitse (0.3) niin clearly about it, .hhhLike I don’t have to (0.3)
5 (.) siihen (.) niinku puuttua, .h ↑Sse syntyy niinkun like (.) sort of (.) worry about it. .h ↑It comes like
6 automaattisesti >koska täällä on olemassa< tääa: (.) automatically >cos we have here< this: (.) ↑AA
7 ↑AA:lainen henki jo ole-°mas° Se on jo (0.5) Ja- spirit here it already °exists° It’s already (0.5) And-
8 B:
Before the bell rings, Rapa has been explaining that, in his opinion, the common success (i.e., AA’s goal) depends on the spirit of the group and AA (lines 1–7).12 We might already hear this meditation as including resolution-relevant views that might occasion a felicitous environment for closing. Rapa, however, is not yet oriented to closing. The time signal (line 8) starts at the initial onset of an utterance, subsequent to which Rapa gives up the construction unit in question “it is already” (line 7), and a 0.5-sec pause is opened. After the pause, Rapa initiates a new utterance that explains further his point, “and therefore well erm I think all you need is
just to walk in through that door and say you are an alcoholic” (lines 10–12). Again, this statement could be heard as a resolution and closing-relevant statement. Rapa, however, carries on immediately, and his turn continues for several TCUs (lines 12–18). There are several completion-relevant points before the recipients come in. The next completion relevant points, in lines 12 through 13, are, “that has happened to me (today)” and, “and I am grateful” (line 13). It is worth noticing that the speaker speeds up after the latter completion point, “>and like I still say . . .” (line 13). The speaker’s rush in initiating a new unit displays his anticipation of the recipients’ possible attempt to take a turn, which he thereby preempts. After the preempting of recipients’ responses, the next possible completion point follows at line 15, “I am extremely pleased with my life today.” Subsequently, when the recipients do not come in immediately, Rapa gets poetic, “today this way, today I feel fine, today has been a fine day” (lines 16–17). This is a three-part construction (a sort of poetical phrase) in which every completion point is prosodically marked as continuous. After the poetic three-part list, Rapa makes an inbreath to initiate a new utterance and begins a new unit, “and well” (line 18). At this point, the audience (finally) comes in and starts the applause. In the recording, we can hear how the applause gets louder, and respectively the speaker’s voice fades away. In this fashion, the audience takes over and ends the turn with the help of applause. Consequently, the chairperson takes the turn after the storm of applause has started dying and thanks the speaker, but also adds an account, “there was applause as soon as three minutes was up, be ready” (lines 22–23). The chairperson has sanctioned the normative order of the meeting format. In Extracts 15 and 16, when the speakers start to speak overtime, the recipients become activated, and they take the initiative to allocate the turn to the next speaker. The recipients may be led by the chairperson (line 15) or by the audience (line 16), but in either case, they guarantee the maintenance of the interaction format of AA meetings. The turns that are too long are sanctioned, and the normal orderliness is restored by the recipients, and the institutionally auspicious environment for sharing of experiences is sustained.

We have to also notice that in all its obvious strictness and rigidity, the format of a meeting is a reflexive accomplishment, the robust character of which stems from the variety of ways in which it is managed. We see this reflexive flexibility in cases in which the format of a meeting is invoked to preempt possible trouble. A case of this type is shown next. This relatively short turn by Peitsi (P) is shown in its entirety.
Extract 17 (V1Peitsi0686)

1 P: Mä oon Peitsi ja mä oon alkoholisti=tota=noin (=.)
   I’m Peitsi and I’m an alcoholic=well=erm (=.)

2 mä oon puolesta päivästä lähtien jännittäny tänne
   since noon I’ve been nervous about coming up here

3 pönttöön tuloo, (=) päätin silloin että mä tuun tänään
   to take the stand (=) then I made my mind up to come
   ↑pönttöön  ja ..hhh hh Toi kolmas perinne
today to the ↑stand and ..hhh hh That third tradition

4 on maldohlistanu munkin AA:n hh Mä oon saanu
   has made possible my AA too hh I received the:
   ↑po nthöö ja .hhh hh That third tradition

5 tota=noin AA-sanoman hinnassa=ja (=.)
   well=erm AA message in the slammer-< and (=.)

6 linnassa mä jouduin sitt tutkimaan itteeni mikä on
   in the slammer I had to take a look at myself who is
   se: hh (0.5) Peitsi (0.8) onko mun pohja käsillä
   so: hh (0.5) Peitsi (0.8) have I reached my bottom

7 >ja mä löysin oman pohjani sillä< tavalla että, (1.0)
   >and that’s how I discovered my limits< so that, (1.0)

8 mä perehdyin omiin  luonteen heikkuksieni
   I took a closer look at my weaknesses of character
   (-) eli niihin mitka oli  pahentunu (-)
   (-) that’s the things that had gone worse (-)

9 mun juomavuosina (1.2) nää heikoudet
   during my years of drinking (1.2) these weaknesses

10 mitkä mä olin jo lapsena saanu=tota (2.0)
   that I had already picked up as a child-erm (2.0)

11 mihin mä sitt aloin juomaan (0.5)
   which I started to drink for (0.5)

12 kun ne pääs pahentumaan (0.5) tänä juoma-aikana
   when they got worse (0.5) during this drinking period

13 → (2.0) Ja tota hhh (0.5) ollaan vähän kipsissä nyt (=.)
   → (2.0) And well hhh (0.5) I’m a bit stuck now (=.)

14 → mikä ei varmaankaan mikään ihme (1.6)
   which I suppose is no wonder (1.6)

15 → Jotai pitäis vielä kyllä sanoa (1.2) nf:hh (1.2)
   Somethin’ should I still surely say (1.2) nf:hh (1.2)

16 → Ei mitään muuta ku-ett (-)
   That’s all except th-that (-)
Peitsi opens his turn in a customary way, but then he says that he has been nervous since noon (line 2). After a few utterances, he starts to have difficulty trying to find words and proceeding with his talk. From line 6 on, there are frequent hesitations, syntactic redirections, and long pauses. In line 16, Peitsi himself notes, “I am a bit stuck now.” Further on, he still orients to the normative expectation of the length of turn, “something should I still surely say” (line 18). Instead of finding new talkables, the speaker, however, initiates a closing, “that is all except that” (line 19) and then launches an idiomatic phrase for a closing, “I will soon pee in my pants” (line 20). However, the interesting detail for us is that the time signal goes off during Peitsi’s idiomatic closing phrase. Here, the time signal is launched much earlier, before the 3 min are up. The timekeeper, who uses the stopwatch, seems to have been monitoring Peitsi’s talk and has switched the signal on for the speaker to save face. In this way, the format of these meetings is not an exterior fact but a moral fact through which the interaction order for sharing of experiences is maintained and managed.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Participants may treat closings of interaction as an index of the outcome of the very interaction and, in so doing, give closings a strategic position for understanding the sense of the interaction as a whole. In institutional settings, in particular, closings may be designed to exhibit the speakers’ understanding of the practical outcome of the interaction. In AA, closings of turns are filled with what we have called the rhetoric of gratitude. This rhetoric has many forms, but, overwhelmingly, the AA members acknowledge support they have received and display the salience of AA for the resolution of their personal problems. The display of the importance of AA for personal recovery forms an auspicious environ-
ment for closings as it indicates that the interaction has already reached its goal. The relevance of the rhetoric of gratitude is further underlined by the fact that talk about problems, and in particular about unsolved problems, is treated by the speakers and recipients as being an improper environment for closings in AA. In and for closings, members have to complement their “problem talk” with resolutions that can be counted as closings. Consequently, the rhetoric of gratitude is crystallized in the recurrent use of contrast devices and other kinds of “dialectical” rhetoric. As a whole, in their closings, the members portray that they both receive and give support always when there is a need. As an outcome of this rhetoric, the closings of turns in AA meetings stand for the felicity of AA interaction.

Many characteristic features of closings of turns in the Vuori group derive from the use of a stopwatch (as a technical solution to divide time evenly between participants). The materials presented in this study show that members of the Vuori group have a consistent orientation to the preallocated time slots. The speakers try to avoid closings before they have filled up the expected length of turn, but they also avoid talking overtime. This can be seen from the great number of closings taking place at a close proximity to the time signal. Almost one half of the closings are produced, at a maximum, an utterance after the time signal—that is, through the ongoing utterance during the onset of the time signal or through the next utterance after the onset of the time signal. Furthermore, these orientations are shared among the participants so that the recipients avoid taking the initiative to close a turn prior to the time its normative length has come up, and, vice versa, they get active as soon as the time signal has been given if the speaker attempts to hold the floor overtime. The participants’ orientation to the closings guarantees a smooth allocation of turns as a bedrock for the organization of sharing experiences in AA meetings.

Finally, we have traced a fascinating collision of the institution of talk-in-interaction and the setting-specific constraints. Namely, occasionally the time signal happens to go off immediately after a speaker has initiated a compound construction unit in which the completion will take more than one utterance. Systematically, the speakers then complete the projected unit despite the time signal. Moreover, the recipients, who withhold from taking any actions to end the turn, treat the speaker as one who is ratified for as long as it takes to complete the compound unit. This shows that the generic institution of talk-in-interaction is relevant also inside the formal turn-taking arrangements of AA meetings. Nevertheless, the speakers
use compound construction units in the environment of closings so that they are able to make use of the rhetorics of gratitude. The compound construction units, which as such are context free, are used in a most context-sensitive manner to invoke and to make locally relevant AA’s set of beliefs. Recurringly, the speakers used a specific device that projects epistemic skepticism toward an idea to be told—that is, “first I thought . . . but then I realized.” In this fashion, the speakers used this device to display a positive change in their beliefs. The members indicated that they used to think in one way, but today they have realized a better way through AA. Hence, the speakers in AA use context-free resources in a context-sensitive manner to display their positive understanding of mutual help as a proper way of closing their turns.

NOTES

1 It may be that, even internationally, the use of a stopwatch is very rare in AA meetings. However, we do not have any systematic data on its prevalence elsewhere. The use of technical means displays and provides a solution for the AA members’ concern about dividing time evenly between participants. Furthermore, it leads to some interactional contingencies to be analyzed.

2 A meeting is “open” when everybody interested is allowed to attend. All the speakers, however, in the analyzed meetings are AA members. Relatives and friends of alcoholics do attend these open meetings, but generally they do not take turns of talk.

3 The restrictions imposed by the tradition of anonymity generally preclude video recordings. Naturally, the lack of video recordings is unfortunate, as we cannot make use of gazes and nonverbal gestures. However, some setting features may alleviate this loss. My own observations and other ethnographic materials (Mäkelä et al., 1996) suggest that intensive eye contact may be avoided in AA meetings. The delicacy of the situation and the respect for the integrity of persons who admit their personal failures may be partially constructed with the help of cautiousness toward others. The speaker’s devotion to autobiographical reflection can occasionally be seen also from a vacant look, as the speaker’s vision, metaphorically speaking, is turned inward. The more or less unconditional ban on video recordings is itself part of this phenomenon through which a spiritual, even a sacred atmosphere is built. Moreover, the large size of the meeting hall and the large number of attendants may additionally weaken the chances for intensive eye contact in the group studied. The use of signals to mark the end of time for each turn demonstrates that not only talk but also the setting itself is organized through audio signs.

4 The names, and possibly some other details, have been changed to secure the anonymity of the persons involved. In addition to the CA transcription symbols, the following
are useful: The “at” symbol (@) surrounding a stretch of talk marks an animated
voice, the number sign (#) signals a creaky voice, the asterisk (*) marks a shivering
voice, £ marks smile in the voice, and $ marks laugh in the voice. The contributions
coming from the audience are identified with the speakership symbol A, that is, A: tttt
((clapping)); the time signal is marked with B, that is, B: rrrr; the chairperson’s turns
with C; and other speakers’ turns with the initial of the speaker’s name as noted. The
analysis is originally based on the Finnish transcripts, but most analyses can be fol-
lowed with the help of the “idiomatic” translation. Due to space restrictions, the
“gloss” that sequentially and syntactically more closely follows the original speech is
added between the Finnish and translation lines only when the analysis hangs on the
distinct syntactic form of Finnish utterances (for more complete glosses of materials,
see Arminen, 1998).

5 The manual use of the stopwatch would allow the timekeeper to terminate an ongoing
turn early or to let a speaker have extra time, but the timekeeper’s accountability di-
minishes his or her chances to use such discretion freely (see Extract 5). On rare oc-
casions, the timekeeper may switch the signal on early, if there are “legitimate” grounds
for it (Extract 17). Elsewhere, I have discussed a case in which a speaker was allowed
to speak overtime, as he was in the middle of deep emotional reflection when the sig-
nal went off (see Arminen, 1998). Generally, manual operation of the stopwatch is
rare, and in almost all cases the signal starts automatically at a predetermined time.

6 Don Zimmerman (personal communication, August 13–15, 1997) suggested using the
term sequence completor for conventionalized items, such as “thanks,” that are used
to mark the closing of interactional episodes. He also paid attention to the relevance of
their presence or absence in the closings of AA turns.

7 In the transcripts, I have systematically marked the pauses inside the current speaker’s
lines and not in the separate lines. In this context, the pauses are recurrently heard as
being pauses inside the speaker’s turn (as in this case) and not in between turns. How-
ever, on some occasions, some recipients may treat a pause as being their pause,
thereby allowing them to take a turn. The reader is advised to pay attention to the
pauses (irrespective of the way they are marked) and to consider their varying
interactional consequences.

8 This (and the next extract) are rare instances in which the signal may have been
switched on manually or in which authentic coincidences have taken place. However,
the seating arrangements (see the Appendix) and the stacks of AA literature on the ta-
ble behind where the timekeeper sits make it almost impossible for most participants
to observe the timekeeper’s hands. Therefore, most of the participants could not possi-
bly know whether the time signal was given by the timekeeper or by the automatically
adjusted stopwatch. Consequently, the distinction between manual–automatic opera-
tion is not available or relevant to most participants. The timekeeper’s actions become
relevant only if somebody challenges the accuracy of the measurement of time (as is
the case in Extract 5), or the time signal is given after a noticeably short turn (as in Ex-
tract 17), or if somebody is given a considerable amount of extra time (which does not
happen often). To conclude, this was merely a coincidence irrespective of how it was
occasioned in the first place.
9 Of course, as in the previous case (see note 8), we cannot be certain whether this is a “sincere” coincidence or an accomplishment by the “witty” timekeeper. However, the chairperson’s comment “right on the dot” would seem to make more sense if the coincidence was sincere.

10 The syntactic redirection runs more smoothly in the Finnish original. Because the object of the sentence, “them,” which is given up for a new one, is further back, there are two “well-formed” utterances in Finnish that share the middle part of their construction: se kenttä tuo hyvin läähelle mulle (the field brings very close to me). In Finnish, this phrase both completes a first unit but also initiates a new one. Unfortunately, I have not found a way to translate this syntactic structure into English.

11 Again this utterance is syntactically crucially different in Finnish. In Finnish, the utterance is syntactically: “but that is my soul’s and emotional life’s structures-IN” ((in structures)). Therefore the first possible completion-relevant point is after the word “structures” and not after “soul’s” or “emotional life’s.”

12 The indexical expressions “take care about it” (line 4) or “worry about it” (line 5) seem to refer to Rapa’s talk about “common success,” which precedes the extract shown.

13 Originally, my intention was to show here a table of the closings’ proximity to the time signal. Subsequently, I confronted so many difficulties in formulating a reliable and valid statistical representation of this phenomenon, as simple as it may look, that only a warning concerning statistical representations of interactional phenomena is in place here. A good demonstration of the internal complexity of very simple phenomena is that the definition of the closings’ proximity to the time signal turned out to be dangerously ambiguous. One of my early observations was that almost all of the closings happen in very close proximity to the time signal. To check this I tried at one point to count how many of the closings were accomplished before the time signal (i.e., before the full time), how many during the time signal, and how many continued after the time signal (and for how long). However, as reasonable as this statistical account might be, it did not take into consideration the simple fact that the length of the time signal varies according to the situated features. Consequently, the relation of the closing to the onset of the time signal would be a better measure, but that does not allow us to discuss reliably how long turns continue after the end of the time signal. The participants themselves treated the speakers’ continuations after the end of the time signal as attempts to speak overtime (thus, having direct interactional consequences). Therefore, the simple phenomenon, the closings’ proximity to the time signal, was a compound phenomenon. Its statistical representation would demand at least two tables: the closings’ proximity to the onset of the time signal, and the closings’ proximity to the end of the time signal (which are distinct but interrelated phenomena). Moreover, additional complexities were emerging. Closings’ placement in relation to the time signal may be occasioned by different reasons, and it may also be designed as a part of different actions. Therefore, the statistical categories were inherently ambiguous. For instance, turns that end before the time signal can be short for a number of reasons. Moreover, closings that continue after the time signal for one or more TCUs can be very different depending on whether the continuation was already projected be-
fore the time signal; that is, the continuation may be an independent expansion or a part of the compound construction unit. Consequently, the finding that the closings are completed in close proximity to the time signal served as an important starting point, but it cannot be presented as a result of the study.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX: THE FLOOR PLAN OF THE HALL
FOR THE VUORI GROUP OPEN MEETING

Stage

chair secr

the speaker podium

chair rows

soft drinks

coffee table

hallway

coat racks

Kitchen

WC