Silence is talk: Conversational silence in Australian Aboriginal talk-in-interaction.

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0. Abstract.

This article presents a Conversation Analytic study of silences in talk recorded in remote Aboriginal communities, and compares the length, distribution and interactional management of such silences with what we know about them in Anglo-Australian and American talk.

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Ethnographic studies of Australian Aboriginal discourse have frequently claimed that Australian Aboriginal people are comfortable with long periods of silence. While our findings support this notion, the micro level of analysis we are able to apply to our data here allows for a more fine-grained understanding of what it means to tolerate longer silences in the context of Aboriginal conversation.

Keywords.

Conversation Analysis, Silence, Turn-taking, Australian Aboriginal languages

Bio-Notes.

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1. Introduction¹

In a paper on silencing Australian Aboriginal witnesses in court, Eades (2000:167) comments on research claiming qualitative differences between silence in Aboriginal and white Australian conversation,

"Earlier research has found that Aboriginal speakers of traditional languages often feel quite comfortable with quite lengthy silences in their conversations, especially when important matters are being discussed. Silences are not interpreted by Aboriginal interlocutors as indicating that communication has broken down..."

Long periods of 'comfortable' silence are also described in Walsh (1991:2) where he presents a number of scenarios that are indicative of his account of conversational style of Aboriginal people in remote communities. In one scenario a group of men sit on the beach facing the sea with long periods of silence broken by occasional observational comments such as 'Tide's coming in'. In another scenario a group of adults and children are around a campfire. The children talk over the top of the adults but as in the first scenario, "The adults talk from time to time but for the most part are silent." (Walsh, 1991:2).

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¹ We are enormously grateful to the Garrwa people who have shared their language with us, especially those women whose talk is represented here. We would also like to thank the audience of the 2007 Australian Linguistics Society Conference in Adelaide, and especially Diana Eades, for feedback on the earlier version of this paper presented there. The two anonymous reviewers have also provided valuable food for thought. Any remaining errors are our own.

Such characterisations are presented as evidence of the considerable differences in interactional styles between Australian Aboriginal people and mainstream white Australians. Yet we still have little understanding of how Aboriginal conversation is organised outside of cross-cultural settings. What does it mean to be 'comfortable' with longer silences? What constitutes 'quite lengthy silences'? Are comfortable lengthy silences a feature of an Australian Aboriginal conversation style (i.e. a cultural feature), or are they a reflection of more general interactional features (i.e. a consequence of the local interactional context)?

In this paper we address these questions through an examination of silences in conversations recorded in the remote Northern Australian Aboriginal communities of Borroloola and Robinson River. Our initial observation of the data was that there were indeed considerable numbers of long silences in these conversations, consistent with the ethnographic characterisations provided above. However such observations require further empirical analysis of the silences, their length, where they occur, and how they might be explained in their local (i.e. interactional) context. The Conversation Analytic approach we take allows for a more detailed analysis of the features of silence in our data, and how it might compare with what has been described for non-Aboriginal conversation.

2. Previous work

There is a considerable body of ethnographic and sociolinguistic work on cultural variation in conversation style. One focus of this research has been on the meanings and values different cultures ascribe to *verbosity* and *reticence* (i.e. lots of talking vs. absence of talk) and how these are understood by participants in different cultures, and whether positive or negative attitudes are placed on them. For example, Tannen (1984; 1985) describes New York Jewish

culture as one which places a high value on simultaneous talk, equating this with high involvement and sociability, while silence is negatively valued as signalling a lack of involvement. Conversely, Athabaskan (Scollon and Scollon, 1981; Scollon, 1985) and Apache (Basso, 1990) cultures are described as ascribing a number of positive meanings to silence. This reticent style is contrasted with more verbose Anglo-American conversational behaviour². Many of these studies additionally posit a connection between problems in cross-cultural communication and variation in the interpretation of silences of different lengths: problems may arise because participants of one culture have a different tolerance for silence than participants of another culture.

Variability in the way silence may function in interaction is also recognised in Conversation Analytic research (eg. Schegloff, 2006a:72). This research has revealed the exquisite timing involved as participants project the end of another's turn in order to start promptly at the completion of an utterance ('transition relevance place'). The foundational work on turn-taking found speakers orienting to one speaker talking at a time with a preference for no gap (or overlap) between turns (gap minimization) (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). But gaps do indeed occur in various ways in conversation. They may occur within an

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² The relativity of such claims is illustrated by Tannen's (1984) contrast of the highly verbose New York conversation style with more reticent Californian and British styles.

³ The Conversation Analytic research into conversational silence has largely been based on conversations recorded among Anglo-Americans and British people. While the findings of such research are not explicitly claimed to be about a particular culture's conversational style, there is consistent recognition that claims only pertain to the data examined. Indeed although the fundamental architecture of turn taking (i.e. that people orient to taking turns, and that speaker change occurs systematically) are thought to be universal aspects of human social interaction (eg. Sidnell, 2001; Schegloff, 2006a; Levinson, 2006), there is also a widespread expectation of variability in some features.

⁴ We make a distinction here between 'conversational' silences, which are breaks in the flow of talk within and between turns of talk, and other kinds of silences which might arise from individuals choosing not to talk (eg. following the 'if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all' convention), or being proscribed from talking (eg. in taboo relationships, or

individual's turn as a 'pause'. Here it has been shown that such 'pauses' within turns typically occur with explicit place-holding behaviour (eg. grammatically incomplete utterances and prosody, or an *um*), which indicates that the current speaker has not completed their turn.

Silences may also occur in the space between turns (i.e. when one participant has reached a point of completion of their turn). In some of these cases, the silence may reflect a hitch or slow down in the timing of turn transition, while in other cases, it may reflect a reluctance for a participant to take the floor. As such gaps extend in length, they may result in conversational 'lapses', where participants disengage, perhaps attending to other activities, and there may be a tendency for topic shift when the conversation is taken up again (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974).

As 'normal' practice in conversation prefers no gap or overlap, silences which extend in time past the transition space are often treated as flagging something unusual or troublesome about the interaction. For example gaps can be seen as indications that a response is 'dispreferred' and/or repairable (Pomerantz, 1984; Schegloff, 2006b). Other kinds of trouble may be related to pauses during word searches (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1986; Hayashi, 2003). However, as the cross-cultural research cited above indicates, silences need not signal trouble in the interaction and indeed may be appropriate communication in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, as the quote from Eades (2000) in the first paragraph of this paper claims, longer gaps need not result in lapses in conversation.

because of the institutional setting). These institutional and culturally sanctioned silences have also been the subject of much ethnographic study (eg. Agyekum, 2002; Nakane, 2007)

So what does constitute a gap in conversation such that it is treated as 'problematic' by participants? Jefferson (1989), on a metric for a 'standard maximum' silence, found in American English and Dutch conversations, that although there was much variation in the length of silences, most longer silences clustered around the one second interval (0.9 - 1.2 secs). Very long silences (say, of more than 5 seconds) were usually associated with some non-conversational activity (e.g. writing down an address) that interfered with the normal pace of the talk (also Goodwin, 1981:106 'activity-occupied withdrawal'). Other proposed causes of variation in the lengths of silences are attributed to the overall pace of speaking. That is, if the overall pace of talking is slower, then the 'standard maximum' silence may be extended (Jefferson, 1989:183-4).

Lehtonen & Sajavaara (1985) also found a relationship between pace of speaking and tolerance for silence in Finnish when they attribute speakers' tolerance of longer inter-turn gaps than Anglo speakers to an overall slower pace of talking (measured in syllables uttered per minute). However no metric is placed on the amount of silence that Finnish conversationalists will tolerate in association with such slower rates of speaking. As an apparent exception, Scollon & Scollon's (1981:25) comparison of Athabaskan and Anglo-Canadian and Anglo-American conversation styles does discuss lengths of silence. They note that Athabaskans' 'tolerance' for gaps between turns runs to about 1.5 seconds in contrast with standard American English 1 second, although it is unclear how such silences were measured. They claim that this metrical difference of about half a second contributes to problems in cross-cultural communication, as using this metric Anglo-Americans will take a turn before an Athabaskan is ready to, resulting in a dominance of the conversation. Similar

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⁵ This metric was based on both intra-turn pauses and inter-turn gaps.

⁶ The Scollons' claim of a one second tolerance by Anglo-Americans predates Jefferson (1989) considerably.

problems have been observed for cross cultural communication between Aboriginal and European Australians (eg. Eades, 1991; 2000; 2007), although there has been no close analysis of what it is about Aboriginal use of silence that might contribute to their apparent mismatch in conversational timing in intercultural settings (including Australian institutional settings).

This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of the length and management of conversational silences in Aboriginal Australian conversation, focussing on recordings of Garrwa speaking people living in two remote Aboriginal Australian communities in Northern Australia. Ethnographic research in Australia has identified differences in general conversation style among Australian Aboriginal people and mainstream White Middle Class Australians which include claims of differences in practices of turn-taking, tolerance for silence and tolerance for extended periods of overlapping talk (eg. Liberman, 1985; Walsh, 1991; 1995; Eades, 1991; 2000; 2007). Anecdotally it is clear that these claims resonate with many working with Australian Aboriginal people across the continent, whether in remote communities or not. However despite the ongoing interest in the grammar, sociology and anthropology of traditional Aboriginal languages and society, to date there has been very little empirical work based on the close analysis of transcribed ordinary conversation. The study of silences presented here is a demonstration of the utility of such an approach to further develop an understanding of relationships between language, culture and interaction.

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⁷ An exception is Garde (2003).

3. Australian Aboriginal conversation style

The lengthy silences described by Walsh (1991) in the scenarios depicted in the opening paragraph are part of a conversation style he characterises as both 'non-dyadic' and 'continuous' (Walsh, 1995:222). Key features of the 'non-dyadic, continuous style described by Walsh are that:

- a) that speakers tend not to address (or even face or look at) particular participants in these contexts (='non-dyadic' communication (222)).⁸
- b) speakers seem to start up talking whenever they chose to, with little consideration for what other participants or prospective participants might be doing (= 'continuous' communication (222)).

This characterisation of Australian Aboriginal conversation style implies little orientation to transition relevance, which in turn implies a preponderance of gaps and overlaps. The consequences of 'non-dyadic' and 'continuous' style for silence is seen in the scenarios described in Walsh (1991:2) and above. Silence can occur for long periods when groups of people are together, with little or no pressure to maintain talk between participants. ⁹

⁸ This style of communicating shares much with Reisman's (1974) characterisation of Antiguan creole turn-taking as 'contrapuntal' and 'anarchic'.

⁹ The 'non-dyadic' and 'continuous' style also has consequences for overlapping talk. According to Walsh, people may talk extensively at the same time without any indication of trouble in the interaction. But Walsh did not consider the extent to which such periods of overlapping talk constituted schismed conversations where more than one conversation can be occurring at the same time (Egbert, 1997). Our data includes extended periods of such overlapping talk that are schismed conversations, each one orderly in its own right once analysed, but chaotic on the surface due to the number of people talking at the same time (See Gardner & Mushin (2007) for an account of some overlaps in terms of incipient schisms in the Borroloola data).

These features were contrasted with what Walsh called Anglo White Middle-Class (AWMC) conversational style: 'Dyadic', where talk is directed at specific others in discrete and well-timed moments; and 'non-continuous', where turns were seen as discrete units which had clear start and finishing cues. This characterisation of Anglo-Australian conversation style implies that longer silences will be less tolerated as directed talk favours immediate responsiveness. It is consistent with the general preference for gap minimization described above for Anglo-American conversation.

Other characterisations of Australian Aboriginal conversation style are consistent with Walsh's description. For example, Liberman (1985:73) makes similar observations about non-dyadic organization of talk in a Western Desert community (a group quite culturally distinct from the Wadeye community of Northern Australia that Walsh refers to),

'A speaker addresses his comments to everyone, and anyone may take up the account in a cumulative manner. Turn-taking in Aboriginal community discourse is serial rather than based upon a structure of 'you-me' pairings.'

This characterisation describes a system of turn-taking that is less chaotic or random than the that described by Walsh, but it nonetheless implies that speakers have no obligations to start or stop talking with a minimization of gaps in turn-by-turn patterns.¹⁰

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¹⁰ There are other studies of indigenous interaction that have focused on other aspects of conversational practice. For example, Eades' (1982) focused on different strategies for asking for information using Aboriginal English, while Garde (2003) has focused on patterns of reference and the social deictic system in Bininj Gun-Wok

Both Walsh and Liberman are careful to acknowledge that Indigenous people do at times direct their talk at particular people, and engage in turn-by-turn talk. However they both also stress the normality of this continuous and non-dyadic style in community interactions, especially in contexts where there is no particular institutional activity, or communication with Anglo-Australian people. One of the aims of the study reported here is to empirically investigate such non-institutional intra-cultural talk to determine the extent to which the conversational silences found in this talk is indicative of a particular Aboriginal conversational style as Walsh and Liberman have described.

What are the implications of this characterization of interaction for how silence is treated in conversation? One possibility would be that since talk is 'undirected', if no one chooses to talk, then this is not considered problematic. An extension of this would be that even if someone were selected as next speaker (e.g. if they were asked a question or requested to say or do something), then there would little pressure to respond. The lack of pressure to respond may result in a longer 'standard maximum' for silences, such as Scollon & Scollon (1981) claim for Athabaskan. However, these are just possibilities. The literature cited in this section does not dwell on conversational silences and does not provide an account of their length or distribution. Our aim here is to present such a study. In the next section we describe the relevant ethnographic and linguistic features of our data. In section 5 we consider the evidence for a 'standard maximum' silence that provides a metric in conversation for what counts as a tolerable length of time between instances of talk. In section 6 we analyze the contexts in which longer silences occur in our data, and in section 7 we return to a

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¹¹ Throughout his book, Liberman (1985) claims to be documenting everyday discourse, although most of the data he discusses seems to involve larger group discussions of community importance. His particular interest in examining the discourse is in how consensus in group decision-making is achieved, rather than how the general flow of ordinary talk unfolds.

consideration of the implications of our findings for the characterization of Aboriginal conversation as non-dyadic and continuous, and for cross-cultural communication more generally.

4. Our data

The data used for this study were recorded during a field trip in 2003 to the remote Aboriginal communities of Borroloola and Robinson River in Northern Australia. The field trip was part of the first author's ongoing descriptive and documentary work on the Garrwa language. The people recorded were mostly language consultants for the Garrwa language project, and their family members.

Borroloola is a town of about 1000 inhabitants on the Macarthur River, close to the Gulf of Carpentaria. It serves as a regional hub for smaller Aboriginal communities, cattle stations and tourists who mostly visit for recreational fishing. The population of Borroloola is mostly Aboriginal, the two largest language groups being Yanyuwa and Garrwa. Most Yanyuwa people live in camps within the town itself while most Garrwa people live on the eastern side of the Macarthur River. Robinson River is a small community 150 kms southeast of Borroloola along an unsealed road. It is in traditional Garrwa country and its population of about 250 people is almost all Garrwa. Until very recently, non-Aboriginal people were not allowed into Robinson River without a permit and the few non-Aboriginal residents are mostly government workers (eg. teachers, health workers) or employees of the community (eg. shop manager, town clerk). This is in contrast with Borroloola, which also has a number of non-Aboriginal owned businesses and residents.

Garrwa people first came into contact with European settlers in the late 19th century as the country was co-opted for cattle pasture. From the first half of the 20th century, Garrwa people largely worked on cattle stations as stockmen and domestic workers. The elderly people who work as Garrwa language consultants (both for this project and the first author's descriptive work on Garrwa) tell stories of their hunter-gatherer grandparents' initial encounters with white people, but they themselves were born on cattle stations and have led relatively settled lives (although there is still considerable movement between communities). People live in extended family groups in houses, but much of life takes place outside in public spaces.

The advent of European settlement has led to the decline of the Garrwa language in favour of English and the English-based creole language 'Kriol'. Today there are few people under 50 who use Garrwa as a language of ordinary interaction. In the conversations used for this study, all of which are minimally based around interactions involving Garrwa women aged 60 or older, the language shifts between Garrwa, English and Kriol.

Our data consist of five conversations. Four of these conversations were audio-recorded in Borroloola between two elderly Garrwa women, 'Tina' and 'Ellen' ¹². These recordings took place on the veranda of a cabin where the authors were residing either before work started in the morning, or in tea breaks during the day. At such times, the first author would leave the recording equipment running while she absented herself from the interaction. There are times when the first author is present (eg. to offer drinks) but the women are mostly engaged in talking with each other. From their position they can see the road, and in one of the conversations they call over a passer-by to talk at a wire fence separating the cabin from the road.

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¹² To preserve anonymity, the only the names of the participants and persons referred to in the conversations have been changed.

The fifth conversation was both audio and video recorded on a porch of the house of one of the participants in the community of Robinson River. The 'Porch' recording began with two elderly Garrwa women ('Kate', 'Daphne') and some children engaged in a Garrwa language activity. This activity broke down fairly early in the recording, which runs for more than two hours, when the children left the women after about 20 minutes. Another 20 minutes later 'Hilda', another elderly Garrwa woman arrives and sits with Kate and Daphne. The first author is present on occasions to check the recording, but is mostly not part of the interaction. During the two hours of recording there are periods when the three women are alone and there are periods when other community members enter and leave the interaction. The context of this recording thus emulates the kind of open and public conditions that Walsh observed as underlying his non-dyadic and continuous talk.

Of the two hours of recorded 'Porch' Data, we have closely transcribed 25 minutes, starting about 90 minutes into the recording (another 40 minutes is roughly transcribed). The four Borroloola conversations have been closely transcribed and constitute another 35 minutes of talk. All transcriptions were initially transcribed, and the language was glossed and translated in collaboration with the main participants who were recorded. The subsequent close CA transcription, incorporating features of timing and prosody, was carried out by the authors away from the field. This data has been used to investigate other aspects of turn-taking behaviour in Australian Aboriginal talk such as overlap (Gardner & Mushin 2007) and orientation to transition relevance places (Gardner & Mushin, in preparation).

We measured and classified silence lengths to replicate the silence lengths considered in Jefferson (1989), and in section 5 we directly compare our results with hers to consider to

what extent we can identify a 'standard maximum' silence in our data. Silences of 0.2 seconds or more were measured and transcribed in this data, according to CA Jeffersonian transcription conventions (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). Measurements were taken directly from the digital sound file to ensure accuracy in transcription. Altogether 1257 silences were transcribed (120 intra-turn and 1137 inter-turn silences) with the following distribution of silence lengths:

 0.2-0.4 secs
 346

 0.5-0.8 secs
 282

 0.9-1.2 secs
 193

 1.3-1.8 secs
 209

 1.9-2.4 secs
 95

 more than 2.5 secs
 132

The spread of tokens in each of the six intervals over nearly an hour of talk in five different recordings demonstrates the enormous variability in lengths of silence over the course of a conversation: the most frequent interval we measured was between 0.2 and 0.4 seconds, but about 50% of silences were over 0.9 seconds. The following extract from our Borroloola data illustrates the range of silence lengths we find throughout. The talk is mostly Kriol and the local variety of English. In this extract, Tina and Ellen are talking about one of Tina's sons who lives in the town of Elliott and had been ill. There is one clear intra-turn pause of 0.2 secs in line 95 and the other silences, which range from 0.2 to 4.6 seconds are between turns. There is also one instance of overlapping talk in line 105, when following the 0.9 silence (but after some vocalisation by Tina), Ellen offers an assessment of the Tina's son at the same

time that Tina continues her report of his activities. Transcription and abbreviation conventions are provided in an appendix.

(1) Garrwa4:10.10.03:V3:95:2'05"

```
↑>But <u>I</u> bin-(0.2) <u>t</u>inking about-; ↓(gu dar on'na).
95
       Tina:
                1' E:lliot, bud e: r:i:ght tubal-
96
                I was thinking about going to Elliott, but he's alright now
97
                (0.8)
      Ellen: Yind<u>i</u>¿
98
                 Really?
                (0.2)
99
                \uparrow \uparrow \underline{Y}ea:h. hhh
      Tina:
100
101
                (3.3)
102
      Tina: Rea:lly good na-
103
                (0.9)
104
       Tina: tk ·hh- [He go:in' la'] chu:rch `imsel:f¿
                He's going to the church himself
                          [°K u: r d a°;]
105
      Ellen:
                          Poor.thing
                (4.6)
106
                \uparrow_{\underline{R}eally} \downarrow_{\underline{g}ood-t}.
107
      Tina:
                (3.4)
108
       Tina: 'E go r:ighd up la' chu:rch,
109
                He goes right up to the church
                (2.6)
110
                `E li:sten;
111
      Tina:
                he listens
112
                (1.6)
```

A striking feature of this data is the lack of trouble in the interaction, despite the prevalence of silences in between turns. Ellen's entry in line 98 with the newsmarker *yindi* comes after 0.8 seconds, and is confirmed by Tina in the next term. The following gap of 3.3 secs leaves the floor open and it is Tina who continues with her assessment of her son's improved condition (*really good na*). The overlap in line 105 is an indication that both Tina and Ellen considered the floor to be available, although Tina has shown she is gearing up to talk with the alveolar click and inbreath. Both complete their utterances before the next lengthy pause of 4.6 seconds. As this conversation was audiotaped only, we are not in a position to know what, if any, other activities might be in progress during these pauses, but there is nothing audible going on here and there is nothing in the talk to suggest any other activity. The sequence of longer gaps in lines 106 to 112 occur as Tina increments her report of her son's progress. Again there is no indication here that the gaps 'mean' that there is a problem with the communication, nor a problem with memory or lexical access.

We discuss such longer gaps in our video recorded data in section 6, where we have visual access to what the participants are engaged in besides talk. In the next section we consider the idea suggested in Jefferson (1989) that for Anglo speakers, a one second silence is about the limit of tolerance, but that this may be subject to variation.

5. Is there a 'standard maximum' silence in Garrwa conversation?

Jefferson (1989) explicitly recognised the enormous objective variability in the lengths of silences in any given conversation. Her study particularly focussed on the length of silent time it takes before "... some next action ought to happen 'now'" (p170). That is, before the

participants start treating the apparent gap or pause in conversation as something to be attended to. For example, in the following extract, Bette comes in after exactly one second with a turn beginning placeholder *u:Uh::::m*, signalling a recognition that she needs to respond to Andrea's offer of lettuces, even if it is as a deferral of acceptance or rejection.

(2) [Owen:8B15(A):43-44:SO] ((face to face)) (Jefferson 1989: example 1.8)

Andrea: By the way do you want any lettuces little lettuces?

Because they've come out very we[ll

Bette: [†Have they,

(0.4)

Bette: ↑Oh:.

Andrea: → °If you're interested°

 \rightarrow (1.0)

Bette: \rightarrow u: <u>Uh::::</u>m I'm just(tr)- <u>thinking</u>.

Jefferson found that such 'about a second' silences (i.e. silences of 0.9-1.2 secs) were by far the most frequent range in her data, as shown in table 1 below. The first column of numbers shows the ratio of one second silences to all other longer silences. The second column shows the ratio of 0.9-1.2 second silences to the next cluster (1.3-1.8 secs). The results show that overall silences of more than about a second occurred far less frequently than one second silences and this basic ratio is across a range of interactional contexts (ranging from 1:1 to 3:1). The significance of one second (cf. other longer intervals of silence) becomes even

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more apparent when one compares the numbers one second silences to those in the next 'bracket' of silence that Jefferson measured (1.3-1.8 secs), ranging from 2:1 to 10:1.

Insert Table 1 here

If we compare Jefferson's results with our own data, we find a very different story. This is presented in table 2 below. Here we find for both the total and for the individual recordings, that silences of more than a second are more frequent (and sometimes far more frequent) than silences of about a second (0.9-1.2 secs). The ratios range from about 1:2 to 1:5.4. Furthermore if we look at silences of about a second compared with silences of about 1.5 seconds (i.e. 1.3-1.8 secs), we find in general a fairly even distribution (overall the ratio is about 1:1 with one recording at 1:2).

Insert Table 2 here

One striking difference from Jefferson's results is that silences of about a second and silences of about 1.5 seconds occur in approximately equal numbers (in Jefferson's data the 1 second silences were far more frequent). What this suggests is that unlike Jefferson's findings that indicated something special about the one second interval compared with other intervals, for our data, there appears to be little relevance attached to one second intervals in comparison with others. Speakers seem equally 'tolerant' of one second as they are of 1.5 seconds. In fact, the relative frequency of silences longer than 1.8 seconds in our data (cf. Jefferson's data), which is less than for silences of about 1 or 1.5 seconds, but nonetheless robust in overall numbers, suggests the *lack* of a 'standard maximum' at all, since no particular interval of a second or greater stands out. This particular result is at odds with Scollon & Scollon's

(1981) observations of Athabaskan tolerating gaps of about 1.5 second in comparison with 1 second for Anglo-Americans (but see below). The table above both shows that both appear equally likely.

The comparison of silence frequencies over whole conversations provides us with rough evidence that there may be something qualitatively different between the conversations examined by Jefferson and those of our study. It confirms the basic observation that talk among Aboriginal people may in part be characterised by longer silences between turns than we find in other kinds of conversations that have been so examined. The comparison cannot tell us where these differences may lie, and what communicative significance they may reflect. We can however gain a more nuanced analysis by examining the lengths of silences, and participants' orientation to them in different kinds of turn sequences.

One context in which it does appear that speakers attend to the length of time between turns is when someone is *selected* as the next speaker (e.g. they are asked a question, or requested or offered something). We find in these contexts that responses mostly come within 1.5 seconds, illustrated in the examples of question-answer pairs below. In (3) the gap is less than a second while in (4) and (5) the gap is (1.4). In all of these examples the question is answered directly and positively with no indication of trouble, despite the apparent delay.

(3) Porch2.9:970

970 Hilda: [Na wanyi- (.) >wanyimba barri yalu.<

Na wanyi- wanyimba barri yalu

what- what-do 3Pl

And what did they do?

971 -> (0.7)

972 Kate: <u>W</u>udumba yil' yal' nanau<u>:</u>¿

Wudumba yili yalu nana

Get HAB 3Pl that

They used to get it

(4) Porch2.8:611:0'30"

611 Kate: =Winjawa nan' kang:aroo.

Winjawa nani kangaroo

Where that kangaroo

Where's that kangaroo

612 -> (1.4)

613 ?: (A) boil (up).

(It's being boiled up)

(5) Porch2.9:1004

1004 Daphne: >An' wanyi kuyu nan' yiliburr'-.<

And wanyi kuyu nanda yiliburru

what bring that waterlily

And who brought that waterlily?

1005 -> (1.4)

1006 Kate: 'Ya:'lu, minjil' yal:';= jila karrina

Yalu minjili yalu jila karrina

3Pl CONJ-HAB 3Pl go east-ABL

1007 Win:mirrinanyi,hh

Wåinmirrinanyi

PLACE.NAME-ABL

They did, they went from the east, from Calvert

Hills Station

It should be noted however that some of these silences of about 1.5 seconds do occur in contexts where the response is dispreferred, as in (6), where the question of the location of some 'sugarbag' (wild honey) in 1202 is responded to in 1205 with a clarification question 'what for?' after (1.6) seconds.

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(6) Porch2.10:1202:1'00"
1202 Daphne: Wanjawa ny- >^nungkala bayamu';= narriyalaman.<
             Wanjawa ny-
                           nungkala bayamuku narriyalaman
                           IduIncl children tree.sugarbag
             Where are we two and the children (going to find)
             sugarbag?
1203
             (1.6)
1204 Hilda: >Wanyinkanyi [ barri,< ]=
              Wanyinkanyi
                            barri
              What-DAT
              Why
1205 Kid:
                          [(Come on)]=
1206 Daphne: =>Way:barri n'n' walunyi.<
               Waybarri nanda walunyi
                         that before
               Where
               Where (did we find) it before?
```

Whether the responses are preferred or not, the sequences in which responses are required rarely result in silences of longer than 1.5 seconds. In contrast, when the floor is open to any speaker (i.e. when no speaker has been selected), the lengths of silences between turns are far more spread, and include more longer periods of silence. Note that these examples do not fit with Walsh's characterisation of 'non-dyadic' talk. Here a response is both elicited and given. Where there is a gap between question and answer (or other pairing of action that involves

speaker selection), it rarely surpasses 1.5 seconds.¹³ Around this length of time it appears that the talk may or may not be treated as problematic. They indicate a pattern of turn-taking which may indeed allow for a longer period of silence than Anglo-Australians are comfortable with, but it is silence which seems to have an upper limit.

Aside from these cases in which a response is expected, there does not appear to be a particular interval of silence corresponding with a particular tolerance limit in our data. We do however find a far greater frequency of silences longer than about a second than Jefferson found in her data. This supports the Eades' (2000:167) quotation in the opening paragraph characterising Australian Aboriginal people as comfortable with lengthy silences – lengthy by Anglo standards. It is unclear from this work how long the notion of 'lengthy' is in the context she examines. As she makes reference to lapse-like behaviour, we extrapolate that her focus is on silences of several seconds (i.e. long enough to constitute lapses in Anglo talk), rather than 1.5 seconds. In our data we find that in most cases, silences of above 1.5 seconds do not result in lapses, even up to 13 seconds!¹⁴ In the next section we demonstrate how such silences are used in our data, and how they appear to be treated as ordinary by participants.

6. Accounting for longer silences.

-

¹³ We have only two examples in the date set where a selected speaker takes longer than 1.6 seconds to respond. In the first, the selected speaker was engaged in a side activity of drinking (a speech disabler), and takes 5.5 seconds before responding. In the other, the selected speaker never responds to a question and the sequence is never closed.

¹⁴ Our longest silence is in the audio-only recorded Borroloola data and runs to 41.5 seconds. The first author returns to offer water to Tina and Ellen. There are sounds of moving recording equipment around (probably the first author), and the rustling of a tarpaulin. The silence is broken by Tina calling out to a passer-by, which suggests that the women were looking out at the street scene during this time. This is a clear case of a lapse.

In this section we examine some sequences which incorporate longer silences (i.e. of about 1.5 or greater). Our aim here is to demonstrate that such long silences appear 'ordinary' in the talk we have examined. The extracts we report on here are all from the Porch conversation as this was videotaped. We note however that such patterns of longer silences are also found in the audio recorded data from Borroloola we have transcribed. The extracts presented here all come from parts of the recording when only the three women were present. They are sitting on a porch. Daphne and Kate are sitting at about a 30 degree angle from each other, oriented towards the camera. Daphne is slightly further forward than Kate. Hilda is on Kate's right but leaning against the house wall behind Kate. This means that Kate and Daphne need to turn their heads to look at Hilda, but not vice versa. Daphne and Kate also need to visibly move to make eye contact. There are objects in front of the women, including wooden artefacts, handbags and a cup and bottle of lemonade.

6.1 Longer silences in storytelling and related sequences

One context in which we find numbers of longer gaps is during storytelling, where one speaker has an extensive turn consisting of many units of talk. These multi-unit turns may or may not be explicitly negotiated among the participants. In Anglo conversation, even when a multi-unit turn has been granted to a participant (such as with a pre-story sequence that is accepted by the other participants (Schegloff 2006b)), incipient gaps between turns may be filled with minimal responses and assessments. These turns tend not to detract speakers from storytelling, and also tend not to result in significant speaker change (eg. Jefferson, 1978; Goodwin, 1984).

Our data include a considerable amount of storytelling and related activities (such as reminiscing, or providing extended answers to questions) involving multi-unit, or extended, turns. We observe that such sequences contain numerous longer gaps. While these make up only a small proportion of the total gaps of more than 1.3 seconds in this data, they suggest that in multi unit turn sequences, there is a tendency towards longer silences. This is illustrated in (7) below.

(7) Porch: 2.9:1017

```
Jungku 'ili;= 'NANANKANY-YÖ::.= bakili muny:ba
1017 Kate:
             Jungku yili
                           nanankanyi
                                            bakili munyba
                   HAB
                          that-DAT
             Sit
                                            and-HAB cover
1018
                   nani'w:anyi.
             ya'
             yaji naniku-wanyi
             place goat-EllenG
             We used to have a big mob of goats that
             covered the place
1019
          -> (2.0)
1020 Kate:
             Yukul:yarriwanyi.
             Yukulyarri-wanyi
             Goat-EllenG
             The goats
          -> (1.3)
1021
1022 Kate:
             >Bakili 'alu wa:radijba wa'arra;= 'ngarajina;=
              Bakili yalu waradijba wawarra
                                               ngarajina
              And-HAB 3Pl be.busy
                                    kid
                                               drink-SS
             nga:mulu';= nayi barri-; -ehh
             ngamulu
                       nayi barri
             milk
                       here BARRI
```

Those kids would be busy drinking milk here 1023 **->** (0.5) 1024 Kate: <N<u>i</u>:ne mo:<u>p</u>,> Nine mob Nine mob 1025 **->** (3.5) 1026 Kate: Ni:ne;= >barri jungkuyi bayakada;= nga:rda-¿ barri jungkuyi bayakada Nine ngarda Nine BARRI sit-PA baby mother Nine, mother and baby (were there) 1027 **-> (2.0)** 1028 Kate: Ngal' nga:kinkurru;= kanyiya':rru, Ngala ngakinkurru kanyiyayurru CONJ 1Sg-DAT-DEC ${\it KIN.TEllenM-DEC}$ But my younger brother-cousin **-> (1.8)** 1029 1030 Kate: Dey bin $m:\underline{u}$ lamula;= $1\underline{i}:1$ one like-; (0.2) They bin mulamula little one like carry.on.hip S:tagie bo:y; hhh Stagie boy They carried the little one on their hip, Stagie Воу 1031 **-> (2.0)** 1032 Hilda: (.Wanya.) Who **-> (0.8)** 1033 1034 Kate: Dis un: bin finished. hh This one's finished (=dead) 1035 (0.2)1036 Hilda: °la: W:est Australia.°

in Western Australia

1037 Kate: hhYea:h.

1038 -> (2.2)

1039 Kate: De::y use tuh cah- u-carryim baki./; .hhh NGALA

and CONJ

1040 NURRU BAY: UNGU BUJUWAN;

1PlExcl west waterlily

But we got waterlilies west

In (7), Kate has been reminiscing about life in her youth at one of the region's cattle station. This reminiscence began in response to an earlier question by Daphne. In this sense, Kate's use of the floor is sanctioned by the other participants. Her reminiscence is punctuated by a number of longer gaps: 2.0, 1.3, 0.5, 3.5, 2.0, 1.8, and 2.0 seconds. After this Hilda asks a clarification question about the identity of the person Kate has just mentioned (1032). The one shorter gap in this extract of 0.5 seconds in line 1024 preceded an increment 'Nine mob' which clarifies whose kids were drinking milk (first mentioned in line 1022). All of the gaps following up to the speaker change are over 1.5 seconds.

The video evidence points to everything proceeding normally. Both Daphne and Hilda sit quietly listening. There is no indication that anyone else is trying to take the floor (until Hilda's question in 1032). From the video, we can see very little activity that would prevent either Hilda or Daphne from speaking, and furthermore, little evidence that Kate's gaps are motivated by her own non-verbal activities. The only possible example of such an action comes between the gap in 1019 and when Kate utters 'Stagie boy' in line 1030. During this period Daphne takes a cup from in front of Kate and places it in front of her before filling it with lemonade. This activity may contribute to her lack of talk contribution in this period but there is nothing in this that would disable speech. Hilda does not appear to be doing anything

other than sitting. She is looking at Kate (the storyteller) for part of this extract. In the gap in line 1025, Hilda looks down and starts fiddling with some small objects on her lap, but looks up again at Kate when she starts speaking again at 1026. Kate begins this extract looking at Daphne (who had been the last speaker). By 1023 she has moved her gaze from Daphne to be looking front-on at no one in particular (she may be watching Daphne pour her drink, but it is unclear exactly where her gaze is placed at this point). During her utterance in 1030 she turns to look at Hilda, which may account for her taking a turn in 1032 when she asks for more clarification on the identity of 'Stagie boy'.

The absence of attempts to 'fill' these gaps is striking. As a non-Aboriginal one might, for example, expect indications of recipiency from the other participants, such as response tokens, assessments or non-verbal gestures. As these women were children together, this particular reminiscence of Kate relates to experiences that all the women have shared, yet there is no rush to co-remember or contradict, or assess. While this lack of gap-filling seems striking, when another participant does enter the conversation, as Hilda does in line 1032, this also is treated as unproblematic. In 1034, Kate clarifies the identity of 'Stagie boy' as the one who died in Western Australia, and this is acknowledged (without gap) by Hilda in 1037. In 1040, following a 2.2 second gap, Kate resumes her reminiscence. What this suggests is that there while there appears to be little pressure to signal recipiency (either verbally or visually), neither is there a problem should someone else take a turn.

6.2 Longer silences in turn-by-turn talk

The contexts of storytelling and related activities are ones in which by nature of the activity, one speaker has gained continuing rights to the floor. The long gaps we see in examples like

(7) may be non-problematic in these contexts because there is no immediate competition for the floor. However we also see such long silences when there is ongoing speaker change, as in (8) below, which is part of a complaint sequence.

(8) Porch:2.1:846:PD2.

```
846
             JURARRBA NGAYU NGAWUKUKU.hh
     Kate:
             Jurarrba ngayu ngawukuku
                      1Sg pregnant.belly
             I'm hot in the guts
             ((I'm angry))
847
            (1.3)
848
     Daphne: Jurarrba >ninji< ngawukuka.
             Jurarrba ninji ngawukuku
                       2Sg
                             pregnant.belly
             You're hot in the guts
             ((You're angry))
849
         -> (2.3)
850
     Kate:
             `ana:nkuny'
                          wawarrany'.
             Nanawa-nkunyi wawarra-nyi
             DEM-DAT
                          child-DAT
             With those kids
851
         -> (2.2)
852
     Daphne: Barri balba yali;=
                                  bukamba na,
             Barri balba yali
                                  bukamba na
             Barri go
                      3P1-PA
                                  all
                                          NA
             They've all gone
             (0.3)
853
854
     Daphne: W<u>i</u>:jba `li
                            k'ngkarr'/dat;= s:choolyurri.
             Wijba yali kingkarri school-yurri
             Return 3P1-PA
                                             school-ALL
                            uр
```

They've gone back up to school

855 -> (4.5)

856 Hilda: Mm: ^hm.

857 (0.5)

858 Daphne: Barri[wa.

Barriwa

Finish/Anyway

The extract in (8) shows that even when participants are engaged in turn by turn talk, they still tolerate silences of well over a second. The extract begins with Kate announcing that she is 'hot in the guts' = angry. After 1.3 seconds, in 848, Daphne aligns with Kate's complaint. Note that Daphne's turn is a preferred response to Kate's complaint, and as such, according to work on preference organization (Pomerantz, 1984; Schegloff, 2006b), should come quickly. 15 This is followed by a gap of 2.3 seconds, during which Daphne drinks from a bottle, but Kate and Hilda do not seem to be involved in any activity other than fiddling with small objects in front of them throughout this extract. Kate breaks the silence with an increment to her earlier turn by starting to explain who she is angry with (the kids). Daphne's aligning turn in 848 does not elicit this response (that is, there is no indication in this turn that Daphne is requesting more information). After another gap of 2.2 seconds, Daphne announces that they (the kids) have left, and pauses for 0.3 seconds, before continuing her turn with an increment to say where they've gone. After an extremely lengthy gap of 4.5 seconds, Hilda acknowledges with a falling Mm hm. During this time, Kate is fiddling with something in her fingers without looking at it and turns to Daphne just before the Mh hm. Daphne is screwing on the bottle top and sets in on the ground just before her own turn in 858. Hilda is stroking a coolamon and turns it over just after the Mh hm. None of the women appear therefore to be engaged in an activity that is particularly timed to coincide with the

¹⁵ In contrast, dispreferred responses are often delayed. (Levinson, 1983; Goodwin, 1986).

duration of the silence, nor are they activities which necessitate detraction from taking a speaking turn.

For an Anglo-Australian, the acknowledging response in 856 seems to occur so late as to lack relevance, yet here it is treated as unproblematic. The falling terminal intonation contour suggests perhaps that this *Mh hm* is proffered as a sequence closing device, rather than as a continuer (Gardner, 2001). This is supported by Daphne's overt termination of the sequence in the very next turn with *barriwa*, a form which is conventionally used to finish a sequence. ¹⁶ This extract is thus a nice example of the ordinariness of long silences in this interaction.

6.3 Silence during 'Activity-occupied withdrawal'

Recall that Jefferson (1989) accounted for some of the longer silences in her American data as being a result of participants disengaging from talk to attend to other activities, such as writing down an address, and Goodwin (1981:105) similarly discusses an example of a participant disengaging from talk while getting ready to inhale on a cigarette. In the extracts examined so far, it has been argued the participants are not engaged in activities which appear aligned with the silences, and so the silences cannot be accounted for by the activities alone. That is, while participants may be engaged in various non-verbal behaviours (eg. fidgeting with objects, rubbing their faces, scratching), these are not speech disabling in themselves. Furthermore they are not coordinated with the gaps in conversation and they may start well before the gap and continue well after the gap. For example, while it can be argued that Daphne's preoccupation with pouring lemonade into a cup in extract (7), and her

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¹⁶ Barriwa is also the conventional Garrwa form for leave-taking.

drinking from the lemonade bottle in extract (8), means that she has temporarily absented herself from the floor, this does not account for Kate and Hilda not taking the floor during these longer silences.

Our data does however have some instances where the silences can be explained by coordinated activities that can account for the resulting gaps in conversation. This is shown in (9).

```
(9) Porch: 785
785
      Hilda: Fra:zh one >kuna [nayi<;= (</pre>
                                                             ).]
               Fresh one kuna nayi
                            Q
                                  here
               Here are fresh ones, (aren't there)?
786
      Daphne:->
                                   [>\underline{G}i' \text{ me dat bru:sh},= \text{there}]
               >bardibard' ba' nga';= mamanumba.
                bardibardi baki ngayu mamanumba
                old.woman and 1Sg
                                         lose
                Give me that brush there, old woman, I lost it
787
              -> (0.6)
      Hilda: -> Wh:at.
788
              -> (2.3)
789
      Daphne: * Uh br:ush, = nga:ki. *
790
                              1SqDAT
                 My brush
```

In line 786 Daphne ceases calling out and asks for a brush to be passed over to her. This is in overlap with Hilda. The brush is closest to Kate and Daphne gestures towards Kate during the request. Both during the request and in the gap that follows, Kate is drinking from a cup.

Nonetheless while she is drinking, and at the same time that Hilda utters 'what' (possibly because she took the request to be directed at her), Kate passes the brush to Daphne who puts it into her bag. The gap between Daphne requesting the brush and her asserting that the brush belongs to her occurs largely while Kate is passing the brush to her. Kate cannot speak as she is drinking. Hilda's 'what' comes after 0.6 seconds, and this coincides with Kate reaching for the brush so that Hilda can see that Daphne's request is being taken up by Kate. The (2.3) seconds of silence in line 789 is thus accounted for by a non-verbal action.

7. Conclusions

Our investigation of silences in the talk of some Australian Aboriginal people talking among themselves in their own community have in part demonstrated what is meant when it is claimed that such people are comfortable with long silences. If, like Jefferson, we take one second to be at the shortest end of what counts as a 'long' silence, then it is clear from our data that the frequency of these silences is much greater than she found in her Anglo and Dutch data. ¹⁷ Furthermore, it is also clear that the occurrence of such longer silences does not correlate with either interactional problems, nor word searches (although they may account for certain silences in particular contexts). This result supports the claims that Australian Aboriginal people do indeed tolerate long periods of silence, and treat such silences as ordinary. While we cannot predict which turns will be followed by silences of a particular length, we can demonstrate that it seems that regardless of the length of the silence (which in our data can be as long as 13 seconds), talk may progress with no orientation to the gap and

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¹⁷ Anglo-Australian conversation data collected and transcribed by the second author supports the view that such longer silences, while they occur, do not occur as frequently as we found in this Aboriginal data. (Gardner, 2001)

without the gap turning into a conversational lapse. We suggest that this is what is meant by 'comfortable silence'.

Our data also shows that while we find, contra Jefferson (1989), little evidence for a standard maximum silence of a second, we do find that when a participant is selected to talk next, silences of more than about 1.5 seconds are indeed an indication of trouble. Whether this corresponds to a metric similar to the 1.5 second inter-turn gaps identified by Scollon & Scollon (1981) for Athabaskan, remains to be seen. This distribution of longer silences in cases of next speaker selection does suggest that even though selected speakers may be provided with a longer space in which to take their turn, this space is generally shorter than when no speaker has been selected.

When no speaker has been selected, there is a gradual decrease in the numbers of silences, the longer they become, with silences of more than 2.5 seconds occurring the least frequently and silences of more than 5 seconds occurring quite rarely. Such longer silences also occur in all of the contexts we have examined, except in multi-party situations where the conversation schisms so that gaps in these conversations are less apparent. The point at which a silence ends by someone taking the floor (whether it be the prior speaker talking or someone else), does not seem to be driven by an underlying 'pulse' of conversational pace.

Our findings suggest that claims made in the intercultural communication literature that imbalances in contributions between participants from different cultures, such that the member of the 'Western' or 'Anglo' culture dominates the turns and the member of the other

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¹⁸ Jefferson's metric does allow for standard maximums of more than a second, but there she claims that the second interval is still relevant. That is, in some conversations, the metric may be 2 seconds, or 3 seconds. We find no orientation to any particular interval throughout our data.

culture remains reticent, may result from the application of different metrics for turn-taking (eg. Scollon & Scollon (1981) for Athabaskan, but see also Nakane (2005; 2007) for Japanese students in Australian university classrooms). Our data suggests that while there may indeed be culturally based differences between Anglo and Aboriginal Australians in how longer silences are oriented to and negotiated in interaction, these are not linked to a particular interval of time.

It should also be pointed out that in many instances the people we have recorded take turns in conversation with no gap, with overlapped transitions or with gaps of less than a second. Indeed gaps of less than a second constitute more than half of the measured silences in our data. The fact that many turn transitions occur within or just after the normal transition space is an indication that the Aboriginal people we have recorded can orient to the timing of turns in much the same way as anyone else. ¹⁹

The main point of differentiation we find between our data and what has been described for Anglo cultures is the relatively high frequency of silences of more than a second that do not correlate either with trouble in the interaction, nor with a coordinated activity which precludes or interrupts the flow of talk. The distribution of these gaps may indeed contribute

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¹⁹ A detailed analysis of overall turn-taking behaviour is the subject of another paper (Gardner & Mushin, in prep). In that paper we show that speaker allocation in these Garrwa conversations operates in the same way as was described in Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) (SSJ). Sometimes current speaker selects next speaker, and then the next speaker is obliged to speak, albeit with more regular delay than is generally found, for example, in Anglo talk. Nevertheless, the next speaker usually talks within 1.5 seconds. If current speaker does not select next speaker, then we find, just as for SSJ, that any other speaker can self-select. If they don't (within the transition relevance place), then current speaker can continue. Also turns are produced with TCUs, and transitions become relevant at any possible end of a TCU, just as in SSJ, only more regularly the uptake of the next turn is delayed.

to an impression of a different kind of conversational style, one where there is less pressure to immediately take the floor as soon as it is available.

Why should this be the case? We suggest that at least part of the answer may lie in the social and physical environment in which the conversations we have examined were recorded. The old women recorded here spend much of their everyday lives sitting together without particular orientation to the clock time. Their time to interact is much less limited than those who live with appointment times, who live at distance from each other and so whose interaction must always be punctuated by needing to be elsewhere. This is perhaps what Walsh (1991) was suggesting when he described Aboriginal conversational style as 'continuous'. Here we suggest that continuity is less about turn-taking and more about the members of a community having the expectation that there are open ended opportunities to continue a conversation. The overall result of this social life may well include less pressure to immediately take the floor during a conversation.

But this cannot account for the fact that longer comfortable silences have been observed as regular features in very different kinds of communities. These include Aboriginal people living in both rural and urban communities which may also have substantial non-Aboriginal populations (cf. remote communities with predominantly Aboriginal populations of the kind presented here)²⁰, but they also include interactions between non-Aboriginal people; for example, people often comment on the slow pace of rural speech compared with city dwellers; couples, siblings, or old friends, even in urban settings.

²⁰ We are grateful to Diana Eades for pointing this out to us.

One possible shared feature here is the intimacy of participants. Participants in the conversations we have recorded were not just close friends and relatives, but also people who have known each other their whole lives and who have lived in a fairly small communal society. There is thus a great deal of familiarity and shared experience. In such contexts, constant talk may not be necessary to maintain sociability (cf. Tannen, 1984; 1985). If tolerance for longer silences is related to the intimacy and shared experiences of participants, this suggests that this aspect of conversational style might be a feature of any community that shares these features of intimacy, Aboriginal or not. This raises the question of whether tolerance for longer silences is a reflection of Aboriginal culture per se, or whether it is an adaptation of universal principles of interaction to a particular social contingency (Schegloff, 2006a; Levinson, 2006). If it is the former, then it remains to be explained why this aspect conversational style is so widespread across different kinds of Aboriginal communities, representing a range of cultural heritages and experiences of colonisation. The extent to which it is an adaptation of human social behaviour is best explored through an extensive comparative study of silences in a range of communities and a range of contexts. This is the subject of future research.

As a final point, it should be noted that the analysis presented here does not account for the use of longer silences in intercultural communication settings of the kind examined by Eades (2000; 2007). The results from our small corpus of intracultural non-institutional Aboriginal talk shows that when selected as a next speaker participants do take their turns in a timely manner, albeit slightly longer than has been observed in non-Aboriginal talk. This result would support the idea that inter-turn silences longer than about 1.5 seconds, in particular when a next speaker has not been selected, are normative practice for Aboriginal people, and

this may account for some of the communication problems faced in intercultural settings, such as courtrooms and classrooms.

Appendix: Transcription conventions and abbreviations

Our transcription maximally consists of four lines. The first line uses CA conventions for coding prosody, timing and overall phonetic shape (Schegloff 2006: 265). This is followed by a line which 'spells out' the lexical forms of Garrwa words, followed by a gloss line for Garrwa and Kriol words. English words are not indicated on the gloss line. The fourth line is a free translation, where required. The following abbreviations are used in glossing Garrwa and Kriol:

ABL – ablative

ALL – allative

BARRI – a discourse particle

CONJ - conjunction

DAT – dative

DEC – deceased person

DEM – demonstrative

EllenG – ergative

HAB – habitual

IMP - imperative

NA – a discourse particle

NEG – negative particle

PA – past tense

Q – question particle

SS – same subject (switch reference marker)

1sg – first person singular

2sg – second person singular

1plncl – first person plural inclusive

1plExcl – first person plural exclusive

3pl – third person plural

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Table 1: Jefferson's (1989:183) results

Data type	c. 1 sec : all longer silences	0.9-1.2 secs : 1.3-1.8 secs
Primary Run	951:328 (c. 3:1)	951:92 (c.10:1)
Timary Run	731.320 (c. 3.1))31.92 (C.10.1)
Intra-sentence silences	261:109 (c. 2.5:1)	261:67 (c. 4:1)
Group therapy sessions	88:42 (c.2:1)	88:20 (c. 4.5:1)
Dinner party	36:34 (c. 1:1)	36:18 (2:1)
Upholstery Shop	23:10 (c. 2:1)	23:7 (c.3:1)

Table 2: Our results

Data type	c. 1 sec : all longer silences	0.9-1.2 secs : 1.3-1.8 secs
Borroloola 1	32:54 (c. 1:1.7)	32:32 (1:1)
Borroloola 2	50:76 (c. 1:1.5)	50:39 (c.1.3:1)
Borroloola 3	32:60 (c. 1:2)	32:31 (c. 1:1)
Borroloola 4	8:43 (c. 1:5.4)	8:16 (1:2)
Porch	71:203 (c. 1:2.8)	71:91 (c. 1:1.3)
Total	193:436 (c. 1:2.25)	193:209 (c. 1:1.1)