

*Oh*-prefaced responses to assessments:  
a method of modifying agreement/disagreement

John Heritage, UCLA

(1) Introduction

I want to begin with a text from the "Parade" section of the LA Times of Sunday, January 25th, 1998. On the cover is a picture of a woman in full firefighting attire, backlit by flames and hosing water at a target that is out of the shot. Superimposed on the picture is a text that reads: "A firefighter, a jockey, a welder, a tobacco farmer, a boxer - these women's stories are as different as their professions, but they all have one sentiment in common: 'Oh, yes I can!'" A significant element of the 'sentiment' referred to here is one of rebuttal. This woman, the reader is led to infer, decided to be a firefighter, and was told that it is not a job for a woman. The picture with its caption conveys that she has driven back this attack, and overcome the opposition of nay-sayers. A substantial contribution to that understanding, I want to suggest, is made by the *oh*-preface to this quotation. "Oh, yes I can" conveys something different, in this case more oppositional, than just "Yes I can": it is this kind of difference that I am trying to reach in this paper.

It has long been recognized that turn-beginnings are a significant and strategic aspect of turn design (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974; Schegloff 1987a, 1996, Lerner 1996). As Schegloff (1987a) observes, turn beginnings often project the planned shape and trajectory of the remainder of the turn constructional unit to follow, thus providing hearers with resources for anticipating both what kind of action is under construction and also what it will take to be complete. Turn-beginnings are thus important resources both for the anticipation and organization of sequences of actions, and for the management of the turn-taking through which those sequences are implemented. Turn beginnings are also strategic sites because they are a prime location for the placement of sequential markers that convey some relation between what the current speaker is about to say and what the previous speaker has just said. Turn components like *well*, *uh*, *but*, *so*, *oh*, and others are all used in this way. For example, turn beginning is the standard position for "*well*," "*uh*," and other markers used to index a relationship of dispreference or disaffiliation between the position taken by a previous speaker and the position the current speaker is about to adopt (Pomerantz 1984a; Davidson 1984; Schiffrin 1987). Similarly prefacing a question with "and" is a resource for conveying that the question to follow is part of a continuing activity initiated previously (Heritage and Sorjonen 1994).

The particle "*oh*" is also used at turn beginnings to convey a stance towards what the previous speaker has said. When persons preface a second or responsive action with '*oh*', they are commonly understood to have acted in a fashion that problematizes the action to which they are responding. *Oh*-prefaced responses to questions, for instance, often embody a challenge to their relevance or appropriateness (Heritage 1998). In the following case taken from a radio talk show, Sir Harold Acton, a celebrated English aesthete, was interviewed by British broadcaster Russell Harty. The interview has turned to a discussion about the manners of the Chinese and some work that Acton was doing in Beijing - teaching modern poetry at Beijing University. Sir Harold Acton's reply to the question "Did you learn to speak Chinese" is *oh*-prefaced:

(1) [Chat Show:Russell Harty-Sir Harold Acton]  
 1 Act: ...h h h h and some of thuh- (0.3) some of my students  
 2 translated Eliot into Chine::se. I think thuh very  
 3 first.  
 4 (0.2)  
 5 Har: Did you learn to speak (.) Chine[:se.  
 6 Act: -> [.hh Oh yes.  
 7 (0.7)  
 8 Act: .h h h h You ca::n't live in thuh country without speaking  
 9 thuh lang[uage it's impossible .h h h h h=  
 10 Har: -> [Not no: cour:se

Here, given that Acton taught modern poetry and that his students were the first to translate T.S.Eliot's work, the interviewer's question is clearly vulnerable to the charge that it is questioning the obvious. Acton's responsive 'oh yes' manages to convey just that, treating it as evident that he would have learned the language. Subsequently both parties topicalise the self-evident nature of the point. Acton goes on to explain briefly why it was essential to learn the language to live in China (lines 8-9). And this explanation, in turn, is acknowledged by the interviewer (with "Not no: course" [line 10]) in a way that treats the answer to his question as, after all, having been quite self-evident (Heritage, 1998).

As I have argued elsewhere, this process of challenging the relevance or appropriateness of a question by *oh*-prefacing the response exploits the 'change-of-state' meaning of '*oh*' (Heritage 1984) to indicate that the question has occasioned a marked shift of attention. In the case of questions, conveying a marked shift of this kind can imply that a question was inapposite and, hence, that the respondent is experiencing difficulties with the question's relevance, appropriateness, or presuppositions. In this way, a respondent can challenge or resist the relevance of a question, and the course of action that the question may be implementing.

An important feature of this practice is that, through it, the respondent can convey that their own point of view is the basic framework from which the issue is to be considered, and do so inexplicitly yet insistently (Heritage 1998:291-6). In treating their own point of view as the perspective from which some matter should be considered, *oh*-prefacing respondents index (and reaffirm) a claim of epistemic authority over their questioners. This is a theme that will resurface in this analysis of *oh*-prefaced agreement and disagreement.

## (2) Oh-prefaced Agreements: Epistemic Independence

In analyzing *oh*-prefaced agreements, we can begin by distinguishing two kinds of agreements. First, there are agreements in contexts where persons have had a joint experience of some kind. Here each person knows that the other has rights, grounded in experience, to assess the object in question (Pomerantz (1984a):

(2) [JS:II:41]  
 1 J: T's- tsuh beautiful day out isn't it?  
 2 L: -> Yeh it's jus' gorgeous ...

(3) [VIYMC:1:2] ((J and R are in a rowboat on a lake))

- 1 J: It's really a clear lake, isn't it?  
2 R: -> It's wonderful.

(4) [SBL:2:2:3:46]

- 1 B: Well, it was fun Cla[ire,  
2 A: -> [Yeah, I enjoyed every minute of it.

In these contexts, agreeing second assessments of the experience are ordinarily produced as simple upgraded agreements, or as upgraded agreements prefaced with 'yes' (Pomerantz 1984a). These second assessments convey that the second speaker's agreement is grounded in a newly articulated common experience, which is reconfirmed in a common judgement in the 'here and now.'

Something rather different appears to be going on in the case of *oh*-prefaced second assessments. In the following case, for example, Gay is giving Jeremy a German telephone number. After she has given eleven digits of the number, thus exceeding the norm (during the 1980s) for a (British) intra-country call, Jeremy comments (line 13) on the length of the number, prefacing his comment with "Gosh", an expression which indicates that, for him, this is something new, notable or surprising. Here Gay could have responded with a simple agreement which, as in (2)-(4) above, would have conveyed that her agreement was grounded in the 'here and now' common experience of an interminable telephone number. Instead, her *oh*-prefaced response - "Oh it doe:s" - treats his remark as reviving an earlier observation of the same type that she had made independently of this occasion, and she thereby conveys that, in contrast to Jeremy, she finds it unsurprising.<sup>1</sup> By this means she also manages to indicate that she is an 'old hand' at phoning abroad.

(5) [Heritage:0I:7:3]

- 1 Gay: So the number is (0.2) oh: one oh:.  
2 Jer: Oh one oh:,  
3 (1.0)  
4 Jer: Yeup,  
5 Gay: Four ni:ne,  
6 (0.5)  
7 Jer: Ri:ght?  
8 Gay: Sev'n three,u-six o:ne?hh  
9 (0.6)  
10 Jer: Sev'n three: six o:ne?  
11 (0.3)  
12 Gay: Ei:ght ni:ne,  
13 Jer: -> 'Gosh' it goe:s (.) goes on'n on  
14 Gay: -> Oh it doe:s Germany doe:s.

It may also be noticed that Gay adds a turn component that appears designed to further suggest her expertise about foreign telephone calls. Her post-positioned "adjusting" component ("Germany doe:s.") recalibrates the referent of her response from this particular telephone number to German telephone numbers in general, and also works to convey a degree of prior knowledge on the topic. Moreover, with its hint of a further contrast with telephone numbers in other foreign countries, it implies a still

broader expertise in the matter of placing telephone calls abroad. Shortly afterwards, Gay underscores her expertise, informing Jeremy that the 'ringing' sound on a German phone sounds like a 'busy' signal on a British phone (data not shown).

In (5) the *oh*-prefaced second assessment conveys that the observation being agreed to had already been independently arrived at by the agreeing party on an earlier occasion, and this in turn was used to suggest the agreeing speaker's greater expertise on the topic at hand. In (6) *oh*-prefacing is again used to convey that the opinion being agreed with was formed earlier and on the basis of independent experience of the referent event. However, in contrast to (5), there is no indication of particular expertise on the matter under discussion. Here two Orange County women are talking approximately one week after the assassination of Robert Kennedy in Los Angeles in 1968. Here, the matter on which they agree is not something of which the speakers have a directly shared experience, but rather something which, by virtue of the public media, they have experienced separately but in common:

(6) [NB II:2:R:2]

- 1 Emm: THE:Y gosh uh this is really been a wee:k ha:sn'it?=  
 2 Nan: -> =Oh:: it rilly ha:s. ((sadly))  
 3 Emm: I[t's r i h]  
 4 Nan: [Gee it ri:lly, it rilly ha:[s.  
 5 Emm: [Ah won't ev'n turn the  
 6 tee vee o:n,h

In this example, Emma's assessment of "the week" evidently invokes the assassination event and its aftermath in southern California.<sup>2</sup> Nancy's *oh*-prefaced response, like Gay's in (5), indicates that she has separate and independent access to the assassination and its aftermath which Emma alluded to, and moreover that she has separately and independently arrived at the same conclusion as Emma.

Given that Nancy could have responded with the kind of simple, or *yes*-prefaced agreement that is otherwise commonplace, what is at stake in this marked indexing of epistemic independence? In assessing objects or states of affairs, there are differences between going first and going second. Specifically:

(i) A first assessment can index or embody a first speaker's claim to what might be termed 'epistemic authority' about an issue relative to a second, or to 'know better' about it, or to have some priority in rights to evaluate it. While this may mean little and be readily acquiesced to in the matter of the weather or the quality of lake water (e.g., (2) and (3) above), it may be resisted in the matter of a grandchild (e.g., (18) and (19) below), or the attractions of one's birthplace (e.g., (7)).<sup>3</sup>

(ii) Moreover a first assessment establishes a context in which a second can be found to agree or disagree. In such a context, respondents may be vulnerable to the inference that their response is fabricated on the instant to achieve agreement or disagreement, and is thus a dependent or even a coerced action within a field of constraint that is established by the first.

(iii) These issues can be compounded by the context of the assessment. The priority relationship between a first and second assessment may be less significant in contexts where the parties are joint experiencers of a state of affairs (e.g., the weather and lake

water above). However where a state of affairs is separately experienced or known by the parties, going first can have a greater impact in implicitly establishing superior access, expertise, authority and rights to assess the matter in question, if only because the relative access and expertise of the parties to the state of affairs may remain to be negotiated.

Where, out of these and related considerations, a second speaker wishes to convey that they have previously and independently formed the same view or opinion as the first speaker, *oh*-prefacing is a resource with which to achieve this objective. *Oh*-prefaced second assessments, in short, embody a declaration of epistemic independence. Returning to (6), the *oh*-prefacing of Nancy's agreement markedly indexes her independent access (via media coverage) to the week's sad events. And it also carries the implied claim that her agreement is based on an judgement that, rather than being constructed in immediate response to Emma's assessment, was formed earlier and in independence from it.

In summary: this paper argues that *oh*-prefacing both agreements and disagreements to assessments, thus conveying a 'change of state of orientation' in response to them, is a systematic way of indicating that a speaker has independent access to, and already holds a position on, the matter at issue. The baseline claim conveyed in an *oh*-prefaced (dis)agreement is one of epistemic independence: in this way, the second speaker conveys that the opinion which follows the *oh*-preface is independent of the 'here and now' of current experience and the prior speaker's evaluation. *Oh*-prefacing may achieve this outcome through a 'change of state semantics' which conveys that the first assessment has occasioned a review, recollection and renewal of the speaker's previous experience and judgement, and that it is this that forms the basis for the second assessment. As in responses to questions, *oh*-prefacing conveys that the speaker's own experience is the basis for the evaluation that follows. This baseline claim of epistemic independence is often associated with, and a resource for conveying, superior knowledge of, and/or rights to assess, the matter under discussion.

To demonstrate this phenomenon of epistemic independence, we begin with cases where the agreeing respondent has separate but equivalent access to the phenomenon being assessed, and equivalent rights to know or evaluate it. Subsequently, we will move to cases where the second speaker has a priori epistemic authority in relation to the assessed state of affairs, i.e., primary or privileged access to it, and/or primary or privileged rights to evaluate it.

The data for this paper are drawn from a large number of American and British telephone calls. There are no discernable differences in the deployment of this practice between British and American English.

## (2) (i) Equivalent but Independent Access

In this first set of cases, *oh*-prefacing is used to invoke the independent basis of an agreement when 'going second' on a matter of common knowledge. For example, in (7) Robbie and Lesley, two British teachers connected through a class that Lesley once taught and that Robbie now has charge of, have found, unexpectedly, that they have common origins and family connections in the county of Kent. At this point, the conversation turns to the attractions of their home county which, it transpires, both visit fairly regularly:

(7) [Holt 5/88:1:5:21]

1 Rob: Well that's ri:ght I mean: uh .hhh you know this is the  
 2 thing we: miss the trees eh- yu- exactly the same as  
 3 you[:  
 4 Les: [eYes:.=  
 5 Rob: =An'[you don't realize until you go u:p just how many=  
 6 Les: [Yes  
 7 Rob: =trees there are [( sti[ll if if] the:y)[  
 8 Les: [.hhh [n No :.] [Specially in  
 9 the  
 10 Wea:l:d it['s lovely. .hh[hhhh]h=  
 11 Rob: -> [ Oh- yes [Yes  
 12 Les: =The Wea:ld I lo:ve:: sti:ll.=  
 13 Rob: -> =Oh:: lovely. You (never) use to go to a pub called  
 14 the Wheatsheaf, up at Ide Hill did you?

At line 1, Robbie agrees with an earlier observation of Lesley's by remarking on the number of trees there "still" are in Kent, to which Lesley appends "Specially in the Wea:l:d" (a notably beautiful part of Kent). This remark attracts an *oh*-prefaced agreement from Robbie (line 10). Here Lesley's remark, with its increase in specificity over Robbie's earlier comment about the trees, 'ups the ante' on a point that Robbie had already made. Robbie's *oh*-prefaced response, while evidently agreeing, limits this process, formulating her agreement about the Weald as grounded in independent experience and judgment. Robbie responds in a similar way to Lesley's (line 11) subsequent, more general, of the Weald. Here, Lesley's left-dislocated turn is designed to be heard as a new 'first action,' partially disengaged from the prior sequence, and re-establishing her previous assessment of the Weald as an action to be addressed. Robbie's *oh*-prefaced response, embodies the independence of her own judgment in the matter, but again limits Lesley's effort to extend the topic with a brief and dismissive response.<sup>4</sup> In this example, involving two persons with independent experience of their native county, and equal rights to assess it, the agreeing second speaker *oh*-prefaces her agreements to convey their grounding in independent experience. In this way, she invokes an equality of experience with the one who took the lead in the matter.

A similar process seems to be at work in the following sequence. Here two women are discussing a neighborhood dog:

(8) [MC:1]

1 A: They keep 'im awful nice somehow  
 2 B: -> Oh yeah I think she must wash 'im every [week  
 3 A: [God-she  
 4 must (h) wash 'im every day the way he looks [to me  
 5 B: [I know it

Here neither woman owns the dog, but each of them has equal rights to assess it as an 'independent observer' in the neighborhood. Here B's *oh*-prefaced agreement is offered as based in independent experience and judgment: an independence of perspective which she goes on to support with her observation about how frequently the dog must be washed.

Finally, in a conversation that almost exactly parallels (6), Emma discusses the Kennedy tragedy and its aftermath with another co-participant.<sup>5</sup> Although she claims (in both calls) not to have followed the television coverage of the events, it transpires a little later that she did watch the ceremony in which Kennedy's body was loaded on to a plane for transportation to the East Coast, and that she has a connection with that particular location - she took a chartered flight to Honolulu from the same airfield. In (9), she makes an effort to introduce this information:

(9) [NB II:1:R:2}  
 1 Emm: That's where we took off. The exact spot. on that  
 2 chartered flight.  
 3 (0.4)  
 4 Lot: Oh.=  
 5 Emm: =where the plane came in. I jst watched that but  
 6 (0.3)  
 7 Emm: [hhh  
 8 Lot: -> [Uh I wouldn't ev'n turn it on I [mean I]: js .t.hhh  
 9 Emm: [Uh-uh ]  
 10 Lot: -> Iss too depress[sing.]  
 11 Emm: -> [Oh:::]:: it is terr:uhble =What's new.  
 12 Lot: Gee nothing Emma ...(continues)

However, as it turns out, Lottie did not watch the event and justifies this with the observation that it is "too depressing" (line 10). Faced with the failure of her effort to move the conversation towards her own small connection with the assassination events, Emma is reduced to an *oh*-prefaced agreement which renews her earlier stated position on the assassination. Here the *oh*-preface-carried claim of her independence in that viewpoint may help to mask the sense that she is "merely agreeing" with her co-participant in the aftermath of a failed topic launch.<sup>6</sup> In any case, the *oh*-prefaced agreement is here used preparatory to an abrupt topic-shift, implemented with at line 11 with "What's new." (see also example 7, line 12, and note 3).

Of course, not every second assessment that is based on separate and independent experience is *oh*-prefaced. In the following case, two neighbors - Emma and Margy - are discussing an associate of Margy's husband who is also known, albeit peripherally, by Emma and her husband. After some talk about the associate's business dealings, the following sequence occurs:

(10) [NB:VII:7]  
 1 Mar: B'd isn't it funny Emma how that's all c'nnected  
 2 t'gether? [.hh  
 3 Emm: ['S that terr:ifih=  
 4 Emm: -> =YEAH BECUZ yihknow he's a goodlooking fel'n eez got a  
 5 -> beautiful wife.=  
 6 Mar: -> =Ye:s::. Go:rgeous girl-.hh-.hhh e-We:ll see he'n Larry'v  
 7 been friends fer a long ti:me.=

Here, even though Margy evidently has independent experience of the associate and his wife, her agreement is not *oh*-prefaced. Indeed, (10) and similar cases like it are particularly significant because, although her assessment is in second position, Margy

has a closer relationship with the individual referred to and his wife, and thus arguably stronger rights to assess them. As is shown below, *oh*-prefaced responses to assessments cluster in contexts where the second speaker has epistemic authority in relation to the matter being assessed relative to the first speaker. Thus cases like (10), where a second speaker has the 'prior and independent access' necessary to assess the referent but does not index it, underscore that *oh*-prefacing in the case of agreements is a practice that markedly and optionally conveys an epistemic position.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, *oh*-prefacing in the context of agreements is a method persons use to index the independence of their access and/or judgement in relation to the state of affairs under evaluation. Sometimes, as in (8), the *oh* prefaces turn-components which add further independent contributions to the matter at hand, in others ((7) and (9)), they do not. Thus the basic claim here is that *oh*-prefacing, in and of itself, indexes epistemic independence: an independence which may or may not be elaborated by other elements of the turn that follows. This indexing is inexplicit, marked and optional.

(2) (ii) 'Epistemic Authority' in Access to and/or Rights to Assess the Referent

*Oh*-prefaced agreements are common in environments where the second, *oh*-prefacing speaker has primary access to the state of affairs being assessed, and/or primary rights to assess it. In this context, *oh*-prefacing continues to index 'independent access' to the referent, but it may often be additionally understood to index the epistemic authority of the second speaker.

In the following instance, for example, two dog breeders - Norman and Ilene - have been talking about the readiness of one of Norman's younger dogs to have a first litter. At line 9, Ilene ventures a comment about one of Norman's other dogs (Trixie), who apparently began breeding at a young age:

(11) [Heritage 1:11:4]  
 1 Ile: No well she's still a bit young though isn't [she<ah me]an:=  
 2 Nor: [S h e : : ]  
 3 Ile: =uh[:  
 4 Nor: [She wz a year: la:st wee:k.  
 5 Ile: Ah yes. Oh well any time no:w [then.]  
 6 Nor: [Uh:::]:[m  
 7 Ile: [Ye:s.=  
 8 Nor: =But she[:'s ( )]  
 9 Ile: -> [Cuz Trixie started] so early [didn't sh[e,  
 10 Nor: -> ['o h : : [ye:s.'=  
 11 Ile: ='Ye:h'='

Here Norman's *oh*-prefaced agreement (line 10), in conveying the independence of his assessment from Ilene's, also alludes to his epistemic priority with respect to the information in question. At the same moment, Ilene's tag question (line 9) downgrades the epistemic strength of what would otherwise be a flat assertion.

In (11), the epistemic priority of the second, *oh*-prefacing speaker is available from the topic and context of the interaction, and inexplicitly indexed in the talk. In the following cases, the priority between first and second assessor is directly established in the sequence prior to the *oh*-prefaced second assessment. In (12) Jon and Lyn are talking to Eve, Jon's mother. After Jon's announcement about going to the

movie "Midnight Cowboy," Lyn asks Eve if she has seen it. She replies that she did not and goes on to account for this by reference to a friend, 'Rae', who reportedly said that the film 'depressed her terribly' (lines 5/7):

(12) [JS:II:61]

1 Jon: We saw Midnight Cowboy yesterday -or [suh- Friday.  
 2 Eve: [Oh?  
 3 Lyn: Didju s- you saw that, [it's really good.  
 4 Eve: [No I haven't seen it  
 5 -> Rae [sed it 'n she said she f- depressed her  
 6 ( ): [( )  
 7 Eve: -> ter[ribly  
 8 Jon: -> [Oh it's [terribly depressing.  
 9 Lyn: -> [Oh it's depressing.

Here both Jon and Lyn agree with Eve's friend's opinion, but both their agreeing assessments are *oh*-prefaced, thus indexing the independence of their access to the movie, and in this context that, relative to Eve, they have epistemic priority: direct, rather than indirect, access to the movie.

A similar gradation of access to a referent is apparent in (13), which comes from a dinner party in which Shane and Vivian are hosts to Michael and Nancy. The conversation turns to a neighbor who is quite well known to the hosts, but not to the guests. Shane makes a number of disparaging remarks about the man, characterizing him as an "asshole" and attracting a protest from Vivian, who is rather less critical, that the guests have not yet met him. When it transpires that the guests have in fact met him briefly in the past, Shane revises his assessment (at line 1): "Nuh eez a nice guy 'eez j's sorta dumb". Whereupon the following sequence ensues:

(13) [Chicken Dinner:10]

1 Sha: Nuh eez a nice guy eez[j's s[orta dumb. ]  
 2 Mic: [( [ ) ]  
 3 Nan: [I've talk'to]'m on the  
 4 pho[ne.  
 5 Mi?: [(Yeah)  
 6 (0.4)  
 7 Sha: ( [ )].  
 8 Viv: [Oh when you were over he wz ho:me?  
 9 Mic: Hm-hm?  
 10 (1.0)  
 11 Viv: So wuddiyou thi:nk.  
 12 (2.2)  
 13 Sh?: pwehh 'hh  
 14 Mic: I'on'know I couldn' (1.4) I din'rilly git tih  
 15 talk to'm that much uh- I can't say.  
 16 (1.2)  
 17 Viv: hHuh. (Yuh lucky.)  
 18 (0.9)  
 19 Mic: 'I can't say.'  
 20 (3.2)  
 21 Mic: -> He seem'like a nice guy-

22 Sha: (Naw) he is.  
 23 (0.6)  
 24 Sha: He's [a nice [guy  
 25 Vi?: [(t) [  
 26 Viv: -> [Oh he's a nice gu:y.

Invited by Vivian's "So wuddiyou thi:nk." (line 11), Michael's eventual assessment at line 21 is epistemically downgraded with "He seem", and this is itself preceded by statements (lines 14-15, 19) in which Michael accounts for his unwillingness to assess the neighbor by reference to his lack of knowledge of him. Though hedged, this assessment hearably disagrees with Shane's position and agrees with Vivian's.<sup>8</sup> The assessment attracts responses from both of them. Shane agrees with Michael (lines 22/24), further backing away from his earlier critical position. Vivian's agreement is *oh*-prefaced. Here although both parties clearly have epistemic priority, Vivian, who has taken a consistently more pro-neighbor position *oh*-prefaces her agreement, while Shane (the previously anti-neighbor participant) may be inhibited from an *oh*-prefacing ("knowing better") stance by the inconsistency of the position he is taking relative to his earlier pronouncements.

And in (14) there is also a gradation of access, this time in relation to the qualities of Burmese cats:

(14) [TCIIA:1]  
 1 Abe: Well I had this- (1.2) beautiful Siamese fer years yihknow.  
 2 (en) [I'm (j's a li'l)- unhappyy when 'e wuh- when 'e::  
 3 Ben: [M-  
 4 Abe: had t'be put awa:y tihday, .hh acquired a Bu:rmese.=  
 5 =D'yihknow what that breed [is?  
 6 Ben: [Oh yes indee:d uh we had a  
 7 nighbor thet had a couple a' Burmese.  
 8 (.)  
 9 Ben: They're ni:ce.  
 10 Abe: -> Oh:: it's a great cat. It's the- only cat I ever saw thet  
 11 chased do:gs.  
 12 (0.2)  
 13 Ben: [ehh hu[hh huhh ]  
 14 Abe: [(Hadda)[go out'n r]escue a dog thet wz eight times bigger'n  
 15 he wz th's[morning.  
 16 Ben: [e- .hhhhh Hurra::y fer the Burme:se.  
 17 Abe: e-huh-huh-[heh-[heh-he:h,]  
 18 Ben: [F:::[ight'n fo]o:ls.  
 19 (0.2)  
 20 Abe: Pard'n,  
 21 (0.3)  
 22 Ben: .hhh They're fight'n fools those Burmese,  
 23 Abe: -> Oh I know 'e is.

This sequence begins with Abe's report of his acquisition of a Burmese cat, and his query as to whether his co-interactant (Ben) knows "what that breed is". As it turns out Ben does know about Burmese cats, but indirectly through a neighbor, and he ventures

an assessment "They're nice." (line 9). Abe responds with a strongly upgraded assessment, which also includes an *oh*-preface indexing independent judgment and, in this context, invoking his epistemic authority as a Burmese cat owner. Subsequently, Abe elaborates his assessment with an account of the fighting abilities of Burmese, and offers an event occurring that very morning and involving his own cat as evidence for this (lines 14-15).<sup>9</sup>

A second sequence culminating in a second *oh*-prefaced second assessment is launched with Ben's "Hurra:y fer the Burme:se." and his assessment of them as 'fighting fools.'. This latter, post-positioned, assessment is produced in overlap with Abe's laughter, and Abe solicits its repetition at line 20. Thus Ben finds himself producing a sequentially detached assessment of Burmese cats as a new 'first action' at line 22.<sup>10</sup> In response, Abe launches a second *oh*-prefaced agreement, involving a shift in reference from Burmese cats in general to his own cat. Here both the *oh*-preface and the emphasis on the word "know" upgrade the strength of his assertion, and convey his claim of epistemic authority in the matter.

In cases (11)-(14), the speaker who had rights to know better than the other, asserted those rights with *oh*-prefaced second assessments against the implied priority claims of first assessments. However, more problematic issues may be at stake than sheer epistemic priority. In the following case, extensively discussed in Schegloff (1997), Marsha and Tony are the separated parents of the teenaged Joey, who was scheduled to drive home to his father in Northern California on the day of this call. Tony, the father, has called to find out when Joey left, only to be informed that Joey is flying home on standby because the soft top of his sports car was stolen, and driving north without the top on his car would be too cold. At this point, Tony renews an earlier inquiry about the fate of the car:

- (15) [MTRAC 60 1-2 Stolen]
- 1 Tony: W't's 'e g'nna do go down en pick it up later? er  
 2 somethin like ( ) [well that's aw]:ful
- 3 Marsha: [H i s friend ]
- 4 Marsha: Yeh h[is friend Stee- ]
- 5 Tony: [That really makes] me ma:d,  
 6 (0.2)
- 7 Marsha: -> 'hhh Oh it's disgusti[ng ez a matter a'f]a:ct.
- 8 Tony: [Po o r J o e y ,]
- 9 Marsha: I- I, I told my ki:ds. who do this: down et the Drug  
 10 Coalition ah want th'to:p back.h 'hhhhhhhhh ((1.0))  
 11 SEND OUT the WQ:RD.hhh hnh  
 12 (0.2)
- 13 Tony: Yeah.
- 14 Marsha: 'hhh Bu:t u-hu:ghh his friend Steeve en Brian er driving  
 15 up. Right after:: (0.2) school is out.En then hi'll  
 16 drive do:wn here with the:m.  
 17 Tony: Oh I see.

Tony's inquiry (lines 1-2), as Schegloff notes, takes the form of a question + candidate response, and Marsha makes two attempts to respond with a description of a plan for Joey to return later with his friends to pick the car up (lines 3 and 4), finally succeeding in its articulation much later at lines 14-16. Marsha's attempt to describe the plan is derailed by Tony's assessments of his son's misfortune at lines 2 and 5.

Tony positions the first of these assessments as an immediate follow-on from the completion of his inquiry at line 2, and in overlap with Marsha's first attempt to respond to it. Marsha abandons her response, and restarts it with a minimal agreement ('Yeh') at line 4, before proceeding with a recognizable re-initiation of her previous response to his question. Immediately after her agreement, Tony pursues the issue with an upgrade "That really makes me ma:d," (line 5). It is to this pursuit that Marsha responds with an oh-prefaced agreeing second assessment, embodying an upgrade (from Tony's "mad" to her "disgusting").

A number of observations can be made about this assessment and its context. First, although she is the one with first hand access to the event, this is the first explicit evaluation of Joey's misfortune that Marsha has offered.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, second, she produces this assessment having responded with the most 'pallid' (Schegloff 1997) of agreements ('Yeh') to her husband's first assessment at line 2. Thus, third, as Schegloff notes, her assessment at line 7 is vulnerable to the "suspicion that it has been coerced by Tony's interruptive upgrade of his prior assessment in reaction to Marsha's tepid agreement; that Marsha is just going along, saying what is necessary" (ibid.). In this context, Marsha does three things to defeat this suspicion. She completes her first unit of talk with "as a matter of fact" which, as Schegloff again notes, is a resource for claiming that what is said "is so, and is said, independent of local interactional grounds for saying it" (ibid). Second, she follows this with an account describing her expression of that reaction on an earlier occasion to the kids at the "Drug Coalition." The third practice she deploys is the prefacing of her responsive assessment with *oh*, through which she conveys that, 'of course,' she had 'previously and independently' arrived at this upgraded evaluation of this unfortunate state of affairs.

Here then Marsha, the one with the firsthand experience of the robbery and its impact on her son, was not the first to evaluate the event. But, caught in a persistent and upgraded flurry of assessments by her ex-husband, she was obliged to work hard to provide for the fact that her eventual responsive assessment was not simply a coerced response, from someone who might otherwise be characterized as insufficiently concerned about her son's predicament. *Oh*-prefacing her agreement to convey its epistemic independence from her ex-husband's position was the first of the resources she deployed to that end.

## (2) (iii) Epistemic Authority and the "Agree + Disagree" Format

In a significant number of cases where *oh*-prefaced agreeing turns involve the second speaker's epistemic priority in the matter being assessed, these turns also involve some qualification or disagreement. For example, in the following case, Robbie has recently taken over an elementary school class that Lesley was previously teaching. Here, in a conversation in which Robbie seeks, and gets, reassurance about various aspects of teaching the class from Lesley, her generalized assessment of the children also encounters an *oh*-prefaced agreement. Once again, the *oh*-prefacing conveys that Lesley's opinion was arrived at prior to, and independently, from Robbie's and, in this context, reinforces the epistemic priority on the matter that Robbie recurrently attributes to Lesley across the course of a lengthy conversation:

- (16) [Holt 5/88:1:5:4]
- 1 Rob: Oh I'm such a so: gla:d t'have a chat with you cz I do  
 2 want t' know'n I'm en jo:ying it 'n the children'r love[ly].  
 3 Les: [ .tch  
 4 Les: -> Oh yes.=They are lovely:: i[h if a little ex citeable.  
 5 Rob: [( )  
 6 Rob: Th[a:t's w't I thought. I've thir ty in that roo- I=  
 7 Les: [Hm :.  
 8 Rob: =do:. sympa thize with you.

However, in addition, Lesley modifies her agreement that the children are 'lovely' with the qualification "if a little ex citeable.". Robbie then takes up this shift in the subsequent talk (lines 6/8). In this sequence, we can see an additional motivation for *oh*-prefacing a second assessment. The *oh*-preface indexes an 'independent' and 'decided' perspective which, in turn, invokes Lesley's epistemic authority in the matter of the children. That epistemic authority is then mobilised as part of a turn which ends in Lesley's qualification of Robbie's enthusiasm for the class, and Robbie's acquiescence in that qualification.

In (12), this mobilization of *oh*-prefacing as part of an [agree + disagree] response format (Pomerantz 1984a) is still more overt: both *oh*-preface producers go on to modify their positions in relation to Eve's friend's reported position:

- (12) [JS:II:61]
- 1 Jon: We saw Midnight Cowboy yesterday -or [suh- Friday.  
 2 Eve: [Oh?  
 3 Lyn: Didju s- you saw that, [it's really good.  
 4 Eve: [No I haven't seen it  
 5 Rae [sed it 'n she said she f- depressed her  
 6 (): [( )  
 7 Eve: ter[ribly  
 8 Jon: -> [Oh it's [terribly depressing.  
 9 Lyn: -> [Oh it's depressing.  
 10 Eve: Ve[ry  
 11 Lyn: -> [But it's a fantastic [film.  
 12 Jon: -> [It's a beautiful movie.

In (13), Vivian's positive assessment of the neighbour is subsequently qualified, albeit at a slight distance, with an addition (lines 30-1) in which Vivian re-positions herself closer to Shane's earlier stated position that the neighbor is "sorta dumb." (line 1):

(13) [Chicken Dinner: 9 (extension)]  
 1 Sha: Nuh eez a nice guy eez[j's s[orta dumb. ]  
 2 Mic: [( [ ) ]  
 3 Nan: [I've talk'to]'m on the  
 4 pho[ne.  
 5 Mi?: [(Yeah)  
 6 (0.4)  
 7 Sha: ( [ )].  
 8 Viv: [Oh when you were over he wz ho:me?  
 9 Mic: Hm-hm?  
 10 (1.0)  
 11 Viv: So wuddiyou thi:nk.  
 12 (2.2)  
 13 Sh?: pwehh 'hh  
 14 Mic: I'on'know I couldn' (1.4) I din'rilly git tih talk to'm  
 15 that much uh- I can't say.  
 16 (1.2)  
 17 Viv: hHuh. (Yuh lucky.)  
 18 (0.9)  
 19 Mic: 'I can't say.'  
 20 (3.2)  
 21 Mic: -> He seem'like a nice guy-  
 22 Sha: (Naw) he is.  
 23 (0.6)  
 24 Sha: He's [a nice [guy  
 25 Vi?: [(.) [ ]  
 26 Viv: -> [Oh he's a nice gu:y.  
 27 (0.3)  
 28 Sha: I rib um a lot.  
 29 (2.7)  
 30 Viv: -> But- when- That's the: prob'm when yih try tih carry  
 31 -> on a conversation with im

And in the second example in (14), having agreed that his cat is a "fighting fool," Abe shifts to a strong claim about the affectionate nature of his cat:

(14) [TCIIA:1:detail]  
 1 Ben: .hhh They're fight'n fools those Burmese,  
 2 Abe: -> Oh I know 'e is. But yet eez the most affectionate  
 3 thing I ever saw.

In these cases of *oh*-prefaced [agreement + disagreement], it is noticeable that the *oh*-prefaced agreement incorporates the same descriptive terminology that was employed in the first assessment, albeit qualified by the *oh*-prefaced indication of epistemic independence or authority. These *oh*-prefaced repetitions are then recurrently followed by disagreement components. In these cases, the *oh*-prefaced repetitions are the clear harbinger of subsequent disagreement components, and are designed to index an epistemically authoritative position ancillary to the project of (re-)positioning the speaker as in modified agreement or disagreement with the first speaker.<sup>12</sup>

2 (iv) Disagreement within Agreement: Further Refinements

Since 'oh' can convey the epistemic independence of a second speaker's assessment from a first, *oh*-prefacing can be part of a process of competitive agreement in which each party, while agreeing with the other, invokes the priority of their own experience as the standpoint from which their evaluation is made. In such cases, the affiliation that is normally associated with agreement is marred by a form of ego-centered epistemic struggling between the participants. (17) is a simple case of this phenomenon. This sequence occurs close to the opening of the phone call: Lottie is just back from a trip to the Palm Springs area:

(17) [NB IV.10.R:1]

1 Emm: .h How wz yer tri:p.  
 2 Lot: Oh:: Go:d wonderful Emm[a,  
 3 Emm: [Oh idn'it beautiful do:wn theire,  
 4 Lot: -> Oh:: Jeeziz ih wz go:rgeous::.  
 5 Emm: Wh't a ni:ce wut time'djih git i:n. Jst a li'l whal ago?

Here Emma's (line 3) response, itself indexing 'independent access' to the 'Palm Springs experience' and a degree of separation from the experiential basis of Lottie's report, is met with a response whose *oh*-preface is part of turn that insists (with the past tense) on Lottie's own immediate experience as the basis for the assessment.<sup>13</sup> Here, as Goodwin and Goodwin (1987) have noted in their work on assessments, the contrast between the tenses used by the two speakers marks two distinct stances towards the item being assessed: Lottie, the speaker with the news, uses the past tense to index a specific experience on which her assessment is based, Emma uses the present tense to index a more generalized stance towards the location.<sup>14</sup>

(18) and (19) are more complex and embattled cases. The context of this conversation is as follows. Vera's married son and grandchildren have been visiting for a day or so. When they arrived at Vera's house, after a long-distance car drive, a note on her door directed them to her neighbor Jenny where they had a cup of tea and waited for Vera to return. Now the family has gone home, and Vera and Jenny are discussing the visit. In (18), Vera responds to Jenny's assessment of the children as "go:rgiss" with a specifically behavioral assessment: the children were "ez good ez go:ld," - a shift in tack which she warrants by adding that she had heard "such bad repo:rts.about them." Jenny's response to this assessment is *oh*-prefaced and (i) agrees with Vera's assessment, (ii) disagrees with the 'bad reports,' and (iii) indexes her independent access to the referent - the children's good behavior in her home - as the basis for her position:

(18) [Rahman 14:2]

1 Jen: An' they look so well.the chilreh theh go:rg[iss aren't they ]  
 2 Ver: [D'you know theh-]  
 3 Ver: -> He wz- they w'rr ez good ez go:ld,  
 4 (. )  
 5 Jen: Yes:::  
 6 Ver: -> [Yihknow ah'v hehrd such bad repo:rts.about them.  
 7 Jen: -> Oh:: they w'sm[ashi:ng. ]  
 8 Ver: -> [Ah: : ::n]d eh- they w'good here they  
 9 pla:yed yihkno:w,

Now Jenny evidently designs this turn both to agree with Vera, and to maximize her disagreement with the 'bad reports' which Vera had mentioned (see the section on disagreements, and the discussion of (26) below). But the *oh*-preface nonetheless conveys Jenny's independent access to the behavior of the children (who visited her house), and this is confirmed by the "w" in "they w'smashi:ng" which unambiguously bases the assessment on her personal experience of the children's visit.<sup>15</sup> Here then the

*oh*-preface contributes to Jenny's claimed right to independently assess children whose conduct Vera, as the grandmother, would ordinarily have exclusive rights to evaluate. Significantly, at line 8 Vera abandons an and-projected continuation of her talk at line 6, in favor of mobilizing what we can term a counter-agreement that explicitly asserts (with 'here') her own home as the epistemic basis for her claims. This strongly suggests that, in the face of Jenny's *oh*-prefaced assessment, the task of asserting her epistemic rights in the matter of assessing the grandchildren's conduct has assumed a real priority for Vera. Here the *oh*-preface carried claim of epistemic independence has become a source of friction in a sequence otherwise designed to achieve maximal agreement and affiliation.

A similar order of activity seems to be going on in (19), which is taken from the same conversation and occurred just after (18). Vera's assessment of the older grandchild, James, culminates in her assertion that he "was mischeevous but he was good" (line 7). This is met with an upgraded agreement from Jenny (line 8) which is *oh*-prefaced:<sup>16</sup>

- (19) [Rahman 14:2]
- 1 Jen: [Yeh James's a little] divil ihhh ^heh heh
- 2 Ver: [That-
- 3 Jen: [.huh .hh[h He:-
- 4 Ver: [James is a little bugger [isn'e.
- 5 Jen: [Yeh- Yeah=
- 6 Jen: =[ ( ) evrythi]ng.
- 7 Ver: -> =[Mindju eez good] Jenny, 'e wz mischeevous but w-'e wz
- 8 good.
- 9 Jen: -> Oo 'e wz beautiful here [wuuz n't'ee.=
- 10 Ver: [ Yes.
- 11 Jen: ='E[wz very well be[he:ved.
- 12 Ver: -> [ Yes. ['E wz well behaved he:uh [too:.
- 13 Jen: [Ye:s they're
- 14 luvly little boy:s.
- 15 Ver: Ye:is,

This is a very complicated sequence. At its beginning both speakers have picked out "James" as the naughtier of the two grandchildren using quite extreme terms (lines 1 and 4) that encompass the character of the child as well as his behavior.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently Vera, the grandmother, revises her position, describing James as "good," and then explicitly referencing his behavior with the qualified claim that "'e wz mischeevous but w-'e wz good.". It is now Jenny's turn to revise her earlier observation that James is "a little divil" and position herself as in agreement with Vera's new position. She also does so by reference to his behavior, specifically the behavior that she has witnessed at her home. Here, although Jenny's turn is done as an upgraded agreement (designed to back away from her earlier position and to agree with Vera), the *oh*-preface is part of a turn that, especially with the additional use of the word "here", markedly invokes Jenny's independent knowledge of the behavior of the children, as the basis for her revised position. However this narrows the scope of her agreement to the behavior which she has actually witnessed.<sup>18</sup> The basis of this agreement is in its turn also resisted by Vera, who reasserts her earlier assessment with a further agreement ("E wz well behaved he:uh too:.") that re-asserts her own

experience of the children as a further and final basis for the conclusion they are converging upon. Jenny then seizes this opportunity to exit the sequence with a generalization about both children (lines 13-14). Thus, in both (16) and (17), while the parties are working to achieve full agreement about the behavior of the children, they are also discomforted over how that agreement is to be managed, and which account will have epistemic priority as the basis for the conclusions they are jointly reaching.

## 2 (v) Summary: Oh-prefaced Agreements

In sum, *oh*-prefacing in the context of agreements is a practice which embodies the second speaker's claim to have a perspective and opinion that is epistemically independent of the first.<sup>19</sup> As suggested earlier, *oh*-prefacing may achieve this outcome through a 'change of state semantics' which conveys that the first assessment has occasioned a review, recollection and renewal of the speaker's previous experience and judgement, and that it is this pre-existing experience that is the basis for the second assessment. Through this independence of perspective that is central to the work of *oh*-prefacing in agreement environments, the practice can serve as a resource with which a respondent can talk in a fashion that novelists describe as 'decided.' It projects the second speaker's mind as 'made up' on the topic. And it permits an expression of opinion to be understood as voiced in response to the other's point of view, but not altered by it.

*Oh*-prefaced agreements are more frequent in cases where (a) the second speaker has epistemic authority in the matter of access to, and/or rights to assess, the state of affairs in question, and (b) the second speaker is in some disagreement with the first, and deploys an [agree + disagree] response to register this. These two circumstances may be primary motivations for the claim to epistemic independence that *oh*-prefaced responses to assertions embody, and they may add associative coloring to the understanding of what an *oh*-preface has indexed. Thus *oh*-prefacing is associated with, indexes, and thus reflexively embodies claims to epistemic independence that may be understood and glossed by a recipient in terms of authority and disagreement. Further, while the claim of epistemic independence embodied by *oh*-prefaced agreements may be treated as giving enhanced support to the claims of the first speaker, it may also be understood as embodying an element of epistemic competition between the parties. Under certain conditions, speakers may find themselves dealing with both possibilities simultaneously, and struggling uncomfortably through a process of 'counter-agreement.' Thus across these cases, even the most harmonious, there is an element of epistemic tension between the parties.

## (3) Oh-Prefaced Disagreements

Given that *oh*-prefacing is clearly associated with various kinds of tensions and trends towards divergence and misalignment in sequences which are primarily occupied with agreement, it will come as no surprise that it is also found in disagreement sequences. We begin with two basic claims about *oh*-prefaced disagreements.

First, persons do not ordinarily *oh*-preface a first disagreeing turn. Rather, *oh*-prefacing is used by disagreed with parties in responding to a disagreement that is already launched. Although it is obviously possible that *oh*-prefaced 'initial disagreement' turns can occur empirically, there are none in the substantial data set I have examined for this paper. It is reasonable to conclude, then, that *oh*-prefacing is

rarely a 'weapon of first resort.'<sup>20</sup>

Second, since *oh*-prefaced disagreements are ordinarily responses to disagreement, *oh*-prefacing can be understood as a means of escalating disputes. In this context, its role in indexing a position as 'established,' and as founded in epistemic independence/priority (whether rhetorically or not) is a significant one.

### (3) (i) *Oh*-prefaced Disagreements: 'Holding a Position' in Flat Out Opposition

Although *oh*-prefacing is relatively uncommon in disagreement contexts, its significance there is unambiguously one of escalation and intensification of disagreement. The following case is perhaps prototypical of this. Here two undergraduates, Shirley and Geri, get into a dispute about how many weeks of the Geri's school term are left. Geri's assessment of "six er seven more weeks." initially meets with agreement from Shirley (line 4), but the latter then revises her opinion so as to disagree (lines 6-8), calculating that the quarter has only five more weeks to run:

- (20) [Frankel TC1:7]
- 1 Ger: A:nd uh:m (0.2) ghoo:l is, alri:ght 't's goming alo:ng it['s  
2 Shi: [Yeah=  
3 Ger: =it's only seh- seven more six er seven more weeks.  
4 Shi: Yea:h, rilly,  
5 Ger: A:::n[d  
6 Shi: [There's less then tha:t, this's the beginning of  
7 the seventh week a'the quarter. .hhhh Yer off- You have  
8 five weeks left.  
9 Ger: Uh-uh,  
10 Shi: [Mm-hm,  
11 Ger: [We av more then [fi::[ve,  
12 Shi: -> [.hhh[Oh no Geri five weeks.  
13 (0.7)  
14 (S): .t.hhh  
15 Ger: Wul maybe we 'av six. But we don't have[fi::[ve.  
16 Shi: [.hh[Whendju get ot.=  
17 Shi: =Christmas week er the week before Christmas.

At line 9, Geri resists with "Uh-uh" and a subsequent contradictory claim of "more then fi::ve.". It is this disagreement in which Geri holds her original position, which Shirley then attacks with an *oh*-prefaced rejection, and a reassertion of "five weeks.". At this point Shirley has already underpinned her claim at lines 6-8 with a display of calculation that builds an explicit justification for her position. Faced with continued, but unargued for, disagreement (at lines 9/11), Shirley reasserts the product of her earlier 'calculation' with an *oh*-prefaced repetition. Here the *oh*-prefacing of the turn indexes (i) its epistemic independence, (ii) the 'established' nature of the position she is expressing, and thus (iii) points to the inappositeness of Geri's questioning something that has already been explicitly stated, thereby indirectly asserting a (claimed) epistemic authority on the matter.<sup>21</sup> By this means the response is made more overtly reassertive. Here the practice of *oh*-prefacing is a significant feature of a turn, designed to 'hold a position' that has already been taken up, and which is now reasserted in intensified fashion.<sup>22</sup> Notably it induces Geri into a partial backdown

from her earlier position (line 15).

*Oh*-prefacing achieves this intensification of a stated position by entering a claim of position-holding epistemic independence, while simultaneously providing for the unexpectedness or inappropriateness of the (oppositional) assertion to which it responds. Turn-initial position is a strategic site for this provision in that it represents a first possible opportunity at which it can be made. As an initial response component, 'oh' amplifies the impact of the subsequently stated disagreement.

In (21), as in (20), *oh*-prefacing is used to further escalate an already thoroughly developed disagreement between a grandmother and her granddaughter whom she suspects of being bulimic.<sup>23</sup>

- (21) [SDCL:G/S:25-40]
- 1 G: I don'(t) know (.) I think you're just (0.2) °(well you're)°  
 2 just wearin yourself out with all your activity >I think if you  
 3 slow down a li(tt)le bit and rest a little bit more<  
 4 (0.4)  
 5 S: GRA:[M M A] YOU'RE SO WEIRD!  
 6 G: [Maybe]  
 7 S: >I don't even know why you say that I- <.hh I am f:i::ve  
 8 thr:ee:: and I still weigh a hundred an' te[n- fif teen po:unds?  
 9 [(noise))  
 10 (0.6)  
 11 G: -> O:h you don't weigh a °hundred an'°fifteen pounds .hh  
 12 all your clothes are fallin off of ya everybody tells you  
 13 ya look thi::n?

Here the grandmother's rebuttal of her granddaughter's disagreement is *oh*-prefaced. The epistemic claim embodied in the *oh*-preface is a fascinating maneuver: surely the granddaughter - especially if she is bulimic - will have an exact knowledge of her own weight. Yet the *oh*-preface can imply that the grandmother knows that the granddaughter is over-estimating her weight for argumentative purposes, and indeed at line 12 the grandmother offers two kinds of evidence to support her side of the case.

Even in less intensely contested disagreements, *oh*-prefacing is ordinarily restricted to 'second rounds' of disagreement. In the following case, Rich has disclosed that he's working from three to eleven during the weekends - something that Hyla regards as "terrible hours." (line 5).

- (22) [Hyla-Rich:2]
- 1 RIC: Well I go in en outa work from about three to eleven  
 2 thirt[y].  
 3 HYL: [tch Oh: yer ki::dding.  
 4 (0.3)  
 5 HYL: That's terr[ible hours.]  
 6 RIC: [Jes- jes fe|r (.) jest today en yesterday.  
 7 HYL: O:h.  
 8 (.)  
 9 HYL: Those're aw:ful hour:s.  
 10 RIC: -> Oh but the pay is grea:::t.

In this sequence, Rich deflects Hyla's first assessment (at line 5) with the incremental claim that he's only working these hours for two days (line 6). However, on Hyla's subsequent renewal of the negative assessment (at line 9), he again disagrees, citing the pay - something to which he has epistemically privileged access. That disagreement is *oh*-prefaced and, once again, *oh*-prefacing is used to 'hold a position' as a weapon of second resort.

In these cases *oh*-prefacing is used when the speaker is rebutting a disagreement and, in my data at least, this is the prototypical context for *oh*-prefaced disagreements. It is thus no accident that it is just this sense that is conveyed in the text with which I began this paper. The women (firefighters and others) described in the text are, we imagine, retorting to nay-sayers, to people who deny their occupational aspirations. It is the *oh*-preface which specifically conveys this, and it does so because *oh*-prefaced disagreements overwhelmingly manifest themselves as disagreements to disagreements.

### (3) (ii) *Oh*-prefaced Disagreements: 'Holding a Position' in Scaled Disagreement

We have seen that *oh*-prefaced disagreements are predominantly deployed to respond to actions which are themselves disagreeing: in all such cases they 'hold a position' that the speaker has already taken up in a prior turn. However they also occur in environments of downgraded or 'weak' agreement (Pomerantz 1984a). Pomerantz (ibid:68) notes that downgraded agreements frequently engender disagreement sequences in which the participants reassert previous positions. Not surprisingly, some of these reassertions are *oh*-prefaced, as in (23). Here a strongly positive assessment is met with an agreement token ("yes") and a downgraded assessment. The producer of the original strongly positive assessment then reasserts her position with a second strongly positive one that is also *oh*-prefaced.

- (23) [GJ:1 (From Pomerantz 1984a:68)]  
 1 A: She's a fox.  
 2 B: Yeah, she's a pretty girl.  
 3 A: -> Oh, she's gorgeous!

Here the *oh*-preface upgrades the disagreement that is expressed in the mismatch between descriptors by underscoring the reassertive 'position holding' quality of A's response. A similar process is apparent in (24):

- (24) [NB VII:1-2]  
 1 Emm: =Oh honey that was a lovely luncheon I shoulda ca:llled you  
 2 s:soo[ner but I:l:[lo:ved it.Ih wz just deli:ghtfu[: l.]=  
 3 Mar: [((f)) Oh:::] ['( )] [Well]=  
 4 Mar: =I wz gla[d y o u] (came).]  
 5 Emm: ['nd yer f:] friends] 'r so da:rli:ng,=  
 6 Mar: = Oh::[: it wz:]  
 7 Emm: [e-that p]a:t isn't she a do:[ill?]  
 8 Mar: [iY e]h isn't she pretty,  
 9 (.)  
 10 Emm: -> Oh: she's a beautiful girl.=  
 11 Mar: =Yeh I think she's a pretty gir[l.]

12 Emm:

[En that Reinam'n:]

Here too Emma's (line 10) reasserted position is *oh*-prefaced, indexing that she is holding a position vis-a-vis an unlooked for, or less than apposite or agreeable response. This case is notable for the fact that Margy sustains her disagreement into a fourth turn with a yes-prefaced turn that preserves the exact assessment value that she offered in her first downgrade at line 8. However, with the yes-preface in place, Margy's utterance, which also 'holds a position', manages this in a less argumentative way, and is done as a less reassertive disagreement. This example permits us to see that there is a clear distinction between *oh*-prefaced and yes-prefaced position adjustments. While Emma's *oh*-prefaced upgrade comes off as an explicit disagreement, Margy's subsequent yes-prefaced downgrade is managed, like her first (line 8), as a muted disagreement or 'pseudo-agreement.'

In sum, in the context of direct disagreement, *oh*-prefacing is rarely deployed in a first disagreeing action. Rather it is normally reserved for disagreements with assertions that are themselves disagreements. In such contexts, the epistemic independence embodied in *oh*-prefacing is hearable as explicitly holding an earlier stated position, and secondarily as implying the inappositeness or untowardness of the counter-position. For this reason, *oh*-prefaced reassertions of upgraded or downgraded assessments relative to another's position underscore the element of disagreement that those actions embody without *oh*-prefacing.

#### (4) Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that *oh*-prefacing is used to convey the epistemic independence of a second judgment or evaluation from a first, and primarily in cases where the parties have not had joint access to the referent being assessed. It is used by an agreeing party to markedly indicate access to, and/or evaluation of, a state of affairs which is independently grounded from that of the first speaker. More commonly than not, it is used in contexts where the second speaker has epistemic priority with regard to the matter under discussion. Thus it may be motivated as a means of disputing any epistemic priority that is asserted by the sheer 'firstness' of a first assessment, and to disengage a second speaker's expression of opinion from the taint of being produced merely "in agreement with" or "in conformity with" the first speaker's opinion. A substantial subset of *oh*-prefaced agreements embody some element of epistemic competition between the parties, often compromising the element of affiliation that is normally embodied in the process of agreement. A further subset involve movement towards position adjustment or disagreement by the second speaker.

*Oh*-prefaced disagreements embody upgraded disagreement relative to the same turn in the same context without the *oh* preface, and tend to be restricted to subsequent disagreements, or disagreements with disagreements.

It might be concluded that *oh*-prefaced responses to assessments are somewhat undesirable actions to encounter. While generally true, this is not always the case. In the following datum, Emma is telling her sister about an accusation that Emma's husband has made, as reported to Emma by her (Emma's) married daughter:

(25) [NB IV.10.R:4]

1 Emm: ... she s'z well:< (0.3) DA:D se:z you won't LIVE  
 2 IN THE A PA:RTMENT in thetcher unHA::PPY UP THERE'n  
 3 you want him tuh c'mmute BA:CK 'n forth evry day  
 4 which is a Go:d da:mn LIÉ:,  
 5 (.)  
 6 Emm: .hh[hh]<  
 7 Lot: -> [Oh ::::::: y:eah[c u z]you'd never sai:d tha\*:[t.  
 8 Emm: [e-H\_e] [A:nd  
 9 uh,...

Here, Emma's sister's *oh*-prefaced response at line 7 simultaneously manages escalated disagreement with Emma's husband's assertion as reported by Emma, and epistemically independent agreement with - and thus independent corroboration of - Emma's assessment of that assertion as a "Go:d da:mn LIÉ:,". Her action is the more remarkable as a gesture of raw affiliation with her sister by the fact that her 'epistemic independence,' though strongly asserted and powerfully voiced, is at best dubious in the context of a 'he said, she said' dispute between husband and wife. While *oh*-prefaced responses are often 'bad news,' they are not invariably so.

References:

Aston, Guy (1987). Ah: A corpus-based exercise in conversational analysis. In John Morley and Alan Partington (ed.), Spoken Discourse. Camerino, Italy, Universita di Camerino: 123-137.

Beach, Wayne (1996). Conversations about illness: family preoccupations with bulimia. Mahwah: NJ, Erlbaum.

Chafe, W. (1986). Evidentiality in English conversation and academic writing. In W.Chafe and J. Nichols (ed.) Evidentiality: The Linguistic Coding of Epistemology, Norwood NJ, Ablex, pp.261-272.

Clayman, Steven (1998). Some uses of address terms in news interviews. Unpublished mimeo, UCLA .

Davidson, Judy (1984). Subsequent Versions of Invitations, Offers, Requests, and Proposals Dealing with Potential or Actual Rejection. In J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage (ed.), Structures of Social Action. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 102-128.

Goodwin, Charles and Goodwin, Marjorie Harness (1987). Concurrent Operations on Talk: Notes on the Interactive Organization of Assessments. IPrA Papers in Pragmatics 1, No.1: 1-52.

Goodwin, Marjorie Harness (1980). Processes of Mutual Monitoring Implicated in the Production of Description Sequences. Sociological Inquiry 50: 303-317.

Heritage, John (1984). A Change-of-State Token and Aspects of Its Sequential Placement. In J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage (ed.), Structures of Social Action. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 299-345.

Heritage, John (1990/1). Intention, Meaning and Strategy: Observations on Constraints on Interaction Analysis. Research on Language and Social Interaction 24: 311-332.

Heritage, John (1998). Oh-prefaced responses to inquiry. Language in Society 27(3): 291-334.

Heritage, John (frth). The Limits of Questioning: Negative Interrogatives and Hostile Question Content. In Philip Glenn, Curt LeBaron and Jennifer Mandelbaum (eds.), Excavating the taken-for-granted: Studies in language and social interaction. A festschrift in honor of Robert Hopper, [Volume publisher pending]

Heritage, John and Sorjonen, Marja-Leena (1994). Constituting and maintaining activities across sequences: and-prefacing as a feature of question design. Language in Society 23: 1-29.

Jefferson, Gail (1981). The Abominable 'Ne?': A Working Paper Exploring the Phenomenon of Post-Response Pursuit of Response. Occasional Paper No.6, Department of Sociology,, University of Manchester, Manchester, England.

Lerner, Gene (1996). On the 'semi-permeable' character of grammatical units in conversation: conditional entry into the turn-space of another speaker. In Elinor Ochs, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Sandy Thompson (ed.), Interaction and Grammar. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 238-276.

Pomerantz, Anita (1984a). Agreeing and Disagreeing with Assessments: Some Features of Preferred/Dispreferred Turn Shapes. In J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage (ed.), Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 57-101.

Pomerantz, Anita M. (1984b). Giving a Source or basis: the Practice in Conversation of Telling 'What I know'. Journal of Pragmatics 8:4: 607-625.

Sacks, Harvey, Schegloff, Emanuel A. and Jefferson, Gail (1974). A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation. Language 50: 696-735.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. (1987a). Recycled Turn Beginnings: A Precise Repair Mechanism in Conversation's Turn-taking Organisation. In Graham Button and John R.E. Lee (ed.), Talk and Social Organisation. Clevedon, England, Multilingual Matters, Ltd: 70-85.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. (1987b). Analyzing Single Episodes of Interaction: An Exercise in Conversation Analysis. Social Psychology Quarterly 50(2): 101-114.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. (1996). Turn Organization: One Intersection of Grammar and Interaction. In Elinor Ochs, Sandra Thompson and Emanuel Schegloff (ed.), Interaction and Grammar. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 52-133.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. (1997). Whose Text? Whose Context? Discourse and Society 8(2): 165-187.

Schiffrin, Deborah (1987). Discourse Markers. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Notes

1. There is a nice paradox here. *Oh*, which is commonly thought of as the 'surprise particle,' is here used to convey the reverse.
2. Because Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles, its aftermath and many of the funeral arrangements received heavy coverage on local television stations.
3. It is possible that the use of turn components such as tag questions in first position assessments embodies a mitigation of any implied claim to epistemic authority that the turn's position embodies, even in the co-present cases, e.g. (2) and (3).
4. This response is hearably brief and dismissive of an assessment that could have engendered an extended sequence on this topic. Robbie then immediately initiates a new topic about a pub. There is a convergence here with the use of *oh*-prefaced responses to questions to curtail the development of topics projected by the questions (Heritage 1998: 313-320).
5. For a more extensive account of these two sequences, see Heritage 1990/1.
6. There is a convergence here with Schegloff's (1996:63) comment that deploying such terms as 'actually' or 'as a matter of fact' is a practice that can be used to indicate that what follows has a contemporary relevance to the speaker that is distinct from that created by the prior speaker's talk. See also the discussion of (15) below.
7. Of course speakers have other ways of indicating the independence and priority of their perspectives. For example, as she elaborates her agreement in lines 6-7 of example 10, Margy underscores the closeness of her relationship to the referenced person, relative to Emma.
8. Michael's reluctance may receive additional motivation from the apparent difference in the stance taken to the neighbor by his host and hostess.
9. It is possible that Abe is referring to his own cat at lines 10-11, thus shifting the reference from Ben's 'Burmese cats in general,' to his own animal as part of his *oh*-prefaced, epistemically authoritative response. However his initial *oh*-prefaced response employs a reference form "it's a" which is likely designed as a generic reference, by comparison with Abe's later use of "he" at lines 15 and 23 to refer specifically to his own cat.
10. I thank Geoff Raymond, who drew this feature of the sequence to my attention.
11. It probably speaks to the state of the relationship between these two interactants that Marsha did not call Tony to inform him of the altered travel plans, and that the call, having been - up to this point at least - focused on the 'mechanics' of Joey's return to his father, now turns to the 'mechanics' of the return of the car itself. In a variety of other ways Marsha, who is ordinarily an emotionally colorful interactant, attempts to maintain a factual, controlled and 'cool' tone.
12. This observation lends some further support to Pomerantz's argument that non-upgraded agreements convey incipient disagreement.
13. The format of Emma's inquiry - "isn't it..." - makes it as close to an assertion in its own right as can be made within interrogative syntax. Questioning in the news media embodying this format is recurrently so treated. For example:

IR: W'l Mister President in your *zeal* (.) for funds during  
 -> the last campaign .hh didn't you put the Vice President (.)  
 an' Maggie and all the others in your (0.4) administration  
 top side .hh in a very vulnerable position, hh  
 (0.5)

IE: -> I disagree with that.hh u- How are we vulnerable because ...

Here Helen Thomas's (UPI) interrogative syntax is not sufficient for her utterance to be treated by President Clinton as simply a neutral question. Rather, she is treated as having taken a position with which the President, as he puts it, 'disagrees.' Questions framed in the negative with such beginnings as "Isn't it," "Don't you," etc. are characteristically responded to as assertions (Heritage frth).

14. There is a strong parallel here with Goodwin and Goodwin's (1987) treatment of the 'asparagus pie' example, to which this discussion is indebted.
15. If Jenny has used "are" instead of "were," the outcome would have likely been less problematic. It might be added that Jenny's choice of adjective - "smashing" - is a shade over-apt as a description of the good behavior of a naughty child!
16. Here the particle preface at line 8, transcribed as "Oo" is treated as a token of 'oh.' Though the shift in its pronunciation may involve some (currently unknown) departure in use and meaning from 'oh,' it is part of the 'oh family' in a way that 'ah' (Aston 1987), 'eh,' or 'uh' manifestly are not.
17. Although Jenny appears to 'go first' in offering this assessment, in fact it is interactionally engendered (data not shown). Moreover, Vera's responsive upgraded and agreeing turn at line 4 is ended with a tag question, muting its second position status and offering itself as a claimedly first position object.
18. In this example, it is noticeable that the *oh*-prefaced second assessment is converted into a first action by the addition of the tag-question. The tag question here is a further resource which Jenny uses to try to work her way out from a reactive 'second position' revision of opinion, and to reduce the extent to which her revised assessment of the child will be seen as interactionally motivated.
19. Significantly, an *oh*-prefaced agreement may be abandoned when its producer recognizes that the object to which it responds was not a first-hand assessment. Thus in the case below, Lesley is describing a visit to her mother in Kent, which among other things involved helping with the garden (lines 1-2), and a trip to Maidstone (line 3). As is clear from the subsequent talk, Lesley is quite distressed by recent changes in the town. The issue is raised by Kevin with a remark - "Yes I hear it's changed a lot." - which could seem, to Lesley at least, to imply exactly the concerns she is about to express. Kevin's turn also embodies (with the evidential phrase "I hear" (Chafe 1986, Pomerantz 1984b) just the kind of reduced epistemic access that is, as we have seen, recurrently associated with *oh*-prefaced second position agreements by epistemic authorities. And indeed this is what Lesley vigorously launches into with "Oh: it (.) was (.) abs-" where, in light of her later remarks, the cut-off "abs-" was presumably going to be "absolutely."

[Holt U/88-2-2:1-2]

Les: eYes: u-and uhm, hmhh.t.hhh we helped her with'er garden  
an' hhh.hhh weeded 'n:d hh generally messed about,h  
But w' went tuh Maidsto:ne .hhhhhhhhhh][

Kevin: [---(1.0)--][Yes I hear it's  
chan[ged a [lot.

Les: -> [ u- [Oh: it (.) was (.) abs- e-We came back so  
depressed. .hhhh It- (0.2) eh that-that Stoneborough,hhh  
uh:m: (0.4) .k.hhhh e-shoppøing arcadeø (.) is: a pi:t.  
hh It: (.) is gha:støly. 'N everything looked taw:ødry  
in it.ø .hhhhh And the people looked so shabby.hh

However the turn with which Lesley was about to agree was, on its face at least, relatively 'neutral.' It describes a report of 'change.' It does not embody the kind of strongly felt evaluation with which Lesley was evidently preparing to agree. It is likely that Lesley abandons this turn start in recognition of the lack of fit between Kevin's remark and what she had intended as an 'agreement.' It is noticeable that her revised turn, now of course shorn of the *oh*-preface, reports a notably 'subjective' experience - "We came back so depressed." -

now positioned as a 'first' action reporting 'news,' rather than a 'second' and agreeing action.

20. An exception to this generalization might arise in the context of highly polarized 'hot button' public issues, for example at the present time, the widely circulated Starr Report and the possible impeachment of President Clinton. For such subjects, one might expect to hear "Oh I completely disagree..." as a first position disagreement, though to date (September 1998) I have not heard such a maneuver. Pseudo-exceptions might include disagreements over topics that, for example, family members recurrently disagree on. In these latter cases, the oh-preface might, through its very use as a weapon of first resort, reinvoke earlier disagreements on the same issue.
21. Shirley also deploys another offensive procedure in this turn: naming her addressee (Clayman, 1998).
22. There is a parallel here with phenomena described in Heritage (1998), in which *oh*-prefacing is used to 'hold a position' in a context of questioning that embodies components of disagreement. The following, well known sequence concerns Mike's claim (line 1) that "a guy at work" has two Cords. A 'Cord' is a rare automobile that was briefly manufactured in the United States in the 1930s and is now copied as a 'classic car.' For these reasons the claim is distinctly newsworthy, especially for the car enthusiasts among the conversation's participants. Mike's claim at line 1 gives rise to a sequence of queries from Curt, of which we are interested in the first two. Curt's initial query is "Not original". While this may be deployed merely as a means to register the out-of-the-ordinary nature of Mike's claim, it may alternatively be taken to indicate doubt as to whether the "two Cords" are of original manufacture and therefore "the real thing" or alternatively just modern replicas. At any event, the design of Curt's question strongly favors a "No" response which, in the unlikely event that it were done, would represent a reversal of Mike's stated position:

[Auto Discussion:13:04-13:15]

Mik: Lemme ask a guy at work. He's gotta bunch a' old  
clu[nkers].

Gar: [Y'know Marlon Liddle?  
(0.2)

Mik: Well I can't say they're ol' clunkers eez gotta Co:rd?  
(0.1)

Mik: Two Co:irds,  
(1.0)

Mik: [And

Cur: 1-> [Not original,  
(0.7)

Mik: 2-> Oh yes. Very origi(h)nal [lateral 'disagreeing' head shake]

Cur: 3-> Oh:: reall[y?

Mik: 4-> [Yah. Ve(h)ry origi(h)nal. [vertical 'agreeing'  
head shake]

Cur: 'Awhhh are you shittin m[e?

Mik: [No I'm not.

Mike's response to Curt's question is composed of two turn-constructural units that (re-)assert his claim as to the originality of the cars. The first unit, "oh yes.", is accompanied by a strong lateral and, in this context, 'disagreeing' headshake. It clearly reasserts his earlier claims of lines 5 and 7. The second unit, "Very origi(h)nal", which is accompanied by a

continuation of the lateral headshake, strongly upgrades that assertion. Curt's second query - "oh really" - is, by contrast with "Not original", not in any way oppositional. It is a "newsmark" of a type that, far from inviting a revision of Mike's position, routinely invites reconfirmation of a position and, further, projects its producer's acceptance of that reconfirmation (Heritage 1984; Jefferson 1981). Mike's response to this second query is identical to the first except for two features. The first is that his head movement is revised from a lateral headshake indicative of disagreement, to a vertical headshake, produced across the entire turn, and indicative of agreement. The second feature is that the reassertive *oh*-preface is removed. This sequence embodies fine grained evidence that *oh*-prefacing in response to questions can be specifically designed to disagree with, or rebut, the position taken by a questioner, and to do so by indexing the 'established' nature of the position being defended, and pointing to the inappropriateness of questioning something that has already been explicitly stated (Heritage 1998) as an ancillary part of holding, and upgrading, the position that has already been taken. It remains to be added that both of Curt's questions are designed to underscore the 'newsworthiness' of Mike's announcement and that the sequence is generally benign. Nonetheless, within that understanding, Curt's two questions are treated in quite distinct ways that are fitted to the preferences they embody. See Goodwin (1980) and Schegloff (1987b) for further discussions of this well-known sequence. I thank Charles and Candy Goodwin for very helpful discussion of this example.

23. See Beach (1996) for an extended analysis of this conversation.