

## Beyond and Behind the Words: Some Reactions to My Commentators

John Heritage

*Department of Sociology  
University of California at Los Angeles*

Few authors can have been more fortunate in their commentators than I have been on this occasion, and I am deeply grateful for the thoughtful and probing comments of all three (Clift, 2012/*this issue*; Drew, 2012/*this issue*; and Sidnell, 2012/*this issue*). In some respects they may have been too gentle, and in taking this opportunity to react to the many issues they have raised, I should like to amplify some of their suggestions and caveats and add a few of my own. In what follows, I mean to offer some post hoc spin on what is asserted in the two articles to which they are responding, this inevitably taking the form of tacking between the roles of linguistic form and social context in the constitution of action, with an eye on methodological implications.

### LINGUISTIC FORM AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Some readers may feel that linguistic form was shortchanged in “Epistemics in Action” (EinA) (Heritage, 2012a/*this issue*): After all, English speakers, together with speakers of many other languages, do in fact deploy interrogative morphosyntax in polar questions and, given the effort allocated to this, surely, as Zipf (1949) taught, there must be some interactional benefit? As noted in EinA, however, the fact is that many languages do not deploy interrogative morphosyntax in polar questions and get along quite well without it. Similarly, as also noted in EinA, evidence for the K– “questioning” interactional import of (rising) intonation is murky, to put it mildly.

In this context, it can be useful to recognize that departures from the default “readings” of declarative and interrogative syntax are quite asymmetric. While numerous declarative utterances enact requests for information, relatively few interrogative ones enact assertions. This suggests that while declarative syntax may be a less reliable indicator of assertions, interrogative syntax is relatively more reliable as an indicator of information requests (leaving aside the many “indirect” actions that are also managed via interrogative syntax). Thus, from a probabilistic point of view, while the “epistemic ticker” can never be switched off, it can be “guided” by syntax. If the heuristic is of the “fast and frugal” kind (Gigerenzer, 2004), we should expect some clustering of

errors arising from speakers' use of "reliable" cues from interrogative syntax. These errors would involve attributions that persons are requesting information when in fact they are doing something else, for example, taking someone's side, to use Schegloff's (1984) well-known case. Moreover, although research is clearly essential here, we can hazard that there are distinctive consequences when our ticker is guided by syntax that, as in English, predicts the likelihood of information requests from early on in a turn constructional unit's formation, rather than by question words or clitics that arrive toward the end of the unit.

A similar type of argument may be made for intonation. I am personally persuaded by Stivers and Rossano's (2010) suggestion that rising intonation may function in the first instance to mobilize response. This is well supported by such interactional phenomena as "try-marking" (the use of rising intonation, even in midunit, to solicit recognition of names [Sacks & Schegloff, 1979]). Insofar as it conveys a need or requirement for response, it is not difficult to see how rising intonation can contribute to the sense of an utterance as an information request. However, it seems unlikely that there are many circumstances, in English at least, in which intonation alone enables the recognition of classes of actions or even individual ones, though there may be many cases in which it reinforces that recognition. Implicit in this suggestion is the notion that intonation is one of a series of "layers" of information encoded in utterances and that its salience in action formation may vary with both the linguistic form of the turn constructional unit and the epistemic status of the speaker.

The notion of "layers" of tickers is well expressed in Jack Sidnell's astute response. I support the idea that a set of "heuristics," operating concertedly on linguistic form and social context, are involved in action construction and recognition/ascription. Recognition of this possibility, it seems to me, is an appropriately empirical way to emerge from the relatively static legacy of speech act theory as laid down in the 1970s. The exact nature of these heuristics, together with their ordering and salience, remains to be discovered. I retain the belief, however, that my suggested heuristic for determining whether an utterance is requesting or offering information will turn out to be relatively fundamental among the "layers." Part of the investigations of "layers" should, and will, involve cross-linguistic comparisons of the kind recently pioneered by Sidnell and Enfield (in press). Deep and important findings await us there and also, as Rebecca Clift notes, in an increasing body of cross-linguistic analyses of various epistemic particles (Hayano, 2011, 2012; Wu, 2004; Wu & Heritage, in press).

Sidnell is also right to stress, following Schütz (1964), that epistemic status is a multidimensional beast—his invocation of Hayano's *masseuse* is a gem. Incommensurate epistemic standpoints abound in social life: In our own society the standpoint of the "experiencer" is frequently played off against that of the "expert," with results that are often uncertain—though the growing "culture of victimhood" in the West speaks to the significance of that role in conflicts with overweening technical and bureaucratic expertise. In important articles, Melvin Pollner (1974, 1975) spoke to the significance of epistemic hierarchies in resolving deeply felt conflicts over what is, and what is not, the case. And, at a completely different level of granularity, Goodwin's recent work on the production and maintenance of epistemic ecologies in face-to-face interaction raises similar issues of profound interest (Goodwin, 2010). Sidnell's point is well taken.

In this context, it is also worth recollecting the rapidity with which parties can turn the epistemic tables on one another. The following is a case in point:

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

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

Here Emma's opening question takes a stance that is symmetrical with her (K-) position about her sister Lottie's very recent trip to Palm Springs. However, her very next utterance (line 3) turns the tables on Lottie by inviting her to agree with Emma's assessment of the place. This assessment, with its shift in tense from past (Lottie's experience of Palm Springs during her trip) to present (Palm Springs in general), shifts the epistemic landscape to a "blinds up" (Bolinger, 1957) position for Emma and allows her negative interrogative syntax to be understood as an assertion and not as a request for information (Heritage, 2002). Schütz's "topographical map" with its contour lines, peaks, valleys, foothills, and slopes (Schütz, 1964, p. 126) is so simply and elegantly navigated here.

These considerations introduce the possibility that perhaps EinA's claim that epistemic status trumps morphosyntax and turn design in *every* case is put too strongly. I attempted to guard against too absolute a claim in the final section of the article, and the following case suggests some, albeit minor, qualification. It is taken from a paper by Laura Loeb (in press) that focuses on epistemic dimensions of call and response during Bible study in an African American Catholic church community. In this segment, the Bible study leader ("Mrs. Jones") is describing her conversations with God following the unexpected and early death of her husband. As Mrs. Jones describes it, she was glad that "I had someone that I could just be real with and tell him just d' way I felt" (lines 4, 5, 7):

(2) [Loeb frth: Blessed Word of Jesus 9-9]

- 1 MsJ: We had planned ta travel an do things together after da children grew up?  
 2 Ang: nnYes.  
 3 (1.0)  
 4 MsJ: And you know uh- inna way I'm kinda glad (0.8) that I had someone  
 5 that I could just be real with an[d tell him just d' way I=  
 6 Ang: -> [That's true,  
 7 MsJ: =fe[l t.  
 8 Ang: [That [i- that's beautiful.  
 9 Sha: [mmhm; ((nodding))  
 10 MsJ: Because that was the way he let me heal wa[s arguin' with ↑him.  
 11 Ang: -> [That's (right).  
 12 Ang: uhYes,  
 13 MsJ: hheh he[h heh hn]h  
 14 Ang: [hnkhe Yes.]

This profoundly first-person K+ statement is then agreed with, affirmed, perhaps even confirmed, by one of her recipients, Angela, with "That's true." And a later remark by Mrs. Jones (about healing by arguing with God [line 10]) attracts a similar response from the same recipient. This response—"That's (right)."—deploys a format that is virtually dedicated to acts

of confirmation. What is going on here? How can a recipient “confirm” a first-person account of emotional pain and suffering and its resolution in a personal relationship with God? Is it not the case that, in both of Angela’s responses, content and context, epistemic stance and epistemic status are fundamentally at odds with one another?

But if we take the linguistic form seriously here, then it is possible that the confirmations are reflexively invoking only certain elements of the epistemic topography provided in Mrs. Jones’s account. That is, they confirm, from Angela’s subject position within a community of believers, that God is someone that a person “could just be real with,” and that conversing with God can be “the way he let me heal.” Here then, perhaps, the linguistic form reflexively selects out the epistemic context with which it can be consistent, in a hermeneutic process familiar to the gestaltists. As described by Garfinkel (1967, pp. 78–79) under the heading of “the documentary method of interpretation,” this is a process in which linguistic form and social context stand in a mutually elaborative relationship with one another (see also Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Heritage, 1984, 2010). It may be added, however, that there can be limits to this process. Mrs. Jones’s little laugh at line 13, with its incongruity of affect reminiscent of the responses identified by Jefferson (1984) as associated with “crowding” the options of a recipient, may stand as an incipient sanction of Angela’s (over-)presumption. All of this epistemic stuff is, let us not forget, under the control of the participants and not the observer.

#### MOTIVATIONS, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND METHODOLOGY

“The Epistemic Engine” (Heritage, 2012b/this issue) presents distinct, though somewhat parallel, points of concern. I want to begin by addressing the “hydraulic metaphor” and the implication that a theory of motivation for interaction may seem to lie behind it. The hydraulic metaphor was stimulated by the obvious fact—apparent in short sequences as well as long—that many sequences come to an end when the transfer of some “chunk” of information has occurred and an interactionally ratified “information equilibrium” between the parties has been achieved. A similar process seems to be involved when topic attrition licenses some form of topic shift and/or exit from the conversation itself (Jefferson, 1981).

Ever since Freud, though, hydraulic metaphors have been deployed in theories of motivation, and my use of the metaphor is vulnerable to this interpretation. In some cases, such as requests for information and news announcements, information transfer is transparently available as an indigenous account for the talk in question. However, notwithstanding Tomasello’s (2008) account of primary motives for communication (giving, requesting, sharing), it is a long step to generalize from here to the notion that each and every conversational contribution is motivated by the desire to give (or receive, or share) information. Surely here the reach of the “epistemic engine” would exceed its grasp, not least because our “highest level generalization” would inevitably become trivially true and cease to have “empirical bite,” as Clift, quoting Evans and Levinson (2009), puts it. Overgeneralizations of otherwise perfectly good theories all too readily deprive them of empirical bite, as the misuse of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness unhappily illustrates. It is to be hoped that the “epistemic engine” does not suffer a similar fate.

On the question of motivation, we have luckily passed through the massive inoculation of ordinary language philosophy and ethnomethodology. These tell us that “motivation,” in its first and primary layer, is a matter of social accountability, through which other more personal or

subterranean motives are glimpsed by refraction (Austin, 1961; Burke, 1945; Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984; Louch, 1966; Mills, 1940). As a “hydraulic” theory, then, I see the engine primarily in terms of accountability rather than motivation: A person, finding some new thing to say, is warranted in saying it, and finds warrant from others in its saying, by the fact that it is a “new thing.” If we restrict the engine to this layer of public accountability, then, I believe, we remain on the relatively safe ground of finding evidence for its operation in public displays of its relevance or relevant absence. It is for this reason that I welcome Paul Drew’s clear observations about the existence of the numerous complex considerations that can enter into the giving and receiving of information, considerations that pass abundantly around and beyond the simple “hydraulics” of information transfer. Though its salience and significance may vary, the “engine” is likely, as often as not, to be at the bottom of the food chain in the analysis of interaction: Simplistic efforts to invoke it in an overgeneralized way as an explanation of first resort will be the surest means of robbing it of “bite.”

Lurking behind this whole enterprise are the “three G’s”—Garfinkel, Goffman, and Grice. Among them, they forged a view of interaction that stressed that whatever happens is communicatively relevant: departures from rules or the flouting of rules—CA’s “deviant cases” (Heritage, 1984, 1988)—being sometimes the most communicatively relevant of all. There is always a risk that this point of view will start to produce generalizations that become unfalsifiable and, hence, nonempirical. CA has for many years been defended against this fate by its foci of research: second (or responsive) actions, and interaction-internal processes such as turn taking and repair. In all these cases, next turn is the “go to” place for the empirical warrant for a claim. Used in this way, “next turn” (and sequential context, more generally) has been the ultimate guarantee that research remains robustly empirical and uncontaminated by rootless ratiocination.

But to understand the underlying mechanics of first actions, including but not exclusively the role of epistemics in their formation and recognition, “next turn” will not always be a source of unequivocal validation. It and the other resources of sequential analysis drawn upon in these articles will certainly help us understand *that* a prior turn was, or was not, understood as a request for information, but it may be less informative about *how* that came to be the case. The uncertainty that this consideration introduces can only redouble the risks of circularity to which Drew alludes and that I have tried to amplify here. However, the gains to be made from understanding some of the “tickers” that are likely contributing to action formation and recognition seem to me to make the risks worth taking, and it is for this reason that I have ventured to write these articles.

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