

Turn-initial position and some of its occupants

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Abstract

This paper considers a recent and growing body of research into turn-initial objects, and describes some of the difficulties associated with their analysis. It suggests that they particularly cluster around 'expectation canceling' functions: in first position to manage the connectedness or otherwise of a current turn to the previous one, and in second position to resist the constraints on second position speakers arising from first positioned turns.

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The present group of papers focuses on a variety of linguistic objects that can occur in turn-initial position. By the expression 'linguistic objects,' I mean to differentiate them from two other major classes of things that occur at the beginnings of turns: (i) audible preparations for speech, such as in-breaths, throat clearing, etc. which belong to the pre-beginning phase of a turn at talk (Schegloff, 1996), and (ii) the management of gestural, postural and gaze orientation which are part of the multimodal organization of moving into speakership (e.g. Goodwin, 1980, 2000; Streeck and Hartge, 1992; Mondada, 2007, 2009; Streeck, 2009; Keisanen and Rauniomaa, 2012; Deppermann, 2013). In contrast to those aspects of turn beginnings, the turn-initial elements described here are very much a part of the 'turn proper,' though they are still, for the most part, not syntactically integrated with the rest of the turn constructional unit. Most of them comprise single lexemes, varying greatly in their semantic and functional import from apparently straightforward items like address terms (vocatives), through expressions like 'oh' and 'ah' (Heritage, 1984; Aston, 1987) to more opaque discourse markers like 'well,' on the semantics and pragmatic functions of which it has been more difficult to find consensus (Jucker, 1993; Pomerantz, 1984; Schiffrin, 1987:102–127; Schegloff and Lerner, 2009; Schourup, 2001). Some, but by no means all, of these objects can occupy an entire turn by themselves. These turn-initial objects share some common characteristics that contribute to the difficulties associated with their analysis, and that will bear enumeration.

First, some can occur in a variety of positions within sequences. Within conversation analysis it is conventional to distinguish between first (initiating), second (responsive), and third (sequence closing) positions in a sequence (Schegloff, 2007). For example, the versatile English particle 'oh' can occur in all three positions (Heritage, 1984, 1998, 2002; Schiffrin, 1987:73–101; Bolden, 2006)

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(1) (GJ:FN) ((Three people are walking together: someone passes them
           wearing a photograph teeshirt))
1   N:  -> Oh that teeshirt reminded me [STORY]
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(2)
 1 Ann: How are you feeling Joyce.=
 2 Joy: -> Oh fi:ne.
 3 Ann: 'Cause- I think Doreen mentioned that you weren't so well?

(3) (HG:II:25)
 1 N: .hhh Dz he 'av 'iz own apa:rt[mint?]
 2 H: [.hhhh] Yea:h,=
 3 N: -> =Oh:,

As will be apparent, the functional significance of 'oh' varies very considerably across these three sequential positions, and in this sense its import is 'positionally sensitive' (Schegloff, 1996), though its general semantics as Heritage has suggested (1984, 1998, 2002, see also Person, 2009) is not. Similarly, while there may be a lack of consensus over the function of 'well' in second position (Jucker, 1993; Pomerantz, 1984; Schiffrin, 1987; Schegloff and Lerner, 2009; Schourup, 2001), there is little doubt that its role and significance in third position is quite distinctive (Kim, 2013b). The variety of sequential positions in which these turn-initial objects can occur serves as an important source of evidence both for their intrinsic properties and affordances, and for their distinctiveness one from another both within a language and across languages.

Second, many turn-initial objects can also occur in other places within the turn. For example, address terms can appear in turn-initial, turn-medial and turn-final positions (Clayman, 2012):

(4) [Field 2.2.2]
 Les: ->.t CAROL I finished the boo:k.

(5) [Field 5/88-2-4]
 Dee: Oh: yes well I do hope so cz I mean av-uh a:fter all
 -> Mark we're not gett'n any younger. . .

(6) [MDE MTRAC 60-1/1]
 Mar: -> W'l it's: e-You really sound good Ro:n.
 Ron: I- Well I just came back fr'm a two month vacation.

'Oh', by contrast, can occur in turn-initial and turn-medial (James, 1972, 1974) positions, but not in turn-final position. Yet again, the Mandarin particle 'a,' which can appear in both turn-initial and turn-final position, shares some commonalities with English 'oh's, when occurring as a final particle (Wu, 2004; Wu and Heritage, forthcoming). As in the case of sequential position, position within the turn is also an important source of evidence about, and of differentiation between, turn-initial objects.

Third, it follows from these considerations that placement within turns and sequences, and within *types* of turns and sequences is a significant driver of the work that turn-initial objects perform. Lacking, in the vast majority of cases, any referential function, they are differentiated entirely by reference to their semantics and places of occurrence. As the editors note in their Introduction, these objects are not described in the vernacular culture of societies, where they are for the most part 'seen but unnoticed.' Their specification tends to be formidably abstract.

Fourth, for these reasons, translation or other efforts to represent turn-initial objects in another language are almost always positively misleading. Those who work on them characteristically speak of difficulties in their translation, and efforts at translation frequently lead to misrepresentation and misunderstanding (Wu and Heritage, forthcoming).

All of these factors – the multiplicity of objects together with their variations in positioning within turns and sequences, the complexity and layering of their functions, and their incommensurability across languages – contribute to the challenge of bringing them to determinate description.

1. Turn-initial position

In opening this discussion, I would like to start from remarks by Schegloff (2007) on the topic of 'progressivity.' Schegloff writes (2007:14–15):

Among the most pervasively relevant features in the organization of talk-and-other-conduct—in-interaction is the relationship of adjacency or “nextness.” . . . The relationship of adjacency or “nextness” between turns is central to the ways in which talk in interaction is organized and understood. Next turns are understood by co-participants to

display their speaker's understanding of the just-prior turn and to embody an action responsive to the just-prior turn so understood (unless the turn has been marked as addressing something other than just-prior turn).

As Schegloff's comments make clear, participants will make efforts to understand each turn at talk as responsive to the prior in coherent and intelligible ways, and as others have argued, they are under normative pressure to do so (Garfinkel, 1967; Grice, 1975; Goffman, 1983). Indeed one of the earliest observations in the conversation analytic literature concerned 'misplacement markers' (e.g., 'by the way') which are designed to lift the expectation that what follows should be understood within the interpretive constraints of 'next position' (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973).

Within this onward production of next-positioned actions, turn beginnings assume an important significance: they can offer initial clues as to the broad turn-shape and turn-type that is about to be implemented (Schegloff, 1987:71–72), together with the stance the current speaker may be taking towards the just prior turn. In particular they can either project what we may term 'unmarked nextness' in which the current speaker continues a sequence of turns within some expected set of parameters (e.g., 'Are you going to the movies'/'Yes') or, alternatively, they can index some kind of departure from expectations for the subsequent turn (e.g., 'Are you going to the movies'/'Well I wasn't planning to...').

2. Indexing departures

Two of the papers in this collection address turn-initial elements that are associated with departures from the expectations set up by questions. This is no accident. Questions are prototypical adjacency pair first actions that establish powerful normative constraints that bear on the next turn (Schegloff, 2007). They establish both topical and action agendas for response, and constrain recipients within presuppositional matrices that may be difficult to resist (Heritage, 2010). Moreover in the case of the most frequent form of questions, polar questions (Stivers, 2010), the management of these constraints by recipients can be subject to detailed evaluation by the questioner from the very first syllable. Thus as Raymond (2003) shows for English, 'yes/no' type-conforming responses are preferred, and their prosody is immediately monitored for whether they will undergo expansion (Raymond, 2010). Moreover, any departure from immediate and prompt type-conformity is inferentially rich, and can be monitored for the stance its producer is taking towards the question, and for the type of response that will likely eventuate (Raymond, 2003; Stivers and Hayashi, 2010; Heritage and Raymond, 2012). Similar observations are described by Sorjonen (2001a,b) for Finnish, though in this case, as she shows, the nature of type-conformity itself is more complex.

It is in this context that turn-initial components of response to questions assume a compelling significance for interactants and, hence, for students of interaction. In fact, a growing spate of recent publications testifies to a growing interest in these turn-initial elements of response (Bolden, 2009a,b; Hayashi, 2009; Heinemann, 2009; Lindström, 2009; Schegloff and Lerner, 2009; Fox and Thompson, 2010; Keevallik, 2012; Kim, 2011, 2013a; Stivers et al., 2011; Mazeland and Huiskes, 2001). It is significant that, as Kim (2011, Kim, 2013a,b) notes, some of this research embraces postpositional and predicate-final languages like Japanese and Korean, showing that, within conversation at least, significant elements of conversational action are being managed in turn-initial position.

Almost all these studies document the use of turn-initial components to take up stances that resist, or otherwise 'push back' on, some aspect of the prior question. In a simple case, such as *oh*-prefacing, the speaker registers the redundancy and, hence, inappropriateness of the question itself while going on to produce a straightforward answer to the question as put (Heritage, 1998). In other cases, such as responses prefaced by *well* in English (Schegloff and Lerner, 2009), *iya* in Japanese (Hayashi and Kushida, 2013) and *kulenikka* in Korean (Kim, 2013a,b), more complex and polyvalent forms of resistance are foreshadowed. For example, Hayashi and Kushida (2013) note that *iya*-prefaced responses can involve such matters as: (i) resistance to being positioned as knowledgeable (K+) about some matter; (ii) resistance to the type of response being invited; (iii) resistance to presupposition(s) of the question; and (iv) resistance to the course of action that a question may be understood as implementing. Perhaps some of this breadth arises from the fact that *iya* (which can serve for the word "no" in the context of polar questions (Hayashi and Kushida, 2013:233)) is a fairly blunt instrument as far as turn-initial particles go. But while it may be blunt, the use of "no-type" turn initial objects in response to *wh*-questions is fairly widespread. Hayashi and Kushida note the existence of substantial parallels in the functioning of *no*-prefacing in English (Raclaw, 2013), *ani*-prefacing in Korean (Kim, 2011, 2013a) and *ei*-prefacing in Estonian (Keevallik, 2012), though they are also careful to note that there is no exact matching in these functions.

In the case of *kulenikka*-prefacing in Korean (Kim, 2013a,b), the preface is used to project a subtle form of resistance to the terms of the question to which response is directed. Specifically, the preface anticipates turns in which speakers defer type-conforming responses or even evade the question altogether. Not unlike English *well*, the preface is associated with a "reshaping of the response space" that the question otherwise projected. This role contrasts with another turn preface *ani* that, as Kim (2011, 2013a) shows elsewhere, takes a much more oppositional stance towards the preceding question, and projects some more general attempt to block the sequence and its associated project that the question was otherwise implementing. Though *kulenikka*-prefacing may be more subtle in the form of its resistance than *ani*-prefacing, its role in

turn-beginnings is evidently quite clear to interactants: Example 6 in Kim's paper shows how inferentially rich – and sanctionable – a turn-initial *kulenikka* can be. In a situation in which the respondent has already taken an evasive stance towards previous questions, his turn-initial *kulenikka* alone is sufficient to attract a sanctioning interjection from the questioner.

By comparison with the subtleties of some of the objects already discussed, the phenomenon described by Clayman (in this issue) – the use of address terms to preface answers to questions – may have more general cross-cultural import. As Clayman notes, address terms are most extensively used in initiating, or first positioned, actions (see also Schegloff, 1968; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1998). When used in responsive or second positioned actions, he argues, they draw on this background of usage to convey a sense that the response is motivated independently of its initiating question, thus putatively detaching it to some extent from its anchorage in the preceding question. Two possibilities flow from this detachment: (i) a respondent can 'cleanse' a response from its motivational entanglement with the preceding question, and (ii) a respondent can detach the response from the terms of the question, 'volunteering' a response that is putatively freed from that question's agenda and presuppositions. Not surprisingly address term-prefaced responses are frequently evasive or otherwise involve resistance to the agenda of the questions to which they respond (Rendle-Short, 2007; Clayman, 2010, 2012; Butler et al., 2011). To the extent that the vocative function of address terms in summoning the attention of recipients is a cross-cultural universal, it is likely that the functions of address-term-prefaced responses to questions identified by Clayman may also generalize across cultures – a small island in what may otherwise be a sea of relativities (Sidnell and Enfield, 2012).

3. Indexing continuity

While the practices described above occur in second positioned actions, and mainly function to resist the projected expectations of highly constraining first actions, a second class of practices centers on the first or initiating actions themselves. Here the relevant issue concerns whether these initiating actions are to be understood as part of an ongoing sequence or course of action, or as a departure from it. The first discussion of this issue was in 'Opening Up Closings' where Schegloff and Sacks (1973) discuss the role of 'misplacement markers' such as 'by the way' in lifting the presumption that the following turn is to be understood as arising out of its immediate sequential context, and that the preceding turn is to be understood as the core interpretive matrix for its comprehension. Subsequently Heritage and Sorjonen (1994) discussed a converse case. This involved the role of *and*-prefacing in indexing that a question, though superficially topically distinctive, was to be understood as continuing a line of questioning or the overall activity trajectory implemented through such a line. A number of subsequent papers have addressed the indexing of items to come that are, alternatively, continuative, disjunctive or 'expectably new' (Bolden, 2008, 2009a,b; Keevallik, 2012; Weidner, 2012).

In contexts where new sequences (or even new conversations) are initiated, the default expectation may well be that 'new business' is to be the object of the subsequent talk. In these contexts, it may be expected that a major function of turn-initial objects will be to counter this expectation. This theme of using turn-prefaces to build actions that are to be understood as continuations of earlier talk is taken up in Keevallik's (in this issue) discussion of *no(h)*-prefacing. She focuses on environments in which connections are made between new topics and sequences and earlier elements of talk that are quite distant in time, sometimes with a lapse in connection between the parties. In this context, she argues, *no(h)*-prefacing works to cancel any basic expectation or presumption that temporally or thematically disjointed talk will be on an unconnected new topic, and instead to project that this talk is intended to be connected to what went on some time earlier. This is a paper that deserves considerable interest and study not least because in building these sequential connections participants, are as Keevallik points out, also building social relationships as well.

It is tempting to conclude, therefore, that whether the task involves either resisting the terms and expectations set in motion by a preceding turn, or inviting a recipient to recognize the sequential, pragmatic and activity connections between a current turn and an earlier one that is *not* the preceding turn, turn-initial particles are an important resource through which these 'expectation cancelling' functions are implemented. Where, for whatever reason, this kind of cancellation of the sequential and interpretive significance of 'next position' is to be achieved, turn-initial position is a strategic location from which to do so. It is strategic since it can reset expectations for the entire turn to follow and, with it, implications for the subsequent turns and the projects they implement as well. And, as the literature increasingly indicates, this is just as significant for languages where a good deal of the grammatical action normally occurs at the ends of sentences and turn constructional units.

The final paper in this group, by Smith (in this issue), is distinctive in that it takes up a specific sentence-initial frame, "I thought," e.g., "I thought [you were X-ing]," that is effectively dedicated to registering new information. It does so by asserting that the new information just conveyed by A, undercuts B's earlier belief. As Smith shows, the earlier belief was normally founded in earlier statements made by A. In puzzling out this commonplace, yet oddly obscure, formulation, Smith points to its claim of connectedness, not between actions-in-sequences, but rather between persons in

relationships. He thus contributes to a theme that emerges in Keevallik's paper as well, and has surfaced (perhaps too infrequently) in earlier papers (Drew and Chilton, 2000; Pomerantz and Mandelbaum, 2005) concerning the overarching role of conversation in maintaining relationships. In this case, however, the claim of connectedness that is carried by the "I thought you were. . ." is double-edged. Not only may its speaker (B) be found incorrect by the epistemically authoritative A, but also, depending on the circumstances, there is an implication that B might have been informed sooner of the change in plans. A turn of this kind may thus engage complex epistemic and morally knotted dilemmas that neither party may find easy to resolve.

4. Conclusion

It is far too early to know what to make of the current upsurge of work on turn-initial objects. A major question will likely concern whether it is possible to specify an underlying 'semantics' or 'pragmatics', for any given object in a particular language. It is surely tempting in the flush of synchronic analysis to reach for common denominators that underlie, and yet are colored by, a multitude of positionally specific usages. Yet those who are used to taking a diachronic perspective in which it is possible to observe the ways in which usages migrate, merge, and divide under pressure from language contact or the simple invention of other usages, may counsel caution. Yesterday's exception to the rule may be tomorrow's social change. Whatever the outcome of questions of this sort, these papers add to the resources with which we can pose the questions and begin to conceptualize how to answer them.

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