

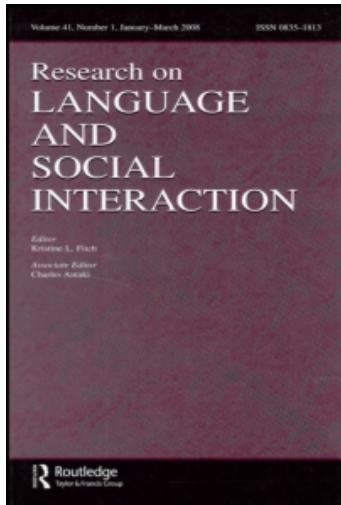
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A Scalar View of Response Relevance

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We are grateful to Emanuel A. Schegloff (ES; 2010/this issue) and Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen (ECK; 2010/this issue) for their thoughtful engagement and challenging commentaries. In this response we lack space to address all of the issues they raise. On matters of data interpretation, readers should consult the exemplars themselves. We focus here on what we take to be the key issues, in particular two proposed alternative hypotheses, the role of pursuits of response, the implications of our model of response relevance for the structural scaffolding of conversation, and finally speaker agency.

THEORIES OF RESPONSIVENESS

Conversation Analysis (CA) research supports a theory of communication that fundamental structures of social interaction are robust across gender, class, culture, language, and setting (see Schegloff, 2006; and also Levinson, 2000, 2006). Schegloff proposes as candidate structures, turn-taking, repair organization, and sequence organization (2006). As Schegloff conceptualizes it, sequence organization is centered on the notion of adjacency pairs (2007). In this conception, a variety of action types mobilize response as a matter of normative obligation. Absent responses are “noticeably absent” and accountable as such. A challenge to this conception arises from the fact that not every contribution to a conversation makes response conditionally relevant, even among actions that have been identified in the literature as first pair-parts. To address this problem, “Mobilizing Response” (MR; 2010/this issue) proposes a context-independent theory of sequence organization in which sequential position, action, and turn design all play a role. ES and ECK offer alternative hypotheses that require two discrete systems of sequence organization depending on either conversation context or on action class. Here we consider these hypotheses and discuss why they are problematic.

Thank you to Nick Enfield and John Heritage for valuable comments and discussions in the course of writing this response and to Charles Antaki for making it possible to have such a discussion in the pages of *Research on Language and Social Interaction*.

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The Conversation-Context Hypothesis

The first hypothesis suggested by ES and ECK is that “nonfocused” talk is governed by a fundamentally different organization than “focused” conversation. This theory proposes that the same fundamental action (e.g., assessing, announcing, noticing, offering, requesting) is understood differently by interactants if they are in a “focused” rather than a “nonfocused” conversation. By contrast, we argue that if, for instance, A assesses the food she and B had for dinner this evening as they are standing waiting for a bus to go home (with visual access) or as B rounds a corner into the next room, in a darkened room, or on the telephone (where they lack visual access), the relevance of B’s response is fundamentally unchanged: (a) as an action the assessment invites but does not require a second assessment; (b) depending on the design and position of the assessment the pressure for response may be increased.

A fundamental problem with the conversation-context hypothesis is that it relies on a dichotomy of states of conversation. Drawing on Goffman (1963), ECK formulates the distinction as between “focused” and “nonfocused” while ES formulates it as between “continuing states of continuous talk” and “continuing states of incipient talk.” The precise boundaries between these conceptualizations, both as used by the commentators and relative to each other, are unclear (but see the introduction to Syzmanski, Vinkhuyzen, Aoki, & Woodruff, 2006 for a discussion). Moreover, although the dichotomy should not be equated with visual access, there is clearly substantial overlap for the commentators and in the literature. The meaningfulness of these different states of talk for conversationalists remains an open empirical question. We take the focus distinction to be broader and better defined, so we use these terms here although it may be that, to the extent that participants orient to the contexts as distinct, the latter distinction may be relevant.

If two discrete systems govern the two contexts, then participants must be able to recognize which context they are in at any given moment. But when is a context nonfocused enough for the nonfocused relevance rules to apply? Heritage raised this same problem regarding the difference between a Parsonian and a Garfinkelian account for someone responding (or not) to a greeting, arguing that a “different rules for different contexts” approach is inherently unwieldy for a social world in which contexts shade into one another. The ethnomethodological alternative is that actions index contexts (Heritage, 1984, pp. 103–134). We suggest that it is more plausible that in these two contexts, people index their level of engagement and desired engagement through the way they design their actions.

The commentators imply that response relevance in nonfocused interaction should be treated as exceptional, a departure from conversation in focused contexts. ECK suggests that “conditional relevance has never been claimed to hold in *nonfocused* gatherings.” Although it may not have been asserted as such, Schegloff (2007) relies on many copresent situations similar to those relied on in MR in laying out his views about the adjacency pair and expansions of basic sequences. Thus he implies that sequence organization applies to these nonfocused contexts as well.¹ We believe that a theory of sequence organization should apply across conversational contexts. It is in this context that children learn how to use language in conversation, and nonfocused conversation

¹Data referred to in the book as Chinese Dinner, Chicken Dinner, Virginia, and Stew Dinner are all face-to-face mealtime conversations. Others such as US, KC-4, SN4, Pre-party, Post-party involve other forms of copresent interaction: hanging out at a shop, a visit by one couple to another, a visit to borrow notes at a university dormitory, and car rides to/from a party, respectively.

comprises *the* dominant form of everyday informal social interaction in every society in all 6,000 languages spoken in the world today, especially if that is meant to extend into (virtually) all forms of informal face-to-face interaction.² Indeed, a great many of the world's languages have never been spoken on a telephone. Surely the organizing structures underlying this sort of conversation are *the* organizing structures of everyday conversation, structures that can be modified in various situations, such as those without visual access.

In MR we argue that some modifications of the current theory of response relevance are necessary to deal with what we see as a recurrent phenomenon—that actions that have been analyzed as first pair-parts with conditionally relevant second pair-parts, at times, neither receive second pair-parts nor is the lack of response treated as noticeably absent. That nonresponse happens less in contexts of no visual access requires an account but does not detract from the challenge it poses to our basic theory of sequence organization.

We suggest a simple account that does not require two systems of sequence organization: As speakers we learn (and it takes learning) to adapt to a context where we lose visual access to one another whether that be because one disappears around a corner, or because we are talking by telephone. In all of these situations the primary difference is one of reciprocity. Any time that a response is missing, the prior speaker can wonder whether s/he has lost his/her recipient; not so in face-to-face conversation. We suggest that (vocal) responsiveness may be higher in a context without visual access precisely to manage this interactional problem. When an assessment is done in a context lacking visual access, it is always a possibility that a speaker has lost his/her recipient, and this increases recipient responsiveness. Thus it is not that a response is any more or less relevant depending upon the context but rather that responsiveness, in general, is higher in a context of no visual access—a hypothesis that could be empirically tested. Moreover, if gazing at each other is one indication of focus and attention, then this is dealt with in MR.

The Two Classes of Action Hypothesis

The second hypothesis is alluded to by ES at the end of his commentary where he proposes that there are action-specific response relevancies. He suggests that rather than two different systems of sequence organization depending on conversation context, there may be two systems of sequence organization—one for each of two classes of action. Could there be one class of actions that, independent of visual access or state of conversation, makes response conditionally relevant, and another class of actions that does not make response conditionally relevant, but nonetheless invites response? ES suggests that a scalar model of response relevance might apply to the latter class of actions but maintains that a binary model applies to the former class.

We too began with this possibility (See our “Implications for a Theory of Response Relevance” section in MR), and indeed its trace is still visible in our discussion of canonical and noncanonical actions. Initially it seems plausible that invitations, offers, and other canonical first pair-parts are organized by reference to adjacency pairs whereas other sorts of actions are organized by reference to another sequential structure. Schegloff allowed for the possibility of another form of sequence

²Our data include both situations where couples are copresent for dinner and cases where friends are together in order to talk to one another. Both commentators imply that all of our data is of the “nonfocused” or “continuing state of incipient talk” variety.

organization (Schegloff, 2007, p. 9). Evidence in support of the “two classes of action” hypothesis includes that most canonical first pair-part actions are responded to. When they are not, nonresponse is routinely treated as problematic. By contrast, less canonical first pair-part actions (e.g., assessments, announcements, noticings) are less consistently responded to than the canonical first pair-part actions. In these cases, nonresponse is less likely to be treated as problematic: No response following a noncanonical initiating actions is not sanctioned. Moreover, some actions appear to make response more relevant than other actions, independent of the design used. Consider that if I offer you use of my bicycle this action seems inherently more response mobilizing than if I assess the weather.

However, a significant problem with the “two classes of action” hypothesis is the conflation of action and design. Canonical first pair-part actions are typically designed with multiple response-mobilizing features whereas noncanonical initiating actions are not.³ Initially, this makes it difficult to discriminate between the theory presented in MR from this one. However, two key pieces of evidence argue against the two-tiered view of actions suggested by this hypothesis.

First, it is not only noncanonical initial actions that can be less direct in design. Canonical first pair-part actions are also sometimes done in less direct ways and consequently use fewer response mobilizing resources. It is in precisely these contexts that they are less likely to be responded to (as discussed in MR). If both canonical and noncanonical initiating actions are more likely to be responded to when delivered with response-mobilizing features, then a scalar conceptualization is appropriate to both classes and there is no reason to subdivide actions into classes.

Second, the resources of turn design that mobilize response in contexts where a speaker is initiating a sequence are the same resources speakers use when working to secure response to a second- or even a third-position action. In MR we focus on contexts where persons did not respond to a first-position action. However, the same resources increase response relevance at points where a sequence is otherwise possibly complete.⁴ Heritage and Raymond observe that interrogative syntax in second-position assessments contests the diminished epistemic rights that would ordinarily be accepted by the speaker of a second assessment. They suggest that “by virtue of its interrogative syntax, this format mandates a second assessment through the conditional relevance of a question–answer pair more strongly than would a simple declarative” (Heritage & Raymond, 2005, p. 21). Similarly, Rossano has shown that interactant gaze at a point of possible sequence closure treats the sequence as incomplete and is associated with sequence expansion (Heritage & Raymond, 2005).

Thus, although we maintain that there is a difference in response relevance by action type, if the same design features increase response relevance across actions and sequential contexts, then it is unnecessary to make a distinction between classes of actions. Instead, if there appear to be two classes, it is because they emerge from the mechanisms discussed in our account.

³Actions that are maximally response mobilizing obviously have less room for manipulation via turn design. This is certainly true of highly ritualized actions such as greetings, farewells, and summonses. Yet, limited ethnographic observation suggests that even here gaze and delivery can make a difference for responsiveness. Schegloff has also noted that a recipient of a second summons can recognize it as a second, thus as qualitatively different from a first, even without having heard the first summons. Part of this may arise from the “upgraded” nature of second summons (Schegloff, 2007, p. 52).

⁴By focusing on potentially sequence-initiating actions, we maximize the relevance of response derived from sequential position. Arguably in second and third position sequential position reduces the pressure to respond.

PURSUITS OF RESPONSE IN OUR THEORY

In MR we leverage as evidence in support of our theory of response relevance that the same design features we discuss are also relied on to *pursue* response. The commentators interpret the action of pursuing response to be supportive of a theory that response to the first action was *conditionally relevant* and thus is treating response as *relevantly absent*. In MR we adopt a view that simply by performing an action in sequence initial position the speaker *invites* but does not necessarily *require* response. Subsequent to an action that invites uptake, a speaker may or may not *pursue* response. Although a sanction would treat response as relevantly absent, a pursuit treats a response as desired but does not sanction the recipient for not having produced a response. The extent to which a pursuit treats a lack of response to the prior as a violation depends on the design of the pursuit. Whereas in MR Extract 6 Cindy's pursuit clearly treats Mom as having failed to answer her question, MR Extracts 16–19 do not have this sanctioning quality to them. In each, by upgrading the initiating action, speakers treat their original action's design as partially responsible for the lack of uptake. (For a discussion of pursuits relying on unmodified redoings versus modified redoings see Rauniomaa, 2008).

To reiterate our argument with respect to these cases—speakers may wish to *invite* uptake of a noticing, announcement, assessment, etc. without placing significant pressure on a recipient to respond. Among strangers at a bus stop for instance, such a design respects the fact that a fellow traveler may not be interested in chatting and leaves him/her with a way out of interacting, a way out that a more coercive turn design would not. Or again, speakers may prefer to rely on a less-coercive design when seeking agreement or appreciation, which are more meaningful when offered relatively independently (rather than coerced by the first speaker).⁵ If an invitation to respond is not taken up, often nothing more is said or done. However, in some cases (see MR), speakers who began in a less-coercive fashion pursue response more coercively. After all, as we discuss in MR, although independent appreciation or agreement is optimal, at times we may want to know someone's opinion even if that requires a degree of coercion. This shows that (a) the lack of response is attributed to the original design of the action, (b) the resources interactants rely on to secure a response in pursuits are the same as those relied on to secure a response in other contexts, and (c) interactants are at times willing to compromise independence of the agreement or appreciation in favor of securing some form of response. Such cases do not offer evidence that response was relevantly absent.

THE STRUCTURAL SCAFFOLDING OF CONVERSATION

The commentators suggest that adopting a scalar theory of response relevance as proposed in MR means that we lose “much of the structural scaffolding of conversation” (ECK, 2010/this issue, p. 34). In fact, the basic scaffolding remains unchanged.

First, as articulated in MR, both action and sequential position can set up strong response relevance. Some actions, regardless of their design, are more generative of response than other actions. Thus, requests appear more generative of response than noticeings. However, despite a

⁵Heritage and Raymond (2005) argue this same point from the perspective of the second speaker.

heavy emphasis on action within the CA literature, we still lack a theory of action ascription. The bread and butter of CA has been identifying practices for varying the social-relational aspects of actions; however, we know relatively little about how people design and recognize the actions themselves in the first instance. For instance, Curl and Drew's fine work on offers and requests documents striking differences in the import of different action designs (Curl, 2006; Curl & Drew, 2008). Yet the fundamental question of how we recognize an offer or request remains unanswered. Moreover, Conversation Analysts rely heavily on the responsive turn in action analysis—we know a given action is a request if the recipient treats it as one. Yet, in a number of cases shown here there is no uptake, so how are we to ascertain what action the speaker designed or what action the recipient understood him/her to be implementing? When we can answer these questions we will improve our understanding not only of action ascription but also of response relevance. Based on our current understanding of action, it is clear that different actions mobilize response to different degrees. Further empirical work will clarify the nature of these differences. Most of our argument, though, goes beyond the differences that actions have for response relevance since our arguments about turn design apply more generally. Thus, whether a given action is analyzed to be a complaint or a noticing, we have shown that it is more likely to be responded to when it is delivered with response-mobilizing design features.

Second, many actions are canonically designed with multiple of the features we've discussed, and this creates a sense of response relevance. Requests are canonically done with design features that are generative of response. Noticings are canonically done without these features. We are not doing away with the cornerstone of sequence organization. Rather, we are taking a general and context-independent view of sequence organization. In our view, initial actions invite paired responsive actions in response, just as in the Schegloff and Sacks model (Schegloff, 1968; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). It is the mechanism of that invitation and the binary versus scalar quality of it that we are challenging. We believe speakers and recipients rely on sequential position, action, and turn design to indicate (and assess) the degree of pressure for response. And we believe that this is achieved not in the sense of a light switch but in the sense of a dimmer switch. Like a dimmer switch, an action's design can reach maximum pressure for response, but it need not always be at maximum or off altogether.

Third, even when an action is low on the scale of pressure for response and is done without these response-implicative features, simply by virtue of being uttered in a position that is possibly sequence initiating, it *invites* response. Whether it winds up successfully initiating a sequence is contingent on what the recipient does. Thus there is no difference of opinion about the claim that these actions are being offered to interlocutors for possible uptake.

SPEAKER AGENCY

As we stated earlier and as ES underscores in his commentary, CA embodies a theory of communication that conversation structures can be independent of various aspects of speaker identity and context, including even the language being spoken. In MR we are centrally concerned with the speaker-independent resource that interactants rely on to mobilize response. Indeed, as we showed in MR and discussed earlier in this response, there are recurrent patterns that appear to be in place across many different speakers—speakers of different races, genders, and ages, and talking in different contexts and using different languages.

However, ES remarks that

Although felicity of expression and accessibility to readership often engender the metaphor of people using or deploying the practices, the more serious stance emphasizes the robustness of the organizations of practice and the ways in which they shape the conduct of this or that transient congregation of persons. (2010/this issue, p. 41)

For our part, we are unwilling to lose sight of the fact that speakers *do* deploy these structures for particular interactional objectives. It is precisely this analytic leverage that allows us to understand the affordances of a non-response-mobilizing design. A low-pressure design is ideal for a situation such as when Kim announces “I put raisins in the salad” (MR Extract 20, 2010 /this issue, p. 24). As a structure we can say that it matters not who the individual is offering this announcement. We can simply say that due to its combination of action type, sequential position, and turn design, its pressure for response is low. Yet, that would only be part of the story. After all, Kim is relying on this particular design to this particular recipient at this particular moment. Whether Mark likes the raisins matters for whether she will put them in future salads, something we suppose she is likely to do if she can secure an independent unmitigated positive assessment of them. Thus, her beginning with a low-pressure turn design is well suited to this enterprise. The escalation is also understandable in these terms (see MR).

Our perspective is no more “actor centric” than other foundational CA studies documenting recipient design including speaker orientation to what an interlocutor knows about (Goodwin, 1979),⁶ or how s/he will recognize a reference to a person (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979) or place (Schegloff, 1972). A concern with the social actors involved (not only with the structures) is also prominent in other early CA work. Sacks’s analysis of the structure of a joke and the preference for laughter over silence as well as in his discussions of agreement and membership categorization devices reflect this concern (Sacks, 1972, 1974, 1979, 1987). One of Jefferson’s most fundamental contributions to CA was to identify how people affiliate and disaffiliate with each other through technical resources including laughter, repair, or colligation (Jefferson, 1984, 1986, 1987; Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987).

We see speakers as involved in an agentive way, as they implement actions relying on particular practices in particular contexts to particular recipients. We are committed to a view that maintains a primary focus on the fundamental structures of conversation, but at the same time recognizes that people are performing actions to, with, and for others. Who these people are to each other and what their respective projects are, matter both to the interactants and for the interaction, and thus inescapably for those who are committed to the analysis of their conduct.

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⁶Since Goodwin’s initial study, research has repeatedly shown how concerned interactants are with each others’ states of knowledge, rights to know and make assertions, and relative authority to know and make assertions (e.g., Drew, 1991; Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Schegloff, 1996).

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