

Transitioning between activities with the Danish change-of-state token *nå*



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Abstract

In this paper I demonstrate that the Danish change-of-state token *nå*, which is ordinarily employed to register a shift in a speaker's state of information, can also be used to propose and mark a transition between activities. While *nå* is indexical by nature, both its sequential position (after a topic or activity has been potentially closed down) and its composition (of being imbued with other – both lexical and physical – properties) mean that the co-participants have no trouble understanding when a *nå* indexes a shift in orientation and thus embodies a proposal to transition between activities, rather than serving as a simple receipt of information.

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1. Introduction

Human interaction is typically organized around a number of different activities, phases, or sequences. A telephone call, for instance, consists minimally of an opening and a closing sequence (e.g., [Schegloff, 1968](#); [Schegloff and Sacks, 1973](#)), service encounters minimally include an opening sequence where customer and service provider greet each other, a phase in which the customer makes a request that is granted or denied, a sequence of monetary exchange and a leave-taking sequence (e.g., [Merritt, 1980](#); [Sorjonen and Raevaara, 2014](#)), doctor–patient encounters minimally involve a symptom description phase, an examination phase, a phase during which a diagnosis and/or treatment recommendation is delivered (e.g., [Robinson, 1998](#); [Robinson and Stivers, 2001](#)) and sometimes even sequences of ‘small talk’ (e.g., [Benwell and McCreaddie, in press](#)) and so on. Often, participants transition between each phase or sequence in a relatively routine and unmarked manner, but many – if not all – languages also have available a range of lexical items that can be used to propose a transition between a previous and a next phase in their interaction. The various lexical items that can be employed for transitioning between activities or phases in interaction are often glossed together as ‘discourse markers’ because they are “sequentially dependent elements which brackets units of talk” ([Schiffrin, 1987:31](#)). In reality, however, the lexical items that have so far been described as serving to propose a transition between activities in interaction seem to come in two different linguistic categories. On the one hand, there are pro-adverbs such as the Estonian *nii* and *soo* ([Keevallik, 2010a,b](#)), English and German *so* ([Bolden, 2008, 2009](#); [Barske and Golato, 2010](#)), Swedish and Danish *så* and *sådär/sådan* ([Ottesjö and Lindström, 2005](#); [Lindström and Heinemann, 2009](#)); on the other hand, there are adjectives, i.e. items that are otherwise used for assessing or evaluating, such as English and German *okay* ([Beach, 1993, 1995](#); [Barske, 2009](#)) and English *lovely*, *brilliant*, *right* and *alright* ([Antaki et al., 2000](#); [Antaki, 2001](#); [Gardner, 2001, 2007](#)).

In this paper, I consider a third type of lexical item that can be used to propose a transition between activities in interaction, namely the Danish *nå*. In linguistic terms, this item can best be categorized as an interjection or change-of-state token, which – like English *oh* – can be used “to propose that its producer has undergone some kind of change in his or her

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locally current state of knowledge, information, orientation or awareness.” (Heritage, 1984:299). In its most frequent context-of-use (see section 2) Danish *nå* serves to index that its producer has undergone a change with respect to his or her state of **informedness**, as illustrated in the following extract that contains three *nå*’s of this type (lines 17, 23 and 29). The extract is from a home help visit, where two home helps are taking a break in the kitchen while a disabled pensioner is having her lunch in the living room. The extract begins when one home help (HH1) inquires of the other (HH2) whether she has ever ordered clothes from *ellos*, a mail-ordering company¹:

(1) 128-129-130 TH/F4/HH/5

- 01 HH1: Har du no'ensinde bestilt fra ellos?
Have you ever ordered from ellos?
- 02 (1.7)
- 03 HH2: En enkelt gang, [>det var<
Once only, >it was<
- 04 HH1: [Hvor lang tid varede det
How long did it take
- 05 inden du fik det?
before you got it?
- 06 (0.3)
- 07 HH1: Det' snart fjorten dage siden jeg har bestilt,
It's almost fourteen days since I ordered,
- 08 (0.9)
- 09 HH2: >Ve' du hva' det'< nok fordi de:t æ- det' he-
>You know what it's< probably because i:t i- it's al-
- 10 det' ny e- ny- de nye ting.=>.hh< Jeg tror
it's new e- ne- the new suff.=>.hh< I do think
- 11 ås'- Jeg tror ås' det tog en Ne:j (0.4)
I do think it took a No: (0.4)
- 12 >otte ti dage,< (t[og det vist ikk' mere)
>eight ten days,< (don't think it took more)
- 13 HH1: [Q:kay.
- 14 (0.8)
- 15 HH2: >Du ska' () bruge det te' konfirmationen?<=
>You need () it for the confirmation?<=
- 16 HH1: =Nej.=
=No.=
- 17 HH2: =Nå.
(0.4)
- 18 (0.4)
- 19 HH1: Det ska' jeg dog ikk'.
I at least don't.
- 20 (0.9)
- 21 HH1: Jeg trænger bare så'n te' en ny jakke,
I just so need a new jacket,
- 22 >å' så har jeg< prøvet å' bestilt den.
>and then I have< tried to order it.

¹ This and all following examples have been transcribed according to Jefferson (2004). All examples come from a larger collection of *nå*’s (see section 2) and the first number(s) of the extract heading indicates the example's number in the collection. The second part of the heading indicates the data set from which the example was collected.

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