

Sequence recompletion: A practice for managing lapses in conversation



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Abstract

Conversational interaction occasionally lapses as topics become exhausted or as participants are left with no obvious thing to talk about next. In this article I look at episodes of ordinary conversation to examine how participants resolve issues of speakership and sequentiality in lapse environments. In particular, I examine one recurrent phenomenon—sequence recompletion—whereby participants bring to completion a sequence of talk that was already treated as complete. Using conversation analysis, I describe four methods for sequence recompletion: turn-exiting, action redos, delayed replies, and post-sequence transitions. With this practice, participants use verbal and vocal resources to locally manage their participation framework when ending one course of action and potentially starting up a new one.

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1. Introduction

It is a regular occurrence in conversational interaction for silence to emerge at the end of a sequence of talk, and then for someone to end that silence with some utterance that neither forwards the topic nor implicates some next action. Take for example Extract 1, which begins with Hannah informing Molly about their university's interlibrary loan program (a more technical analysis is given in Section 3). Transcripts follow [Jefferson \(2004\)](#) for verbal/vocal conduct and [Mondada \(2014\)](#) for bodily conduct.

(1) RCE25_1

01 HAN: you're only allowed a certain number of inter: (.)
02 library loans though aren't you.
(some lines omitted)
03 HAN: I think it's something like thi:rtly.
04 MOL: [oh okay.]
05 HAN: [but- (.)] just s- (.) so you know.

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- 06 MOL: °awright,° wɪ I put in I think maybe an order
 07 uv (0.4) ˈfaɪv of thm.
 08 HAN: °oh okay.°
 09 (0.8)
 10 HAN: °mm.°
 11 (0.9)
 12 HAN: .h I'm going out to dinner tonight.
 13 MOL: where'r you ɡoɪŋ?

In this sequence of talk, Hannah informs Molly that they're allowed to borrow up to thirty books (lines 1–3). Molly receipts this information (line 6) and reveals that she only ordered five, which is safely below the maximum. Hannah, in turn, receipts this information (line 8), which brings the sequence to a place where it could stop and something else could start up. The range of things that could happen next include topic continuation, resumption of some prior matter, initiation of new interactional business, and so on. None of these options are selected, however. Instead, there is silence (line 9). This silence is a lapse; it results from both participants forgoing the chance to speak. In this lapse environment, Hannah produces a quiet *mm* (arrowed). With this token, she merely registers what transpired in the prior sequence, implicates no specific next action, and brings the sequence to completion once more. That is, she *recompletes* the sequence. In this paper I expand on observations made in Hoey (2015) by examining this practice—sequence recompletion—through which participants reoccasion the relevance of sequence closure in a place where a sequence was already complete. I will try to show that participants use things like *mm* in lapse environments as a way to manage issues related to turn-taking, sequence organization, and participation.

2. Sequence completion and lapses

Sequences are vehicles through which participants collaboratively bring off courses of action in interaction. A generic concern for participants is locating where sequences might end (see Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). According to Schegloff (2007), the definitive mark of sequence completion is the initiation of another sequence, as this reveals a speaker's understanding of the prior sequence as finished. However, participants do not always know in advance whether someone will initiate a new sequence. They can only parse the unfolding interaction for indications of *possible* completion (see Schegloff, 2006), whereupon they may justifiably treat the sequence as complete by, for instance, initiating another one. The general question addressed in this paper is how participants produce and recognize possible sequence completion.

How participants arrive at possible sequence completion is bound up with how a sequence begins. A sequence-initiating action may straightforwardly indicate what it would take to adequately address it. For example, a sequence initiated with a request comes to possible completion once that request is either granted or denied (Schegloff, 1990). And a sequence that begins with other-initiated repair may be complete upon the provision of a repair solution (Schegloff, 2007). These sequences form adjacency pairs, where an initiating action makes conditionally relevant a type-matched responsive action from another participant (Schegloff, 1968, 2007; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). Many sequences, then, may be treated as finished with the production of a type-matched response to the initiating action.

This picture is complicated by the fact that possible sequence completion is inherently provisional, as participants may always expand the sequence (Schegloff, 2007). Even if some turn constitutes an adequate sequence ending, participants can always go on with that course of action. Sequence expansion may be minimal, as with sequence-closing thirds (SCT) like *oh*, *okay*, or assessments, through which participants display preparedness for ending the current sequence and produce something that could embody its completion. Conversely, sequence expansion may project further talk, as with repair initiation or topicalization of something from the prior sequence (Schegloff, 2007).

The abiding possibility of expansion permits sequences to grow rather long and complex such that recognizing completion is not so straightforward. Sequences that are organized by topic talk, for instance, systematically obscure what it would take to count as adequate completion. This is because they characteristically progress in a stepwise fashion, with the boundaries of topics/sequences shading into one another, and participants shifting between speakership and reciprocity (Jefferson, 1981, 1983a; Button and Casey, 1988; Schegloff, 1990; Sacks, 1992). For closing such extended sequences, participants can use sequence-closing sequences. This typically involves a proposal to end the sequence—for example, through an upshot, summary assessment, or something that demonstrates a grasp of what just transpired—followed by alignment in movement to closure by coparticipants (Schegloff, 2007: 168; see also Curl et al., 2006; Schegloff, 2009; Park, 2010). Participants also use certain multimodal practices to recognize sequence completion, like attenuating prosody from one turn to the next (Goldberg, 1978), gaze withdrawal (Rossano, 2012), and retraction of or shifts in bodily disposition (Goodwin, 1981; Schegloff, 1998; Mondada, 2015).

However participants arrive at possible sequence completion, the basic range of operations available at that point are a) stay with the same course of action (expansion), b) go on to something else (sequence initiation), or c) neither of these

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