Remembering and understanding with *oh*-prefaced yes/no declaratives in Dutch

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Abstract

Shared understanding is at the heart of social interaction: it is demonstrated and maintained with every turn-at-talk. Still intersubjectivity can on occasion break down, and this can happen for a plethora of reasons. Using conversation analysis, this paper demonstrates three practices that participants in Dutch talk-in-interaction use to repair breakdowns of intersubjectivity. The first practice consists of an *oh ja*-prefaced declarative. With this practice an interactant conveys that s/he remembers here-and-now some information which s/he thereby treats as relevant for understanding the prior talk. The second practice consists of an *oh*-prefaced declarative, with which the speaker claims to now understand something s/he earlier did not understand or had misunderstood. Both practices are declarative yes/no-type initiating actions, meaning that confirmation is treated as the relevant next action. Both practices, however, do very distinct actions. With a remembering, an interactant claims independent epistemic access, whereas with doing understanding access is local, and inferred from and dependent on the co-interactant's talk. We compare these two practices to *oh*-prefaced yes/no-type interrogatives. These too are used to address problems with intersubjectivity, but they claim instead that the prior talk by the interlocutor somehow contradicts the speakers background assumptions.

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1. Knowing and understanding in interaction

As was argued by Sacks (1992, vol. II:140) in his lectures, understanding is indispensable for social interaction: "if understanding isn't there, then there's nothing much going on." But as Sacks also notes, this is not why understanding is of interest for researchers of social interaction. Instead, it is because participants in talk-in-interaction do "showing understanding"; i.e., the interactants treat understanding as relevant for the ongoing talk.

This paper discusses three practices that interactants use in Dutch talk-in-interaction to address breakdowns of intersubjective understanding (cf., Sidnell, 2014; Heritage, 1984a). The focus is on two specific types of declarative yes/no-type initiating actions (YNDs). These are declarative utterances that address information to which the addressee has primary epistemic access and which therefore make confirmation relevant as a next action (Raymond, 2010; Heritage, 2012). In the first practice the YND is prefaced by *oh ja* ('oh yeah'/'oh that's right'). With an *oh ja*-prefaced YND the speakers claims that s/he here-and-now remembers some information which s/he thereby treats as relevant for understanding the prior talk (cf., Betz and Golato, 2008; Emmertsen and Heinemann, 2010;

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Heritage, 1984b; Koivisto, 2013; Middleton and Edwards, 1990; Kasterpalu, 2016). These two turn-constructional units – the *oh ja* and the YND – constitute one turn at talk, one ''major action'' (Levinson, 2013). In the second practice the YND is prefaced by just *oh.* With an *oh*-prefaced YND an interactant both claims and demonstrates that s/he now understands (Heritage, 1984b; Koivisto, 2015; Golato and Betz, 2008; Kasterpalu, 2016; Weidner, 2016). We compare these two practices with a third, very similar practice: an *oh*-prefaced yes/no-type interrogative (YNI) (Raymond, 2003). With an *oh*-prefaced YNI, a speaker also addresses a problem with intersubjectivity, and confirmation is also treated as a relevant next action. With *oh*-prefaced YNIs, however, the speaker conveys that his/her assumptions were in some way contradicted by the addressee.

The particular understanding that interactants achieve is typically not formulated. Instead, by doing a next turn interactants displays how they understood a prior turn – e.g., by doing an answer, a speaker displays his/her understanding of the prior turn as a question (Sacks et al., 1974:728). After each turn-constructional unit (TCU) there is a transition relevance space (TRP) where the addressee of that TCU can become the next speaker (Sacks et al., 1974) and by not initiating repair at a TRP the addressee implicitly claims that the prior turn was unproblematic and thus that s/he has understood that prior turn (Robinson, 2014). This understanding can then be accepted or rejected in the third turn (Schegloff, 1992; see also Koole, 2015). Understanding thus to an extent takes place *under the radar*: as long as there is no evidence to the contrary, interactants continue to assume that they understand and are understood (Schutz, 1967). This means that when interactants *do understanding* – i.e., specifically demonstrate and not just claim that they understand – they do so for a reason: reaching an understanding was problematic (Lindwall and Lymer, 2011; Robinson, 2014) – i.e., intersubjectivity had potentially or actually broken down (Schegloff, 1992).

The three practices discussed in this paper are used to address actual breakdowns of intersubjectivity. In all three practices, the change-of-state token *oh* (Heritage, 1984b) is combined with an additional TCU that conveys the specific change of state that has been realized.

The *oh ja*-prefaced YND is used to do *now-remembering*. We call this *doing now-remembering* as opposed to just *doing remembering*, because one of the crucial aspects of the practice we discuss, is that the interactant had forgotten information that s/he treats as relevant for understanding a prior turn (cf., Middleton and Edwards, 1990). As s/he now remembers, s/he also understands that prior action, and thus the interaction can continue (Mondada, 2011; Robinson, 2014).

The *oh*-prefaced YND is used to do now-understanding (Koivisto, 2015). Interactants do now-understanding for one of two reasons: either they did not understand at all, or they had misunderstood. In both cases, the *oh*-prefaced YND claims that the speaker here-and-now understands correctly. The practices are thus the same, but the sequential environment varies. When an interactant does not understand, the talk does not progress until the problematic turn has been addressed. The trouble source can thus be found in the local sequential environment. In cases of misunderstandings, however, the interactants have no reason to assume that their understanding was not correct. In fact, a misunderstanding requires by definition that the participants have moved on, since by moving on they claim to understand each other. The problem source of a misunderstanding is thus not necessarily located in the immediate prior turn, or even in the local sequence (Koivisto, 2015; Schegloff, 1992).

Although the focus in our analysis is on declaratives, we find that *oh*-prefaced YNIs can also be used to restore intersubjectivity. This practice, however, is less frequent in our data and its functions are diverse. As such, we can only give a taste of *oh*-prefaced YNIs in this paper. Our aim here is to show that there are systematic differences between *oh*-prefaced YNDs and YNIs: they are used in different sequential environments and do different actions. These differences provide insights into the epistemic claims that are encoded with both syntactic constructions.

2. Data

The data used for this analysis consist of about 12.5 h of casual phone conversations recorded by students at Utrecht University. The conversations are mostly between students, friends, and family, with topics spanning everything from homework to social events. The data have been analyzed according to the method of conversation analysis (Ten Have, 2007) and transcribed according to Jeffersonian conventions (in Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). We provided simple translations for each line, and word-by-word translations for the lines containing the relevant turns.

We found 66 cases of *oh* (*ja*)-prefaced YNDs and 27 cases of *oh*-prefaced YNIs. From this we removed all instances where the practice was used for other functions than repair. For example, in response to a news announcement, an *oh*-prefaced YND can be used to invite more talk (Heritage, 1984b; Jefferson, 1981). We also removed all cases where either the quality of the recording was insufficient, or the *oh*-prefaced YND was not responded to due to extra-interactional