

Aha-moments in interaction: Indexing a change of state in Polish

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the change-of-state functions of *aha* in Polish. Drawing on the analysis of data from ordinary and institutional conversations the paper identifies systematic patterns in the token's prosodic realization and its sequential position, which allow for distinguishing three different kinds of change-of-state signaled by *aha*. It will be shown that (1) a relatively plain *aha*, produced as a third-positioned receipt to question–answer sequences, indicates a change in informedness, while a prosodically accentuated *ʌa t̪ha:::*, (2) uttered in response to elicited or unelicited elaborations, indicates now-understanding, and (3) produced as a post-expansion to an already possibly closed sequence, indicates revelation.

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1. Introduction

Beginning with Heritage's (1984:299) seminal observation that the English *oh* proposes that “its producer has undergone some kind of change in his or her locally current state of knowledge, information, orientation or awareness”, studies on change-of-state as a domain of action have proliferated. Apart from explorations of the various sequential environments and functions of English *oh* (cf. Heritage, 1998, 2002, 2012), cross-linguistic studies have documented practices for showing that the participants have undergone a change-of-state. Prior research has shown, for instance, that speakers of different languages use a vast array of linguistic units, ranging from particles (Golato, 2010; Heinemann, 2009; Koivisto, 2015) or a combination of two tokens (Betz and Golato, 2008; Emmersten and Heinemann, 2010; Koivisto, 2013) to more extended turn formats, such as *oh* + acknowledgement (Heritage, 1984), to indicate the participant's ‘change of state’ (Heritage, 1984). Additionally, as Koivisto (2013) has shown for Heinemann (2016a,b) for Danish, the token itself can have different structural variants and prosodic modifications. Moreover, explorations of the sequential contexts that host change-of-state tokens have revealed a number of interactional functions that these elements can have. For instance, as an initiating action *oh ja*-prefaced yes/no declaratives in Dutch indicate remembering (Seuren et al., 2016), while a first-positioned *achso* in German marks a sudden realization or understanding that is then consequential for the speaker's next-positioned action (Golato, 2010). Occurring in second position, as a response to an informing, *achso* has been shown to be a claim of having understood the prior talk (Golato, 2010). Located in third position with respect to the prior adjacency pair, change-of-state tokens often function as sequence-closing thirds, with English *oh* being case in point (Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 2007). Cross-linguistically, some examples of tokens used in that position include *ai nii(n)* and *aa* in Finnish, which, respectively, indicate “only-now-remembering” (Koivisto, 2013), and mark a current understanding of some relevant issue that was either

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contradictory to the speaker's prior assumptions or somehow unclear (Koivisto, 2015). In German, research on *achJA* and *achso* has demonstrated that *achJA* marks a shift from not remembering some relevant information to now remembering it (Betz and Golato, 2008), while *achso*, which appears in third position to a repair, signals now-understanding and is an operative repair resolution (Golato and Betz, 2008).

This, by no means exhaustive overview highlights the fact that the understanding and the analysis of the functions of change-of-state tokens across languages coalesce with the sequential and activity contexts in which the tokens are deployed. Moreover, this brief summary also draws attention to the focus on the tokens' compositional modifications within specific languages, which oftentimes coincide with the varying functions that these tokens have. Taken together, these observations provide a framework for the investigation of how speakers of Polish index that they have just undergone a change-of-state. Adding to the still developing body of conversation analytic research on Polish (Zinken and Ogiemann, 2011; Zinken, 2013) and contributing to the cross-linguistic explorations on the broader area of change of state (Betz and Golato, 2008; Hayashi, 2009; Heritage, 1984; Koivisto, 2013), this paper draws parallels with the findings outlined above and contributes to research on state-of-change tokens through discussing the uses of *aha* in Polish.

The paper is organized as follows. First, I will provide a brief description of *aha* in Polish. Second, I will describe the data and the method used for the analysis. Third, I will discuss a number of instances of *aha*, highlighting the differences between the token's function relative to its prosodic realization and the sequential environment in which it occurs.

2. The status of *aha* in Polish

On the whole, participants in Polish conversations have various means at their disposal for receipting turns-at-talk that provide information (be it both information elicited through questions or unelicited information obtained through, for example, news announcements). These range from minimal responses such as *uhm*, *mhm* and *ta* ("yeah"), which signal acknowledgment and continuity (Schegloff, 1982) to more elaborate forms like *rozumiem* ("I understand"), in which the propositional content of the utterance comprises an explicit expression of understanding. *Aha* is also a part of this repertoire.

In the absence of prior interactional research on *aha*, a dictionary-based explanation of its usage proposes that it is an exclamation, conventionally functioning to indicate confirmation, understanding, recollection or irony (Drabik and Sobol, 2007). Wierzbicka (2003:326–329), who compares a number of interjections across cultures, calls *aha* an "all-purpose cognitive interjection" and proposes a semantic correspondence between *aha* and the expression 'now I know it'. In her comparative account of the different statuses of interjections in Polish and German (among them Polish *aha* and German *ach*), Bednarczyk (2014), who offers a description from a morphological, syntactic and semantic point of view, calls for a pragmatic investigation of interjections. This paper contributes one answer to that call.

3. Data and method

The data for the study are drawn primarily from naturally occurring telephone conversations (50 calls), ordinary and institutional, as well as doctor-patient interactions (20 consultations), yielding a total of 38 instances of *aha*. Additional conversational material comes from an over 60-h long video recording of interactions in a recording studio, filmed at the actual location in 2011. Not all of the interactions from that recording have been transcribed yet and an auditory investigation of the material has so far yielded 8 instances of *aha*. Given that there exists no other conversation analytic research on the change-of-state tokens in Polish, it is difficult to offer cogent explanations for this currently infrequent occurrence of *aha* in the data at this point. It may well be the case that other lexical elements are used for this function as well in Polish (for instance *a*, *o* and *oho*). Hence, further examination of the phenomenon will be needed in order to deepen our understanding of change-of-state tokens in Polish in general and the role of *aha* in the system of Polish change-state-tokens in particular. Significantly however, the kinds of naturally-occurring materials used for this study show that the practice of indicating a change of state is not restricted to a particular context or particular speakers, but rather occurs in a variety of communication contexts.

The data have been examined using the methods of conversation analysis. First, the data were scrutinized for all instances of *aha* and transcripts of the relevant contexts were made, according to the transcription conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (Jefferson, 2004). Second, for ease of reading, only the relevant turns contain three lines of transcript, where the first represents the original in Polish, the second is a morpho-syntactic gloss,¹ and the third line provides an idiomatic translation into English. Names and other elements of talk that could contribute to participant identification were changed.

4. Signaling change of state in Polish

This paper demonstrates that a careful examination of the design and sequential contexts in which *aha* is deployed contributes to our understanding of the types of functions that the token accomplishes. Most generally, *aha* functions as a

¹ The list of glossing symbols is provided in the Appendix.

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