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ScienceDirect

Journal of Pragmatics 104 (2016) 207–210

journal of PRAGMATICS

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Commentary

On the diversity of 'changes of state' and their indices

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Available online 24 September 2016

It is now nearly 50 years since Victor Yngve drew attention to a variety of response particles (such as *yes*, *uh huh*, *oh*, *okay* and so on) that he characterized as ''back channel'' communication, indicative of attention or interest (Yngve, 1970:568). In a disciplinary context in which spoken language was not much considered, and pragmatics itself was still in *statu nascendi*, this was a remarkable and far-sighted observation. The ensuing years have seen an extraordinary efflorescence in the study of particles and, while Yngve made no attempt to differentiate them, contemporary studies have instantiated a wholesale recognition of the diversity of particles and their functions, both within and between languages. Our increasing grasp of this diversity has permitted ever more nuanced understandings of sequential order in conversation, and of interaction across cultures.

Change-of-state tokens have definitely participated in this expansion. Research began with English *oh* and *ah* (Heritage, 1984; Aijmer, 1987; Aston, 1987; Schiffrin, 1987). Though these scholars began from independent starting points and used somewhat different methods, their convergence on general aspects of *oh* and its functioning was striking, and contrasted with the diversity of opinions on other English particles, for example, the turn-initial particle *well* (see Heritage, 2015, forthcoming, for an overview). The rapid convergence was enabled, perhaps, by the fact that *oh* exhibits a semantic core that is highly stable, though subtly particularized, across contexts. Thus when I first started to work on *oh*, it was possible to believe that most languages had an *oh*-like object, resembling English *oh* in terms of functioning. I was disabused rather thoroughly of this view in 1988 when Marja-Leena Sorjonen, then a graduate student at UCLA, said that it was hard for her as a Finn to understand how English speakers got along with just a single particle. This comment foreshadowed her own work on response particles (Sorjonen, 2001), and Aino Koivisto's subsequent dissection of the functions and affordances of a cluster of particles serving change-of-state functions in Finnish (Koivisto, 2013, 2015a, 2015b, this issue). The disclosure of this differentiation is now proceeding apace in multiple languages, as the present issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics* testifies.

1. Background: English *Oh*

English *oh* has a number of properties that it will be useful to register before proceeding further. (i) *Oh* can appear as a stand alone item, constituting a self-subsistent turn constructional unit (Sacks et al., 1974), and it can also be deployed as a turn-initial item, prefacing a more extensive turn at talk (Heritage, 1998, 2002). (ii) It is in very frequent usage: According to Norrick (2009), *oh* is the second most common turn-initial object in English conversation (after *yeah*), and the third most common free-standing object (after *yeah* and *okay*). (iii) Its positioning within the turn is structured through a 'linear syntax' (Hakulinen, 1993) of turn-initial objects, in which *oh* normatively precedes *well*, and *well* normatively precedes 'attention getting' items such as *look*, *listen* and address terms. (iv) In terms of sequences, *oh* participates in what Schegloff (1996) calls positionally sensitive grammar. It can appear in all three primary sequential positions (Heritage, forthcoming): (a) in first position it is generally used to introduce a relatively abrupt shift from some ongoing action to another (Jefferson, 1978; Heritage, 1984; Bolden, 2006); (b) in second position, responsive to a first action, it communicates a variety of stances depending on the nature of the preceding action (Heritage, 1998, 2002); and (c) in third position it tends to be used to close

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2016.09.007

off the preceding sequence (Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 2007). In the first two positions *oh* overwhelmingly appears in conjunction with additional turn components, while in the third it may, but need not, appear in free-standing form. (v) Finally, as the editors of this special issue note, there is a clear cross-linguistic clustering of change-of-state particles around the ''open, rounded vowels *a* and *o*'' (Heinemann and Koivisto, this issue: 4). This is possibly because these vowels are readily amenable to lengthening, and to prosodic variation that can offer fine-grained, but non-propositional and 'off record', differentiation of response. And, as the editors also note, following Couper-Kuhlen (2009), this differentiation of response may be of particular value for languages that, like English, are relatively sparsely outfitted with lexically differentiated change-of-state resources.

I believe that I am correct in saying that all, or almost all, contemporary work on changes-of-state proceeds under the aegis of Goffman's concept of response cries (Goffman, 1978). Goffman defined response cries as ''signs meant to be taken to index directly the state of the transmitter'' (Goffman, 1978:811), and used this term to describe vocalizations such as *ouch*, *brrr* and *eeuw* (expressions of pain, cold, and disgust respectively). Goffman's definition is a very careful one, designed to handle the fine line between the unmediated expression of subjective states and communicative action *designed to express* their unmediated expression. The expression ''signs meant to be taken'' is crucial here, because it places response cries unambiguously within the category of conventional signs, or in Grice's (1957) terms meaning$_{nn}$, rather than natural signs that directly express feelings or communicate other 'mental events' after the fashion discussed by Darwin (2009 [1872]). It may be added that *oh*, like Goffman's other above-mentioned examples, is conventionalized and integrated into the linguistic system of English. It is something that has to be learned and its semantics acquired by speaker-hearers. This stands in contrast to cries or grunts that are neither integrated nor learned nor conventionalized in this sense (Dingemanse et al., 2013), and are in fact much closer to natural signs. Goffman's conceptualization is generally compatible with notions of linguistic stance (Du Bois, 2007, see also Kärkkäinen, 2003; Wu, 2004).

2. Function

In writing about English *oh* in 1984 and subsequently, I was at pains to stress its functional opacity outside the semantic change-of-state core, and indeed it was this that Sorjonen's comment (mentioned earlier) registered. There are, after all, so many additional shadings that can be expressed: discovery, learning, remembering, recognition, realization, registration, and delayed versions of the last four of these, being corrected, repair and so on. And these shadings can have their own emotional laminations (surprised, excited, disappointed, sad, and so on), and may be variously positioned in socio-cognitive space – for example, supportive or affiliative to the interlocutor or otherwise, believing or disbelieving, empathic, sympathetic, etc. These elements of stance can 'bleed' ever wider. When one contemplates the combinatorial possibilities, even the rich variety of change-of-state tokens available to Finnish speakers (such as *aa, aha, ai, aijaa, ai nii*) seem to pale into insignificance, and it becomes necessary to recognize that here, as elsewhere in language use, the indexical and reflexive properties of usage have to carry the main load.

As it turns out, most languages seem to have at least two change-of-state tokens, most of which have been presented by analysts as standing in contrastive relations with one another. However these tokens chop up the conceptual and affective 'possibility space' afforded by the change-of-state proposal along distinctive dimensions and in very different ways, with the consequence that it will almost always be misleading to translate change-of-state tokens from one language into another – a consideration that also applies to most other turn-initial particles (Heritage and Sorjonen, forthcoming).

Moreover, because their 'semantics' are so abstract, change-of-state tokens are highly dependent on context, co-text and intonation in order to be understood as expressing specific cognitive and affective shifts. Accordingly, we can ask:

i) How much context do we need to grasp the import of particular tokens, as expressing, for example, 'surprise' (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006), or 'disappointment' (Couper-Kuhlen, 2009).
ii) How is the semantic space of English *oh* divided up in other languages such as Mandarin (Wu, 2004; Wu and Heritage, forthcoming), Japanese (Hayashi, 2009; Hayashi and Hayano, forthcoming; Endo, 2015), Finnish (Koivisto, 2013, 2015a,b, this issue), German (Golato, 2010, 2012; Golato and Betz, 2008),
iii) How do individual particles collocate and interact with other particles to generate distinctive types of changes-of-state (Betz and Golato, 2008; Emmertsen and Heinemann, 2010; Koivisto, 2013).
iv) What is the role of phonetic-prosodic features, for example lengthening and intonation, in modifying or extending some 'baseline' change-of-state understanding in different languages (Reber, 2012; Thompson et al., 2015:64–80). Is this something that can be generalized across languages?
v) Under what circumstances does the indexical field (Eckert, 2008) evoked by a change-of-state token vary? For example, *oh*-prefaced responses to questions indicate the question's inappositeness and the respondent's resistance to expanding a response (Heritage, 2002), but Danish *nå* (Heinemann, 2009, this issue), and Mandarin *ou* cannot be deployed to this effect (Wu, 2004).