

Well they had a couple of bats to be truthful: Well-prefaced, self-initiated repairs in managing relevant accuracy in interaction

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Abstract

This paper reports a conversation analytic study of *well*-prefaced, self-initiated repairs in talk-in-interaction. We show that speakers use *well*-prefacing of self-repairs to manage the credibility of claims in talk. Specifically, *well*-prefaced self-repairs attend to the relevant accuracy of a turn-so-far by revising it but without retracting it. For example, in the extract from which the title for this paper is taken, a speaker tells an interviewer that in 'New Zealand the- they for millions of years had no mammals. The- they they only had really birds'. This turns out to be a slightly exaggerated claim, which the speaker self-repairs in the transition space with a *well*-prefaced statement – 'Well they had .hhh a couple of bats to be (.) .hhh to be truthful But (.) they had no big mammals. No cats. No (.) dogs. No stoats'. Here, the additional information modifies the claim that there were no mammals (because there were bats) but also maintains the gist of what was said earlier (i.e. there were no large, predatory mammals). Our work has clear resonances with Drew's (2003) analysis of precision and exaggeration in interaction, though where he focussed on recipient-prompted revisions, we focus on self-initiation. Like Drew, we note that participants' orientations to speaking precisely connect to matters of veracity and accountability.

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1. Introduction

It is vital in talk-in-interaction that there are systematic practices for repairing ostensible troubles in hearing, speaking or understanding (Schegloff et al., 1977). There is little point in interaction that is incomprehensible to participants. Repair is therefore deeply implicated in the achievement of intersubjectivity (Drew, 2003; Heritage, 2007).

The basic interactional organisation of repair was set out by Schegloff et al. (1977), in which they make a central distinction between the task of repair initiation (indicating there is a problem) and the task of providing the repair solution (fixing the trouble). They further distinguish between who – self or other – carries out these tasks.

The sequential locations of repair are relative to the problem (or trouble source). Schegloff et al. (1977) observe that the first opportunity space for repair is within a current speaker's on-going turn. Thus, self-initiated same-turn repairs are by far the most common. Indeed other-correction is rare (Jefferson, 1987) and often avoided or abdicated altogether (Jefferson, 2007). The commonality of same-turn self-repair, however, relates not only to the matter of current speakership and sequential opportunity but also to basic sociality; self-initiated same-turn repair respects the rights of speakers to own what they say (Heritage, 2008).

This paper marks a departure from the traditional focus on sequence in studies of repair, and offers an analysis of the relationship between lexical form (*well*) and the kind of repair that it is used to do: the relationship between form and function. The specific practice we explore is *well*-prefaced self-repairs. We argue that *well*-prefaces in the domain of self-repair are

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used systematically to manage the accountability of an utterance by revising it in some way; often by adding detail to be more precise but, importantly, without affecting its original gist or import. That is, with *well*-prefacing, the speaker attends to ‘on the record’ accuracy, with an original utterance being treated as essentially correct.

Our work resonates with that of Drew (2003) on precision and exaggeration, and Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson (2005) on what they call ‘concessive repair’. Both papers deal with the ways in which speakers back down from an original claim or description whilst preserving its essential correctness; revision rather than retraction. For example, Drew (2003) shows that speakers and recipients attend to the relevant precision of talk by treating some original utterance as insufficiently precise for the occasion. In such cases, speakers modify their original utterance in order to be more exact. In many of Drew’s examples, speakers make their modifications in the face of ‘sceptical’ reciprocity (e.g. silence or interrogatively framed news receipts (*‘Oh really’*)). In this sense, the relevancy of precision is, in part, generated by the recipient’s response. This contrasts with our cases, in which speakers’ modifications appear to be self-generated. That is, with *well*-prefaced self-repairs, speakers ward off sceptical responses rather than respond to them.¹

In a later paper, Drew (2005) presents cases which more closely resemble the type of action we are reporting here; self-initiated revision, rather than retraction of earlier claims. In these extracts, speakers back down from an original version in ways that are fitted to the cross-cutting preferences at play. For example, in one instance (*ibid*, p. 139), a speaker, perhaps having (at a point earlier than the call this data comes from) been put in the awkward position of asking for the return of a borrowed item (a power tool), first denies having been inconvenienced by the lack of access to the tool (*‘he didn’t need it’*), and then immediately revises it to suggest having needed it for just one thing. Drew shows how these two versions of the same ‘reality’ are generated by different preference structures. The first version is a response to an apology and is fitted to the preference for accepting an apology and absolving the other of blame (Robinson, 2004). The second is, in a sense, the more ‘accurate’ version because it accounts for needing the tool back in the first place. The difference between not needing and just needing it for one thing is treated by Drew as a modification rather than a retraction.

Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson (2005) also discuss the ways speakers modify a previously overstated position by examining a practice that they call ‘concessive’ repair. By this, they mean repairs that back down from the sense of a previous utterance, whilst maintaining its original gist. That is, speakers are seen to ‘concede’ ground whilst producing themselves as accountable for the appropriateness of their original statement. Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson explored a broad range of concessives, examining their different sequential positions and semantic design; they proposed a two-part schema of the practice; first, a concessionary statement is produced (e.g. *‘I mean...’, ‘of course not all...’*) and this is followed by a revised statement, often *but*-prefaced, that shows how the original statement was partially justified. They argue that the practice manages talk that is overstated as opposed to ‘misspoken’ (*ibid*: 282).

Our paper also focuses on this conversational practice and contributes to the understanding of practices for achieving a revised position by examining one form of concessive repair. That is, *well*-prefaced, same-turn, self-repair. Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson are reluctant to identify concessive repair as self-initiated. This is because several of their cases come from co-present interactions for which they have only the audio. Quite understandably, they are, therefore, reluctant to state that recipients show no signs of scepticism. We argue, however, that *well*-prefaced repairs can be self-initiated.

2. *Well*-prefaced, same-turn, self-repair

The following extract comes from a telephone call between girlfriend and boyfriend, Penny and Stan. Penny works as a part-time waitress in a farm-shop where she is the most junior member of staff. At the start of the segment Penny is launching a story about two of her bosses.

Extract One [CTS05]

01 Pen: ((Clears throat)) .h tch Right you know er:m .hhhh (0.5)
 02 er::m: y- you know I’ve got two bosses,
 03 **well I’ve got loads** but (.) my main two like Reanne
 04 and Trudie.
 05 Sta: Yea:h hh=
 06 Pen: =And Trudie’s just like really sort of really sort of
 07 re- horrible and moody and stuff. .hh And Reanne’s like
 08 really nice. But she doesn’t do any work right.

¹ This is not to argue that *well*-prefaced repairs do not occur as responsive actions. We are focusing on self-initiated self-repair, but *well*-prefacing of other-initiated self-repair also occurs, and seems also to manage skeptical responses. This points to the relationship between form and action that we comment on later.

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