



Extending the notion of pragmatic completion: The case of the responsive compound action unit

Heidi Kevoe-Feldman^{a,*}, Jeffrey D. Robinson^b, Jenny Mandelbaum^c

^a Department of Communication Studies, Northeastern University, 204 Lake Hall, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, United States

^b Department of Communication, Portland State University, United States

^c Department of Communication, Rutgers University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 May 2011

Received in revised form 25 September 2011

Accepted 3 October 2011

Available online 1 November 2011

Keywords:

Compound action

Conversation analysis

Customer service

Sequence

Turn taking

Initiating actions

ABSTRACT

An important rule of turn taking is that, once a person gains the right to speak they are normally entitled to produce a single unit of talk, such as a single word, phrase, clause, or sentence. Conversation analysis has long recognized that, and attempted to describe how, this normal entitlement can be modified by pragmatic exigencies. Along these lines, this article demonstrates that a particular type of initiating action (referred to as a status inquiry) makes conditionally relevant a particular type of compound action unit (Lerner, 1991) that minimally contains two ordered pieces of information, each of which occupies at least one sentential unit. Data are audiotapes of 193 calls between one of five customer-service representatives and customers calling an electronics organization to check on the status of equipment that they have previously sent in for repair. This article contributes to our understanding of how pragmatic concerns can uniquely structure participants' understandings of what constitutes a possibly complete 'unit' of talk, as well as 'allowable' places for speakership.

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1. Introduction

Our understanding of the rules for conversational turn taking (Sacks et al., 1974) have significantly contributed to our understanding of social organization. One of these rules is that, once a person gains the right to speak, they are normally entitled to produce a single unit of talk (e.g., a word, phrase, clause and sentence), and that their turn comes to a place of possible completion after that of the unit.¹ However, conversation analysis (CA) has long recognized that, and attempted to describe how, this normal entitlement can be modified by a variety of exigencies associated with grammar (Betz, 2008), prosody (Ford and Thompson, 1996; Local and Walker, 2004; Schegloff, 1998), and, relevant to the present article, pragmatics (Ford and Thompson, 1996; Jefferson, 1991; Levinson, 1983, 2000; Robinson, in press). Within CA, pragmatic elements are commonly tied to the structure of social action, per se (for review, see Ford and Thompson, 1996). The present article is concerned with how a sequence-initiating action can uniquely structure the character of a responsive action such that it is normally constituted by multiple, particular, ordered sentential units, and thus this article is concerned with how a sequence-initiating action can uniquely structure participants' understandings of what constitutes a possibly complete 'unit' of talk (see Selting, 2000). Specifically, we demonstrate that a particular type of initiating action makes conditionally relevant

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 973 223 5918; fax: +1 617 373 8533.

E-mail address: h.kevoefeldman@neu.edu (H. Kevoe-Feldman).

¹ For various elaborations on the notion of *turn constructional unit*, see Ford (2001a), Lerner (1991), Selting (2000), and Schegloff (2006).

a particular type of compound action unit (Lerner, 1991). In the following introduction, we review prior work dealing with compound action units and highlight potential contributions of the present article.

The concept of a compound action unit was originally formulated by Lerner (1991), whose article was primarily focused on a different concept, that of the compound turn-constructional unit. However, toward the end of his article, Lerner observed: “Not only are some turn-constructional units available as compound units, *but larger, internally segmented actions are as well*” (p. 453, emphasis added). Lerner went on to argue that, “the sequencing of actions in conversational interaction can also supply features that betoken a *compound ‘action unit’*” (pp. 454–455, emphasis added). Recognizing that there can be different types of compound action units, one of them involves responsive actions (vs. turns, per se) that are projectable, by virtue of the conditional relevance rules associated with their initiating actions, as having two or more components that each are constituted by at least one lexical, phrasal, clausal, or sentential unit.² For example, in a subsequent publication, Lerner (1992) offered the example of the story prompt as an initiating action (e.g., “Oh you haftuh tell’m about yer typewriter honey,” p. 251) that makes conditionally relevant a story (or some type of pre-structured extended telling), which is a type of compound action unit (in this case, a responsive one). For another example, see Extract 1. Referring to a play, Nancy prompts Hyla to produce an extended telling: “Can yuh tell me what it’s about:?” (line 2).

Extract 1:

01 Nan: Kinda looking forward to it. What u:m, (1.0)
 02 -> Can yuh tell me what it’ s about:t=?
 03 Hyl: =.hhhhhhh[Yeah. It take-]
 04 Nan: [O:r would it- uh-]
 05 (.)
 07 Hyl: [No. It takes] pla:ce, i:n, .t (0.2) u=-ni:neteen thirties
 06 Nan: [()]
 08 HYL: in Oklahom[a,
 09 Nan: [Uh hu:h,=
 10 Hyl: =.hh A::n’ , .hhh .t.hhh (0.2) It’ s just like the
 11 psychological backgroun’ behind all these different people
 12 in this:f[am’ ly.] =
 13 Nan: [Mm hm:] =
 14 Hyl: =.hh Li:ke, the husban:d... (Hyla continues)

Hyla projects a multi-unit responsive turn, which she ultimately produces across lines 3–14, with a long and pronounced in-breath (symbolized in the transcript by h’s preceded by a period; line 3; Schegloff, 1996). Nancy’s continuers (at line 9, “Uh hu:h,” and at line 13, “Mm hm:”) display her orientation to Hyla as producing an extended telling (Schegloff, 1982).

Initiating actions, like the story prompt, that make conditionally relevant compound action units are virtually unstudied within conversation analysis (but see Lerner, 1991, 1992). The uniqueness of such a practice can be appreciated in light of a variety of ways in which initiating actions are implicated in providing for the relevance of multi-unit responsive turns that do not represent compound actions (although a responsive compound action unit is, by definition, a multi-unit responsive turn, the reverse is not always the case). What follows are three examples.³ A first way in which an initiating action can provide for a multi-unit response involves the conditional-relevance rule, which normatively obligates a particular type of response (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Schegloff, 2007). If an initial, responsive unit of talk (e.g., a word, phrase, clause, or sentence) does not constitute a relevant response, then its possible completion does not constitute a place where the responsive turn is possibly complete because a relevant response is still ‘due.’ As such, these responsive turns typically end up being constituted by multiple units. This is the case in Extract 2 (which was analyzed by Heritage, 1984b:266).

Extract 2:

01 B: Uh if you’ d care to come over and visit a little while
 02 this morning I’ ll give you a cup of coffee.
 03 -> A: Hehh Well that’ s awfully sweet of you,
 04 I don’ t think I can make it this morning
 05 .hh uhm I’ m running an ad in the paper and- and uh
 06 I have to stay near the phone

² Houtkoop and Mazeland (1985) might have called this a *closed* (vs. open) discourse unit.

³ Although there are a variety of explanations for how responsive turns (or second-pair parts) come to be composed of multiple turn constructional units – for example, via the practice of the *rush through* (Schegloff, 1987) or the abrupt-join (Local and Walker, 2004) – here we are only concerned with explanations involving social structures associated with initiating actions (or first-pair parts), such as rules associated with conditional relevance and preference organization.

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