A PRACTICE FOR (RE-)EXITING A SEQUENCE: AND/BUT/SO + UH(M) + SILENCE*

Emanuel Abraham Schegloff

THE TOPIC

One of the distinctive contributions conversation analysts have tried to make to pragmatics has been insistence on the inescapable relevance of sequential position to determining what some bit of talk-(and related conduct)-in-interaction can be understood to be doing – in the first instance by participants in the “speech event,” and consequently by students of such events. The orders of “position(ing)” range from “position in a turn-constructional unit” to “position in a turn” to “position in a sequence” to “position in the overall structural organization of a conversation or other form of occasion,” inter alia.

In what follows, the “bit of talk-in-interaction” being examined is “uh” or “uhm” [henceforth “uh(m)’]”. In the recent literature, Clark and Fox Tree (2002), and a number of subsequent publications, singly and collaboratively, have proposed that “uh(m)” is to be understood as a full-fledged word, one that projects upcoming silence – shorter in the case of “uh,” longer in the case of “uhm,” displaying imminent trouble in speaking.

There is much to be said for the understanding of “uh” and “uhm” as implicated in trouble in talking – whether in psycholinguistic terms of speech planning and speech production and uptake or in conversation-analytic terms concerned with the practices of repair. However, not all

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occurrences of “uh(m)” are best understood by reference to the units that figure centrally in prior inquiry – sentences or other units that are the building blocks of turns at talk ("turn-constructional units" or TCUs in conversation-analytic terminology).

Elsewhere (Schegloff, 2008), I have described a deployment of “uh(m)” by reference to the overall structural organization of the unit “a single conversation” – a usage where it has no necessary relationship to “trouble” at all. In what follows here, I offer an account of “uh(m)” positioned by reference to the unit “a sequence,” where it does have something to do with “trouble,” but a very different sense of trouble than figures in other prevalent accounts.

The topic here is a use of “uh/m” as a resource for exiting – or more commonly re-exiting – a sequence. In this usage, “uh/m” appears in conjunction with a conjunction – “And uh(m),” “But uh(m),” or “So uh(m)” – each of which is included in the little set of data extracts to which this contribution is limited. Unlike the previously encountered “uh(m)”s, these ones appear to require at least a bit of silence following them to do their work, but this silence is not itself the trouble or its tacit harbinger; absent the silence, the work of these little constructions is more problematic.

FOUR EXEMPLARS

Three of the four sequences to be examined are extended telling sequences, in each of which the teller is responding to some sort of eliciting action by recipient. The other is more compact.

In Extract (01), Marsha and Tony are a separated or divorced couple, she living in Southern California, he in Northern California. Their teenaged son Joey lives with his father, but has just spent a long weekend with his mother in the south, and was to return to his father on that day. Tony has called, Marsha has asked if Joey has reached home (line 07), only to have Tony ask when Joey left (line 8). It dawns on Marsha that no one has told Tony about a change in the travel arrangements (lines 10–11), and she then launches into a telling of “what happened.” When Tony intervenes (lines 22–23) to ask about the fate of the car, Marsha brushes the question aside with a one-word answer in order to continue the telling (lines 24–34).

(01) Marsha and Tony

00 ((ring))
01 Mar: Hello? 
02 Ton: Hi: Marsha? 
03 Mar: Ye:ah. 
04 Ton: How are you. 
05 Mar: Fi:ne. 
06 (0.2) 
07 Mar: Did Joey get home yet?