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

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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-constructive 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: | Hj: Marsha? |
| 03 Mar: | <u>Ye</u> :ah. |
| 04 Ton: | How <u>are</u> you. |
| 05 Mar: | <u>Fi</u> :ne. |
| 06 | (0.2) |
| 07 Mar: | Did <u>Joey</u> get home yet? |

- 08 Ton:→ Well I wz wondering when 'e left.
 09 (0.2)
- 10 Mar: hhh Uh:(d) did Oh: .h Yer not in on what
 11 ha:ppen'.(hh)(d)
 12 Ton: No(h)o=
 13 Mar: =He's flying.
 14 (0.2)
- 15 Mar: En Ilene is going to meet im: Becuz the to:p
 16 wz ripped off?v iz car which is tih say
 17 someb'ddy helped th'mselfs.
 19 Ton: Stolen.
 20 (0.4)
- 21 Mar: Stolen.=Right out in front of my house.
 22 Ton: Oh: f'r crying out loud,=en eez not g'nna eez
 23 not g'nna bring it ba:ck?
 24 Mar: 'hh No so it's parked in the g'rage cz it wz
 25 so damn co:ld. An' ez a >matter fact< snowing
 26 on the Ridge Route.
 27 (0.3)
- 28 Mar: 'hhh So I took him to the airport he couldn'
 29 buy a ticket.
 30 (·)
- 31 Mar: 'hhhh Bee- he c'd only get on standby.
 32 (0.3)
- 33 Ton: Uh hu:[h,
 34 Mar:→ [En I left him there et about noo:n.
 35 (0.3)
- 36 Ton: Ah ha:h.
 37 (0.2)
- 38 Mar:→ **Ayund uh,h**
 39 (0.2)
- 40 Ton: W't's 'e g'nna do go down en pick it up
 41 later? Er somethin like ...

The telling comes to a recognizable end at line 34. It is “recognizable” because (1) that installment of the telling reports the end of Marsha’s contact with Joey, which is the basis for her telling;

and (2) that installment includes a word from the start of the telling, specifically, the word “left” from Tony’s inquiry that prompted it (at line 8) – one common practice for showing possible completion (Schegloff, 1998, 2005). So Marsha means to be finished here, but Tony responds with another “continuer” (at line 36) – an interpolation by which a recipient displays an understanding that a multi-unit turn is under construction and has not yet been brought to completion (Schegloff, 1982). Marsha has tried to exit the telling; Tony has replied with an utterance that underwrites its continuation. At line 38, Marsha produces an “And uh,” waits about 2/10th of a second and Tony takes over the floor to pursue his earlier inquiry about the car which had been given short shrift on its earlier asking. This is a model of the effective use of [“and uh(m)” + silence] as a practice for re-exiting a sequence that one participant has tried, or is trying, to exit.

Extract (02) provides another exemplar of a successful re-exit, though a somewhat more effortful one. Annie and Charlene are two African-American young college women (so described by the collector of the data). Annie has apparently recently discovered that she is pregnant, and has conveyed this fact to her parents. Charlene knows this, and may well have called to find out what has happened. In examining the extract that follows, take note of bits of the talk that get repeated (printed in italics); as displayed in the previous instance, this can be a practice for moving to close the telling, and, with it, the sequence.

(02) Annie and Charlene

- 01 Ann: Hello_i
 02 Cha: Hey
 03 Ann: Hey
 04 Cha: What’s happening.
 05 Ann: We:ll (.) I just got off the phone with
 06 my da_id
 07 Cha: W-(oo) hahaha what did he say.
 08 Ann: KHE: he said uh (1.0) well ↑ I guess you’re a
 09 grown woman
 10 (1.0)
 11 Ann:→ and uh >*he didn’t say too much about it*,< he
 12 said uhm (2.4) said something ’bout well why
 13 buy the cow when you c’n get the milk fer
 14 free or som’n like that
 15 (0.8)
 16 Ann: KKHEh[H e h]
 17 Cha: [W ha ha ha]
 18 Ann: Uh-huh

- 19 Cha: O-ka:::y
20 Ann:→ *He didn't say too much though*
21 Cha: Mm-Hm:
22 Ann: E:n he said you know I just wanna make sure
23 (0.6) Oh he ta-he talked about hm how all men
24 are reluctant to uh make a commitment to get
25 married, hh I'm not sure whether he was sayin
26 this would I think he was saying this would
27 (0.6) prevent Danny from (0.6)
28 Cha: havin to make that commitment?
29 Ann: Ri:ght
30 Cha: M-Hm
31 Ann: E:n uh
32 ((tape interference noise))
33 Ann: talking about men all need to be domesticated
34 or something I doh- I'm not quite sure where
35 he was going with
36 th[at k h h h]
37 Cha: [did he ever] get philosophical?
38 Ann: Khahahaha
39 Cha: O::h
40 Ann:→ ((coughs)) **So uhm**
41 **(1.3)**
42 Ann:→ Yeah.*he didn't say too much*
43 (0.6)
44 Ann: which was good.
45 Cha: Went okay then?
46 Ann: mmhmm.
47 Cha: Well tha:[t's g o o d.]
48 Ann: [How you doing.]

Note that after providing one bit of telling (at lines 08–09), there is what will turn out to be the first mention of “didn’t say much about it” (line 11) – itself a fore-shadowing of an abbreviated telling. Then at line 20 it is repeated. The repeat can serve as a move to closure, but all it gets back from Charlene is a continuer, at line 21. So Annie goes on with the telling, recruiting Charlene’s assistance in doing so at lines 27–28. When Charlene intervenes with a question at line 37, Annie

- 21 Mar:→ =°turning in yer stomach .hh
 22 (0.5)
 23 Mar:→ **But u:m:**
 24 (1.2)
 25 Kar: C'est la vie, c'est la vie,=
 26 Mar: °=eyeh°
 27 (1.2)
 28 Mar: That's about it hell I haven't been doing
 29 anything but- (·) s- Well, (0.2) going out
 30 [actu]ally.
 31 ?Ka: [mmh]
 32 (0.7)
 33 Mar: I 'aftuh start studying no:w

At lines 18 and 19, Mark uses repetition of the words from his preceding turns in a fashion designed to bring the now “wounded” sequence to a close, but it gets no response at all (line 22), and at line 23 a “But um” is deployed as a follow-up effort to exit the sequence. Initially it is no more successful than the previous tries, but Karen finally responds with a virtually dedicated sequence closer, “C’est la vie, c’est la vie,” thereby displaying her understanding of the point of Mark’s prior turn, but no next move is made to seal the closure by launching a new sequence – until finally Mark re-closes the prior sequence yet again (line 28) and moves to start something new.

Extract (04) is even more effortful, and eventually fails, necessitating a kind of abrupt mid-utterance topic change that is far from common. Arthur and Rebecca are two young adults trying to launch careers in Hollywood. She has recently received encouraging responses to some script proposals, and he has been offered a job at ABC studios, and is working there part time to see how he likes it before deciding whether or not to take a full time position. He has been describing the work setting and his experiences around the ABC studios for several minutes preceding the start of Extract (04).

(04) Arthur and Rebecca

- 01 Art: An' de fitting rooms are down there where ar-
 02 yuh know where all de actors come in.=
 03 Reb: =Uh huh?
 04 Art: They come in there n to git fitted 'n stuff.=
 05 Reb: =Oh gre:at!=
 06 Art:→ =**A:nd uhm:**.hhh an then there's all these

- 07 editing rooms for (.) thirty-five millimeter
 08 an' seventy millimeter stuff?
 09 Reb: °Hmm
 10 (0.8)
 11 Art: s- big (0.2) you know w- (0.6) all these
 12 roo:ms.
 13 (0.6)
 14 Art:→ **And um** ↑*so: it's jus kinda interesting.*
 15 (1.0)
 16 Art:→ **Um::** (0.4) *so I c'n certainly lea:rn from it.*
 17 (0.3)
 18 Reb: Eh::ye:ah,
 19 Art:→ **A:nd um:** *it's not a bad place to be.*
 20 (0.5)
 21 Art:→ becuz it's real- (.) *ya know I got humming*
 22 → *birds no:w?*
 23 (0.2)
 24 Reb: What?
 25 Art: I(h) .hh I have hu:mming birds.
 26 Reb: Oh:: gre:at, [You should get a fee:der.
 27 Art: [°Yeah,
 28 (0.4)
 29 Art: °Yeh >well they< jus' come naturally to my
 30 window. (0.2) <I'm at my desk.
 31 Reb: Well you should (.) put a feeder in front of
 32 yer window 'n then you can look at'em,
 33 Art: 'N they'll come all de ti:me=
 34 Reb: =Uh huh
 35 Art:→ .hhh Anyway, so how'r you doin,

At lines 6, 14, and 19, Arthur, the topic's initiator and chief protagonist, produces three "And uh(m)"s that are ineffective, and it is notable that Arthur does not allow any silence to develop after any of them. Then there is an "um" followed by silence at line 16 which was not, however, an "and uh(m)," a "but uh(m)," or a "so uh(m)." This talk is going no place, and Arthur cannot get out of it. At line 14, he offers the kind of summary evaluation that worked for Annie in Extract (02); and another at line 16; and at line 19, he opts for denying the negative. What he gets from Rebecca are

continuers (lines 3, 9, 18), assessments whose fit to what they follow is either terribly misjudged or intendedly ironic (e.g., at line 5), or nothing at all (lines 13, 15, 17, and 20). Finally, at lines 21–22, Arthur breaks off a TCU mid-word, and abruptly produces an utterance totally incongruous in context that can only elicit repair initiation from Rebecca (Drew, 1997). This is a forced mid-turn topic shift if ever there was one – what might well be termed “an escape” (Schegloff, 2008). The escape having been effected, they linger on the topic of the birds for just a few exchanges (lines 21–34), and then Arthur asks Rebecca about how *she* is doing, stressing the reciprocal character of the inquiry in eerie similarity to Annie’s escape from Charlene in Extract (02).

THE UPSHOT

To sum up, the focus of many prior treatments of “uh(m)” has been their [i.e., the “uh(m)”s] implication in trouble, and, in particular, their common use in pre-monitoring *silence*. But even more salient is their pre-monitoring *talk-to-come* – hence their deployment in turn-initial position, where they can display their utterers’ recognition of having been selected to speak next, or their indication of a claim to do so – even if a bit of silence intervenes first. It is this common import of “uh(m)” that figures centrally in the practice described here, which can be summed up with the following observations, all of which need to be present for the efficacy of the practice: (1) analyzable/recognizable displays of designed closure (whether via the repeat of earlier words examined in this paper or via other such practices) followed by an extension of the talk; (2) a conjunction projecting possible further talk in a determinate relationship with what has preceded (as “and” for addition or extension, “but” for contrast, or “so” for entailment or upshot); and (3) an immediately following “uh(m),” followed by (4) silence, where the talk that has been projected by the conjunction would have occurred by the canon of progressivity embodied in the preceding talk. It is this package that serves to (re-)enact the speakers’ commitment to exit the extended turn or sequence.

So, I submit, we have here an “uh(m)” quite different from those implicated in repair, and quite different as well from the “uh(m)” marking reason-for-the-call as a feature of the overall structural organization of the unit “a single conversation.” And the silences following these “uh(m)”s figure quite differently in these three environments and in these three uses of “uh/m” as well.

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