DISCOURSE AS AN INTERACTIONAL ACHIEVEMENT: SOME USES OF 'UH HUH' AND OTHER THINGS THAT COME BETWEEN SENTENCES

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1.   From the standpoint of students of 'discourse', conversation and other forms of talk in interaction are subvarieties of discourse. What comes to be minimally criterial for discourse is the presence, in some sort of coherent relationship, of a spate of language use composed of more than one sentence (or whatever other unit is treated as grammatically fundamental). It is then common to be concerned (1) with the basis for the apparent coherence between the several components of the discourse, (2) with the cognitive structure of the unit, and (3) with the mechanisms by which it is analyzed or decoded on reception.   There may be an effort to discern quasi-syntactic relationships between successive parts of the discourse--between successive sentences, for example.   And discourse units, such as paragraphs, may be found to be constituted by such quasi-syntactic relationships.   The actual enactment of the discourse--for example, its telling--often seems to be treated as the behavioral realization of a preplanned cognitive unit. The prototype discourse for such an approach is the narrative or lecture, which readily lends itself to treatment as the product of a single speaker, whose cognitive apparatus underlies and shapes it.
For the student of talk in interaction, discourse (still minimally defined as a spate of talk composed of more than one sentence or other fundamental unit) is more usefully treated as one type of production in conversation (or other speech-exchange situation).   Note that, although some sorts of objects for analysis, such as written stories, memoranda, and legal documents, may appear suitable for analysis under the former conception but not the latter, in many cases the same objects of inquiry are seen differently from the two points of view.   The common discourse-analytic standpoint treats the

lecture, or sermon, or story told in an elicitation interview,
campfire setting, or around the table, as the product of a
single speaker and a single mind; the conversation-analytic
angle of inquiry does not let go of the fact that speech-
exchange systems are involved, in which more than one par-
ticipant is present and relevant to the talk, even when only
one does any talking.

Let me recount an old experience. Once I had trouble
understanding certain monologues in Shakespeare. I was
watching a series of rehearsals of *The Winter's Tale* by the
Canadian Shakespeare Company on public television, and had
gotten down my *Complete Shakespeare* and was following the
text. In the monologue in question, I could see how line 2
followed 1, 3 followed 2, and line 4 followed 3; but I just
could not figure out how line 5 followed line 4. And then I
saw in a series of rehearsals that, the authoritative text in
front of me to the contrary notwithstanding, line 5 did not
follow line 4; some action followed line 4, and line 5 followed
that action. And what was at issue in the rehearsals was
what that action should be and who should do it, for the sense
of line 5, and ensuing lines, would be affected in a major way
by it.

Anyone who has lectured to a class knows that the (often
silent) reactions of the audience--the wrinkling of brows at
some point in its course, a few smiles or chuckles or nods,
or their absence--can have marked consequences for the talk
which follows: whether, for example, the just preceding
point is reviewed, elaborated, put more simply, etc., or
whether the talk moves quickly on to the next point, and per-
haps to a more subtle point than was previously planned.[1]
If this is the case in such a situation of talk-in-interaction as
the lecture, then its relevance should be entertained as well
for experiments, elicitation interviews, and ordinary conver-
sation.

Clearly, different speech-exchange systems are involved in
lectures and ordinary conversation, with different turn-taking
practices providing quite differently structured opportunities
to talk or participate in other ways. That is one reason why
the reference to lecture situations describes wrinkled brows
and smiles and nods, rather than utterances or even 'uh huh's.
Clearly, as well, in several different types of speech-exchange
situations, there can be occasions in which participation is
constructed by a speaker in continuing response to inter-
actional contingencies and opportunities from moment to mo-
ment, and occasions in which a participant has a preformed
notion, and sometimes a prespecified text, of what is to be
said, and plows ahead with it in substantial (though rarely
total) disregard for what is transpiring in the course of this
talking. But these two extremes are not equally likely to
occur in the various types of speech-exchange situations; the
prespecified text, adhered to 'no matter what', is much less

common (and for good structural reasons) in ordinary conversation than in sermons or lectures. Even the wholly prespecified talk, which most approximates the enactment of a cognitive object, must be adapted in its delivery to its occasion, and will certainly have been designed with attention to its recipients and the situation of its delivery in the first place--both aspects of interactional sensitivity. However, it should be clear at the outset that in what follows I am most centrally concerned with what I take to be both the primordial and the most common setting and organization for the use of language--ordinary conversation. Although much of what I have to say is relevant to other settings, the way in which orientation to co-participants and interactional structure matter to discourse and its formation, will vary in different speech exchange systems with different turn-taking systems.

Important analytic leverage can be gained if the examination of any discourse is conducted in a manner guided by the following.[2] (1) The discourse should be treated as an achievement; that involves treating the discourse as something 'produced' over time, incrementally accomplished, rather than born naturally whole out of the speaker's forehead, the delivery of a cognitive plan. (2) The accomplishment or achievement is an interactional one. Quite aside from whatever individual cognitive or processing achievements might be involved (which are not to be treated only as anterior to the interactional), the production of a spate of talk by one speaker is something which involves collaboration with the other parties present, and that collaboration is interactive in character, and interlaced throughout the discourse, that is, it is an ongoing accomplishment, rather than a pact signed at the beginning, after which the discourse is produced entirely as a matter of individual effort. (3) The character of this interactional accomplishment is at least in part shaped by the sociosequential organization of participation in conversation, for example by its turn-taking organization, which is not organized to be indifferent to the size of the turns parties take, but whose underlying (though supercessable) organization is designed to minimize turn size. It is this feature which requires us to see 'discourse' and 'discourse units' which have overcome this bias as achievements and accomplishments. (4) Because the actual outcome will have been achieved by the parties in real time and as, at each point, a contingent accomplishment, the mechanisms of the achievement and its effort are displayed, or are analyzably hidden in or absent from, various bits of behavior composing and accompanying that discourse, and analyzable with it.

One class of such behavior which is implicated in the achievement of discourses in conversation is the concern of this paper. Instances of the class take the form of vocalizations such as 'uh huh', 'mm hmm', 'yeah', and others as well

as head-gestures such as nods.[3] These, as well as other,
bits of talk and behavior produced by other than the 'main
speaker' are regularly discarded when discourses--the stories,
the arguments, etc.--are extracted from the tangle of detail
which composed their actual occurrence. 'The story' is puri-
fied of them in the course of its extraction, both by lay re-
counters and by professional analysts. It is this separation
of bits of talk, otherwise intercalated with each other and con-
tingent on one another, into two distinct classes, of which one
is the 'real talk' (the story, the 'what-was-being-said') and the
other conversational 'detritus' (apparently lacking semantic
content, and seemingly not contributing to the substance of
what the discourse ends up having said), which makes possi-
ble the notion of 'discourse' as a single speaker's, and a single
mind's, product. It is a consequence as well that the inter-
actional animus and dynamic of the spate of talk can disappear
into the cognitive structure and quasi-syntactic composition of
the discourse. What has been discarded may itself be picked
up by investigators--typically other investigators, even other
sorts of investigators--for separate treatment under such
rubrics as 'accompaniment signals' (Kendon 1967) or 'back-
channel' actions (Yngve 1970; cf. Duncan and Fiske 1977).
    But, as I urge later, the fact that both parts of the occa-
sion--the teller's telling and the behavior of the recipients--
may be subjected to study does not restore the interactivity
lost when the former is extracted from the latter. For the
parts of the telling appear to follow one another, rather than
each following some responsive behavior by a recipient (or the
lack thereof); and what recipients produced after this or that
part of the telling has been removed from the environment of
that to which it was responsive. From 'discourse' and 'listener
behavior' so conceived and studied, it is unlikely that one will
be able to reassemble the actual structure of 'talking at length
in conversation'.
    In what follows, I first elaborate a bit on the meaning of,
and the reasons for, treating the occurrence of discourse in
conversation as 'an achievement'. One mechanism for that
achievement has its focus at points at which recipients or
hearers could begin talking but content themselves with 'uh
huh' and the like instead, after which prior speakers continue.
I briefly discuss recent treatments of vocalizations such as 'uh
huh' and 'yeah', and then offer some alternatives.

    2. Why should the existence of a 'discourse' (a multi-
sentence unit) in ordinary conversation be treated as an
achievement? Elsewhere (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson
1974) it has been argued that speakers construct utterances
in turns at talk out of describable structured units, with
recognizable possible completions. In English, some lexical
items (e.g. 'hello', 'yes', 'who'), some phrasal units, some
clausal units, and sentences constitute such 'turn-constructional

units'. The end of any such unit is a possible completion of a turn, and possible completions of turns are places at which potential next speakers appropriately start next turns. If this is the case, then an underlying structure of turn distribution is in operation which organizes interactive enforcement, or potential enforcement, of a minimization of turn size.

If such a system is in operation, then a constraint for single-unit turns has at least two sources. First, there is an organizational basis for current nonspeakers to monitor for the possible completion of first units in a current turn as a place to start next turns. And second, there is an orientation by speakers starting a turn to the organizationally motivated orientation of others to so start up, which can engender a designing of the talk in a turn to be so organized as to get what needs to be said said before the end of the first unit's completion. The second of these can contribute to making the smooth operation of the first viable and routine. A great many turns at talk in conversation thus end up being one unit long.

With all of this, it is obvious that some turns at talk end up having more than one unit in them. Nor is this an anomaly, or counterevidence. It does invite exploration of the possible existence (and features) of methodical ways in which such multi-unit turns are achieved. If there are such ways, then their use may serve as additional evidence of the underlying organization which these methods are used to supersede, at the same time as they explicate the work of achieving the supersession--the discourse. Although this is not the place to undertake an extensive, let alone exhaustive, account of such methodical devices, several may be mentioned to supply a sense of the sorts of phenomena that are involved.

One class of methods by which multi-unit turns may be achieved is that composed of devices initiated by the potential speaker of the multi-unit turn.

(a) The potential discourse-speaker may indicate from the beginning of the turn an interest in producing a more-than-one-unit turn. For example, the speaker may begin with a list-initiating marker, such as 'first of all',[4] projecting thereby that after the turn-unit in which the 'first' is done, more will follow. Note that there may otherwise be no particular need to pre-mark an item as first in a list (i.e. besides leaving it to be so discovered over the course of extended talk, by virtue of eventual subsequent items) other than the problem of getting to produce subsequent items. Beginning a turn this way recognizes the turn-taking contingency, and, by projecting a multi-unit turn, invites recipients to hold off talking where they might otherwise start, so that the 'post-first-units' may have room to be produced.

(b) Indeed, the turn-position, or turn-opportunity, in which the beginning of a projected multi-unit turn could be produced, may instead be entirely devoted to a whole turn which is focused on doing the projecting (as the list-initiating marker

does within a turn). Some years ago, Sacks (1974) described
one such operation under the rubric 'story prefaces', and more
recently, I have described under the term 'pre-pre' a similar
logic of use underlying one class of occurrences of utterances
of the form 'Can I ask you a question' (Schegloff 1980). In
both cases, a course of talk is projected which involves more
than one turn-constructional unit, and the talk begins with a
display of that projection. Note that it remains for recipients
to honor this projection, and to withhold talk at the points at
which it would otherwise be appropriate. Although initiated
by the intending extended-turn speaker, if an extended turn
results, it will have involved interactive accomplishment by
both speaker and recipients, the latter being recipients only
by abjuring their possible status as speakers. The list-
initiating marker, or story preface, or 'pre-pre' (i.e. 'Can I
ask you a question') are the overt markers of orientation to
the constraints making achievement of discourse problematic,
and of the effort directed to superseding them.

(c) Speakers may also employ methodical devices for achiev-
ing a multi-unit turn at positions other than the beginning of
the turn in question. There is, for example, what can be
called the 'rush through'--a practice in which a speaker, ap-
proaching a possible completion of a turn-constructional unit,
speeds up the pace of the talk, withholds a dropping pitch
or the intake of breath, and phrases the talk to bridge what
would otherwise be the juncture at the end of a unit. In-
stead, the speaker 'rushes through' the juncture without in-
breath, reaches a point well into a next unit (e.g. next sen-
tence), and there stops for a bit, for an inbreath, etc.
(Schegloff 1973). Here the turn-extension device is initiated
near the otherwise-possible-end of the turn, rather than at
its beginning. Once again, interaction and collaboration are
involved, for recipients could start up despite the displayed
intention of current speaker to continue, and produce thereby
at least a 'floor fight'. Once again, the turn-extension de-
vice exhibits, on the speaker's part, an orientation to the
imminent possibility of another starting up as s/he approaches
the end of the turn-unit. Once again, if successful at getting
to produce a multi-unit turn or discourse, the talk displays
the special effort involved in achieving it.

Of course, not all multi-unit turns are the result of speaker-
initiated methods designed to achieve them. Some multi-unit
turns are the outcome of a different methodical production.
A speaker produces a one-unit turn, at whose possible comple-
tion no co-participant starts a next turn. Then one way the
talk may continue is by the prior speaker talking again, some-
times by starting a new turn unit.[5] On possible completion of
the now added second unit, a multi-unit turn has been pro-
duced; of course, the same cycle may occur on the next
possible completion as well.[6] In cases of this sort, the course
of action which issues in a multi-unit turn is 'initiated' by a

recipient, and not by an (intending) speaker of (what ends up as) the multi-unit turn, or discourse unit. Once again, interactional achievement is involved, each participant orienting to the other(s), and all oriented to the underlying turn-taking organization, which is itself an interactionally driven and constrained organization. Once again, signs of the collaborative work are marbled through the talk--in this case, in the form of a frequent slight gap of silence at the possible turn completion which can issue in prior speaker resuming and extending the turn into a multi-unit one.

In the preceding, I have tried to point to several methodical routes by which multi-unit turns or discourses can come to be. Each concerns how a second turn-constructional unit can come to be produced at the point at which the underlying turn-taking organization otherwise provides for turn-transition. But sometimes quite extended spates of talk are involved--stories, chains of argument, long descriptions, etc. The point about the joint, interactive achievement of discourse is not limited to the beginning of spates of discourse--the initial possible transition point at which the turn stays with the same speaker. Recurrently through an extended spate of talk, places where others could start up appear, and when others do not start up full utterances, there are commonly small behavioral tokens by which interactive management of the possible transition occasion is effected--bits of assessment or the absence of them where they are relevant, tokens of interest, nods, smiles, 'uh huh's, and withholding of these, gaze direction with or without mutual gaze, and the like. It is on one class of these that I concentrate in what follows.

3. The modern literature in which bits of talk, vocalization or related behavior are extracted from what becomes ongoing talk by another, and are subjected to treatment in the aggregate, begins with the linguist Fries (1952). Fries treated together the following sorts of forms (1952:49): 'yes', 'unh hunh', 'yeah', 'I see', 'good', 'oh', and others of lesser frequency. Others have dealt with body-behavioral versions of this behavior, and have discussed the vocalized forms in the course of doing so (Kendon 1967; Dittman and Llewellyn 1967, 1968). The most common term now in use for such items, 'back-channel communication', was introduced by Yngve (1970), and includes a much broader range of utterance types, including much longer stretches of talk. The term 'back-channel' has been adopted by Duncan and his associates (for example, Duncan and Fiske 1977), together with the broadened definition of the class. Duncan and Fiske (201-202) include not only expressions such as 'uh huh', 'yeah', and the like, but also completions by a recipient of sentences begun by another, requests for clarification, 'brief restatement' of something just said by another, and 'head nods and shakes'.[7]

Throughout this literature, two related characterizations have been offered to deal with these bits of behavior. According to one, these bits of behavior are evidence of attention, interest, and/or understanding on the listener's part. (Thus Fries 1952:49, '...signals of this continued attention...', or Kendon 1967:44, '...appears to do no more than signal... that he is attending and following what is being said...').[8] A second use of such behavior proposed in this literature is that it '...keeps the conversation going smoothly' (Dittman and Llewellyn 1967:342), or '...appears to provide the auditor with a means for participating actively in the conversation, thus facilitating the general coordination of action by both participants...' (Duncan and Fiske 1977:202-203).

I do not intend to comment extensively on this second characterization beyond noting that once an organization of conversation is established in which nonspeaker interpositions are a recurrent part, their presence will be part of 'going smoothly' or of active participation; but this does not tell us why active participation is taken to involve this sort of behavior, or why the absence of such interpolations undercuts the 'smoothness' of the conversation, if indeed it does (cf. Schegloff 1968:1092-1093). However, it is the capacity of 'uh huh' and cognate bits of behavior to betoken attention and understanding which is the most common proposal about these events taken in the aggregate, with each removed from its context of occurrence; and it is to this sort of characterization that the following points are addressed.

(1) The term often used in the literature to describe 'uh huh' and similar productions is 'signal', and it is unclear what the implications of this term are for the strength of what is believed to be done by these bits of behavior. It is worth noting, however, that 'uh huh', 'mm hmm', 'yeah', head nods, and the like at best *claim* attention and/or understanding, rather than *showing* it or *evidencing* it. The references to 'signals of continued attention' or 'signal...that he is attending and following' treat these as more than claims, but as correct claims, and this need not be the case; it is, at any rate, a contingent outcome, and not an intrinsic characteristic of the behavior being described.

(2) It is unclear why any particular behavior--such as 'uh huh' or a head nod--should be needed to address the issue of attention, whether to claim it or to show it. Regularly, these bits of behavior are produced when there are otherwise present on a continuous basis sorts of behavior which are understood as manifestations or exhibits of attention, such as continuing gaze direction at speaker.[9] Aside, then, from the issue of whether 'uh huh' etc. evidence attention or claim it, there is the issue of why attention is taken to be problematic in the first place, in need of showing *or* claiming.

(3) If, for the moment, we treat the issue of attention as having its relevance established, then it may be noted that any instance of an indefinitely extendable set of utterances

would either claim or show attention to, or understanding of, an immediately preceding utterance by another. That is, a vast array of types of talk following an utterance by another exhibit an orientation to it; accordingly, the claim that 'uh huh' exhibits an orientation to, or attention to, preceding talk does not help discriminate 'uh huh' from any other talk, or tell us what 'uh huh' in particular does or can do, and therefore why a participant might choose to produce it rather than something else.

(d) If, however, we aim to understand how bits of behavior such as 'uh huh' and the like may be taken as bearing on the attention, interest, or understanding of their producers with respect to the talk being produced by another, then we should also note that 'uh huh', 'yeah', and the like are regularly taken as betokening agreement as well. A search for the mechanism by which interest, attention, or understanding are exhibited by this behavior, should also deal with the apparent exhibiting of agreement.

When 'uh huh's etc. are considered in the aggregate, then, the characterization of the class as signaling attention, interest, or understanding appears equivocal. Although it can be argued that attention and understanding are generically relevant in conversation, no ready account is at hand (when the aggregate of cases is considered) for why these issues need specially to be addressed, why they are addressed with these tokens, why addressed at these particular points (if, indeed, it is at particular points, on this account, that these tokens are placed).

However, examination of particular occurrences of the sort of behavior under discussion--of particular 'uh huh's, 'yeah's, etc.--might yield answers to some of these questions. In particular instances, for example, analysis may show that attention was indeed problematic for the parties, and that an 'uh huh' or a nod was produced 'in response to' an extended gaze by the speaker which appeared to solicit a sign of attention/interest/understanding. Or, analysis may show that certain usages by speakers regularly involve addressing the issue of understanding in their immediate aftermath. Thus, as described elsewhere (Sacks and Schegloff 1979), speakers may use 'recognitional reference forms' (such as proper names) to refer to persons they think recipients know; but if speakers are not certain that recipients know the intended referent, they may mark the reference form with an upward intonation, soliciting some signal of recognition (a special kind of understanding); if no such display is forthcoming, further tries, involving further clues to the identification of the referent, are provided, with display of recognition again solicited. Recipients may betoken such a recognition with 'uh huh' or may add to this token (especially if recognition was delayed) some demonstration of recognition, as in (1) and (2).

(1) A: Ya still in the real estate business, Lawrence
    B: → Wah e' uh no my dear heart uh, ya know Max
           Rickler h
      → (0.5)
    B: with whom I've been 'ssociated since I've been out
           here in Brentwood has had a series of um (0.?)=
    A: →   [yeah
    B: =bad experiences uhh hhh I guess he calls it a
           nervous breakdown.
    A: Yeah
           (Sacks and Schegloff 1979:19)

(2) L: ...well I was the only one other than than the uhm
     → tch Fords? Uh Missiz Holmes Ford? You know uh
         the the cellist?
        [
    W: → Oh yes. She's she's the cellist.
    L: Yes
           (Sacks and Schegloff 1979:19)

With this background, one can note that even in the absence
of overt solicitation by upward intonation of some display of
recognition, after recognitional reference one commonly finds
'uh huh' and the like,[10] as in (3).

(3) Bee: hh This feller I have- (iv-) "felluh"; this ma:n.
        (0.2) t! ‾·hhh He ha::(s)- uff-eh-who-who I have
        fer Linguistics is real ly too much, ·hh h=
    Ava: →   [Mm hm?]   [Mm hm,
      (TG, 198-201)

It is not that some substantial proportion of 'uh huh's etc. are
thus accounted for, but that an analytically coherent set of
cases can be assembled in this way from a series of analyses
of individual cases, the basis for the coherence of the class
being derived from the sequential environment in which those
particular tokens are produced. Although appeals to signalling
attention, interest, and/or understanding appear equivocal when
invoked on behalf of the aggregated occurrence of tokens such
as 'uh huh', 'yeah', and the like removed from their particular
environments, such accounts may be viable and strong when
introduced for delimited and described cases in which the rele-
vance of these issues *for the parties to the conversation at
that point in the talk* can be shown. Appropriate sets of such
analyzed single cases may then be assembled to display re-
current practices, themes, structures, etc.

    4. Is there nothing more general, then, that can be said
about such utterances as 'uh huh' and the like, when they
compose all of their producer's vocalization on that occasion

of talking? Two observations seem to me to have sufficiently
general relevance to bear mention in this connection.

Perhaps the most common usage of 'uh huh', etc. (in en-
vironments other than after yes/no questions) is to exhibit on
the part of its producer an understanding that an extended
unit of talk is underway by another, and that it is not yet,
or may not yet be (even ought not yet be), complete. It
takes the stance that the speaker of that extended unit should
continue talking, and in that continued talking should con-
tinue that extended unit. 'Uh huh', etc. exhibit this under-
standing, and take this stance, precisely by passing an oppor-
tunity to produce a full turn at talk. When so used, utter-
ances such as 'uh huh' may properly be termed 'continuers'.

Note that the sorts of issues mentioned earlier as arising
with respect to the 'signalling attention and understanding'
accounts bear differently here.

(a) For talk-in-interaction whose turn-taking organization
makes possible-completion-of-one-speaker's-talk a place where
another can start up a next turn, it is structurally relevant
at such places for parties to display their understanding of
the current state of the talk. For example, as Sacks pointed
out years ago, participants sometimes begin a turn by produc-
ing an 'uhm' just after the possible completion of a prior turn,
then pausing, and then producing a turn, rather than just
delaying the start of their turn until they are 'ready'. They
may be understood to proceed in this fashion precisely in
order first to show their understanding of the current state
of the talk and their stance toward it (i.e. 'a prior turn is
over, it is an appropriate occasion for a next turn, I will
produce one'), in some independence of the actual production
of the turn they eventually produce. So also is it relevant
for parties to display their understanding, when appropriate,
that an extended turn is underway, and to show their inten-
tion to pass the opportunity to take a turn at talk that they
might otherwise initiate at that point.

(b) 'Uh huh's, etc. as continuers do not merely claim an
understanding without displaying anything of the understand-
ing they claim. The production of talk in a possible turn
position which is nothing other than 'uh huh' claims not only
'I understand the state of the talk', but embodies the under-
standing that extended talk by another is going on by declin-
ing to produce a fuller turn in that position. It does not
claim understanding in general, but displays a particular
understanding through production of an action fitted to that
understanding. [11]

(c) Except for the limited set of behavioral productions that
are used to do 'continuers', it is not the case that any in-
stance of an indefinitely extendable set of utterances would
achieve this outcome or do this job. Most other forms of talk
would be full turns in their own right, rather than ways of
passing the opportunity to produce such a turn, and would

fail precisely thereby to display understanding of, or respect for, an extended unit still in progress.

The 'continuer' usage is most readily illustrated by data in which clear marking of the end of the extended unit, or discourse, is provided, and until the occurrence of which the 'in-progress' character of the talk is clearly visible. Among the ways in which such marking may be done are the several ways of announcing, at the beginning of the unit, the sort of thing that will be its possible end. For example, there are story prefaces (cf. Sacks 1974) which may characterize the sort of event the forthcoming story is about (for example, 'a funny thing happened...'), such that the unit will not be possibly complete until such an event has been mentioned, and may be over at the end of its mention. Or there are 'preliminaries to preliminaries' (Schegloff 1980) in which an 'action-type' is projected (like 'question' in 'Can I ask you a question?') as that to which preliminaries are leading; the preliminaries may then be developed as an extended discourse (e.g. a description, a story, etc.) until such an action is done (e.g. such a question is asked) as these preliminaries could be leading up to. Several instances are given in (4) and (5).

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(4)   1  B°:    I've listen' to all the things that chu've said,
                   an' I agree with
      2          you so much.
      3  B°:    Now,
      4  B°: →  I wanna ask you something,
      5  B°:    I wrote a letter.
      6          (pause)
      7  A:     Mh hm,
      8  B°:    T'the governor.
      9  A:     Mh hm::,
     10  B°:    -telling 'im what I thought about i(hh)m!
     11 (A):    (Sh:::!)
     12  B°: →  Will I get an answer d'you think,
     13  A:     Ye:s,
                   (BC, Red:190)

(5)   1  B:  →  Now listen, Mister Crandall, Let me ask you
                   this.
      2          A cab.  You're standing onna corner.  I
                   heardjuh
      3          talking to a cab driver.
      4  A:     Uh::uh
      5  B:     Uh was it- uh was a cab driver, wasn' i'?
      6  A:     Yup,
      7 .B:     Now, yer standing onna corner,
      8  A:     Mm hm,
      9  B:     I live up here in Queens.
     10  A:     Mm hm,
     11  B:     Near Queens Boulevard,
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12  A:     Mm hm,
13  B:     I'm standing on the corner of Queens
               Boulevard a::nd
14         uh::m (       ) Street.
15  A:     Right?
16  B:     Uh, I- a cab comes along.  An' I wave my
               arm, "Okay,
17         I wancha I wancha."  You know,
18  A:     Mm hm,
19  B:     Uh::m, I'm waving my arm now.  Here in
               my living room.
20         hhhh!
           [
21  A:     heh heh!
22  B:     A:nd uh, he just goes right on by me.
23  A:     Mm hm,
24  B:     A::nd uh-two::, three:, (.) about three
               blocks,           •
25         beyond me, where- in the direction I'm going,
               there
26         is a cab stand.
27  A:     Mm hm,
28  B:     Uh-there is a hospital, (0.?) uh, a block
               (0.?) up,
29         and there is a subway station, right there.
30  A:     Mm hm.
31  B:     Uh now I could 've walked, the three or
               four blocks,
32         to that cab stand,
33  A:     Mm hm,
           [
34  B:        Bud I, had come out-of where I was,
               right there
35         on the corner.
36  A:     Right?
37  B:  →  Now is he not suppose' tuh stop fuh me?
38  A:     If he is on duty,
               (BC, Red:191-193)
```

Note that after the projection of a question upcoming, the re-
cipient of the extended talk confines himself almost entirely
(the alternatives are touched on below) to continuers--'uh huh',
'mm hmm', 'right', and the like, until a question is asked (of
the sort analyzably projected; not just any subsequent ques-
tion; not, therefore, the one at line 5 in (5). The extended
unit then being completed, and a determinate action being
called for by the question, the recipient of the discourse
addresses himself to the question. The same form of utter-
ance may be produced (for example, the 'yes' at line 13 in
(4)), but in this sequential environment it is a full turn,
rather than passing one.

What will constitute the end of an extended spate of talk is not always named or characterized as it is in the aforementioned forms; still it is regularly readily recognized by the participants. Sometimes, however, misunderstandings occur, and a continuer produced to display an understanding that an extended unit is in progress and is not yet completed thereby displays a misunderstanding, as in (6) (taken from the same corpus of telephone calls to a radio talk show, as was the source of (4) and (5).

```
(6)  1  B:    This is in reference to a call, that was made
                about a
     2        month ago.
     3  A:    Yessir?
     4  B:    A woman called, uh sayin she uh signed a
                contract for
     5        huh son who is- who was a minuh.
     6  A:    Mm hm,
     7  B:    And she claims inna contract, there were
                things given,
     8        and then taken away, in small writing.
     9        ((pause))
    10  A:    Mm hm
    11  B:    Uh, now meanwhile, about a month ehh no
                about two weeks
    12        before she made the call I read in, I read or
                either
    13        heard-uh I either read or hoid onna television,
                where
    14        the judge, hadda case like this.
    15  A:    Mhhm,
    16  B:    And he got disgusted an' he says 'I'- he's
                sick of these
    17        cases where they give things in big writing,
                an' take
    18        'em, an' take 'em away in small writing.
    19  A:    Mhhm,
    20  B:    An' 'e claimed the contract void.
    21  A:    Mhhm,
    22  B:    Uh what I mean is it c'd help this woman
                that called.
    23        You know uh, that's the reason I called.
              (BC, Gray, 74-75)
```

At line 21, A produces another in the series of continuers that have helped propel B's telling; this one, it turns out, is 'mistaken', for the caller had apparently intended 'An' 'e claimed the contract void' to be the end--perhaps hearable as 'a solution' for the woman to whose earlier call he refers.[12] It is worth noting that 'trouble' around the end boundary of discourse units need not be understood as 'cognitive' or

processing error; it can be the vehicle for thoroughly de-
signed interactional effects (cf. the discussion of reengage-
ment of turn-by-turn talk at emergence from a story in
Jefferson 1978).

These instances allow me to remark on several additional
points which may provide some sense of the interactional tex-
ture involved here.

1. Note that after a continuer, the speaker of the extended
unit may 'do the continuing' in various ways (and it should
be underscored that this locus of talk should be investigated
precisely for the work of 'doing continuing'). In (4), the
first continuers are followed by increments to the turn-unit
(sentence) already in progress; in (5), some continuers are
followed by increments to the prior sentence (for example,
lines 10-11); others are followed by starts of new sentences,
(for example, lines 12-13); still others are followed by what
could be counted as new sentences by virtue of their gram-
matical independence, or as increments to the prior by virtue
of their linkage by conjunction--by just such a token as marks
'continuation' (for example, lines 22-26). In this respect,
then, there is no major differentiation between sentences and
multi-sentence units or discourses; the same mechanism can
engender an elaborated version of the former or the latter.

2. Note that the bits of behavior produced by the recipient
of the extended talk vary. Two points may be advanced here.
First, even when little other than continuer usage is involved,
the tokens employed for it vary. I have referred to 'uh huh',
'yeah', etc. throughout this paper, and have not addressed
myself to the differences between these tokens. I note here
only that the availability of a range of tokens may matter less
for the difference of meaning or usage between them (if any)
than for the possibility thereby allowed of varying the compo-
sition of a series of them. Use in four or five consecutive
slots of the same token may then be used to hint incipient
disinterest, while varying the tokens across the series, what-
ever tokens are employed, may mark a baseline of interest.

Second, in some of the positions at which some sort of con-
tinuer is relevant (as may be shown, for example, by the
speaker withholding further talk until one is produced, as in
(4), lines 5-7, or (6), lines 8-11), the immediately preceding
talk may be such as to invite some sort of 'reaction' aside
from, instead of, or in addition to the continuer. And one
does find throughout extended units--especially stories--
markers of surprise ('Really?'), assessments ('oh my', 'wow',
'you're kidding', 'isn't that weird', 'wonderful', etc.), and
the like. In the fragments I have cited, we may note the
laugh in (5) at line 21, and in (4) the laugh/assessment/
expletive at line 11. Note in the case of the latter that it
follows a selection of idiomatic phrasing that indicates 'scold-
ing' (and this has already been reported as directed to a high
political official), and its last word is delivered with a laugh

token as well.[13] In the case of (5), note that at lines 16-17,
the teller 'packages' the telling in a very dramatic format with
exaggerated self-quotation, which could have been designed
to engender a more forthcoming appreciation than this 'mm hmm'
provides.[14] Note, then, that although B does continue talking
after the continuer, here she does not continue with the ex-
tended unit that was 'in progress', but shifts from a descrip-
tion of the events being told about to a description of the cur-
rent scene of the telling, using the recurrence of 'waving the
arm' as the bridge. The description appears designed to
underscore 'incongruity' and to elicit a response to it, but
even the first effort at this fails to get a response ('I'm wav-·
ing my arm now.'); she then adds another (she could have
resumed the story) to underscore the incongruity even further
('Here in my living room'), to which she appends a laugh token
as well. This time she does get a response of the sort she
has apparently been after. (Note: one is tempted to write
'of a sort fitted to the character of her talk', but, of course,
it is precisely the assessment of the character of her talk
which is at issue in the sort of response A makes or withholds.
It may be suggested that the mechanism by which a series of
same continuer tokens displays incipient disinterest involves
the availability of tokens of surprise, special interest, assess-
ment etc., the nonproduction of which shows the recipient not
to be finding in the talk anything newsworthy, interesting, or
assessable. Varying the continuer tokens may mask the ab-
sence of other types of response token; using the same one
continuously may underscore it.)
    The general point I want to make here is that the operation
of continuers and of the other bits of behavior produced by
recipients in the course of, or rather in the enabling of, ex-
tended talk or discourse by another, is designed in a detailed
way to fit to the ongoing talk by the teller, and 'to fit' may
involve either 'cooperating' with what that talk seems designed
to get, or withholding; both of these are fitted to the details
of the locally preceding talk, and cannot be properly under-
stood or appreciated when disengaged from it. When disen-
gaged, there is no way of telling that the 'mm hmm' at line 18
in (5) is not only a continuer, but is possibly withholding a
laugh; and without that, one may not be in a position to under-
stand why the teller next abandons the story for a description
of her telling posture. In brief, disengaging the listener be-
havior from its local sequential context not only undercuts the
possibility of understanding what it is doing; it can remove an
important basis for understanding what is going on *in the dis-
course itself*.
    The preceding discussion having ended with an account of
some of the interactional texture in particular data fragments,
it is in point to recall that the concern of this section is to
see what more general assertions can defensibly be put forth

to characterize what tokens like 'uh huh' may be doing. One
I have suggested is the usage as 'continuer'.

The continuer usage rests on the observation that 'uh huh',
etc. passes the opportunity to do any sort of fuller turn at
all, on the grounds that an extended unit is already in pro-
gress. Note, however, that, were a fuller turn done, it
would be some particular type--it would be of some particular
form, and would be doing some particular action or actions.
In passing the opportunity to do a fuller turn, a participant
therefore is also passing the opportunity to do *something in
particular*--the opportunity to do whatever might have rele-
vantly been done at that point. We just discussed a case in
which an 'mmhm' was alternative to a laugh; but we clearly
cannot say that 'uh huh', etc. is generally a way of with-
holding laughter, because there is no way of showing that
doing laughter is generally relevant, and if something cannot
be shown to be relevantly present, then it cannot be rele-
vantly absent, or withheld. Of course, laughter is not gener-
ally relevant; it was relevant in the case I have discussed be-
cause the other party did something to make it relevant, and
that is why one needs the local sequential environment--to see
what the other parties have done that makes some sorts of
next actions relevant, which 'uh huh' may be displaying the
withholding of. The question is: are there any kinds of
actions which have some kind of 'general relevance' in conver-
sation, by which is meant that they are not made relevant by
the particulars of someone's immediately preceding talk or be-
havior? There is at least one candidate.

One kind of talk that appears to have quite a general po-
tential provenance is what has elsewhere (Schegloff, Jefferson,
and Sacks 1977) been termed 'other-initiated repair' or 'next-
turn repair initiation'. A variety of constructional formats are
used to do the job of initiating the remedying of some problem
of hearing or understanding the just prior talk of another--
several of the WH-question terms, such as 'who', 'what', etc.,
as well as 'huh', partial (and sometimes full) repeats of prior
turn, partial repeats plus one of the question words, and
others (pp. 367-369). It appears that there are no systematic
exclusion rules on the possible relevance of next-turn repair
initiation in any possible turn position. Although next-turn
repair initiation is generally withheld until after completion of
the turn in which the trouble-source occurred, it appears cor-
rect to say that such repair initiation is regularly potentially
relevant after completion of any unit of talk by another. [15]
Its use exploits its positioning--next after the unit in which
the trouble-source occurred. If it is the case (Schegloff,
Jefferson, and Sacks 1977:363) that any talk can be a trouble-
source, then 'after any talk' can be a place for repair to be
initiated on it. Speakers can look to the moments after some
unit of talk to find whether repair on that talk is being initi-
ated; indeed, speakers who will be continuing can leave a

moment of nontalk for such repair to be initiated if the talk
just produced is to be treated by others as a trouble-source.
Then 'uh huh', nods, and the like, in passing the opportunity
to do a full turn at talk, can be seen to be passing an oppor-
tunity to initiate repair on the immediately preceding talk.[16]

Note that, if tokens such as 'uh huh' operate to pass an
opportunity to initiate repair, the basis seems clear for the
ordinary inference that the talk into which they are interpo-
lated is being understood, and for the treatment in the liter-
ature that they signal understanding. It is not that there is
a direct semantic convention in which 'uh huh' equals a claim
or signal of understanding. It is rather that devices are
available for the repair of problems of understanding the prior
talk, and the passing up of those opportunities, which 'uh
huh' can do, is taken as betokening the absence of such
problems.

Further, the use of other-initiated repair as one way of
pre-indicating the imminent occurrence of disagreement
(Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977:380) suggests why 'uh
huh's and the like can be taken as indications of agreement
with the speaker of an ongoing extended unit. For if dis-
agreement were brewing, then opportunities to initiate repair
would supply a ready vehicle for the display and potential de-
flection of that disagrement. Passing the opportunity to raise
problems of understanding may be taken as indicating the ab-
sence of such problems. It may also be taken as indicating
the absence of that which such problems might have por-
tended--disagreement--and thus be taken as indications of
agreement.

It must be noted, however, that there is a difference be-
tween this usage and the continuer usage. It was noted
earlier that with regard to the 'current state of the talk',
'uh huh' does more than claim an understanding, but embodies
it in particulars and acts on it. With respect to the under-
standing of, and agreement with, what a prior speaker has
said and done, 'uh huh' is merely a claim of understanding.
Such a claim may turn out to be incorrect; and passing one
opportunity to initiate repair is compatible with initiating re-
pair later. The status of 'uh huh' as an indication of under-
standing or agreement is equivocal in a way in which its status
as a continuer is not, as participants who have relied on it will
have discovered and regretted.

In this section, I have tried to formulate what appear to me
to be the only two general characterizations that can be sus-
tained when applied to singular, particular, situated instances
of vocalizations such as 'uh huh': a usage as continuer and a
usage to pass an opportunity to initiate repair. For the rest,
the treatment of them in the aggregate, separated from the
talk immediately preceding them, loses what they are doing.
Perhaps more germane to the official topic of this Georgetown
University Round Table, along with that is lost the character

of the ongoing talk during which they have been produced.
Thereby our understanding of discourse is weakened. I close
with several observations on this theme.

5. Among the themes I have stressed most strongly is that,
at least in conversation, discourse must be treated as an
achievement. There is a real, recurrent contingency concern-
ing 'who should talk now'; the fact that someone continues is
an outcome coordinatedly achieved out of that contingency.
There is a real, recurrent contingency concerning what who-
ever-gets-to-talk should talk on; the fact that the same speaker
who talked before talks again *and talks more of the same thing*
is an outcome achieved out of this contingency (they could
have gone on to repair what preceded; they could have paren-
thesized into a comment about their talking; they could have
'touched-off' into something entirely different, etc.).
Once it has happened that 'a speaker continues' (for exam-
ple, 'a teller continues his story'), that appears entirely
'natural'; we lose sight of what were contingent alternatives;
they do not become 'ex-alternatives' or 'alternatives-not-
taken'; they simply disappear, and leave the achieved outcome
in the splendid isolation of seeming inescapability. For ana-
lysts, this is a great loss. Good analysis retains a sense of
the actual as an achievement from among possibilities; it re-
tains a lively sense of the contingency of real things. It is
worth an alert, therefore, that too easy a notion of 'discourse'
can lose us that.
If certain stable forms appear to emerge or recur in talk,
they should be understood as an orderliness wrested by the
participants from interactional contingency, rather than as
automatic products of standardized plans. Form, one might
say, is also the distillate of action and/in interaction, not only
its blueprint. If that is so, then the description of forms of
behavior, forms of discourse (such as stories) included, has
to include interaction among their constitutive domains, and
not just as the stage on which scripts written in the mind are
played out.

NOTES

1. The behavioral vehicles for interaction between 'per-
former' and 'audience' may vary among various 'single speaker'
settings, but the fact of interaction is certainly not limited to
the academic lecture. Max Atkinson (private communication)
has been exploring it in political speeches in Great Britain.

2. See, for example, the paper by Marjorie Goodwin (1980).
These themes are relevant not only for discourse units, but
for 'sentences' as well. Cf. Charles Goodwin (1979).
3. Of course, not every occurrence of one of these vocali-
zations is an instance of the usage I am concerned with; not,
for example, occurrences which follow so-called 'yes/no ques-
tions'.
4. Once again, not all utterances of 'first' or 'first of all'
are list-initiating, although they do commonly project some form
of extended talk, if only by indicating that before an already
relevant action, something else is to be done, as in the follow-
ing segment:

```
Vic:     I know who didit.
James:   You know who didit,
         [
Vic:     Yeeah,
Vic:     Ye:s.
James:   Who wuzzit.
         (0.7)
Vic:   → First of a:::ll, un Michael came by:,...
         (US, 33)
```

5. The alternative is adding to the turn unit already pro-
duced, which can then be recompleted, as in the following:

```
Anne:    Apparently Marcia went shopping fer all these things.
         (1.0)
Anne:    Becuz uh: (0.5) Leah didn't seem t'kno:w, which
         kid//d-
         (Post-Party, I, 5)
```

6. On the possibilities discussed in this paragraph, cf.
Sacks et al. (1974:704, 709, 715).
7. Cf. note 16.
8. Kendon does describe another use of such interpolations
--a 'point granting' use.
9. In Fries' materials from telephone conversation, and in
Dittman and Llewellyn's experimental format (1967:348), the
parties are not visually mutually accessible, and this remark
is not in point.
10. As it happens, a number of Yngve's instances are of
this sort; cf. Yngve 1970:574.
11. Cf. Fragment 6, lines 20-23, and the discussion in
note 12.
12. Note that B's 'what I mean...' shows an orientation to
'having been misunderstood'. He does not *go on* to say he
means to help the woman and this was the reason for his call;
he uses a repair format to indicate that this is what he meant
before, which was not understood by A, as displayed by the
'mh hm' which indicates waiting for more to come. This bears

on the remark earlier in the text that continuer tokens dis-
play an understanding of the current state of the talk, and
do not merely claim an understanding. It is the displaying of
what understanding their producer has which makes it possi-
ble for recipient of the continuer to find that understanding
flawed.

13. On the ways in which a laugh token can solicit a re-
sponse from a coparticipant, cf. Jefferson (1979).

14. If so, then the 'mm hm' may be used in lieu of, or to
display the withholding of, such a more forthcoming response,
a possibility further examined later. Note too that 'uh huh',
etc. can be delivered in an indefinitely extendable range of
ways; some 'uh huh's can mark surprise, appreciation, assess-
ment, etc.

15. Indeed, it can be relevant after a suspected talk unit
by another, as exchanges such as the following show:

        (Silence)
    A: Huh?
    B: I didn't say anything.
            (EAS: FN)

16. In this respect, 'uh huh', 'mm hmm', nods, and the
like are specifically alternatives to utterances such as 'huh?',
'what?', 'who?', and the like, rather than being comembers of
a category such as 'back-channel communications', as in Yngve
(1970) and Duncan and Fiske (1977). On the other hand, 'uh
huh', etc., in being alternatives to repair initiation, are in a
sense part of the organizational domain of repair.
    In writing in the text of 'passing the opportunity to do a
full turn at talk', I appear to be joining the consensus re-
ported on, and joined by, Duncan and Fiske (1977:203) that
'back-channel actions, in themselves, do not constitute speak-
ing turns'. However, I do not believe that (a) this question
should be settled on conceptual or definitional grounds; (b)
the various components included in the term 'back-channel'
fare identically on this question; or (c) positions on the turn-
status of 'uh huh' are invariant to the occasion for the issue
being posed. I can here only suggest the basis for this
stance. Consider the fragments in (i) through (iii).

    (i)   D: But listen tuh how long-
                [   ]
          R: →   In other words, you gotta string up the-
                    you gotta string up the colors, is that it?
                    (KC-4, 37)

    (ii) R: Hey::, the place looks different.
          F: Yea::hh.

```
     K:          Ya have to see all ou r new-
                             [         ]
     D:    →                         It does?
     R:          Oh yeah.
                 (KC-4,2; cf. Sacks et al.; p. 720)

(iii)  1 B:      hhh And he's going to make his own paint-
                    ings,
       2 A:      mm hmm.
       3 B:      And- or I mean his own frames.
       4 A:      yeah.
                 (SBL: 1, 1, 12-11)
```

Note first that in both (i) and (ii), talk which requests clarifi-
cation (in (ii)) or repeats and solicits confirmation (in (i)),
which are two types of back-channel for Duncan and Fiske,
win out in floor fights, though, according to Duncan and Fiske,
it is a consequence of back-channels not being turns that in-
stances like these are not even counted by them as simul-
taneous turns. In my view, the issue of the turn-status of
some utterance should be approached empirically, i.e. do the
parties treat it as a turn; in (i) and (ii), clarification talk is
so treated. I believe much talk of this sort is treated by
participants as having full turn status. However, other sorts
of vocalization, such as 'uh huh', are not so treated, as Dun-
can and Fiske note, at least with respect to simultaneous talk
and its resolution.

When the issue is a different one, however, a different posi-
tion may be warranted. In (iii), for example, 'paintings' in
line 1 is an error, which is corrected at line 3 by its speaker.
This correction is undertaken after the recipient has had an
opportunity to do so, and has passed. With respect to the
organization of repair and its interactional import, it can
matter that B's self-correction follows a passed opportunity
for A to initiate repair. A silence by A in that position may
well have called attention to the presence of a repairable;
the 'mm hm', in specifically not doing so, is doing something.
'Mm hm' is more than 'not a turn'; with respect to the repair
issue, it is very much like one.

Accordingly, it seems appropriate to me that the turn-status
of 'uh huh' etc. be assessed on a case-by-case basis, by
reference to the local sequential environment, and by refer-
ence to the sequential and interactional issues which animate
that environment.

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