



ELSEVIER

Journal of Pragmatics 33 (2001) 1947–1955

Journal of
PRAGMATICS

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Squib

Getting serious: Joke → serious ‘no’[☆]

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Received 15 September 2000; revised version 3 November 2000

The deployment of ‘no’ in turn-initial position is often taken *vernacularly* as a disagreement marker or rejection particle. Indeed, it is often taken as that – with relatively little reflection or analysis – in the social science literature concerned with language and interaction as well, including conversation analysis.

Of course, disagreement with, or rejection of, another’s talk are often not marked by ‘no’ at all, being modulated in keeping with the preference structures relevant to agreement and disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987 [1973]; Schegloff, 1988a). When ‘no’ is a part of such a turn, it is often *not* initial, but preceded by other things – including silence – to mark dispreferredness. Indeed, the absence of such delays can be notable, and can serve to herald transition to a different phase of activity, such as upgrading a disagreement to a full-fledged argument, or to mark something distinctive about the activity or the discourse community under examination, as in the hopscotch games played by Latina and African-American girls described by Candy Goodwin (1998).

There are occurrences of turn-initial ‘no’, however, for which analysis along simple ‘disagreement’ or ‘rejection’ lines misses the point. For example, so-called third position repairs (Schegloff, 1992) are commonly launched with one or more turn-initial ‘no’s. When a speaker takes the response to her or his prior turn to reveal a problematic understanding of it, they may address that problem by re-doing their prior turn, as in ‘No, I don’t mean X, I mean Y’. A ‘no’ of this sort is not a rejection of the other’s prior turn. Indeed, the third-position repair may be designed to underscore that no such rejection of other’s prior turn is being done, by including as its

[☆] Prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, NY, 1996.

second part an explicit acceptance of it: ‘No, I understand that. I don’t mean X, I mean Y’. So turn-initial ‘no’ does not *invariably* mark rejection of an interlocutor’s contribution. Indeed, as Jefferson (1996) shows, it can be used to mark acknowledgement of another’s talk, or even affiliation with it.

One reason for avoiding a wrong understanding of turn-initial ‘no’ (other than a principled commitment to getting things right) is that the default vernacular understanding of ‘no’ as marking ‘disagreement’ or ‘rejection’ can send analysts in search of what in an interlocutor’s talk or other conduct is being rejected or disagreed with. If nothing presents itself as directly plausible, it can lead to extensive interpretive creativity to locate a target. And if something *is* directly plausible, it can serve to reinforce an analysis which may nonetheless be mistaken.

But, as noted, turn-initial ‘no’ can be doing other things as well, and in this paper I try to explicate and exemplify one of them. It can be used to mark a transition from just-preceding talk (usually by the ‘no’-speaker, but not always), talk which was analyzably ‘non-serious’ (of which ‘joke’ is the most common and overt version), to what will follow and is designedly ‘serious’. That, in a nutshell, is the claim: turn-initial “no” can mark a transition from non-serious to serious talk. Now let me try to *show* it in a simple way – by just working through analytically grounded glosses of a number of episodes in which this ‘no’ usage figures. I will then hint at a few bases for its significance.

Consider, then, the turn-initial ‘no’s which figure in the several exchanges reproduced below, beginning with extract (1).

(1) SN-4, 5

- 1 Sherri: Hi Carol.=
 2 Carol: =H[i : .]
 3 Ruthie: [CA:RO]L, HI:;
 4 Sherri: You didn’ get en icecream sanwich,
 5 Carol: I kno:w, hh I decided that my body didn’t need it,
 6 Sherri: Yes but ours di:d=
 7 Sherri: =hh heh-heh-heh [heh-heh-heh [hhih
 8 (??): [ehh heh heh [
 9 (??): [()]
 10 Carol: hh Awright gimme some money en you c’n treat me to one an
 11 I’ll buy you a:ll some [too.]
 12 Sherri: [I’m] kidding, I don’t need it.
 13 (0.3)
 14 (??): (hih)
 15 Carol: I WA:N’ O:N[E,
 16 ?Ruth: [ehh heh-hu [h
 17 Carol: [hheh-uh _hhh=
 18 Carol:→ =No they [didn’ even have any Ta:(h)b.
 19 ?Ruth : [hheh
 20 Carol: This is all I c’d find.
 21 (.)

The focal utterance in excerpt (1) is at line 18, ‘No they didn’ even have any Tab’. Directly on her arrival to this interaction-already-in-progress, Carol is targeted (at line 4) with a complaint for not having done something which the others had apparently been led to expect – bring an ice cream sandwich. When the source of the complaint, Sherri, persists (at line 6) after Carol has tried to deflect or dismiss the complaint with an account, Carol offers (at lines 10–11) to undertake a remedy. With both of these responses – the initial account and the subsequent offer – Carol shows herself to be taking the complaint seriously, i.e., as a complaint. In response to the offer, however, Sherri recants and claims the whole affair was meant to be kidding in the first instance (at line 12). (For a more detailed account, see Schegloff, 1988b: 118–131.)

It is in the aftermath of this exchange, in which Carol turns out to have missed the claimedly non-serious or ‘kidding’ character of the terms of Sherri’s participation, that Carol speaks next. Her ‘I WA:N O:NE’ (at line 15) is produced in a loud, whining voice, apparently designed to do ‘being a child’. In doing so, she aligns herself not only with the assertedly ‘kidding’ tenor of the preceding exchange, but also with the disappointment at the absence of the ice cream. That this utterance is understood by its recipients to be non-serious and joking is evidenced in its aftermath by Ruthie’s laughter (line 16), in which Carol herself then joins.

Alignment on the ‘kidding’ stance having been achieved, Carol returns to take up again a more ‘serious’ response to the initial utterance (at lines 18, 20), which she thereby shows herself still to take as harboring a serious import, and the form of her response – its action type – is the same as her *initial* response (at line 5), an account (although the sort of account is different). This shift (at line 18) from the utterance which was (designed as) non-serious, a ‘joke’, and was taken as such, to the ‘serious’ (i.e., non-joking) account which follows is marked with ‘no’.

In extract (2), Freda and Rubin are guests for dinner at Kathy and Dave’s, and have just been explaining that the summer home which they have in the past invited Kathy and Dave to use has been offered to others, with an invalid mother, etc. At the start of the excerpt reproduced here (lines 2, 4, 7–8), they are insisting that Kathy and Dave can go and use the house anyway.

(2) KC-4, 14

- | | | |
|----|--------|---|
| 1 | Freda: | An <u>besides tha</u> [:t, |
| 2 | Rubin: | [You c’n go any [way |
| 3 | Dave: | [<u>Don’- Don’</u> git- don [get] |
| 4 | Freda: | [they] |
| 5 | | won’t be: |
| 6 | Dave: | Y’know there- there’s no- no long explanation is <u>necessary</u> . |
| 7 | Freda: | <u>_Oh nono_no</u> : I’m not- I jus:: uh-wanted: you to know that you |
| 8 | | can go up anyway.= |
| 9 | Rubin: | = <u>Yeah</u> ::. |
| 10 | | (0.2) |
| 11 | Freda: | <u>Y</u> ou know. |
| 12 | | (0.2) |

- 13 Freda: Beaus-ah
 14 (3.3)
 15 Rubin: They don mind honey they're jus not gonna talk to us ever
 again.=
 16 Dave: =(hehem)/(ri:(h)ight)
 17 (0.8)
 18 Kathy: We don mind<[we jus ne:ver gonna talk to you e:ver hh(h'g)
 19 Dave: [(No, b't)
 20 Rubin: heheheheh
 21 Kathy: → _No::_ that's awright
 22 Freda: _So::_
 23 Dave: _()_
 24 Freda: You know what we're gonna_ in fact I'm- she I haven't seen her
 25 since I spoke to you but I'm going to talk to=what ayou making?

There are various indications that this is an awkward juncture for both parties – the accounts by Freda and Rubin, the denial by Dave that accounts are necessary (lines 3, 6), the incipient denial by Freda (line 7) that explanations were being offered and her insistence on the house's availability (lines 7–8), an insistence which gets no uptake throughout an exceptionally long gap of silence (lines 10–14). Finally (at lines 15), Rubin treats this response – or lack of it – as a sign of Kathy and Dave's having taken offense, with his 'They don mind honey they're jus not gonna talk to us ever again' – equivocal as between 'serious' and 'kidding'. I term this 'equivocal' in that various marks of 'kidding' – its overttness, its overstatement, its broad 'aside' delivery – are offset by the fully deadpan character of its delivery (what Drew, 1987 termed 'po-facedness').

That this utterance, though ostensibly addressed by Rubin to his wife Freda, was targeted at Kathy and Dave is registered by the next turns' production by Dave and Kathy. Dave responds with a laugh-infiltrated confirmation token (line 16), which tempers the seriousness of the confirmation token by a display that the prior was taken as non-serious.

Kathy's response is more artful. She does the confirmation by repeating Rubin's utterance virtually identically (except for pronoun replacements fitted to the speaker change). The practice of 'confirming by repeating' is a way of confirming not only what has been said in the repeated utterance but also that that had been inexplicitly conveyed before (Schegloff, 1996). In its deployment here, this confirmatory repeat treats Rubin's turn at line 15 as having been an accurate reading of what Kathy and Dave were inexplicitly conveying by demeanor. She delivers this turn in the same serious tone employed by Rubin ... before breaking into a laugh at its end. The recognition that this is designed to be taken non-seriously is registered by Rubin's ensuing laugh (at line 20). The 'joking' response of 'mock resentment' at the 'deprivation' of the house is then followed by Kathy's delivery of another response, 'That's alright', claimedly her 'serious' response, marked by the turn-initial joke → serious 'no'.

It is not at all clear, by the way, that this defuses the situation, and we see Freda a moment later (at lines 24–25) extracting them all by a precipitate and disjunctive

topic shift mid-turn ('I haven't seen her since I spoke to you but I'm going to talk to=what ayou making?').

The exchange in extract (3) follows a break in this already ongoing interaction occasioned by the arrival of another participant and a brief exchange with her (the 'ice cream sandwich' exchange with Carol which furnished extract 1). After Carol's departure, the participants in the previously ongoing interaction look for a resumption path. Sherri undertakes to deflect them from a return to what was in progress before the interlude (line 3), but Mark resolutely manages a transition back from the topic of studying to the topic of partying.

(3) SN-4, 6

- 1 Mark: Where were we.
 2 (0.5)
 3 Sherri: I dunno.= 've you been studying lately_
 4 Mark: No, _not et aw-_ not et a:ll:. I hafta study this whole week.
 5 <every ni:ght, {(_hhhh)/(0.8)} en then I got s'mthing planned on
 6 Sunday with Lau:ra,
 7 (0.5)
 8 Mark: She- she wen- she 'n I are gonna go out 'n get drunk et four
 9 o'clock in the afternoon.
 10 Sherri: huh-huh hhh[h
 11 Mark: [It's a religious: (0.3) thing we're gonna have.
 12 (0.3)
 13 Mark: I d'know why:, _b't
 14 (0.5)
 15 Mark:→ Uh::m, () No- her ex boyfriend's getting married en she:'s:
 16 gunnuh be depressed so:.,
 17 (0.8)
 18 Sherri: [She wasn't invited d'the]wedding_
 19 Mark: [(I'm g'nuh take 'er out.)]

In the course of describing his plans with Laura, Mark offers what appears to be designed as a 'joke', namely the characterization of getting drunk on Sunday afternoon as 'a religious thing we're gonna have' (line 11). This is a pun of sorts, and as is not uncommon for punning, there are none of the more overt design marks of 'joking', such as infiltration by laugh tokens. The trope is meant to do the work. There is no hearable uptake at line 12, and then some hemming and a delay in continuation at lines 13–15 (very likely a version of a common aftermath of a 'dud', which may be termed the 'post-failed joke hitch'). The 'joke' account for his plan having fallen flat, Mark then moves to offer a 'serious' account of and for the activities planned for Sunday, this move from joke to serious being marked by the turn-initial 'no'.

Note, by the way, that such a transition marker can be relevant even in the absence of laughter – or groaning – to ratify the joke-character of what has preceded. By the same token, this 'no' can serve as data-internal evidence for an otherwise *not* overtly marked 'non-serious' or 'joke' design for the speaker's prior utterance, and

can thereby underwrite a professional analyst's account that the earlier turn was produced with non-serious 'accent'.

In extract (4) Kathy and Dave have been discussing with their dinner guests Freda and Rubin (as in extract 2) the diagnosis and prospects of a mutual friend, who was suspected of having cancer, and whose tentative diagnosis, they have just learned, is 'giant follicular lympho-blastoma', a label whose import they have been discussing with no confident conclusion. Rubin offers to check it out with a lawyer friend who knows a lot about medical matters, and asks Kathy to write out the diagnosis for him so that he can show it to the lawyer. The reproduced extract (4) accompanies her return with the paper on which she has written the diagnosis.

(4) KC-4

- 1 Kathy: 'N my] best handwriting=I hope you can read it.
 2 (0.2)
 3 Kathy: (Noone else ca'.)
 4 (0.2)
 5 Kathy:→ (No but that's very- that's very neat [for me.]
 6 Rubin: [Giant, oh this is goo:d. [fol-
 7 licula:r lympho:-blas:toma,

The 'joke' here is in Kathy's self-deprecating assessment of her handwriting at line 3 ('No one else can [read it]'). When this does not get its preferred response – some rejection of the self-deprecation like the one eventually produced with Rubin's 'Oh this is good', or dismissal by laughter, Kathy speaks again (at line 5) with an assessment of the writing sample she has just produced as 'very neat for me', an assessment marked as 'serious' by contrast with the prior one by the turn-initial 'no' which serves as the transition. This assessment, marked as serious, can make a second assessment relevant (Pomerantz, 1984), and Rubin interrupts his in-progress reading of the diagnostic term (lines 6–7) and supplies an upgraded assessment with 'Oh this is good'.

Here again, the transitioning 'no' can display its speaker's orientation to the prior utterance as non-serious in design, in the absence of other overt evidences to this effect in its implementation, and in the absence of uptake along these lines from recipients. But the exchange in extract (4) strains the usage of the term 'joke' as a contrast to 'serious'. What Kathy has done here does not appear to be designed as a 'joke', and bears no overt markings of one – no laugh tokens or pre-laugh aspiration, for example. It is, rather, a rhetorical figure best termed 'hyperbole', or, in vernacular terms, exaggeration, and it is transparently recognizable as such.¹ The non-serious import of the turn is embodied in this hyperbole, which invites understanding as 'not to be taken at face value', or, as they say, 'literally'.

If prior instances can be taken to have established a prima facie case for 'no' as a possible device for transitioning from 'joke' to 'serious', then perhaps this instance may serve to suggest that 'joke' is but one 'value' of the more general feature 'non-

¹ It is, then, another usage of a practice which Pomerantz (1986) termed 'extreme case formulations', here used to do an action other than 'legitimizing a claim'.

serious'. Such a 'no' should be understood in this expanded sense as marking a transition to a next production which is 'serious' from a preceding one which was 'non-serious', in a *range* of senses, including ones embodied in rhetorical tropes of various sorts. Here is another.

In extract (5) Hyla and Rich are a college age courting couple, who live some 500 miles apart. Rich has rushed to the phone, which he has heard ringing as he arrived home and was about to park his motorcycle; it is Hyla calling.

(5) Hyla-Rich, 1

- 1 ((ring ring ring ring ring))
 2 Rich: Hull (h)o(hh)
 3 Hyla: Hull::o
 4 Rich: Hello(h)
 5 Hyla: Hi:: .hh
 6 (0.2)
 7 Rich: Hi:
 8 Hyla: Hi hehuhuhuh .hh
 9 Rich: hhh
 10 Hyla: How(hh)re you(hoo)?
 11 Rich: .hhhuh
 12 Hyla: Uh huh ha besides [out of b]rea(h)th(h).
 13 Rich: [hhh]
 14 Rich: Uh: fine(hh).
 15 Hyla: I wuz just about tuh hang uhhu[h]
 16 Rich: [he]h[hh]
 17 Hyla: [uh]uheh
 18 Rich: .hh I jus got ho:me. .hh
 19 Hyla: I:: figure th(huh)at.
 20 Rich: .hhh
 21 Hyla: .hh
 22 Rich: hhhh
 23 Hyla: How are you(huheh).
 24 Rich: Oh, hhhh
 25 Hyla: hehehuh
 26 Rich: Oh:: (.) I love driving up to [the] door: .h
 27 Hyla: [heheh]
 28 Hyla: Yeh,
 29 Rich:→en hearin the ph- no (.) How are you?
 30 Hyla: Eh I'm fine. I ['m] fine(heh).
 31 Rich: [good.]
 32 Rich: Good.

Rich is out-of-breath as he answers, a 'state' which Hyla reports on his behalf (at line 12) as an initial observation on 'how he is'. She then (line 23) asks the 'how are you' question for another first time (as Garfinkel's phrase goes), by putting the stress

on the ‘are’, one of whose deployments is to mark such a question as a first (Schegloff, 1998: 244, n. 11). Rich’s response (lines 24, 26, 29) is ironic, describing in positive terms what he is otherwise analyzably complaining about – hearing the phone ringing as one arrives home. That this is transparently non-serious – at least in the sense that he does not seriously ‘love driving up to the door en hearing ...’ – is registered in Hyla’s laughter from very early in the turn (line 25), and then again after its central ironic term’s irony is made manifest at line 27 (‘... love driving up ...’).

Rich self-interrupts before coming to a possible completion of this ironic, non-serious response, produces a ‘no’ which seems designed, in this context, to herald a transition to a second, serious response to Hyla’s inquiry. This would complete a deployment of the practice of the ‘joke first answer’, followed by a serious one (Schegloff, 1987: 212–216). But this turns out *not* to be what Rich does. He never does supply a serious response to her inquiry, in the sense of a serious *answer*. Instead he supplies a serious, interactionally appropriate *sequel* to it – a reciprocal ‘howyou’ inquiry. In this respect, then, the ‘no’ – which here is not turn-initial in the same plain sense as was the case in the other exemplars – *does* mark a transition to a serious next utterance/action, though not the one that might have been projected. And the transition is from another alternative to ‘joke’ as a form of the ‘non-serious’, another rhetorical trope, here embodied in an irony.

This is not to say, of course, that every deployment of hyperbole or of irony is ‘non-serious’ in its import for what action or actions are getting done in the utterance in question, let alone *all* rhetorical tropes. The contribution of a rhetorical practice such as hyperbole or irony to the action of an utterance and therefore to its range of possibly relevant responses has to be analyzed in each case – both by the parties and by external analysts. In this respect the task is just like any other aspect of an utterance – e.g., matters of grammatical form such as an interrogative format (Schegloff, 1984 [1975]).

A final observation. Sacks years ago (1972) raised the possibility that there may well be no way of definitively controlling the treatment of an assertion with respect to the joke/serious determination. And it surely appears that utterances may be designed in their surface realization in ways which are not taken to be definitive of their underlying import – jokes being delivered deadpan, and serious matters being camouflaged (or ‘softened’ as they sometimes say) by a humorous delivery. Yet one factor seems to weigh heavily in such determinations, even if not definitively, and that is that the next thing to be done will bear the same accent as the prior did. If what just preceded was a joke, then perhaps the next thing will be as well. Surely this is defeasible, but it appears that it may need ‘defeating’.

The ‘joke → serious “no”’ is one instrument of such ‘defeating’. On the one hand it can mark what preceded as having been a joke or in some other respect non-serious; on the other, it can mark that what is to come is *not*. Of course, it too can be used non-seriously, subversively as it were, and be followed by more joking. But what is being subverted then is the basic operation of this usage, which is to mark transition from the non-serious to the serious, where there are relevant grounds for such an operation.

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