On an Actual Virtual Servo-Mechanism for Guessing Bad News: A Single Case Conjecture*

Emanuel A. Schegloff, *University of California, Los Angeles*

A conversation analytic treatment of a single episode of talk-in-interaction is used to sketch a mechanism for steering recipients of bad news to better guesses of what the news is. The account of the mechanism makes use of the notion of "preferred/dispreferred response" and distinguishes different usages of that notion. The results of the exploration are used to recommend an approach to specialized contexts in which bad news is communicated, as well as an approach to "specialized" talk more generally.

In naturalistic research on talk-in-interaction whose data are supplied by audio and video taped records of interaction, stretches of talk vary in the degree to which they permit, or even facilitate, the discovery of something new. Some occurrences appear to be "transparent"; they seem to provide direct and immediate access to some conversational mechanism or practice. The present paper is based on an encounter of this sort. A single fragment of conversation gets most of the attention and supplies the leverage for the main proposal. But in contrast with other uses of single cases (e.g., Schegloff, 1987), in which a variety of analytic resources developed elsewhere are brought to convergent focus on an episode of talk which is taken to exemplify their concurrent empirical relevance, here a single fragment serves to launch a proposal about how a certain mechanism operates in ordinary conversation. Grounded as it is in a single occurrence, I characterize this proposal as "a conjecture." But in view of the character of single interactional events as the locus of social order (Schegloff, 1987:102), and the fact that social life is lived in single occurrences whose sense for the participants is "indigenously" displayed and attested by the understandings of the proceedings which interactants show one another through their conduct, I would urge that this single case brings with it "internal" evidentiary resources that warrant its being taken very seriously indeed.

In what follows, I first describe the domain of conversational organization in which this mechanism or practice is situated, the conveying of bad news, and then offer a capsule version of the mechanism itself. Then I present the fragment of data which touched off the paper's undertaking, which instantiates the mechanism and gives evidence of its operation, evidence which I try to spell out. In specifying the operation of this conversational practice, I draw on an analytic tool previously employed in conversation analytic inquiry—the notion of "preferred" and "dispreferred" actions and responses, a notion which the present analysis aims to clarify. I then try to show that the conjectured mechanism seems to be operating in other data than the originating fragment and illuminates those data. The paper ends with

some reflections on the relevance of the substantive conversational domain which has been described and on the analytic tools which have been used.

Bearing Bad Tidings

Conveying information to another and telling that person something may be quite different matters. It was my colleague Harvey Sacks I think who first pointed out that when it comes to bad news, the talk can be organized in such a manner that the recipient of the news can turn out to be the one who actually says it. While the bearer of bad tidings may, thus, in an important sense convey the information, she or he may not actually tell it or announce it. This observation was first prompted by the exchange reproduced in 1, below, taken from a telephone conversation in which Belle, visiting from another part of the country, tells Fanny about a former mutual friend:

[1]   [DA:2:10]

```
Belle:     . . . I, I-I had something (.) terrible t'tell you.=
           =So┌ uh:    ┐
Fanny:        └How t┘errible ┌is it.      ┐
Belle:                       └·hhhhh┘
           (.)
Belle:     Uh: ez worse it could be:.
           (0.7)
Fanny:     W'y'mean Ida?
           (.)
Belle:     Uh yah·hh=
Fanny:     =Wud she do die:?=          ←
Belle:     =Mm:hm,
           (.)
Fanny:     When did she die,
```

Note that, rather than Belle, who is bringing the information, actually articulating it, it is Fanny, its recipient, who comes to do so at the arrowed turn.

Similarly, in the second data fragment, Charlie has called to tell Ilene that a planned trip to Syracuse, on which she was apparently intending to "hitch a ride," is being cancelled. He tells her about a certain "Karen":

[2]   [Trip to Syracuse, 1-2]

```
Charlie:   She decidih tih go away this weekend.
Ilene:     Yeah:,
Charlie:   ·hhhh=
Ilene:     =·kh┌h
Charlie:       └So tha:┌:t
Ilene:                └k-khhh
Charlie:   Yihknow I really don't have a place tuh sta:y.
Ilene:     ·hh Oh:::::.hh
           (0.2)
Ilene:     ·hhh So yih not g'nna go up this weeken'?      ←
           (0.2)
Charlie:   Nuh:: I don't think so.
```

Here again the bearer of bad tidings tells various items of information, but not the bad news—

the "bottom line"—itself; this the recipient herself articulates at the arrowed turn.[1]

In other cases, where the conveyor of bad news *does* actually say the utterance which bears it, the news may be formulated in somewhat equivocal terms, leaving it for the recipient to articulate it in its basic, unambiguous form. In the following fragment, Marsha is telling her ex-husband why their son Joey is flying to the city where the ex-husband is expecting him, instead of driving:

[3]   [MDE:MTRAC:60-1:2]

Marsha: . . . Becuz the to:p wz ripped off'v iz car which iz tihsay someb'ddy
          helped th'mselfs.
Tony: Stolen.   ←
          (0.4)
Marsha: Stolen. Right out in front of my house.

Here Marsha has said that "the top was ripped off," but this is ambiguous as between a tear in a convertible soft top (i.e., the literal sense of "ripped") and a theft, an ambiguity which Marsha herself appears to catch and try to "disambiguate" at the end of the first turn reproduced in 3. But it is Tony who finally comes to say it in its "bottom line" form—"stolen."

There is, it appears, a practice by which bearers of bad news can bring its recipients to be the first to articulate it. This appears to involve the giving of clues—sometimes as slight as that the news is bad (or that much plus the "topic"[2]), sometimes all the pieces of information that add up to the bad news without actually summing them, sometimes the news itself but ambiguously formulated. The clues engage their recipients' common sense knowledge of the world, their recipient-designed mutual knowledge, and their orientation to the occasion of the conversation. This can lead to the proffering of a guess by the intended recipient.[3] In each of

---

1. A closely related practice is described by Drew (1984) with respect to "speakers' reportings in invitation sequences"; cf. especially Section 3 (pp. 133-36) of his paper, whose title reflects this observation, "Reportings relevantly get upshots."

2. As in the following instance, taken from Terasaki, 1976:23.
D: Didju hear the terrible news?
R: No. What.
D: Y'know your Grandpa Bill's brother Dan?
R: He died.   ←
D: Yeah.

3. In some instances, no guess is actually offered, and the news is treated as having been virtually conveyed. The "information" involved may subsequently inform the talk, without ever having been delivered as "news." Consider the following exchange between Hyla and her boyfriend Rich, who lives in another city and was planning a visit. After talk about his recent working hours, which she characterizes as "terrible" and "awful," he continues:
[Hyla/Richard: 75-112]
Rich: But there's something else. ·hhh=
Hyla: =Wha⌈t?⌉
Rich: ⌊I ⌋ wuz gonna call you.
        (.)
Hyla: Yeah.
        ((17 lines omitted, concerned with the date that day, and the next weekend))
Rich: Boss told me, h
        (0.2)
Hyla: Ye⌈ah ⌉
Rich: ⌊tha⌋t they wanna send me back to Rochester again.   h
        (0.1)
Hyla: h-e- when? ·h
Rich: Just take a wi:ld, a wi::ld imaginative guess.=
Hyla: ⌊Oh: ⌋
Hyla: =Please don't tell me heheh=
Rich: =Yeah.
        (footnote continued on next page)

the cases displayed above, and in many others, the guess is correct, as should be expected if the clues have been adequately recipient-designed by the speaker—for *this* recipient, in *this* situation.

Because such interactional processes are undertaken when the bearer of bad news assesses the circumstances as ones in which clues can successfully convey the news (otherwise the news may be told outright), there are relatively fewer cases in which the recipient's guess is incorrect. When it is, it is rejected by the "bearer." But such rejection need not be final; as the conveyor may have prompted an initial guess, so may he or she prompt and "steer" subsequent guesses by the recipient, and do so in and by the very act of rejecting. The explication of this possibility will be aided by considering some past work in conversation analysis concerned with rejections and disagreements, work in which the notion of "preference" figures prominently.

Rejection: A Preferred or Dispreferred Response?

Earlier work, most notably by Sacks ([1973] 1987) and Pomerantz (1978, 1984), has shown that actions such as agreement and disagreement, acceptance and rejection, are importantly characterized as "preferred" or as "dispreferred" responses. These terms do not refer to motivational commitments of the speakers. Accepting an invitation can be the "preferred" response, and declining the "dispreferred" one, whatever the actual desires of an invitee. The ordinary sequential enactment of preferred and dispreferred responses can mark "declining," for instance "declining an invitation," as the dispreferred response, as "reluctant" for example, even if for its speaker the excuse which allows it is a deliverance. "Preferred" and "dispreferred," then, refer to sequential properties of turn and sequence construction, not participant desires or motivations.

Although this is not the place for a lengthy account, it may be useful to review briefly, even if in an inescapably oversimplified way, some of the most characteristic ways in which preference and dispreference respectively are displayed and embodied in talk (see the reviews in Atkinson and Drew, 1979:Ch.2; Levinson, 1983:332-45; Heritage, 1984:265-80).

Dispreferred responses may be accompanied by accounts, whereas preferred ones generally are not. Dispreferred responses may be expressed in attenuated or mitigated form, or even shaped as preferred responses, but the opposite is not the case. Preferred responses generally are packaged in short turns, or at the very start of longer ones, whereas dispreferred responses regularly come in long complex turns, are placed late within them, and are preceded in them by various other components of the sorts already mentioned—accounts, excuses, mitigations, attenuations, and apparent offerings of preferred responses. Commonly, dispreferred responses are preceded by some delay component in their turn, however brief (e.g., an initial "uh," "well," "I dunno," at the start of the turn), whereas preferred responses come at the very start. Further, when a dispreferred response is delivered, the turn-start itself is commonly delayed, either by silence intervening between it and the talk being responded to, or by some other intervening talk, most commonly a "repair" sequence (Schegloff et al., 1977) displaying some "trouble" in hearing or understanding the preceding talk.

Each of these features can be documented extensively (and most of them have been; cf. Sacks, [1973] 1987; Pomerantz, 1978, 1984; Davidson, 1984; and the prior references to Atkin-

---

    Hyla: Tch! ·hhh
            (0.2)
    Rich: I'm sure I could work something in though.
            (0.7)
    Rich: huh I don't know what wha- if this'll work or not. I don't know·h
    And he goes on to tell when his presence is required in various places, and when he proposes to visit Hyla.

son and Drew, Heritage, and Levinson), but in the present context, a single pair of exemplars will have to serve to display some of these characteristic differences. Compare, then, the following two responses to invitations, the first (from Schegloff, 1972) a "preferred" acceptance, the second a "dispreferred" rejection or declining.

[4]   [SBL 1, 10:12]

B: Why don't you <u>come</u> and see me some⌐times.
A: ⌊I would like to.

[5]   [Erhardt:10:Alt]

Vicky: I ca:lled um to see if you want to uh (0.4) c'm over en watch, the
          Classics Theater.
          (0.3)
Vicky: Sandy 'n Tom 'n I,=
Karen: =She Sto⌐ops t'Conquer?
Vicky: ⌊(   )-
          (0.4)
Vicky: Yeh.
          (0.3)
Karen: Mom j's asked me t'watch it with her,h

Note that in 4, the preferred acceptance is done without delay (in fact, slightly overlapping the invitation) in a one unit brief turn with no accounts or mitigations. By contrast, in 5, the dispreferred rejection is delayed first by a silence of 0.3 seconds after the end of the invitation, then by a clarification question, then by another 0.3 seconds after the answer to the clarification question, and when a response to the invitation is finally delivered, the rejection is so mitigated that it is never actually said at all, being replaced by an account for the to-be-inferred declining of the invitation. Of the several features of preferred and dispreferred responses mentioned and exemplified here, the one most relevant to the focus of the present paper is that of sequential and, especially, temporal placement: preferred comes early, dispreferred is commonly delayed.

Ordinarily, as noted, agreement and acceptance are "preferred" response types, and disagreement and rejection are "dispreferred." But Pomerantz (1978) showed that this is not invariant. After self-deprecations, for example, agreement would be tantamount to endorsing the negative assessment of prior speaker. Accordingly, after self-deprecations, disagreement and rejection are preferred responses, rather than the reverse.

These accounts, that is, of the practices of bad news telling and of the organization of preference/dispreference, are the main resources needed to describe the mechanism which is the topic of this paper. In the episode to be examined below, two of the participants infer that bad news is on the way and proffer a guess at what it is, indeed proffer several guesses, none of which is correct. Each of the guesses in turn is rejected.

The observation (for which I am indebted to Jenny Mandelbaum) which triggers the present conjecture is this: these rejections are done, to varying degrees, directly upon possible completion of the "guess" turns, that is, as preferred responses. In other materials, as we shall see, guess rejections are "delayed," are done as dispreferred responses (as, indeed, one might have thought would generally be the case). But there is a single sequence type and a single turn type involved: bad news on the way, a guess at what that bad news is, and rejection of the guess. What then is the basis for differentiating the rejections of wrong guesses, some as preferred (and to varying degrees), others as dispreferred? Here is the conjecture.

The Conjecture: An Actual Virtual Servo-Mechanism

"Rejection" of guesses at bad news is done as a *preferred* response—i.e., quickly and not delayed—when the "actual news" is (according to the bearer's assessment, which is thereby displayed) "not as bad" as the guess. "Rejection" is done as a *dispreferred* response when the actual news is worse than the guess—when the guess is not bad enough, is too optimistic.

The evidence that the device operates in this manner for the members is of the following sort. If a guess is rejected, then one possible sequel is that another guess be proffered. If the last guess was rejected as a *preferred* rejection, i.e., quick, thus showing, according to the conjecture, that the actual news is not as bad as the guess, then the next guess displays an understanding of that by being a less bad guess, by being more optimistic. If the rejection was done as *dispreferred*, as delayed, then the guesser's understanding is displayed by a next guess being "worse."[4]

The result is that by rejecting guesses more or less quickly or slowly, the bearer of bad tidings can "steer" the intended recipients who are trying to guess the news in the right "direction," i.e., toward better guesses. However, if the single case on which this conjecture is based is characteristic, steering in the right direction may not be enough; in this case the bearer had in the end to tell the news. The device may better prepare the recipients to receive the news, but if they do not guess right the first time, they may not guess right at all. But the main interest here is in the mechanism, not the result, and we now turn to examine the case which prompted this conjecture.

A Display of the Device

Mike and Nancy are having dinner with hosts Shane and Vivian, both being boyfriend/girlfriend pairs. They are just finishing the main course (chicken) when the following transpires.

[6] [Vivian, Chicken Dinner, 105ff.]

```
105   M:   What's for dessert.
106        (1.1)
107   V:   Mm:
108   S:   <I- <mm-=
109   V:   =That was his ide:a. (0.2) Okay? ((smile voice))
110   S:   (khhhha)
111   M:   En'ee ⌈forgot about (d'sert)⌉Naht nih    ⌉=         ← a
112   V:         ⌊I left the desser:t-  ⌋ No: no no ⌋          ← a
113   M:   =n:o⌈(dessert.)⌉                                    
114   V:       ⌊He didn't⌋ forget about it.        ← a
115   M:   Hmmm
116        (0.2)
117   V:   u-But- th⌈e dessert ⌉ was hih-⌉=
118   M:            ⌊J e l l o⌋ prob'ly. ⌊hah.⌋      ← b
119   V:                       =⌈ N o⌉ ; No:,        ← b
```

---

4. Davidson's (1984) examination of what follows rejections focuses on offers, requests, invitations, and proposals and documents the observation that rejections of such actions can be followed by what she calls "subsequent versions." As for the characteristics of such "subsequent versions," Davidson (1984:105) notes that they display their speakers' "attempts to deal with some inadequacy, trouble, or problem with the initial formulation."

```
120   M:   Fucken je:llo.=Y'⌈know-⌉        ← b
121   V:              ⌊Wait ⌋        ← b
122        (0.2)
123   N:   ⌈Fig newtons ⌉ri:ght? ⌉ fig new(h)tons. ⌉    ← c
124   M:   ⌊They make su-⌋ Y'know-⌊ Y'know how the-⌋
125        ⌈know how they make ⌈JE:LLO on tee:vee:?⌉
126   S:   ⌊No:: (                            )⌉ =    ← c
127   V:                    ⌊NO:::.    BUT    ⌋ =    ← c
128   S:   =⌈I thought about that. ⌉           ← c
129   V:   =⌊ HE  A:SKED  ME ⌋ 'E said *should    ← c
130        I get fig new:tons*? he ha= ((*=smile voice))    ← c
131   S:   =What
132        (0.4)
133   M:   Know how they make jello on TV to be: (0.3) great
134        dessert.
           ((7 lines on TV Jello commercials omitted))
142   M:   No what di- what d'ju ge- what'd you ge:t.
143        Is ⌈at (a pa ) ⌉
144   V:     ⌊Wai:t. It's⌋ a surprise.=
145   M:   =( Is it ) I be:(h)t
146        (0.3)
147   V:   Ne he he he he=
148   N:   =hm hm hm=
149   S:   =I'll tell ya.
150        (0.2)
151   N:   It ⌈better be good.
152   M:      ⌊What.
153   S:   Oatmeal c(h)ookies (h) (h)=
154   M:   Is it? oatmeal cookies=
155   N:   =Oh::=
```

A full analytic explication of this episode would require more space than is available here. A sketch will therefore have to suffice.

What sets the sequence in motion is Mike's inquiry (105) about dessert. That inquiry can be said to be addressed to the "hosts" as a party, and does not determine which member/ incumbent of the party shall speak for it. (The video record is compatible with this account.) The gap at line 106 suggests that there is some problem with the intra-party allocation of next speakership, with Vivian waiting for Shane to respond because dessert was his responsibility, and Shane waiting for Vivian to respond because she had done the meal to that point. Eventually (and I omit the detailed path to this outcome), Vivian makes explicit that the choice of dessert was Shane's ("That was his idea"), and this denial of responsibility is taken initially by Mike as a harbinger of trouble.

There is bad news about the dessert on the way, and the guests—Mike and Nancy—offer three anticipations of that news. The three guesses are at lines 111, 118-20, and 123 respectively. Each guess is rejected: the 111 guess at 112-114 (the "a" arrows); the 118 guess at 119-121 (the "b" arrows); and the 123 guess at 126-130 (the "c" arrows). It is these three guesses and their rejections which prompt the conjecture described earlier. Several observations may be offered about each of them, in order.

[6a]   [Vivian, Chicken Dinner, 109-115]

```
109   V:   =That was his ide:a. (0.2) Okay? ((smile voice))
110   S:   (khhhha)
```

```
111   M:   En'ee ┌forgot about (d'sert)┐ Naht nih ┐=          ← a
112   V:         └I left the desser:t- ┘No: no no ┘          ← a
113   M:   =n:o ┌(dessert.) ┐                                ← a
114   V:        └He didn't ┘ forget about it.                ← a
115   M:   Hmmm
```

Note first that Mike's guess at line 111 is built by Mike (by use of the "en" [and]) as a continuation of, as something which follows from, Vivian's disavowal at 109. Note as well that this guess by Mike is produced largely simultaneously with talk by Vivian at line 112. Such overlapping talk can, but need not necessarily, impair the capacity of the simultaneous speakers to hear/grasp the talk of the other(s). Note then that Vivian's ensuing talk is built to display that she heard Mike's talk. It does this both by repeating part of the talk ("he forgot about") while negating it ("he didn't forget. . .") and by incorporating aspects of it with pronoun references ("it" for "dessert").

But note especially the quickness of the response—quickness in two respects. First, the rejection or disagreement tokens are placed directly after the first possible completion of Mike's turn, in contrast to the more common delay of disagreements and rejections. Second, Vivian abandons *her* competing turn (line 112) in order to place these rejection tokens there. That is, at the point at which Mike's turn seems to be coming to an end, Vivian's could be emerging into the clear. Speakers of turns emerging into the clear like this regularly either continue after a slight hitch or do what I once (Schegloff, [1973] 1987) termed a "recycled turn beginning," restarting the turn so that it all gets said in the clear. But Vivian does neither of these; instead she cuts off the utterance in progress (line 112) and in that sense turns to address and reject Mike's guess at an earliest possible point. As it happens, Mike goes on to bemoan the anticipated lack of dessert, so that Vivian's talk does *not* emerge into the clear at that point. However, this does not affect the logic of the analysis or of the underlying conversational practices here. Vivian's rejection is aimed at the first projected possible completion of Mike's guess.

The conjecture being proposed suggests that the quickness of this rejection is a way of doing the rejection as a preferred response. The import of rejection being done as a preferred response is that the bad news to be told is not as bad as the guess that has been proffered. If that is the case, if the guesser so understands a quick rejection, then a next guess (if there is one) should reflect this by proffering a version of the bad news which is not as bad as the prior guess.

[6b]   [Vivian, Chicken Dinner, 117-121]

```
117   V:   u-But- th┌e dessert ┐ was hih- ┐=
118   M:            └J e l l o ┘prob' ly. ├hah. ┐            ← b
119   V:                          =├ N o ,┤: No:,           ← b
120   M:   Fucken je:llo.=Y'┌know- ┐      ← b
121   V:                    └Wait ┘       ← b
```

At line 118, Mike offers a second guess, one which no longer expects no dessert at all, but which anticipates news of a not particularly desirable dessert. Lest there be any doubt about the proposed status of "jello" as a dessert, Mike makes his views quite clear at lines 120, 124-5, 133-4 and in the lines I have omitted here (where he refers to it ironically as a "great dessert" and as the product of going "to a lotta trouble").

Once again, Mike's talk (at line 118) is in overlap with Vivian's (at line 117, where she appears to be redoing line 109, and perhaps 112). As with the first guess, Vivian abandons her turn-in-progress before its possible completion in favor of a rejection of Mike's guess. But note that this start up by Vivian, though it comes quickly at *a* possible completion of Mike's turn, does not come at the *first* possible completion of Mike's turn—after "jello." To be sure, there

is no pause or appreciable silence after "jello." Still, in its sequential context it is analyzable as a candidate dessert, and thus as a possibly complete turn. In not interdicting the guess at that point, Vivian shows herself to be not as precipitous in heading it off, more lax about its proposal.

As well, the rejection is not as "emphatic." By that I mean that, in response to the first guess, Vivian had not only provided rejection tokens; she specifically rejected precisely what Mike had proposed, by negating its repetition (114: "He didn't forget about it"). Here, however, she offers just the rejection tokens, and does not expand the turn to reject the guess "by name." Further, it might be noted, the first rejection is done with a "burst" of three rapid nos; the second rejection uses two separate, measured nos, each prosodically distinct.

That Mike may hear this rejection to be not as "definitive" as the first is suggested by his redoing of the guess at line 120 in the face of the rejection tokens, thereby eliciting a further response from Vivian at line 121, this time at first possible completion, but *not* specifically rejecting the suggestion.

The response to the second guess, then, is "less" preferred than the rejection of the first: it is done not quite as "early" in the metric of possible turn completion, and it is done less emphatically. Still, it is not delayed, or otherwise done as a dispreferred response. On the conjecture we are entertaining, this is taken to show that the actual news is still not as bad as the guess, but that the guess is "warmer," closer. This should be reflected in a next guess (if there *is* a next guess) which is "better," or "less bad," news than the prior guess(es).

[6c]   [Vivian, Chicken Dinner, 123-130]

```
123  N:  ⌜Fig newtons ⌝ ri:ght? ⌝ fig new(h)tons. ⌝        ← c
124  M:  ⌞They make su-⌟ Y'know-⌟ Y'know how the-⌟
125       ⌜know how they make ⌜JE:LLO on tee:vee:?⌝
126  S:  ⌞No:: (                          ⌜           )⌝  =   ← c
127  V:                      ⌞NO:::.  BUT ⌟          =   ← c
128  S:  =⌜I thought about that. ⌝                        ← c
129  V:  =⌞HE A:SKED ME        ⌟ 'E said *should          ← c
130      I get fig new:tons*? he ha= ((*=smile voice))    ← c
```

The next guess is offered by Nancy at line 123, while Mike pursues the matter of jello as an undistinguished dessert. (Note, by the way, that Nancy's entry as guesser here suggests the involvement of the couples as parties in this episode, as did the hesitation about answering the inquiry following line 105). Nancy's guess of "fig newtons" can be seen to be "better," that is can be seen (by us as analysts) to be seen (by them as participants) to be "better," in two respects. First, Shane and Vivian both acknowledge that it had actually been considered as a possibility. And second, it turns out to be almost correct, the right *sort* of thing—cookies, if not precisely the right instance. (And indeed, when the actual dessert is announced to be "oatmeal cookies" at line 153, its reception suggests that it is assessed as about on a par with fig newtons). So, although it is also to be rejected because it is not actually correct, as a guess it is roughly correct. How is the rejection done?

Note that the turn in which Nancy guesses (123) is built with a format quite like Mike's preceding talk (118-120). Mike's preceding talk can be characterized as follows: guess item ("jello") + tag question ("hah") + stance-marked guess item ("fucken jello"). Then Nancy's turn has the same format: guess item ("fig newtons") + tag question ("right?") + stance-marked guess item ("fig new(h)tons"), where the laugh token is the stance marker.

Then note that Mike's second guess was rejected after the first of these components. Nancy's guess, however, is responded to later. Shane's rejection token comes at the possible completion of the third component, Vivian's even later, even though the second component could be taken as a strong turn completion, to which a response is relevant next.

Note, furthermore, that Vivian's response is a "No, but . . . ." Sacks ([1973] 1987) treated

"Yes, but . . . " answers as "pre-disagreement agreement tokens," that is, as formal tokens of agreement produced as preliminaries to disagreement, and so heard by interlocutors. More generally, they are pre-dispreferred preferred responses, that is, tokens of some preferred response type, produced and heard as preliminaries to upcoming dispreferred responses. Applied here, "No, but. . ." can be seen to have the same status of a pre-dispreferred preferred response. Then "No"—the rejection—is the preferred response to what is still heard as an "overly negative" anticipation of the bad news, with the dis-preferred part of the response being a concession that this guess is "in the ball park."

Reviewing responses to the three guesses, then, we note: each next guess is responded to later than the prior (after first possible completion, after second possible completion, after third possible completion, and later than that [Vivian, 127]). Associated with less precipitous responses are less emphatic rejections: the first involves a burst of three rapid rejection tokens plus negation of the guess; the second, two measured rejection tokens alone; the third, rejection tokens as preliminaries to concessions. (There is a similar trajectory in gestural expression: from multiple lateral headshakes at the first rejection to none at the third.) Although each response is less strong, each is done as a preferred response, suggesting that the actual news is better than this guess. Each next guess shows the guesser to have so understood the response to the prior guess, by offering a "less bad" anticipation next. When the third guess is treated as wrong but just about right, the bad news recipients guess no more, but re-request the news (at line 142).

It is these observations which have prompted the conjecture about the use of mode of rejection as a "steering device" or servo-mechanism for guiding prospective recipients of bad news to find it for themselves.[5]

Extending the Scope of the Analysis

The preceding account has been developed as a single-case based conjecture in part because it seemed improbable that a substantial number of occurrences could be assembled which had the requisite features—more than one guess, arranged on a scale of "badness of news," with differentially placed rejections. With the results of the preceding analysis in hand, however, other materials present themselves as potentially relevant applications.

In the following fragment, for example, Hyla and Nancy are two college friends who have just been discussing Hyla's "social life," and in particular her failure to hear from a young man ("Richard") from another city who had promised to write first. ("Sim" is a young man in Hyla's home town whom she dates, but who is not as strong an object of attraction).

[7]   [HG:22-23]

01   Hyla: Y'know w't I did las'ni:ght?
02   Nancy: ⌊Wha:t, =

```
03   Hyla:    =Did  a  te:rrible  thi::::ng,
04   Nancy:                        ⌊You called Si:m,
05            (0.4)
06   Hyla:    No;,
07            (.)
08   Nancy:   What,
09            (.)
10   Hyla:    ·t`hhhh⌈Well I hed-⌉
11   Nancy:         ⌊You called ⌋ Richard,=
12   (    ):   =hh-hh=
13   Hyla:    =(h)y(h)Yea(h)h en I h(h)ung up w(h)un 'e
14            a(h)ns⌈wer
15   Nancy:         ⌊Oh: Hyla why::::::,
```

Hyla here initiates a new sequence with a "pre-telling," a form here analyzable as either a story preface (Sacks, 1974) or a pre-announcement (Terasaki, 1976). As becomes clear from her next utterance, by giving a clue she is inviting a guess from Nancy about what her "tellable" is, and she has characterized the sort of thing it is—"a terrible thing." Now this is not a "bad news telling" in the same sense as was involved in other segments displayed earlier. Still, there is guessing at something "bad," and we can see if the device described in our conjecture is at all helpful in tracking what goes on here.

Note then that Nancy is quick to respond to the opportunity to guess. In keeping with the sequential context of the prior discussion of making contact with young men, Nancy guesses that such a contact is what Hyla has in mind to report, the terrible thing being that *she* initiated it rather than waiting for the young man to do so (this was recorded in c. 1975). She guesses (04), "you called Sim."

Hyla's response to this guess is at the opposite range of the scale from those observed in our conjecture material. There, even the most "lax" response was initiated directly after a possible completion of the guess-containing turn; what varied was whether it was the first, or some subsequent possible turn completion. But here, Hyla's rejection is delayed (05) after the guess-containing turn. In the formulation previously proposed, this "delayed" rejection is done as a dispreferred response; it suggests that the actual "news" is worse than the guesser has guessed. The rejection is followed (at line 7) by a slight gap, in which the possibility is allowed that Hyla will add a correction (and hence a telling) to her rejection of Nancy's guess, as rejectors of proffered possibilities commonly do. When that is not forthcoming, Nancy eschews further guesses (as well she might, for she is the position of proffering how terrible a thing she considers her friend capable of doing), and asks outright for Hyla to tell. But directly she grasps, undoubtedly from a closer reanalysis of the preceding sequential context in which "Richard" in particular was being alluded to, what "more terrible" guess might be offered. It is of the same sort,[6] and in the same format, as her prior guess, is on target, and, happily, not quite terrible enough.

The point here is that the conjectured device developed on other, in some ways different, materials appears to be operating here. The guess-rejection-as-dispreferred *is* taken by the news recipient to indicate that the news is worse than guessed, and ends up here leading to a guess in the right direction—indeed, to a virtually correct guess. There are reasons then to be

6. The conjecture might be extended, then, to suggest (albeit without grounding in the detailed data of actual talk) that a response of "no" alone to a guess may convey that the domain of the guess—the *sort* of thing which has been guessed—is correct, and it is the degree of badness/goodness which needs to be adjusted. Otherwise, the rejection may take a different form, such as "no" plus a correction—perhaps even the actual news. I am indebted here to Lena Jayussi, who also suggests that children may reject wrong guesses with just "no" even when the domain of the guess is incorrect, leaving the guesser to keep trying guesses of a wrong sort.

encouraged that the conjectured device is a real one in the participants' actual production of talk. The full scope of its operation remains to be explored.

Structure-Based vs. Practice-Based Uses of "Preference"

The scope of this device's operation aside, its exploration affords an opportunity for explicating and clarifying aspects of the notions "preferred" and "dispreferred." These terms have been employed in at least two distinct ways in past work, and it may be pertinent to make these explicit and clarify their respective usefulness.[7] The treatment here will be concise.

One usage of "preferred/dispreferred" treats it as a property of sequence types, and specifically of the basic unit of sequences, adjacency pairs (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973:295-98; Sacks, [1973] 1987; Heritage, 1984:245-53; Levinson, 1983:303-08). The other usage treats "preferred/dispreferred" as a property of the participants' ways of doing or enacting a responsive activity. In the former usage, some "first pair part," such as an invitation, an offer, a request, is said to have or "project" some type of "second pair part" as its preferred response, e.g., accept or grant, and others as dispreferred, e.g., decline or deny. In the latter usage, a recipient of some type of action, such as an invitation, offer or request, is said to do some type of response, such as an acceptance or grant, "*as a* preferred," or some other response, such as a decline or denial, "*as a* dispreferred."

Although both usages (and undoubtedly others) are drawn on in the work of various contributors to this area of inquiry, there do appear to be "leanings." The first of these usages, for example, is the one which I have mostly favored in my past work. To cite one instance, in writing (Schegloff, 1970) of "go ahead" or "clearance cue" (Goffman, 1963) responses to summonses as the central response type, and the "off-putting" and delaying responses as alternatives, I treated these as organizational features of this sequence type, related to the business the sequence type was used to do.

The first of these usages also underlies most of Sacks's work. For example, in his paper on the preference for agreement ([1973] 1987), the data are sequences with responses to questions of the "yes/no" type, what he termed "agreement" and "disagreement" with questions of the "yes/no" type. Whether a question "prefers" a "yes" or a "no" response is a matter of its speaker's construction of it, "You're going, aren't you?" being built to prefer a "yes" answer, and "You're not going, are you?" being built to prefer a "no." But once the question has been constructed (unless later revised), the preference is built into the sequence and is not a matter of the respondent's construction of the response. If the question is built to prefer a "yes," then a "no" is a dispreferred response, even if delivered without delay and in turn initial position, and vice versa.

The other view, characteristic of much of Pomerantz's work (1975, 1978, 1984), puts the weight less on the side of sequence structure and more on the side of practice. Speakers display the kind of action they are doing, and the kind of stance they take toward what they are doing, by their deployment of sequential properties and turn constructional devices. This is still not the same as motivation and personal desires; a recipient of an invitation can, on this view, do a declining as a dispreferred, as a "reluctantly," even if "privately" overjoyed at the prospect of not going. They do the response which they do "as a preferred" or "as a dispreferred," rather than doing "the preferred or the dispreferred response." There are things to be said for each way of proceeding, and problems for each as well.

If some preference structure is to be assigned to particular sequence types, or to particular

7. See also the effort along these lines by Jack Bilmes (1988). Bilmes includes senses of the notion "preference" not taken up here. He gives special prominence to an early usage which he attributes to Sacks, which diverges quite substantially, and in some respects orthogonally, from the ways in which "preference" has been used in the literature of the last decade and a half, including in Sacks's work.

tokens of them, how is the appropriate preference structure to be determined? Surely this is to be treated as an empirical question. Indeed, answers to this question are an attractive candidate for inclusion in what we mean by "culture" in the anthropological sense, and that part of culture which may well vary.

Nor is it necessarily the case that sequence types named by single action words will have the same preference for all instances of the type. For example, we often assert that "offers" prefer "acceptances" and disprefer "declines." But some offers may well prefer declines, or prefer them at first; initial offers of second helpings of dessert, for instance, may be such a case. And some offers may be made, or makeable, only with the understanding that they will be declined (what we sometimes call "pro forma"). In determining what the preference structure of some sequence type is, one central resource surely is the practices of responding which are observably employed by recipients of its first part.

On the other hand, there are exchanges in which the form of response is that of a "preferred" response, but in which that response seems clearly to be dispreferred—and dispreferred by virtue of the sequence type involved, what is being done through it, and the status of that activity type for the parties. In 8, for example, two girls who once attended college together until Bee transferred to another school are talking on the telephone after a long hiatus. After Ava describes a "Speech" course she is taking, Bee inquires about Ava's current contacts:

[8]   [TG:151-154]

Bee: Eh-yih have anybuddy: thet uh:? (1.2) I would know from the English
       depar'mint there?
Ava: Mm-mh. Tch! I don't think so.

Although Ava produces this negative answer with no delay and in turn-initial position (which are common features of preferred response types), I think that this response should be understood to be a dispreferred one in this sequence. Bee's question is searching for, or proffering, a possible topic for joint exploration, one which recovers their joint experience of the past. It deserves at least a search for a possible affirmative response, especially since, as it turns out in response to a follow-up question from Bee, there is an affirmative response available. Something potentially notable and consequential for the occasion and for the relationship is introduced into the interaction by Ava's doing a dispreferred response type with the sequential characteristics of a preferred response. But an analysis along these lines is not possible unless a preference can be understood to characterize the *sequence type*, independent of the manner in which the response is enacted on this occasion by this speaker.

Almost certainly, we need both usages of the notion preference/dispreference to capture the ways in which parties to talk-in-interaction organize their talk. For the data segment on which the conjectured servo-mechanism was explored, the practice-based usage of preference I have in the past favored *less* appears to have been *most* useful. Although in general we must suppose that guesses prefer confirmations rather than rejections, the sort of sequence we have explored makes the character of the particular guess of greater relevance in determining whether confirming or rejecting it will be the preferred response. Other sequence types may be similar: in general offers prefer acceptances, but this may be highly sensitive to what is being offered.

The proper scope and intermixing of sequence-structure-based and practice-based preference organizations remains to be worked out. One possibility is to treat the "preference" relationship as similar in some respects to "adjacency." Adjacency is a general positional relationship between units such as turns or utterances, which is deeply consequential for how they work. It has a further specialized and upgraded application in the unit called the "adjacency pair," which has properties over and above those characterizing positional adjacency elsewhere (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973:295-96; Schegloff, 1988:113). "Preference" may well have a practice-based form whose provenance in conversation is more general than adjacency

pairs, while having a more specialized application in adjacency pairs, where it becomes a structural property of certain sequence types. But it surely is neither as general as the adjacency relationship, nor as potent.

Closure

Two distinct themes run through the preceding discussion. One concerns a particular sort of *conversational* undertaking—conveying bad news, and the organization of one way in which that undertaking can be handled. The other concerns an *analytic* undertaking which is meant to capture a more general property of some activities done through talk—an asymmetry between alternative tacks a participant can take toward preceding talk, and the use of the notion of "preference" to characterize that asymmetry. Here I can offer but a few paragraphs of temporary closure on these themes.

Perhaps the greatest shortcoming of traditional approaches to talk in interaction is the degree to which they emphasize the information-transmission uses of talk. Even after the "revolution" introduced into philosophy by Austin's focus on what utterances *do,* propositional content remains the bottom line for most analysis. Sociologists and anthropologists have properly insisted on the action properties of talk, although even in these disciplines the treatment of talk as "communication" can subvert this enterprise.

Even with a whole-hearted commitment to talk in interaction as, in the first instance, the locus of social action, however, we must recognize that sometimes the action one party will be undertaking with another is specifically the conveying of information, or "telling news." This is so both with ordinary people in ordinary capacities, and by people acting on special occasions or in special capacities—as, for example, with professionals in modern society. Anyone concerned with such "special" occasions or such specialized "capacities" may well then benefit from an understanding of how such an activity is organized.

The stance adopted here has been that there are certain canonical ways in which the telling of news is organized, and furthermore certain ways in which the conveying of bad news seems to be organized. Although bad news is sometimes told outright, there does appear to be an organized set of practices which provide an alternative to this. Among these is a device for eliciting guesses by the recipient who then articulates the news itself, guesses which are aimed for and elicited when there are grounds for anticipating success, which can then be ratified by the one bringing the news in the first place. The mechanism which this paper has been at pains to describe is "situated" in this domain, being used as a way of steering a guesser who has not guessed correctly to better guesses. In this section devoted to temporary closure, it may be useful to linger a moment on this way of conceiving the larger domain.

Starting with such quite general organizations of practices of talking, one can then ask what further specific practices or constraints appear to characterize particular settings or occasions in which bad news needs to be conveyed, and conveyed routinely. But a proper understanding of such professionally (or "occasion-ally") identified settings and practices will generally best be pursued as specifications of more general practices of talking in interaction. Members of society first learn to be competent interactants, and then shape or adapt their practices to the contingencies which they face, for example, the contingencies of professional practice. And this may well be the best way to understand how they do much of what they do, even professionally. Instead of beginning analysis with the seemingly special features of the persons, settings, or occasions actually being examined, investigators might do well to begin with more general ways of organizing talk, ones not limited to specialized jobs or settings, and ask how the more general resources are adapted for particular, situated use.

Such a stance toward analysis necessarily refers inquirers to whatever general practices of

talking in interaction we can give serious accounts of. One common property which has seemed to characterize diverse particular activities in talk is the asymmetry of their alternativity. By this I mean that alternative ways of talking or proceeding or reacting are often not treated by participants as equi-valent, and analysts must have ways of noting and characterizing such asymmetries. The notion of "preference" is one resource for dealing with such facts as that acceptance and rejection are not symmetrical responses to offers, just as offers and requests are not symmetrical ways of proposing the conveyance of value from one person to another. But the degree to which such preference features are linked to more or less stable structures of action (stable structures of action *for the participants*) on the one hand, or are more improvised ways of enacting stances in transient, particular here-and-nows will continue to demand clarification.

What is at issue is *not* a choice between a notion of preference anchored in the subjective orientations of the interactants *versus* characterizations imposed by researchers from resources extrinsic to interactions under investigation. What is at issue are alternative ways in which the orientations and conduct of participants in interaction may be understood and described, and the analytic problems of researchers in warranting such understandings and accounts. The conclusion reached here has been that both ways of understanding preference will be needed. Another conclusion must certainly be that neither is yet well understood.

References

Atkinson, J. Maxwell and Paul Drew
    1979   Order in Court. London: Macmillan.
Bilmes, Jack
    1988   "The concept of preference in conversation analysis." Language in Society 17:161-81.
Davidson, Judy
    1984   "Subsequent versions of invitations, offers, requests, and proposals dealing with potential
            or actual rejection." Pp. 102-28 in J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage (eds.),
            Structures of Social Action. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Drew, Paul
    1984   "Speakers' reportings in invitation sequences." Pp. 129-51 in J. Maxwell Atkinson and
            John Heritage (eds.), Structures of Social Action. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Goffman, Erving
    1961   Encounters. Indiannapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.
    1963   Behavior in Public Places. New York: Free Press.
Heritage, John
    1984   Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Levinson, Stephen C.
    1983   Pragmatics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Pomerantz, Anita
    1975   "Second assessments: a study of some features of agreements/disagreements." Ph.D. diss.,
            University of California, Irvine.
    1978   "Compliment responses: notes on the co-operation of multiple constraints." Pp. 79-112 in
            Jim Schenkein (ed.), Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction. New
            York: Academic Press.
    1984   "Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: some features of preferred/dispreferred turn
            shapes." Pp. 57-101 in J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage (eds.), Structures of Social
            Action. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Sacks, Harvey
    [1973]   "On the preferences for agreement and contiguity in the organization of sequences in
    1987   conversation." Pp. 54-69 in Graham Button and John R. E. Lee (eds.), Talk and Social
            Organisation. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

1974   "An analysis of the course of a joke's telling in conversation." Pp. 337-53 in Richard
        Bauman and Joel Sherzer (eds.), Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking.
        Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schegloff, Emanuel A.
1970   "Opening sequencing." In The Social Organization of Conversational Openings.
        Unpublished ms.
1972   "Notes on a conversational practice: formulating place." Pp. 76-119 in David N. Sudnow
        (ed.), Studies in Social Interaction. New York: Free Press.
[1973] "Recycled turn beginnings: a precise repair mechanism in conversation's turn-taking
1987   organization." Pp. 70-85 in Graham Button and John R. E. Lee (eds.), Talk and Social
        Organization. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
1987   "Analyzing single episodes of interaction: an exercise in conversation analysis." Social
        Psychology Quarterly 50:101-14.
1988   "Goffman and the analysis of conversation." Pp. 89-135 in Paul Drew and Anthony
        Wooton (eds.), Erving Goffman: Perspectives on the Interaction Order. Cambridge:
        Polity Press.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. and Harvey Sacks
1973   "Opening up closings," Semiotica VIII:289-327.

Schegloff, Emanuel A., Gail Jefferson, and Harvey Sacks
1977   "The preference for self-correction in the organization of repair in conversation."
        Language 53:361-82.

Terasaki, Alene
1976   "Pre-announcemnent sequences in conversation." Social Sciences Working Paper No. 99.
        Irvine, CA: University of California.