

3. On some questions and ambiguities in conversation

EMANUEL A. SCHEGLOFF

University of California, Los Angeles

The datum I am concerned with is the following, in particular the last two exchanges:

(1)

- 1 B: An's- an () we were discussing, it tur-
2 it comes down, he s- he says, I-I-you've talked
3 with thi- si- i- about this many times. I said,
4 it come down t'this:=
5 B: =Our main difference: I feel that a government,
6 i- the main thing, is- th-the purpose a'the
7 government, is, what is best for the country.
8 A: Mnhmm
9 B: He says, governments, an' you know he keeps- he
10 talks about governments, they sh- the thing that
11 they sh'd do is what's right or wrong.
12 A: For whom.
13 B: Well he says- he-
14 A: By what standard
15 B: That's what- that's exactly what I mean. he s-
16 but he says ...

B has been describing to A the differences he (B) has been having with his high school history teacher over the morality of American foreign

This lecture was delivered to a conference on Linguistics and Language Teaching at Rutgers University, April 1972. I am grateful to Dr. J. Barone for inviting me to address the conference. Some of the themes and analyses presented herein were developed in lectures at Columbia University between 1966 and 1972. At the time of writing I was a visitor in the Department of Psychology at Rockefeller University. My appreciation goes to Professor Michael Cole for the opportunity and for his hospitality. The lecture is reproduced here essentially unchanged. Several mechanical errors have been set right; several obscurities clarified, though others certainly remain; the effects of certain psychological and stylistic peculiarities of the time repaired. Some bibliographic references, many of which were unavailable in 1972, have been supplied. A fuller version of the essay was published in *Pragmatics Microfiche*, 1976, 2.2, D8-G1.

Ways of working change over time, and in many respects this lecture and the statement of many of its themes are now a bit archaic to me. But it may still be of some use; some friends specially liked it, and I still like parts of it.

policy since the time of George Washington. I suppose I should say now that the excerpt is taken from a conversation in a radio call-in show (A being the radio personality), although that will not matter at all to the analysis except in one distant way, in which a formal structural characteristic of the conversation is in this case supplied by that fact; but it is the structural feature that counts, not the fact that in this case it is supplied by the radio setting, the feature being supplied in other conversations by other circumstances of setting.

My initial concern with the sequence 12–15 focused on the interruption in 14. Early work on the sequential organization of turn taking in conversation (especially that of my colleague Harvey Sacks) made occurrences of interruptions and interutterance gaps of special interest, as possible violations of the normative organization of the transition from one to a next. Given the recurrent management of that transition with no (or minimal) gap and overlap, and a regular respect for the rights of a speaker, having begun an utterance, to bring it to a point of possible completion (cf. the later statement in Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974), interruptions seemed to warrant examination to find what was involved in departures from that normative practice. In particular, I was attracted by the possibility that interruptions, or some interruptions, might be – so to speak – finely tuned, that is, quite precisely placed by an interrupter (a similar interest animates Jefferson 1973a). An adequate analysis of what was otherwise going on in the sequence might then yield an understanding of the occurrence, and the precise placement, of the interruption; and some degree of confidence in an analysis of what a sequence was occupied with might be derived if, by reference to it, an otherwise not particularly ordered interruption could get seen as “placed.”

1

Before turning directly to this datum, let me address a few remarks to the notion “question” in a more or less unlocated way. It is a strong candidate for popularity in a time when some concessions are thought necessary to the “uses of language,” or sentences of a language; when, for example, it is argued that some notion of a performative or some type of speech act or some kind of presupposition is involved in the production, and presumably in the comprehension, of a sentence or an utterance. If the mere presence of lexical items such as “I promise,” “I bet,” “I guarantee” can be taken as invoking the possible membership of the sentence in which they appropriately appear in a class such as

"promises" or "bets," with an attached presuppositional structure underlying them, how much more powerful is the appeal of syntactic forms such as "question" or "injunction." A ready bridge is apparently before us to cross from language to social behavior, in which, it might appear, the syntax will bear the load. Though it might be conceded that no complete or neat linguistic account of questions is yet available, the relevant attributes being variously apportioned among syntax, prosody, and other resources, still it might appear that linguistic resources will allow the construction and recognition of utterances as questions, and thus as actions of a certain type. Now I think such a view is, or would be, as misleading with regard to questions as a way of bridging language and social action as it is in the case of promises. The general point is that it is misleading to start to account for such categories of action as questions, promises, and so on as the analytic objects of interest. They are commonsense, not technical, categories and should be treated accordingly. I cannot pursue that general point here, so let me address it with regard to some particular categories.

Most of the problems derive from treating the categories (such as questions or promises), rather than particular data, as problematic. For example, Sacks has noted that for a great many cases (I should hazard a "most" here) of utterances like "I promise" or "I bet," it is not "promising" or "betting" at all that is going on, but rather an attempt at unit closure, such as topic or argument or "making arrangements" closure. The use of the sheer occurrence of the lexical items, without regard to the placement of the utterances in which they occur in the sequential organization of conversation, can be badly misleading, though not implausible.

The same thing is true where syntax is so used. Consider "injunction." The following is taken from a recent paper on the closing of conversation:

(2)

((B has called to invite C, but has been told that C is going out to dinner))

- B: Yeah. Well get on your clothes and get out and collect some of that free food and we'll make it some other time Judy then.
 C: Okay then Jack.
 B: Bye bye
 C: Bye bye

While B's initial utterance in this excerpt might be grammatically characterized as an imperative or a command, and C's "Okay"

then appears to be a submission or accession to it, in no sense but a narrowly syntactic one would those be anything but whimsical characterizations. While B's utterance has certain imperative aspects in its language form, those are not ones that count; his utterance is a closing initiation; and C's utterance agrees not to a command to get dressed (nor would she be inconsistent if she failed to get dressed after the conversation), but to an invitation to close the conversation. The point is that no analysis, grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, etc., of these utterances taken singly and out of sequence, will yield their import in use, will show what co-participants might make of them and do about them. That B's utterance here accomplishes a form of closing initiation, and C's accepts the closing form and not what seems to be proposed in it, turns on the placement of these utterances in the conversation. (Schegloff and Sacks 1973:313)

And so also with regard to questions. Consider the following (from Schegloff 1972:107):

(3)

B₁: Why don't you come and see me some times
 A₁: like to I would
 B₂: I would like you to. Lemme just
 A₂: where the-us-this address is. I don't know just

Where are the questions here? Is there a question here? For a participant whose next utterance or action may be contingent on finding about a current utterance whether it is a "question," because, if it is, an "answer" may be a relevant next thing for him to do, does syntax, or linguistic form, solve his problem? Not only does our intuition suggest that, although no syntactic question (nor question intonation, for that matter) occurs in A's second utterance of the excerpt, a question-answer (Q-A) sequence pair has been initiated, a request for directions if you like; more important, it is so heard by B, who proceeds to give directions. And although B's first utterance in the excerpt looks syntactically like a question, it is not a "question" that A "answers," but an "invitation" (in question form) that she "accepts."

Now it might do to play with this last point a bit. It might be argued that there is an easy way to provide for not analyzing B₁ as a question. To wit: consider that the utterance contains in it a component of imperative or injunctive form, "Come and see me sometime." Let us name a construction in English, or American English, an "injunction mitigator."

Instances of injunction mitigators are "why don't you," "would you like to," and undoubtedly others. A rule for its use might be that it can front or precede any injunctive form. It might, I suppose, be made a "sociolinguistic" rule, in the narrow sense of that term, if its use is made contingent on certain relative statuses between speaker and recipient(s), and so on. The rule might be said to transform the syntactic form from "injunctive" to "question," and the action, accordingly, from "command" to "request," "invitation," or "suggestion." And certainly, in a wide range of cases that we can imagine or invent, that transformation seems to be what is involved. In such cases, we would have provided for a recipient not hearing in the utterance a question, but a mitigated injunction, or an invitation, and so on, though, interestingly enough, a question would still be available to a literal analysis, and so declining the invitation might be done by treating the utterance for the question which it could be proposed to contain. But then we might note that in the present case, B_1 , the utterance would be an invitation without the mitigator. And other injunctions do not seem to allow the use of a mitigator, so that if one is used, it does not mitigate an injunction, but rather makes it sarcastic, as in "Why don't you go away and leave me alone." In short, whereas the forms I have for now named "injunction mitigators" may be operators or particles of a sort, what one of them is doing in any particular case will depend on what it is attached to, and where that is placed. It will not, therefore, serve as a generalized means, or even as a restricted one, for depriving nonquestion question forms of a question interpretation.

In insisting that the B_1 - A_1 sequence involves accepting an invitation rather than answering a question, I may seem to be niggling over details. Still, from the point of view of a recipient of the B_1 utterance, whereas a response of some sort is relevant, important differences turn on whether an answer or an acceptance/rejection is in point. Underlying this theme is the comembership of question-answer and invitation-acceptance/rejection sequences in the class of sequential units elsewhere called "adjacency pairs."

Adjacency pairs consist of sequences which properly have the following features: (1) Two utterance length; (2) Adjacent positioning of component utterances; (3) Different speakers producing each utterance.

The component utterances of such sequences have an achieved relatedness beyond that which may otherwise obtain between adjacent utterances. That relatedness is partially the product of the operation of a typology in the speakers' production of the se-

quences. The typology operates in two ways: it partitions utterance types into "first pair parts" (i.e., first parts of pairs) and second pair parts; and it affiliates a first pair part and a second pair part to form a "pair type." Question-answer, "greeting-greeting," "offer-acceptance/refusal" are instances of pair types. A given sequence will thus be composed of an utterance that is a first pair produced by one speaker directly followed by the production by a different speaker of an utterance which is a) a second pair part, and b) is from the same pair type as the first utterance in the sequence is a member of. Adjacency pair sequences, then, exhibit the further features (4) relative ordering of parts (i.e., first pair parts precede second pair parts), and (5) discriminative relations (i.e., the pair type of which a first pair part is a member is relevant to the selection among second pair parts).

A basic rule of adjacency pair operation is: given the recognizable production of a first pair part, on its first possible completion its speaker should stop and a next speaker should start and produce a second pair part from the pair type of which the first is recognizably a member. (Schegloff and Sacks 1973:295-6; cf. also Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974:716-8)

It is by virtue of the pair organization that a "response" is relevant for either a question or an invitation; it is by virtue of the differing pair types that different second pair parts will be required, depending on which first pair part is found to have been just finished.

Consider, in a similar vein, the following, in which a husband and wife are discussing arrangements for visiting another couple, with whom the previous night's scheduled visit had been canceled, while their 1½-year-old daughter plays on the floor:

(4)

- W: Why is it that we have to go there.
 H: Because she ((head-motioning to daughter)) can go out more easily than their kids can.

Note that H hears and treats W's utterance as a question, and answers it by giving a reason. But also note, as H and W subsequently did, that W's utterance can be heard as a complaint, and a complaint on the part of "us" against "them." In terms of that possible hearing, H's response comes off as a "defense" of them against W's complaint, and some troublesome issues about lines of solidarity might be seen to be raised. Were W's utterance heard and treated as a complaint in the first place, then a quite different response to it might be in order, such as joining

the complaint, with possibly quite different consequences for the location, and indeed the occurrence, of the visiting. Again, in either case adjacency pairs are involved; in one case question–answer, in the other complaint–echo complaint, or agreement.

One consequence of this discussion, to my mind, is that not only is the path from linguistic questions to interactional ones not a straight line, but not much may lie at its end. For a substantial part of what we might expect to be available to us as understanding of questions as a category of action is best and most parsimoniously subsumed under the category “adjacency pairs”; much of what is so about questions is so by virtue of the adjacency-pair format. And what distinguishes questions from first pair parts of other sorts does not seem in any straightforward way to be sought from linguistic resources.

Is there, then, no import at all of linguistic form, such as question form, for the action interpretation of an utterance? Could not one say that linguistic form supplies a *prima facie* basis for the analysis of an utterance, which will hold unless superseded by other features; in other words, that it provides a presumption, an “unmarked” interpretation if you will, such that the burden falls elsewhere to make an utterance something else? A likely unparsimoniousness aside, one trouble with such a view is that it treats an utterance’s syntactic form as a “first” feature about it, hence *prima facie*. And in the traditional practice of linguists, as well as of ordinary language philosophers, in which single sentences are (the) normal units of analysis, this may well be the case. But in the real world of conversation, it is not. Most centrally, an utterance will occur someplace sequentially. Most obviously, except for initial utterances, it will occur after some other utterance or sequence of utterances with which it will have, in some fashion, to deal and which will be relevant to its analysis for coparticipants. Less obviously, but more importantly, it (and here initial utterances are not excepted) may occur in a structurally defined place in conversation, in which case its structural location can have attached to its slot a set of features that may overwhelm its syntactic or prosodic structure in primacy. “Well, get on your clothes and get out and collect some of that free food” occurs in such a structurally defined place. Second slots in adjacency pairs are such a structural place.

Even where an utterance is in the linguistic form of a question, and seems to be doing questioning, the latter will not be adequately accounted for by the former. For if the question form can be used for actions other than questioning, and questioning can be accomplished by linguistic forms other than questions, then a relevant problem can be

posed not only about how a question does something other than questioning, but about how it does questioning; not only about how questioning is done by nonquestion forms, but about how it gets accomplished by question forms.

Let me now try one more line on the theme I have been trying to develop. One thing one might mean by an utterance being interactionally or conversationally a question is that it lays constraints on the next slot in the conversation of a sort special to the Q-A pair type of adjacency pairs. Leaving aside an explication of what those special constraints might be, we can consider how some of the materials already mentioned and some additional ones look in terms of this notion. There is what I suppose might be called "the clear case"; for example:

(5)

A: What time is it?
B: It's noon.

in which an adjacency pair is initiated making a second pair part relevant, and the second pair part seems to satisfy whatever formulation of the notion "answer" one uses. There is an earlier considered fragment:

(6)

B: Why don't you come and see me sometimes.
A: I would like to.

in which an adjacency pair is initiated, but one whose constraints are not of a Q-A sort, or whose treatment as of a Q-A sort, that is, giving reasons why not, will likely get a hearing as rudeness or teasing rather than answering, as in the similar case of requests, like "Do you have a cigarette?" "Yes (pause) would you like one?" There is yet another interesting case that merits extended treatment, though it cannot be given here. It is the case in which a Q-A format is used to package a sequence, such that the initial utterance is indeed used to set answer-relevant constraints on the next slot, but where the sequence is not used to do questioning or answering at all. Here, the format is determined by the linguistic forms, but what is done in that format has nothing to do with questioning. A relevant example is drawn from an earlier point in the conversation from which the initially cited datum comes.

(7)

1 B: Because- an'he did the same thing, in
2 War of- The War of Eighteen Twelve, he said

- 3 the fact that we were interested in expansion,
 4 t'carrying farther, was () something against.
 5 Y'know a-argument t'use against. But see the
 6 whole thing is he's against, he's [very- he's ()
 7 A: Is he teaching
 8 history or Divinity
 9 B: I don'kno(h)w. But he's very anti-imperialistic.

Now whatever its appearance when excerpted from the conversation, these last two turns (at lines 7–9) are not respectively a question as to someone's subject matter, and a confession of ignorance, which is the interpretation required if we see them as a Q–A sequence. The conversation contains early on:

(8)

- B: ... I'm taking 'merican history this term, I'm
 a junior. Well I- now the new term began I
 gotta new teacher, so, we're starting from
 about you know, Washington's foreign policy
 ((interpolations by A omitted))

"Is he teaching history or divinity" is not asking subject matter, and "I don't know" is not a confession of ignorance. This is not questioning and answering, though a question–answer format is used to "package" the sequence. The distinction is critical to what will be placed in the second slot of the pair, and how what is placed there will be understood.

Though in many of these cases, alternative analyses of the first utterance in the sequence are theoretically, or heuristically, conceivable (e.g., the analysis of "why don't you come visit," etc.), they do not appear to be in practice confounded in an ambiguity. The "distinctions" I have been pointing out are quite academic, in the sense that their proper, perhaps only, place is here in the lecture hall. They are not distinctions drawn by the participants, for whom rather it appears that what is being done is quite straightforwardly available or analyzable. Because the constraints on a next utterance for a next speaker can be quite sharply different if a last utterance is seen to be a question or something else, we might do well to examine in some detail a case in which both possibilities, with their attendant constraints, are entertained by the participants – a case, that is, of *empirical* ambiguity as to whether an utterance is a question or some determinate alternative. And in examining such an ambiguity, we shall encounter some sequential features of conversation, of the sort I suggested before, that overshadow the contribution made by its linguistic form to what an utterance is doing.

2

I now turn to the sequence I put before you at the beginning. My intention is to try to locate the sources of the ambiguity of "for whom" in the sequential structures of the conversation. I further want this to be explication of a real ambiguity rather than a theoretical one, that is, not one where only one sense is actually operative for the participants, though an analyst can conjure up other senses it might have, under some other circumstances. Therefore, I shall want to support the claim that both analyses of the utterance, which I argue compose the ambiguity, are available to, and are employed by, the participants, that is, both analyses will have been dealt with by both parties. Then we can turn to the utterance itself and attempt to explicate the sequential basis for the ambiguity.

The tool I shall use initially is one based on, and fundamental to, a great deal of prior work in conversational analysis. It is that coparticipants in conversation operate under the constraint that their utterances be so constructed and so placed as to show attention to, and understanding of, their placement. That means that utterances, or larger units, are constructed to display to coparticipants that their speaker has attended a last utterance, or sequence of utterances, or other unit, and that this current utterance, in its construction, is placed with due regard for where it is occurring.

Now that constraint, and what is required to meet it, can vary in power and in detail. Adjacency pairs are especially strong constraints, a first pair part making relevant a particular action, or a restricted set of actions, to be done next. When next speakers do such an action, they not only comply with the requirements of the particular adjacency pair initiated; they show in their utterance their understanding of what the prior utterance was doing – a first pair part of that pair type (cf. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974:728–9). At the other end of the scale, the constraint of showing attention to sequential context may be satisfied by speakers' showing that although they may know what is relevant next, what they are about to do is something else. Thus, there is a form we have elsewhere termed "misplacement markers" (Schegloff and Sacks 1973:319–20) – "by the way" is a familiar one – which speakers may use at the beginning of an utterance. This form can show, among other things, that they know that something other than what they are about to do is in order, or that what they are about to do is "out of place." Although they may then go on to do it, they will have had their utterance display their attention to, and understanding of, the preceding

utterance or sequence at least enough to know that what they are doing is not "naturally" or "properly" placed there. There are other such forms, such as starting an utterance with an "oh" (sometimes combined with using it to interrupt), when it is not topically coherent with what precedes, a show of unplannedness if you like, the way "free association" is accomplished conversationally, a display that what follows has been "touched off," a disjunction marker. Or, the use of "anyway" as a right-hand parenthesis, to show that what it precedes is fitted not to the immediately preceding, but to what preceded that.

Across the range of power and detail, utterances are built to display speakers' understanding; they are thereby made available for coparticipants' inspection to see if they display an adequate understanding of that which they claim to understand. This resource we will come back to later. For now, we want to notice that they also thereby make available to the *analyst* a basis in the data for claiming what the coparticipants' understanding is of prior utterances, for as they display it to one another, we can see it too (cf. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974:728-9). It is this resource that will be used in an initial run-through of the sequence that engages us.

Since the turn at line 12 in this sequence is the one we shall want to focus on, we shall be returning to it in considerable detail. Let it then suffice for now that it appears to be a question. It is, furthermore, a question specifically designed for the place in which it is used. Now the phrase "place in which it is used" is critical, and how we formulate "place" will be central to the later analysis. For now we can note that the turn at line 12 is not a fully formed question, but shows its attention to what preceded it, at least in part, by requiring of its hearer attention to what preceded it for its very understanding: it is, so to speak, built off of, or on to, the preceding turn, uses it as a resource for its construction, and requires its use as a resource for its understanding. One thing further needs to be said at this point about its relation to what precedes it, and that is that what it is appended to is a statement of someone else's views; you will note the prior turn starts "He says." So a preliminary characterization of 12 might be that it is a question, requesting clarification by B of someone else's views, of which he (B) has just given a (summary) version.

Now "for whom" will sustain a quite different analysis. That is, it can stand as a way for A to show agreement with B. I say "show agreement" to differentiate it from agreeing, or more particularly from claiming or asserting agreement, for agreement, like understanding, is subject to incorrect or manipulative treatment. That is, there can be extrinsic rea-

sons for claiming understanding or agreement, for example, in the case of agreement, to achieve closure of a topic or argument, a theme to which we will return. In any case, for both understanding and agreement, "claiming" them and "showing" them are different sorts of things, and impose different requirements. In the present case, "for whom" can be seen as an attempt to show understanding of, and agreement with, B. It does this by complaining about, or challenging, a position with which B has just asserted himself to be in disagreement, proffering a possible argument of B's. Under that analysis, it is not an answer to a question that is a relevant next utterance or action, for a question has not been asked (though a question form has been used); rather, an acknowledgment of agreement is relevant.

It should be noted that neither of these putative "analyses" of "for whom" has yet been provided a basis. They are proposed now as observations, I hope with some cogency. I intend next to show that the sequel in the conversation is consistent with first one, and then the other, of these analyses being taken up. But the basis of these understandings of "for whom," either by the parties to the conversation, or for the analyst, remains to be analyzed. Certainly, "for whom" is not a question by virtue of its linguistic form, its inclusion of a "wh-word," alone, for not all utterances with wh-words are questions. And it is not a complaint/agreement in any self-evident way, for no basis has been provided for hearing "for whom" as in some way B's position (which is central to that analysis) rather than A's.

If 12 is a question, then it is a first pair part of an adjacency pair, a pair of the type question-answer, and the one to whom it is addressed should do the second pair part for that pair type, that is, here he (B) should do an answer. Further, if the question is doing a request for clarification, the answer should do a clarification. And, finally if the clarification requested is of another's view, as was suggested by appending the question that requests it to a statement of those views, then the answer should assign the clarification, that is, the extension of the views, to their holder. As much of an utterance as B gets to produce at 13 is consistent with all of this. In seeming to undertake a clarification, or further explication, and starting with "he says" where the "he" finds as its referent the same referent as the "he's" in lines 9-11, B can be seen to display his understanding of 12 as a question he is now answering, a request he is now satisfying. Let me emphasize that while for us now he is displaying it too, in the first place he is displaying it to A. And as B is engaged in an analysis of 12 to find what it was doing and what he might then do next, so A is engaged in an analysis of 13. And from the

amount of 13 that gets out before A interrupts, what has been suggested above about it is available. "Well he says" is all that is needed to see that B heard 12 as a question, a request for clarification of the other's position, and is starting to do what he should on that analysis, namely, answer the question by giving clarification of the other's position. When enough of the utterance is out to display that, and no more, A interrupts.

It appears that the understanding of 12 "for whom" that B displays himself in 13 to have, is for A, the speaker of that utterance, incorrect. That is, it appears that while B understood that to be a question, requesting clarification of the teacher's position, A did not produce it to be that.

That one party can see that, and how, an utterance of his has been misanalyzed by another from that other's subsequent utterance we have found on quite other materials. For example, someone doing an intendedly terminal greeting who gets back a "yes?" can find that it was heard incorrectly, and, in particular, what wrong thing it was heard as; that is, the greeting was heard as a summons (cf. Schegloff 1968:1082). In particular, parties can detect such errors by seeing an interlocutor's utterance as a second pair part, finding the first pair part it would be a proper sequel for, and seeing how the utterance it follows, in many cases their own prior utterance, could have been heard as such a first pair part. Here, I am proposing, A can hear 13 as a possible answer, can locate a question as a prior form of utterance that would have elicited an answer as its proper sequel, and can see how 12, his own prior utterance, while not produced to be a question, could be so analyzed. That much is available from 13, B: "Well he says." By interrupting at that point with an utterance of the type involved, A in effect disallows B's proceeding on that analysis of 12 in this slot.

The utterance with which A interrupts at line 14 is exquisitely designed for its place. While we do not have any equivalence rules for utterances in conversation that I know of, this utterance – "By what *standard*" – is as close to an equivalent for 12 – "for *whom*" – as I can imagine. In its syntactic form, in its intonational contour, in its stress placement, the two are isomorphic. And, importantly, it is built on to, or off of, attaches itself in exactly the same way as did 12, to line 11. It is more a duplicate of 12 than a repetition of 12 would have been. It is, it appears, *the* way of repeating the turn at line 12.

Its use here is that it invites a reanalysis with a different outcome of the utterance it repeats. It seems to invoke a procedure I will call a "redo invitation": that is, it invites the last speaker to repeat some last operation and come up with a different output. One way the procedure may

be invoked is by repeating the element on which the operation is to be redone. Let me cite two quite different sorts of data (in both of which, however, the repetition is done by the recipient of the repeated element, not its speaker):

(9)

- S: Do you need any help up there.
D: All we can get.
S: All you can get.
D: Yes, you have a station wagon or anything
that can haul injured?

in which a reanalysis of what would be an adequate answer is elicited, more specifics then being produced; and the following which I take from a paper by Gail Jefferson (1972:295):

(10)

- St: One two three ((pause)) four five six
((pause)) eleven eight nine ten.
Su: "Eleven"? - eight nine ten?
St: Eleven eight nine ten
Na: "Eleven?"
St: Seven eight nine ten.

As this last citation suggests, one way of invoking the procedure involves paralinguistically marked repetition – a special upward intonation pattern, and a special stress placement. Note that neither of these is possible at 14 in the data we are concerned with. An upward intonation on an utterance of question form with a *wh*-word makes it into a recipient's repeat of another's question; and the initial version of A's utterance, at 12, already had a heavy stress at the point where the stress would go to invite redoing. And so A does as close to an equivalent utterance as is perhaps possible, and thereby invites reanalysis of what his utterance was doing. It is worth noting that by building his utterance at 14 to attach to 11 in just the way 12 did, A brings off that the reanalysis he is inviting is what he "intended all along," that is, it was the correct analysis of 12 too, rather than being only what he is doing now, leaving open what a correct understanding of 12 would have been.¹ That is, the form of his construction here provides for the retroactive, or retrospective, relevance of the understanding it is intended to elicit, namely, the alternative we suggested earlier for 12, agreement with B via complaint about B's opponent.

That all of this is effective is shown by 15. It was suggested earlier that

the alternative analysis of "for whom," under which it is seen as showing agreement with B, makes relevant as a next utterance an acknowledgment of agreement. B, in starting his utterance at 15 with an acknowledgment of agreement, then, displays his understanding of what A has been about as a show of agreement.

This point bears a bit of elaboration, for the form of the utterance at 15 is noteworthy. There is a range of forms through the use of which conversationalists can do the work of bringing off collaboratively that they are in agreement. Some are nearly prepackaged, for example, "I agree," "I know," "Right," and the like, which are assertions of agreement; others, unlistable because they are in particulars fitted to the matter being agreed on, show agreement by a variety of techniques, for example, showing one knows what the other has in mind by saying it for him, as in completing his sentence or his argument. Both of these, concerned with claiming or showing agreement, should be distinguished from a quite different action, namely, "acknowledging agreement." The issue of who agrees with whom can be a real one, with sequential consequences, and not, as might be thought, one of vanity, in the face of the raw fact of agreement. That issue is: whose "position" is the point of departure, is the thing to be agreed with, and, therefore, who is in a position to be doing "agreeing": the one who does the "base statement" is not one who can do agreement with it (he can do reassertion of it). Thus if X takes a position, Y may claim or assert agreement. But if X takes a position, and Y then states a position intended to show, rather than claim, agreement with X's position, then X should *acknowledge* agreement to show his appreciation that Y was *showing* agreement. If X should, in that position, agree with Y (rather than acknowledge agreement), it may not be clear to Y that X has understood that he (Y) was showing *his* agreement with X. That is: a first agreement may not take a second, it should get an agreement-acknowledgment. If a second agreement is produced, it may be seen as displaying that the first agreement was not heard or not correctly analyzed.² A bit of data to illustrate some of this is taken from a later point in this same conversation:

(11)

- B: ... the only difference which is made between Mexico 'r United States or Canada or any other countries.
 A: Mm/hmm
 B: is that if the country has different interest. Because of their background, and their al-an' history / an'
 A: and different statures of power. Quite correct.
 B: right

in which A shows agreement by adding a piece of B's argument, then asserts his intention, in doing so, of agreeing – “quite correct” – (relevant here because the stress on the “and” could be taken as modifying it), and B acknowledges the agreement.

Now some forms, like “right,” seem to be used both for agreeing and for acknowledgment of agreement. But the one that B uses at 15 is clearly not an agreement, but an understanding not only of A's position, but of A's action. For since shows of agreement (as compared to assertions or claims) are overtly addressed to the matter being agreed on and not to the fact of agreement, which is left to be analyzed by a coparticipant, for *them* acknowledgments are specially relevant to show understanding.

Let me note at this point that one of the aims in explicating this sequence may now perhaps be claimed, namely, that the ambiguity I want to address is an empirical one, in that both parties deal with both possible analyses: A both gets his show of agreement understood and recognizes the “question” analysis that the utterance at 13 displays B to have made, so *he* deals with both; 13 displays B to have attended the question analysis of “for whom,” and his acknowledgment of agreement at 15 shows him to have employed *that* analysis as well. We have here, then, not merely a theoretically imaginable ambiguity, but an empirically encountered one.

3

At the beginning of the preceding discussion of the sequence from 12–15, I offered initial accounts of two alternative analyses of “for whom,” one as a question, requesting clarification of the teacher's position, the other as a show of agreement by A with B by producing a possible piece of B's argument against the teacher. No basis for either analysis was offered, and it is now time to seek them. By that I mean that no basis for analyzing “for whom” as a question has been established, no procedure whereby B could have come to hear it that way. I clearly am not suggesting that he did not, or could not, hear it that way, having just finished trying to show that he did; only that *how* he could come to hear it that way has not been shown.

Let me start with the analysis of “for whom” as a question or a request for clarification. I shall need some resources developed on quite different material by Sacks (1973a, 1974).

Sacks speaks of a story recipient's slot after story completion as a structural, or a structurally defined, “place” in conversation. One line of reasoning that provides for it is this: the basic turn-taking organization

of conversation operates on an utterance to utterance basis, an oversimplified version of a transition rule being that any next possible utterance completion point is a point at which a possible next speaker may seek to effect transition. The first application of this rule, clearly, will come at the first possible completion point, which, for now only, let us treat as a first possible sentence completion point (cf. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974, for details). A sequential problem for prospective storytellers, insofar as stories require more than a sentence/utterance to tell, is how to get potential next speakers, who may use a first possible completion point to start talking, to not start talking. There is a variety of techniques for so doing, which I cannot describe here, all of which have the consequence of depriving the sentence/utterance of its transition-to-next-speaker relevance. Extended utterance completion, or speaker turn completion, will then have to be detected by hearers by finding story completion. One reason for the story recipient's slot upon story completion being a structural place is, then, that in it recipients must display appreciation of story completion. Another is that, not being afforded over the course of a story occasion for displaying their understanding of the story, there is an issue, upon story completion, of story recipients displaying their understanding of the story, and there is a range of ways of doing so. Showing appreciation of completion, and showing understanding of the story are, or can be, linked tasks, one way of showing one sees the completion being to display one's understanding. Since, as long as the story is ongoing, other speakers properly hold off, story completion is central to the sequential organization of conversation, and the story recipient's slot after story completion is a specially marked place.

I have gone into all of this because the utterance at 12 "for whom" is, or can be seen by participants as, a story recipient's utterance upon possible story completion. Without going through the whole of the preceding conversation, in which with three exceptions, A does only what we call "continuers" (versions of "mmhmm") which is, among other things, a form for hearers showing they see an extended unit, like a story, is in progress and not yet completed, two features of 1-11 suggest that story completion can be found here: (1) B announces it to be a summary ("it came down to this") and summaries or reviews are completion-relevant or closing-relevant (as also in conversational closure [Schegloff and Sacks 1973], "I just called to find out . . ."); and (2) the teller has the characters in the story do a closing relevant action, in this case *in the story* summing their positions, that being a way of agreeing to disagree, and agreeing being a way arguments are brought to a close (and thus the use of "I agree" to mean no more than "let's end it," no

one believing agreement has been reached). A way of ending stories, as Sacks (1972b) has nicely shown holds even for children's stories, is by having the characters do a terminal action in a behavior stream, like going to sleep. If I am allowed to omit further elaboration of this claim, then story completion being findable in 1–11, A is talking at 12 in recipient's slot upon story completion, and his utterance is to be scrutinized for its display of appreciation of completion, and for its understanding of the story.

I want now to introduce a small modification in our understanding of this structural place in conversation. It is intended to take account of the fact that in conversation little if anything can be done assuredly unilaterally. Even for utterances, we speak of their "possible completion points" because, in part, the speaker may continue or another speaker may build something onto an otherwise seemingly completed utterance, so that its initiator turns out not to control fully what his utterance turns out to be. So also for larger units, like "topics," and so I propose for stories. Rather than speaking of story completion, then, I shall speak of story-completion proposal. Tellers of a story can at some point *propose* story completion, but they cannot by themselves *guarantee* it. A story is complete when, its completion having been proposed by the teller, it is accepted by the recipient by recognition of completion and display of understanding.

But allowing completion and (or by) showing understanding is only one of the tacks recipients can take upon a completion proposal. Another thing they can do is disallow completion. They can do this in effect, but unintentionally, by being wrong when they try to show understanding; that is, by producing as their understanding an understanding of the story that is unacceptable to the teller. The story may then be kept open for correction. Recipients can do this intentionally also; that is, they can produce an intentional misunderstanding of the story: for example, B has just reported to A that "Sibbi's sister had a baby boy"; she continues

(12)

- B: but uh she was long overdue
 A: Mm
 B: And she-she had gained about forty pounds anyway. They said she was tremendous. So I'm sure they're happy about that.
 A: Yeah that she's tremendous hh.

But the most regularly used form by which a recipient can keep a story open, one designed in a sense to do that job, is a question about the

story. A question about the story, in requiring an answer from the teller about the story, may keep the story open. Thus, just as that recipient slot is specially inspected for the possible appreciation of completion and the understanding of the story it may contain, so it is inspected for the other relevant possibility it may contain, namely, a question about the story to keep the story open. That is a thing for the teller to look for, since if it is there he or she will have to deal with it. And if an utterance in question form appears there, it should be heard, on this account, as a question. It should be heard that way not by virtue of the question form, but by virtue of the relevance of finding a question there if one can, that last condition being satisfiable by a question form. With that, I hope to have shown a basis for the first possible analysis of “for whom,” that is, hearing it as a question, requesting clarification. It is through and through provided by the sequential structure in which it is implicated, and the place it occupies in it. And I hope to have suggested one sort of power linguistic form may have, other than the “action-determining” power rejected in the beginning of this paper. We may call it “constraint-meeting power”; that is, given an independent sequential basis for finding an utterance to be a question “if one can” (the last being the constraint), that constraint can be met by the linguistic form of the utterance – its interrogative form.

Let me now try to provide a basis for the other analysis, according to which A is in the utterance at 12 showing agreement with B by disagreeing with B’s announced opponent, or more specifically, by showing he can produce a piece of B’s possible argument, and thereby that he understands and is sympathetic. Insofar as this initial gloss is a bit richer than the initial statement of the first alternative, less may be required in the explication. The major point needing development here is the basis for hearing “for whom” as proposedly B’s position, or part of it. Certainly we don’t want to rely on intuitions about what that position would be if we extrapolated from what is given in the conversation, in order to find “for whom” consistent with it. Let me propose instead that A relies (unsuccessfully at first, as it turns out) on a sequential structure that is operative *within the conversation being reported in the story*, and that is the alternation formula for two-party conversation that is conventionally described as “ababab” but ought, for clarity’s sake here be referred to as BCBCBC, in which C is the teacher.

What I am suggesting is that A produces his utterance not only by reference to the position of his slot as after proposed story completion, but that in constructing an utterance he employs another positioning of that slot, fitted not merely to the fact that he is following *a* story, but fitted to the particular story type and the particular instance of it that his

utterance is following. That is, he employs that this is an “opposition-type” story; that it is about a conversation; that it reports the conversation using the BCBC format; that the positions that are in opposition are mapped into that format (that is, that BCBC tracks not only the alternation of turns but also the alternation of positions), and finally that all of this is presented in the proposed story completion, with the BCBC formula turning out to have C’s position be the one occupying the last turn. His utterance at 12 – “for whom” – is then, by an extension, produced in a slot *in that conversation* (i.e., the one being reported on) that the formula assigns to B, or if you like B’s side, and there is a basis then for hearing it as a contribution to, and thereby an understanding of and agreement with, that side, or with B. It is thus that it can come off as a proposed piece of B’s argument, for B eventually to appreciate as “exactly what I mean.” In support of this device, which requires for its accomplishment seeing that A is extending the story one slot as his way of showing his appreciation of its completion and his understanding (not to mention his siding with B to which we shall return), and thus that his utterance be seen in terms of the sequencing structure internal to the conversation the story reports, in support of this device A builds his utterance, as we noted before, so that it requires reference to the last utterance in *that* sequence for its understanding. It seeks to make his utterance analyzable as a possible next utterance in the conversation in which the utterance it is appended to occurred. But to no avail, it turns out, the first time around.

If we can appreciate that, on this analysis of “for whom,” A is agreeing with B by “siding” with him, joining his side in an oppositional story in which sides are represented by alternating conversational slots, and we can appreciate the relevance, for recipients and tellers, of recipients choosing sides in oppositional stories in which the teller is one of the characters, then perhaps we can briefly reexamine “for whom” under the first analysis – the question analysis – to see how *it* might be understood in terms of A’s siding.

Consider: B is presenting an oppositional story in which he is one of the protagonists. One thing A can do is side with one or the other, teller/protagonist or his opponent. Regularly recipients side with tellers, I suppose because that is in part how tellers choose recipients for stories. But recipients don’t invariably side with tellers. Is there a way that “for whom” as a question might appear relevant to A’s siding with B’s opponent? To be sure, a request for clarification can be doing a show of nonunderstanding, and especially in that structural place; but it can also be examined, when siding is an issue as it may be here, for evidence of siding with an opponent.

Let me suggest that "for whom" can be heard in a way that makes it relevant to siding with "the teacher." That involves hearing "for whom" as a presequence question. "Presequence" is a global term for utterances (typically questions) whose relevance is treated by participants as given not so much by what preceded but by what they are foreshadowing. That is, they are treated as specifically preplaced utterances. Dealing with them can then be sensitive to the sequences they are seen to foreshadow. Thus, for example, pre-invitations, such as "Are you doing anything," are heard for their prefatory character. And seeing them as pre-invitations, or prerequisites, can involve that their answers are selected not only, if at all, with an eye to their descriptive adequacy, but with an eye to what is to be done with the anticipatable utterance they preface. And, indeed, a next utterance can inquire for the specifics being prefaced. Thus "Are you doing anything" "Why?" or "What did you have in mind?"

Now the presequence character of an utterance is not linguistically marked; it is a sequential feature. The utterance following A₂ in data excerpt (3) above, following, that is, "I don't know just where the - uh - this address is," which we earlier suggested is a request for directions, is "Well, what part of town do *you* live," which is here treated as a presequence to direction giving; in other sequential contexts it could be a straightforward question.

I am suggesting that, in the excerpt with which we are concerned, "for whom" can be heard as a presequence to agreement with the teacher and disagreement with B, speculatively proconstructing the putative sequence as A: For whom, B: Well he says . . . A: What's wrong with that. On that hearing, the question complains not about the position to which it is appended, but about the presentation the position has been given by another, the "not having done it justice," and that is a complaint of one who has a possible interest in its being done justice, one such interest being that it is the complainer's position. In the present case, that would be, then, a disagreement, or a presequence to disagreement, with B.

Now I want to note that this view of "for whom" places it differently from the initial analysis as a matter of "strategy" if you will; at a minimum, it locates it strategically. Nonetheless, it falls within the earlier analysis, and is but one kind of extension of it, in that it keeps the story open.

..... *

*About five pages of the original typescript have been omitted here [Eds.].

This matter can be approached in a different way, and one that may elucidate the trouble with using a participant's putative "role," for example, one established at the beginning of the conversation, as of definitive import at any given place in it, or as governing the production and analysis of utterances rather than being controlled by them. While those encountering this form of analysis for the first time regularly feel that the fact this datum occurred on a radio talk show is of massive and pervasive relevance, the critical fact being the relevance of "performer" role; or feel the status of the caller as teenager vis-à-vis an adult is crucial; or any other of a range of "roles" or identifications of the parties, none of these are critical here. What seems to be critical to the conversational phenomenon of telling a story in which the teller is a protagonist is the respective relevance of teller versus protagonist. In the present data the analysis of "for whom" as a request for clarification is linked to an identification of B as protagonist in the story, that is, the particular protagonist he is, vis-à-vis whom A can align himself.

The "derived" action – showing agreement – is linked to an identification of B as protagonist, which is how a derived action is possible here, for via B's status as protagonist the teacher is relevantly available as the target for the "primary" action of the utterance on that analysis. And the primary action as clarification – request is linked to B's identification as storyteller, that is, what he is doing in the this-conversation.

Let me only note that A eventually allows B to deal with "for whom" and "by what standard" under both analyses, as long as the "agreement" analysis is dealt with first.

4

Let me conclude by refocusing on three themes that run through the preceding, in order of increasing generality.

First, *question*: whatever defines the class "questions" as a linguistic form will not do for questions as conversational objects, or interactional objects, or social actions. If by "question" we want to mean anything like a sequentially relevant or implicative object, so that in some way it would adumbrate the notion "answer," if, therefore, something like adjacency-pair organization is involved, with special constraints on the second pair part of a sort not yet analytically explicated; if, finally, we intend "question" to be able to serve as a form of account of *conversationalists'* behavior, rather than idealized speakers and hearers, or "subjects," then it will not do, for a variety of reasons, to use features of linguistic form as sole, or even invariant though not exhaustive, indica-

tors or embodiments of such objects. Sequential organization is critical. That much given, whether it is useful to discriminate such a class "question" as a special object of interest, rather than assimilating it to the class "adjacency pairs" seems to me less clear. But that matter cannot be pursued here.

Second, *ambiguity*: to whatever received accounts we have of sources of ambiguity of utterances, we should add the basis for ambiguity provided by the sequencing structures of conversation. The ambiguity discussed here, concerning the possible question status of an utterance, is certainly not the only sequentially based ambiguity; nor are the sequential organizations implicated in it, and cases like it, the only such ambiguity-generating combination. When we get further along in explicating the various sequential organizations of conversation, and interaction, and importantly, their integration, we shall first get a sense of the range of this phenomenon. And then, perhaps, we will be in a position to see not only how surviving ambiguities of the sort here examined may be yielded by sequential organization, but how a range of potential ones are produced and solved before surfacing.

That last clause is produced by an analytic strategy that ought to be made explicit, and perhaps questioned. Most theoretically or heuristically conjurable ambiguities never actually arise. That could be so because of the operations of a so-called disambiguator, as a component of the brain, as a service of context to syntax, and so on. Or it could be that the theoretically depictable ambiguities are derived by procedures that are not relevant to naturally occurring interaction, and therefore in natural contexts the ambiguities are not there to disambiguate.

The problem of ambiguity can be seen as an "overhearer's problem." That is, an overhearer, getting a snatch of conversation, or even all of it without knowing the "what-is-being-talked-about" independently of the talk he is hearing about it, can hear ambiguities in the talk that are not there for the ratified participants (to use Goffman's term) in the conversation. Talk being designed by conversationalists for what the other does and does not know (Sacks and Schegloff 1979; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; and Schegloff 1972), such design can be expected to avoid in advance much of the potential ambiguity for the coparticipants. Hearers for whom it has not been designed will find ambiguities at points at which their knowledge is not isomorphic with that of the party for whom the talk was designed. Of course, an important part of what a coparticipant knows is what has already been said in the conversation, and so one getting a snatch of it is almost guaranteed to be able to find an ambiguity.

It is expectable that the problems of ambiguity and indexicality should have had their origin and most pointed interest for logic and science, whose interest is in the evaluation of statements stripped from local context, an evaluation that would hold for any man, anywhere, any-time, and not turning on what anyone in particular knows. That almost defines the conditions in their most extreme form for the discovery of ambiguity empirically. Paradoxically, then, ambiguity as a topic of interest, and the discovery of ambiguities empirically in practice, is a natural consequence of the search for "rational" discourse, under one major sense of rational in this context, that is, "universalistic." Nor is it, on this view, odd that ambiguity should be treasured by intellectual traditions that are, on the whole, counterposed to rationalism, for example, the so-called New Criticism.

A great deal of the ambiguity that has troubled philosophers, logicians, linguists, and some sociologists seems to me characterizable in terms of the overhearer's problem, though the disciplines have not relied on being overhearers in fact. A ready procedure is at hand for generating ambiguities of the appropriate form: One starts with a single sentence, sometimes putting into it a classical source of ambiguity (e.g., an indexical expression like a pronoun), sometimes not, and one imagines a range of settings or scenarios in each of which the sentence, or some component of it would have, or be said to have, a "different meaning" or "different sense." In the finding that the "same sentence" or "same component" can have "different meanings" across the imagined range of scenarios is the kernel of the problem of ambiguity. It is because actual participants in actual conversations do not encounter utterances as isolated sentences, and because they do not encounter them in a range of scenarios, but in actual detailed single scenarios embedded in fine-grained context, that I began this discussion with the observation that most theoretically or heuristically depictable ambiguities do not ever arise.

Again, then, a great deal of the ambiguity with which our disciplines have concerned themselves seems to me to be the product of such a procedure. I do not mean to denigrate its status as a problem. I mean only to suggest that the study of such theoretical ambiguity needs to be distinguished from the sort of ambiguity that actual conversationalists actually, empirically encounter as ambiguities in the natural course of conversation. There are such empirical ambiguities, and I am proposing that they are a different sort of thing analytically, and should be considered separately.

When we look for the basis of such ambiguities, I think we must

recognize a (major) source for them in the sequential organizations of conversation. And that will necessarily differentiate their investigation from that of the more traditional ambiguities, which are precipitated in the first place by depriving them of their sequential placement.

If, finally, these are different classes of ambiguities, with different bases, and different forms of investigation appropriate to them, it is not clear to what, in natural interaction, findings about theoretical or heuristic ambiguities and their disambiguation apply. For they are findings about objects that may not, or may not much, appear in the world naturalistically observed or findings that are models from which natural objects in the world to one degree or another depart. And if this argument turns on the consideration that the sentences are divorced from the contexts in which they might in the "real world" appear, then it goes not only to ambiguities, but to findings such as the claimed greater complexity, syntactically and psychologically, of negatives, passives, questions, and so on. The point here is that taking sentences in isolation is not just a matter of taking such sentences that might appear *in* a context *out* of the context; but that the very composition, construction, assemblage of the sentences is predicated by their speakers on the place in which it is being produced, and it is through *that* that a sentence is context-bound, rather than possibly independent sentences being different intact objects in or out of context. The latter is what artificial languages, such as mathematics, are designed to achieve. To treat natural languages in that way is to treat them as *having* the very properties whose absence has motivated the search for artificial formal languages. But it is also to continue to disattend, and indeed to deprecate, the very features that make language, and in particular, its everyday interactional use, the powerful natural object that it is.

Notes

1. An observation for which I am indebted to Katherine Campbell.
2. An illuminating, and more empirically worked through, treatment of many of the issues (concerning agreement) may be found in Pomerantz (1975). (See also Chapter 4 herein.)