

## 4

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## Preliminaries to Preliminaries: “Can I Ask You a Question?”



A sense of paradox hovers over such utterances as “Can I ask you a question?” When I was a boy, wisecracks were the order of the day when one was addressed in this manner—comebacks such as “You already did” or “What, another one?” Just as in the logical paradox of Epimenides the Cretan (“all Cretans are liars”), a puzzle is introduced by the self-referential feature of the utterance. If permission is needed to ask a question, why wasn’t it asked for the question that seems to ask permission? If the speaker has a question and has the floor and a turn to talk, why doesn’t he or she ask the question instead of asking to ask? Why is the question itself “displaced”? What are speakers doing in doing this?

The paradox of the liar poses problems in philosophy and

*Note:* Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the University of Texas, Arlington/Summer Institute of Linguistics; at the First British/German Conference on Ethnomethodology and Conversational Analysis, University of Konstanz, West Germany, April 1980; and at the Second International Conference on Conversational Analysis, Human Interaction and Ethnomethodology, University of South Carolina, April 1980.

logic. "Can I ask you a question"—which might be called a "pragmatic paradox"—poses a question about talk in interaction—a potentially sociological problem. It invites examination of actual occurrences in which such an utterance is employed by a participant to see what, if any, systematic uses it has, and what, if any, organization of interaction it is related to.

One of the first pieces of data that set me off on an investigation of this seeming curiosity was the following:

- (1) [#12, BC, Beige, 18-19]
- 1 A: Good evening, W.N.B.C.::,  
 2 B: Hi:: Brad, 'ow're you.  
 3 A: I'::m fine thanks=  
 4 B: =Tell thet lady she sh'd drive 'n  
 5 not to be afraid.  
 6 ((pause))  
 7 A: Well, that's easy tuh say. But  
 8 not always easy tuh do.  
 9 B: Y're, yer right deh.  
 10 A: Meh!  
 11 B: → I like tuh ask you something.  
 12 A: Shoot.  
 13 B: Y'know I 'ad my license suspended  
 14 fuh six munts,  
 15 A: Uh huh  
 16 B: Y'know for a reason which, I  
 17 rathuh not, mention tuh you, in  
 18 othuh words, --a serious reason,  
 19 → en I like tuh know if I w'd  
 20 talk tuh my senator, or--  
 21 → somebuddy, could they help me  
 22 get it back,

*Note:* The brackets following data citations identify the source of the citation for future reference. All citations except #(16) are from an extensive collection of taped conversations in a variety of settings, with various types of participants. Except where noted, this variation is not germane to the phenomenon being investigated.

Transcription symbols were devised by Gail Jefferson, and are explained in the Appendix, reproduced from Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). Arrows point to the location of that material for which the segment is first cited.

This is the beginning of a telephone call to a radio talk show. During the show, persons in the listening public call a radio personality to ask advice, to give or ask for opinions on issues of the day, to react to recent news, to tell and share experiences, to complain about aspects of urban living, and the like. The point of the preceding list is that there is a fairly definite set of types of calls that people make. An evening's show is made up of a series of calls, usually of various types. The callers are aware of the fact that their calls and conversations are "conversations-in-a-series," and that enters into the way they construct their conversations. For example, in segment one above, the caller begins by addressing himself to the previous caller's topic.

One aspect of talking in a conversation-in-a-series can be that one announces the type of call one means to be initiating, and "I'd like to ask you something" can be understood as doing that kind of job. If materials are examined from other settings in which conversations are oriented to as conversations-in-a-series, we can find similar occurrences. Obviously, the "types" of conversation will be ones relevant for those settings; for example, calls to the police sometimes begin, "I'd like to report a burglary." However, not all occurrences of this kind of utterance are in conversations-in-a-series, and many of those that are do not occur at the beginning and do not do the work of announcing the type of call or conversation being initiated.

The most striking observation about segment one above, furthermore, seems quite unrelated to its initiation of some type of conversation. It is that the *next thing said* by the speaker of "I like tuh ask you something," after he has been given the go-ahead, is *not a question*. Not only has the question that the speaker plans been "displaced" by his "projection" of its occurrence, but it is also not asked next and thus seems doubly displaced. Is this observation idiosyncratic to this conversation, or does it locate a regular feature of utterances such as "I'd like to ask you a question?" If it is a regular feature, then perhaps it is deeply related to the use of this form. Perhaps the single "displacement" can be understood by understanding the double "displacement."

In assembling a collection of such occurrences for examination from a body of transcripts of ordinary conversations, materi-

als are encountered that invite inclusion in the collection. In these occurrences, "tellings" and "requests" are projected instead of "questions," but they are projected in an utterance format very similar to that with which we began; that is, they take the form of "I wanna tell you something" or "I'd like to ask you a favor." By including them, we end up being engaged in an exercise in "turn format" exploration. The turn format being explored here has the following features: First, a speaker projects the occurrence of some type of turn or action by mentioning either what he or she will do (for example, "Let me ask you a question," "I wanna tell you something," "Can I ask you a favor?") or what will be involved for the recipient (for example, "Tell me something," "Listen to this," "Do me a favor"). Second the projected turn or action does not occur in the same talk unit (for instance, the same sentence) but is replaced there either by the name of the action (as in the examples given under the previous point), by a pronoun ("Lemme ask you this"), or by a "dummy term" ("Lemme ask you something"). Although the turn format characterized in this way includes the projection of requests and tellings, question projections by far predominate in the collection of about thirty-five segments I have assembled, and they will figure most heavily in the ensuing discussion.

### Preliminaries to Preliminaries

Examination of the collection reveals first of all that the observations about segment one above are not peculiar to that segment. It is quite common that, after "Can I ask you a question" or "Lemme ask you a question," the next thing that the speaker says or does is not a question. For example:

(2) [BC, Red: 190]

- 1 B°: I've listen' to all the things
- 2 that chu've said, an' I agree
- 3 with you so much.
- 4 B°: Now,
- 5 B°: → I wanna ask you something,
- 6 B°: I wrote a letter.
- 7 ( pause )
- 8 A: Mh hm,

- 9 B°: T'the governer.  
 10 A: Mh hm::,  
 11 B°: -telling 'im what I thought about  
 12 i(hh)m!  
 13 (A): (Sh:::!)  
 14 B°: → Will I get an answer d'you think,  
 15 A: Ye:s/

## (3) [BC, Red: 191-193]

- 1 B: → Now listen, Mister Crandall, Let  
 2 me ask you this. A cab. You're  
 3 standing onna corner. I heardjuh  
 4 talking to a cab driver.  
 5 A: Uh::uh  
 6 B: Uh was it- uh was a cab driver,  
 7 wasn' i'?'  
 8 A: Yup,  
 9 B: Now, yer standing onna corner,  
 10 A: Mm hm,  
 11 B: I live up here in Queens.  
 12 A: Mm hm,  
 13 B: Near Queens Boulevard,  
 14 A: Mm hm,  
 15 B: I'm standing on the corner of  
 16 Queens Boulevard a::nd uh::m  
 17 ( ) Street.  
 18 A: Right?  
 19 B: Uh, I- a cab comes along. An' I  
 20 wave my arm, "Okay, I wancha I  
 21 wancha." You know,  
 22 A: Mm hm,  
 23 B: Uh::m, I'm waving my arm now.  
 24 Here in my living room.  
 25 hhhh!  
 26 A: [heh heh!  
 27 B: A:nd uh, he just goes right on by  
 28 me.  
 29 A: Mm hm,  
 30 B: A:nd uh- two:::, three::, (·)  
 31 about three blocks, beyond me,  
 32 where- in the direction I'm going,  
 33 there is a cab stand.  
 34 A: Mm hm,  
 35 B: Uh-there is a hospital, (O.?) uh,  
 36 a block (O.?) up, and there is a  
 37 subway station, right there.

- 38 A: Mm hm.  
 39 B: Uh now I could 've walked, the  
 40 three of four blocks, to that cab  
 41 stand,  
 42 A: Mm hm,  
 43 B: [Bud I, had come out-of where  
 44 I was, right there on the corner.  
 45 A: Right?  
 46 B: → Now is he not suppose' tuh stop  
 47 fuh me?

## (4) [Cookston, 4-5, rough]

- 1 T: Hypothetically, y'know,--I jus'  
 2 wanna ask you a question.=  
 3 J: =Uh huh.  
 4 T: [From y'er experience with the  
 5 Bible, (0.?) mM um::, (0.?) 'll  
 6 put yourself in th- well le's  
 7 (0.?) ima:gine 'at somebody's in  
 8 this situation, say(0.?) Put  
 9 myself in this situation (0.?).  
 10 If I'm out, if I've been- takin-  
 11 dating a firl for a long period  
 12 of time les' say? (0.?) a:nd um  
 13 after a long period of time I- I  
 14 mean I c'n feel that I'm really  
 15 in love with the girl, possibly,  
 16 → (0,?) and um: (?.?) what  
 17 → about (0.?) now what about sex.  
 18 I mean what about mm uh premarital  
 19 sex. What does th- what- how'll  
 20 I go to the Bible 'n--find a  
 21 guideline for premarital sex.  
 22 J: → Okay. (0.?) My answer's this.  
 23 My answer is the- let me put  
 24 myself in those shoes you just  
 25 described here. (0.?) God's more  
 26 important to me thin iny--person  
 27 is. An' pleasing God is more  
 28 important to me th'n pleasing a  
 29 girlfriend. (0.?) 'N I say  
 30 "Awright God, what is yer: (0.?)  
 31 fondest desire in this regard,"  
 32 ('n) flip flip flip through the  
 33 Bible an' it says, (0.?) ((as a  
 34 pronouncement)) "premarital sex

35 → is out." (0.? 'N so I say "Now  
 36 God, I'm not sure I unnerstand that  
 37 raht now--maybe in a year. But I'll  
 38 do it because I know it makes You  
 39 happy and makin' You happy is  
 40 more 'mportant to me--th'n making  
 41 iny other person happy.

When the projected action is a "telling," the next thing that the speaker does is not a "telling" but a question, as happens twice in the following segment:

(5) [JSLR, 135 simplified]  
 1 Jn: → Say Joe, I wanna tell you sump'n.  
 2 (0.5) ((Edie and Rae talking to  
 3 each other))  
 4 Y'know (that- when we wen' up  
 5 t'that) place  
 6 (to drive a ) car?  
 7 (0.2)  
 8 So I went back [there?  
 9 ((Leni talking))  
 10 En d'you know something=  
 11 → =Listen to this Edie, you guys  
 12 get this. Remember when we  
 13 wen'tuh look et the cars?  
 14 R: Yeah  
 15 E: {Yeah,  
 16 Jn: → We wen'tuh see the fella the next  
 17 day, t'drive the car, en he  
 18 thought you were my son! eh hah  
 19 hah hah hah!

Thus, one regular occurrence is that what follows next after an action projection is not an instance of the projected action, for example, what follows a question projection is not a question.

In a second set of instances, what follows "Lemme ask you a question" is, indeed, a question, but it is clearly not *the* question; that is, it is clearly not the question that "Lemme ask you a question" has projected. For example, in segment six below, the parties to the conversation are both New Yorkers, and Queens Boulevard is a major thoroughfare in New York's largest borough. It is appar-

ent and “d’you know Queens Boulevard?” is not the question B has projected:

(6) [BC, Red: 196]

- 1 A: Driving a car, sometimes, you-  
 2 you get-yuh id-you get- almos'  
 3 tunnel vision sometimes,  
 4 be cause-  
 5 B: → W'll lemme ask yuh some thing. =  
 6 A: = [ -yer =  
 7 B: = [D'you-  
 8 A: = [ Looking at all the things where  
 9 d'car's going, a:nd sometimes you  
 10 don't see what's happening on the  
 11 street.  
 12 B: → [Yeah, but d'you know-d'you know  
 13 → Queens Boulevard,  
 14 A: Yes ma'am.  
 15 B: Well you know they have like uhm  
 16 li-uh well I guess they call-  
 17 where- I don'know 'f they do,  
 18 but they-like the service roa::d,  
 19 ((etc.))

In segment seven, it does not appear that the understanding check is the projected question either (indeed, it could be argued that this fragment properly belongs with the set previously considered, because what follows the question projection is not made into a question until the tag question at its end):

(7) [FD, SP]

- 1 A: → I wuh- I would just like tuh ask  
 2 y'a question, 'hh-  
 3 B: Yes ma'am.  
 4 A: [Uhm,  
 5 A: I understand that there are no  
 6 private ambulance services in this  
 7 town. And that the fire department  
 8 has a rescue wagon,  
 9 A: [Is that right?  
 10 B: [Uh.  
 11 B: We have the ambulance service.



- 12 B: Right.  
 13 B: The rescue wagon.  
 14 ((pause))  
 15 A: Oh.  
 16 B: D'yuh ave a t-  
 17 A: Are you the only people  
 18 that have this?  
 19 B: Right.  
 20 B: you, call us in case-  
 21 A: -other than military?  
 22 B: Right.

One common form such instances take is a question projection followed by an inquiry as to whether the recipient remembers something the speaker supposes the recipient to know, as in segment five above (where, as it happens, it follows a "telling" projection), or in segment eight below (where, as it happens, it follows a "request" projection):

- (8) [#17, ST]  
 0 ((ring))  
 1 R: Hello.  
 2 L: Hi Fred  
 3 This is Laurie.  
 4 How's everything.  
 5 R: ((sniff)).  
 6 Pretty good.  
 7 How 'bout you.  
 8 L: Jus' fine.  
 9 The reason I called was t'ask how  
 10 Ann was.  
 11 R: Oh she's doin' fine.  
 12 She came home t'day.  
 13 L: Yer kidding.  
 14 Do you want to go see her?  
 15 R: Nah I think we should wait a couple  
 16 days 'til she gets used t' havin'  
 17 the new baby' round.  
 18 L: Okay mabe we can go when Dave'n  
 19 Steve go to school on Monday.  
 20 R: Ya sure.  
 21 → Oh by the way ((sniff)) I have a  
 22 bi:g favor to ask ya.  
 23 L: Sure, go'head.  
 24 R: → 'Member the blouse you made a

- 25            couple weeks ago?  
26 L:        Ya.  
27 R:        Well I want to wear it this weekend  
28            to Vegas but my mom's buttonholer  
29            is broken.  
30 L:        Fred I told ya when I made the  
31            blouse I'd do the buttonholes.  
32 R:        Ya ((sniff)) but I hate ta impose.  
33 L:        No problem.  
34            We can do them on Monday after work.  
35 R:        Ya sure ya have time?  
36 L:        I'm sure.  
37 R:        Gee, thanks.  
38 L:        Okay well listen why don't ya call  
39            me when ya get home on Monday.  
40 R:        Okay.  
41 L:        I'll talk t'ya then.  
42 R:        Okay g'bye.  
43 L:        See ya'.

Before we report on the other two major types of occurrences implicated with this sort of action projection, it will be useful to discuss briefly these two types in which a question projection is followed next either by something other than a question or by a question that, however, is not *the* question. In all these instances, the utterances that immediately follow the action projection can be characterized as “preliminary” or “prefatory.” They are produced, and are treated by recipients, as preliminaries or prefaces to the projected action—things (needing) to be done before, or “leading up to,” the projected action.

Previous work in the analysis of conversational interaction— for example, Sacks (1974), Schegloff and Sacks (1973), Sacks (1973), Schegloff (1979a), and Terasaki (1976)—has encountered various types of talk that appeared to be produced by speakers and understood by recipients as talk not only “in its own right” but also “on behalf of,” and specifically preliminary to, other talk that might follow, contingent on the response. A ready example is that of a telephone call in which the caller asks, after an exchange of greetings, “Are you doing anything?” Rather than being understood as talk in its own right, that is, as a request for information to be answered with descriptive accuracy, such ques-

tions are heard (and seem produced to be so heard) as “pre-invitations” and are answered accordingly. If the recipient wants the invitation this utterance prefigures, he or she answers “no.” If the recipient can’t or won’t accept such an invitation, he or she answers with some more or less elaborate version of “yes” (to which the caller may respond by telling what the invitation would have been had a different answer been given to the pre-invitation; for example, “Cause I was gonna say, ‘Let’s go to the movies’”). Sometimes recipients want to know what exactly the invitation will be before taking a position on it, and they may then respond to the question “Are you doing anything?” with another—“Why?” (This is one common use of “why”—as a “post-pre”; with it, recipients show that they understand that a prior turn was, or may have been, “leading up to something.”)

Although taking quite different forms, there are other such recurrent types of turns that are heard as prefiguring a particular possible type of turn next; there are “pre-requests,” “pre-announcements” (Terasaki, 1976), “pre-offers,” and others, which can be grouped under a generic term, “pre-sequences” or “pre’s” for short. There is, as well, the most general type of “pre,” that which prefigures further talk and nothing more specific than that; this is the “summons” or the “attention-getting device” (Schegloff, 1968). Thus, although many “pre’s” prefigure a particular type of turn, not all of them do. What can be said about the preliminaries that follow action projections?

The preliminaries in many of the instances above—all except segment four—tend to be of a particular sort. Each of the projected actions will include, and ends up including, a reference or references to persons, places, or things. The preliminaries are occupied with securing the recognizability or understandability of those references. They do so by introducing the references in a turn or turns in which the reference is not used for the doing of the action that was projected. The recipient then has an opportunity for raising any problems of understanding or recognition or correction that these references pose. Typically they pose none, and the recipient exhibits this (as well as exhibiting a recognition that a larger unit is in progress, of which this is not the end) by use of a “continuer”—a token such as “uh huh” or “mm hm” or

“yeah”—or a confirming answer if the preliminary was a question. After one or more such initial mentions or preparation of referents, the speaker does the projected action, employing in it terms that require reference to what was introduced in the preliminaries without rementioning them, for example, by a pronoun or other pro-term reference, or by terms that require reference to an antecedent that is found in the preliminary (as in segment two above, where “answer” requires the prior “letter”). In the preliminaries, then, terms are introduced without being used; in the projected actions, they are used without being mentioned. The work of “referring” and “what is being talked about” is extracted for separate, prior treatment from the doing of something—asking, telling, requesting—with respect to those referents.

The work of preparing or securing the recognizability and understandability of what will be referred to (that is, “supplying the context”) is accomplished in the preliminaries in either of two formats. If the speaker supposes that the recipient does not know (about) the referents to be mentioned, the preliminaries take a “telling” form, as in segments one, two, and three above. If the speaker supposes, or ought to suppose, that the recipient knows (about) the referents to be mentioned, the preliminaries are characteristically done in a question format of a particular sort—one that asks, “Do you know . . .” or “Do you remember . . .,” as in five, six, and eight above. In the occasional cases in which it is the speaker’s rather than the recipient’s knowledge that is at issue and the recipient is supposed by the speaker to “know,” then the preliminary may take the form of an understanding check question, as in segment seven above.

Whether what follows an action projection is a question or a telling thus turns out to be a quite separate matter from whether the action projected was a question or a telling. It has rather to do with “recipient design”—the design of an utterance by a speaker by reference to oriented-to features of the recipient, in this case what the recipient is supposed by the speaker to know or be familiar with (Sacks and Schegloff, 1979). One ingredient of the “puzzle” and “paradox” noted earlier—the juxtaposition of a projection with something other than what was projected—is thus an artifact of treating those two components as having a mutual relevance

that they do not have. The term in the action projection is selected for the action that the speaker means to exhibit as being “led up to”; the form of the “leading up to it” is selected by reference to recipient-design considerations about what the recipient ought to be supposed to know.

Action projections are themselves preliminaries, or “pre’s.” Initially it might be thought that they are “pre’s” to whatever action they project—pre-questions, pre-tellings, pre-requests. However, in view of the regular occurrence of preliminaries after them, the possibility can be entertained that they have just that outcome as what they are designed and employed to achieve. Accordingly, they should be understood as preliminaries to preliminaries, or “pre-pre’s.” They serve to exempt what directly follows them from being treated as “produced in its own right.” They make room for, and mark, what follows them as “preliminary.” What is involved here is, then, a second-order prefiguring. The work of “prefacing” can be seen to be a full-fledged action in its own right, and not a derivative auxiliary practice; it can itself be prefaced, or pre-figured.

The other major aspect of the earlier noted “paradox” may now start to come clear. The displacement of an action, for example, a question, by a projection of it may indeed be understood by understanding the double displacement. The position occupied by an action projection would not otherwise necessarily be occupied by the projected action. It could be, if the question with its preliminaries (or without preliminaries altogether) were constructed as a single “turn constructional unit” (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974). But when an action projection is followed by what is analyzably a “pre,” the projection can be seen (by a recipient) to have been done as a way of doing a preliminary to a projected action first. And doing a preliminary first can be seen to have required an action projection for its accomplishment. The projection gets the projected action’s relevance into the conversation before the action itself and before the action is adequately prepared. It motivates what directly follows by reference to what will follow *that*. That there are grounds for doing so will be seen below.

Not all preliminaries after action projections are occupied

with reference preparation. Segment nine below presents a different case:

(9) [US, 45-46]

Vic and James are custodians of neighboring apartment buildings. Someone has broken a window in James' building in his absence, and Vic has (at least partially) cleaned up. In the previous 10-15 minutes there have been several recountings of the story, fully detailing Vic's help, and several requests by Vic to have his pail returned, which James has teasingly turned aside.

- 1 J: I'm sorreh {but- but- but I  
 2 V: {Ja:mes.  
 3 J: {must say dat.=  
 4 V: {Ja:mes.  
 5 V: = {Ja:mes.)  
 6 J: = {Yihknow} what I mean.  
 7 V: Ja,mes.)  
 8 J: {Yeh } right.  
 9 V: I left it theh--  
 10 J: {I'm getting sick} a' dis  
 11 shi,t.  
 12 V: {Have a beeh,  
 13 J: {Yeh.  
 14 V: {Have a beeh.  
 15 V: I left {it-  
 16 J: {e(hh)h!  
 17 V: I left- Have a beeh.  
 18 J: Eh-hey let's gi(h)tta- let's  
 19 ge(h)tta bo(h)ttle  
 20 wai(h)ta sekkin=  
 . (( 10 lines of transcript re  
 . what to drink omitted ))  
 21 M: Soon ez Sonny gets back frm the  
 22 stoh.=Sonny's up et the stoh.  
 23 J: {Uhhuh.  
 24 M: {wait'll he {gets back.=  
 25 V: {Ja:mes,

- 26 J: =Uh right.=  
 27 J: (Uh hah?)  
 28 V: = [The pail is in yuh hallway,  
 29 (uh,)  
 30 J: [ I know it hu(hh)h!  
 31 V: The-the- I didn' have a broom wit'  
 32 me, if I adduh hadda {broom I'd uh  
 33 J: e(hh)h!  
 34 V: swept [up.  
 35 J: That's alright.  
 36 V: so (dat's, right on).  
 37 J: [ That's a'ri'- somebody-  
 38 got it up, I don't know who.  
 39 V: (Look). But do me a favr-  
 40 V: → Do, me, one fa:vuh,  
 41 V: I cleaned it up!  
 42 J: [Yeh hh  
 43 J: Yeh right. I- ih-deh ca:n, (I-  
 44 brought de) can (I'll) set it  
 45 dehr own the sidewalk.  
 46 Izzat ehkay=  
 47 V: [No.  
 48 J: =No.  
 49 V: = [Didjeh [sweep up duh rest a' duh  
 50 J: ( )  
 51 V: me [ss.  
 52 J: NO I didn' sweep up nothin!  
 53 V: Well o kay well that's why I left  
 54 J: [Leave ih deh.  
 55 V: the can innuh hallway  
 56 J: [I'll do it (early)  
 57 innuh maw:ning.  
 58 V: [-so if you hadda br<sub>oo:m</sub>=  
 59 J: [Yeh right.  
 60 V: =then you c'd sweep up duh dust  
 61 ( )-  
 62 J: [Very, uh- very good I  
 63 appreesh- °hhh  
 64 V: [-the glass,  
 65 J: I apprecia<sub>te</sub> that Victuh,  
 66 V: [ Tomorroh I-  
 67 V: → No. Tomorroh I want my pail back. =  
 68 J: [E(hh)h yeh.  
 69 V: = Dass a ll.  
 70 J: [Ye(hh)h!  
 71 J: I don'know I may keep dat pail.

If we begin the examination of this segment at line 40, we see that it is an action projection. The request it projects does not occur until lines 66–67. Various things happen between the request projection and the request, not all of which can be dealt with here. Note, however, Vic's turns at lines 53, 55, 58, 60, and 64. They are part of a set of preliminaries giving reasons in advance why the can/pail should be returned—most centrally that it was left in James' territory in James' interest. Now examine the part of the transcript that precedes the action projection, especially lines 9, 15, 17, 28, 31, 32, and 34. Vic makes a series of tries to get something said. The first three (at lines 9, 15, and 17) are in identical form, though each successive try is abandoned one word earlier. Then after a "side sequence" (Jefferson, 1972) on getting something to drink, Vic starts again, as before at lines 2, 4, 5, and 7) with a summons (line 25). He then retries the tack he started earlier, but now in a different form: the "agency" of line 9 ("I left") is dropped and redone as a "state" (line 28, "is in"); the full reference to the pail replaces a pronoun reference ("it"), as does the reference to the "hallway" ("theh" at line 9). Note that at lines 53–55, these two versions are recombined: the agency returns ("I left") and both references—to object and place—are substantives rather than pronouns. It seems clear enough that the utterance at lines 53–55 is a reprise of the tries at lines 9, 15, 17, and 28. But, having been met at line 30 with a "no news" reception, it is now done not as news, but as something to be explained. The explanation at lines 58–60–64 also has a precedent before the action projection, namely, at lines 31–32–34, though the latter is Vic-referring, in the past tense, and negative, whereas the former is James-referring and conditional. In various ways, then, what follows the action projection recapitulates something that was done before it.

It seems clear enough that the initial saying of these elements were also meant to give grounds in advance for James to accede to Vic's request for his pail. But they were not heard that way. They were not heard as preliminary to, or in the service of, an upcoming request, but rather as things said in their own right. Treated as produced in its own right, Vic's turn at lines 31–32–34 is analyzable as an apology or an excuse: it reports a failure to do something for James, and gives a reason, an excuse—the absence



of a tool—for not doing it. That James understands it as an apology/excuse is exhibited in his next turn, where he accepts the apology and excuses the failure by Vic, on the grounds that someone else did the job.

For Vic, who has been making much of what he did for James, this is a disastrous misunderstanding, and he immediately (line 41) reasserts that it was *he* who “cleaned it up.” For this discussion, what is of special interest is that what Vic failed to get heard as a preliminary when James analyzed it as something said in its own right, Vic substantially says again. *The device he uses to get it heard as a preliminary this time is an action projection.* (As it happens, he fails. First, James hears the action projection as a pre-request and responds appropriately with an offer. This Vic rejects, whether because the specifics of James’ offer are not to his liking or because he wants to get the materials in his preliminaries heard. But the possibility should be noted that the “pre-pre” operation can be “subversively” used; that is, materials can be introduced as mere preliminaries that a speaker does not want addressed as matters in their own right. Second, when the preliminary is repeated, James hears it (lines 62–63–65) as a solicitation for thanks and offers his appreciation. Both the offer and the appreciation are rejected, as Vic drives relentlessly through to the action earlier projected—the request, which James once again teasingly rejects.)

I want three points extracted from this very rich sequence. First, other sorts of preliminaries can be placed between an action projection and the projected action than preparing or securing prospective references in the latter. Second, it can be problematic to get a hearing for talk as “not said in its own right but as a preliminary,” and the analysis made of it as “said in its own right” can be very different from its analysis as a preliminary. The work of exempting some next spate of talk from treatment as “produced in its own right,” and marking it as a preliminary, thus appears to be work for which there is a need. Third, some “pre-pre’s” are in fact used just when that need has been displayed.

### Pre-Pre’s Revisited

Another set of instances of action projections in the collection initially seems to disappoint the preceding account and to

require different treatment. In these segments, what follows the question projection not only *is* a question but it is *the* question. No preliminaries intervene between the action projection and the projected action, and so the former does not initially appear to be employed as a “pre-pre.” However, upon examination, the projected action in each of these instances appears itself to be employed as a preliminary to some further talk or action whose occurrence or whose form is contingent on the response to the projected question. In these cases as well, therefore, the action projection appears to operate as a “pre-pre.” It does not serve to insert preliminaries before the projected action; rather, it marks the projected action as itself a preliminary.

Sometimes the preliminary operates in much the same way as other “pre’s,” for example, like a pre-invitation, as in the following reported instance in which the projected question occurring next seems to establish that the appropriate conditions are present for the invitation (or request) to be made and agreed to:

(10) [#22, Sugihara, 1977, 32–36]

- 1 J: I was readin' the word one time an'  
 2 this guy sittin' next tuh me I y'know  
 3 → ( ) an' he said "Hey Can I ask  
 4 → you something? Are you a Christian?"  
 5 "Oh yeah," "Why don't we uh  
 6 M: He was readin'  
 7 the work next to ya?=  
 8 J: =No I was readin' the word and 'asked  
 9 me if I wuz a Christian y'know  
 10 M: Uh huh=  
 11 J: =I said "oh yeah" an' we started  
 12 sha:ring and...

In segment eleven the projected question appears to seek to establish the grounds for a second suggestion, after a first has been rejected:

(11) [#27, US, 57–58, simplified]

- 1 J: =Hey, Victuh  
 2 V: So I (haf - yeah)

- 3 J: The nex'time you see me I'm gon'  
 4 be lookin like he:ll yuh know  
 5 wah,  
 6 (0.7)
- 7 J: Cuz e:vry damn one a' these teeth  
 8 comin out. (0.7)  
 9 Bottom en top.  
 10 (0.7)
- 11 V: Doesn' mattuh you still be you  
 12 wo:ntche James,
- 13 J: S-uh:::,,, Yeh I guess so-MAYBE  
 14 dehr ( ) when I see that  
 15 dennid come et me wit dat damn  
 16 needle I'm ready tuh r:run like  
 17 he:ll. I don' mind eh pullin 'em  
 18 but he comin at me dat needle's  
 19 what I cain't stand. HAH  
 20 HAH HAH HAH!
- 21 V: (Use)- Tellim gas.  
 22 J: °hh huh?  
 23 V: Tellim gas.  
 24 (0.4)
- 25 J: Uh- No I don't wan' no  
 26 ga,s, no I wi- I will take it.=
- 27 V: → w'lemme ask yih this question.  
 28 J: =y'know?  
 29 V: → Lemme ask you one ques tion.  
 30 J: I'll take it. Yeh  
 31 righ,t.
- 32 V: → Lemme ask you dis question.  
 33 J: Yeh.  
 34 V: → Are you getting toothaches?  
 35 (0.8)
- 36 J: No!  
 37 V: → (Den don't )-  
 38 J: → But I got cavities! You know e:vry  
 39 damn one a' these teeth in mah mouth  
 40 I c'n (mo:ve?)  
 41 V: I a:s, ked yuh- ]=  
 42 J: I've got, ]=  
 43 V: =I ast you a question.=  
 44 J: =Yeh affectin my: :=  
 45 V: =Are you getting,  
 46 J: stomach 'n my  
 47 ey es.  
 48 V: Are you gettin pai:n.  
 49 J: Yeah.

The issue by line 27 has come down to James' anxiety about the "needle," and his rejection of the suggestion of "gas" as a way of avoiding it. It seems clear that the question at line 34 is the question projected at lines 27, 29, and 32. It seems clear as well that it is a preliminary to a possible next suggestion that may be forthcoming from Vic, depending on the answer it gets, and that it is so understood and treated by both parties. This can be seen in what Vic does after the answer at line 37, which starts with the form of "drawing a consequence." It can be seen in James' simultaneous talk at line 38 in which he attempts to "head off" the consequence portended by Vic's preliminary. Indeed, by line 49 James has reversed his answer to do so (the answer now being selected less for descriptive adequacy than with an eye to what is to be made of it, as in the answers to pre-invitations). Vic does eventually suggest not pulling teeth as a way of avoiding the needle, and it seems clear that it is that suggestion that James is heading off at lines 38 and following.

In other instances, the projected preliminary is "leading up to a point." In segment twelve below, that is clearly marked (lines 64 and 67) by "Now the point is," and the recipient simultaneously tries to "head it off" (lines 65 and 67).

(1) [BC: Red, 52-54]

A and B have been discussing whether it was legitimate for Israel to put Eichman on trial for Nazi war crimes. A has been maintaining it was not; they should have just assassinated him.

- 1 A: Sir. Listen tuh me. There is no  
 2 legal process. By which. The  
 3 government of one country. Can  
 4 try:: the government of another  
 5 country for what it did to  
 6 its own citizens.  
 7 B: Well the-  
 8 B: Bu'en den den de American gov'mint  
 9 should av- to:ld uh de uh de  
 10 judges, de uh, de uh deh- German  
 11 judges, uh, hh which are uh present  
 12 at dat ti:me, det dey should uh

- 13 staht a trial. Let de German  
 14 judges uh trial- uh [try de murders.  
 15 A: [Yeah?  
 16 A: Mm hm? The only- Th'//only thing  
 17 wrong with that is ( )-  
 18 B: D'you think that that'd be a 'right,  
 19 Would that be uh,  
 20 A: Again. Uh if the German judges  
 21 chose tuh try:: thee, those people,  
 22 hh, yuh see, w-you gotta remember  
 23 something- It's a funny thing about  
 24 → legality. Lemme- lemme show you  
 25 → something about process.  
 26 B: Dey're trying, rright now,  
 27 A: [Wait- [Waidamin'  
 28 Waitaminnit. Waitaminnit. You  
 29 mentioned capital punishment. When  
 30 Great Britain. ((clears throat))  
 31 Or when uh Canada, or en:: most a-  
 32 most civilized nations, hh hang a  
 33 man.  
 34 B: Yes  
 35 A: [There is a process which goes on.  
 36 The body drops down, through the  
 37 trap door into the liddle, opening  
 38 in the bottom a' the gallows, hh  
 39 where is waiting for it, is a  
 40 coroner's jury.  
 41 B: Right.  
 42 A: They see this man die right there,  
 43 bang. He's dead. Then the foreman  
 44 of the coroner's jury called by the  
 45 coroner says, "Who, killed, this  
 46 man." And the executioner steps  
 47 forward an' says "I did." An' the  
 48 coroner says "Have you any uh::  
 49 excuse to offer? as to why we  
 50 should not order you bound over  
 51 for a jury trial for murder?"  
 52 B: Is tha- is [that ( )  
 53 A: [And he presents a  
 54 warrant. Signed, by the duly  
 55 constituted, authority, of that  
 56 province or that state or that  
 57 country. Thet says he is ordered  
 58 and authorized to do so. 'n at  
 59 that point that man is totally off  
 60 the hook.

61 B: I see. Now, I didn' know about det.  
 62 A:→ Now.  
 63 B:→ But,  
 64 A:→ [The point i:s,  
 65 B: [ But wouldn't-  
 66 A: [ thet that exact precedent, could  
 67 have applied tō every man in the  
 68 death camps.  
 69 ((pause))  
 70 B: Right.  
 71 A: See? That's the sad part. Kill  
 72 um? Sure. But that silliness of  
 73 the trial.

In all these instances, what follows the action projection is the projected action. In all of them, that projected action is used as a preliminary to some possible further action—an action to whose occurrence and/or form the preliminary and the response that it gets are relevant.

In many of the segments in which this type of “pre-ing” occurs, it appears to be used to do a sort of “backing up” to deal with something anterior to what has just been addressed—“anterior” in both a quasi-logical and a sequential sense. For example, in segment eleven above, James has announced the imminent pulling of his teeth, and a problem consequent to it—the needle. Vic first addresses himself to the problem of the needle with the “gas” suggestion. When that is rejected, he “backs up” and addresses himself to the anterior matter of the pulling of the teeth—anterior in that the “needle” problem is contingent on it and in that the turn in which it figured is less proximately accessible sequentially. The “backing up” is initiated with an action projection and with the preliminary that it marks (“Are you getting toothaches”).

In segment thirteen, Lois treats her engagement as a tutor as a given and inquires about the date on which she is to start (lines 6–9):

(13) [JG: III: 5: 2–3]

1 Lois: uhh Thisiz Lois Dorian and  
 2 Mrs. White wanted me t'get in  
 3 touch with you about Robert's  
 4 tutoring?

- 5 Maggie: Yes. Uh huh.  
 6 Lois: An I wuz, yih know, wuz jus  
 7 go-wondering when did you  
 8 wanna start on that or I mean  
 9 -- wait till after the=  
 10 Maggie: [.hhhhh  
 11 Lois: =holidays or--  
 12 Maggie: → Well, now lemme-lemme ask you  
 13 this dear, what do you charge.  
 14 Lois: I charge eight dollars an hour.  
 15 Maggie: Eight dollars an hour. I see.  
 16 'hhh An you do this apparently  
 17 after school then.  
 18 Lois: Yes.  
 19 Maggie: Uh huh. 'hTSK'hhh uhh An  
 20 wouldju be able t'come t'my  
 21 home t' dudhor or do you not  
 22 have transportation.  
 23 Lois: No. I do have a car and I  
 24 would be willing (v'k'-)  
 25 t'come over.  
 26 Maggie: 'hhh I: see. 'hhh uh jist a  
 27 moment.  
 28 ((Hand cupped over the  
 29 phone. Talk 'yelled'  
 30 as if into another  
 31 room.))  
 32 Maggie: WHADIZIT MOTHER. I'M TRYING  
 33 T'TALK ON THE PHONE.=WHADIZIT  
 34 YOU WANT ME T'SAY  
 35 (3:0)  
 36 Maggie: EIGHT DOLLARS AN HOU:R  
 37 (13.0)  
 38 ((Talk delivered as if  
 39 Mother has moved  
 40 closer.))  
 41 Maggie: Alright mother. I'm still  
 42 talking on the phone.=I don't  
 43 wantcha ( )  
 44 Maggie: → 'hhh Now lemme ask you this uhh  
 45 do you -- do this all the  
 46 time.= In otherwords, is the  
 47 tutoring that you uhh 'hhh is  
 48 this part of your teaching  
 49 process or are you already  
 50 teaching period or how uh,  
 51 yih know, 'hhh I mean like with  
 52 Mme. Blanc who teaches him

- 53 French of course I know she  
 54 teaches a French cla:ss at  
 55 B-----.
- 56 Lois: Mhm.  
 57 Maggie: [ 'hhh Bu:tuh I w'z just  
 58 wondering now are 'hhh are  
 59 you a qualified regular, yih  
 60 know, California teacher  
 61 where you do teach in a  
 62 schoo:l?
- 63 Lois: No. Not-no I- I am in school.  
 64 But actually at the moment I  
 65 am out of school but 'hhh I  
 66 been going t'UCLA an I have  
 67 been tutoring high school kids  
 68 an younger kids for the last  
 69 four or five years.
- 70 Maggie: Psk.=I:: see. I: see. 'hh  
 71 An iz it your sister who  
 72 teaches the regular classes  
 73 of English at B-----?
- 74 Lois: Not English. Teaches History  
 75 'n Economics.
- 76 Maggie: [ 'hh Oh.  
 77 Maggie: Oh I: see. I: see. Becuz I  
 78 knew there was some connection.
- 79 Lois: Yeas.  
 80 Maggie: [ 'hhh Well I'll tell you now I  
 81 don't know -- 'hh we have  
 82 people in from Florida staying  
 83 with us right now as house  
 84 guests. 'hh An:uhm naturally  
 85 the (h)househ(h)old is a bit  
 86 'hhh tangled up with y'know  
 87 (eh) other people here.
- 88 Lois: Mhm.  
 89 Maggie: [ 'hhh Let me have your name and  
 90 yur uh phone number where I  
 91 c'n rreach you becuz yes  
 92 definitely Robert does need  
 93 tutoring in English  
 94 desperately...

Maggie's next turn (starting at lines 12-13 addresses itself not to that proximate question (the date on which Lois is to start) but to the anterior one on which it is predicated, that is, her hiring of



Lois. She begins to address that issue with questions that are preliminaries to a decision on that matter, and those preliminaries are marked by a question projection. When Maggie returns to the conversation with Lois (at line 44) after a side conversation with her mother, she resumes these preliminaries to the anterior issue and “re-marks” them with another question projection.

The segments discussed in the preceding paragraphs do not, therefore, undercut the proposal that action projections can have a “pre-pre” function; instead, they expand our sense of the forms “pre-pre’s” can take. In the types examined in the preceding section, the “pre-pre” operated to insert preliminaries before the projected action. In this last set of instances, the “pre-pre” operates to mark the projected action as itself a “pre” to some contingent “next.”

Once alerted to this use of action projections, we may be able to discern in some stretches of talk a structure that is not initially apparent. Consider segment fourteen:

(14) [US, 47–48]

Vic, James, and Mike are still talking about the broken window (cf. segment (9)). James then begins opening an envelope, apparently containing his federal income tax refund.

- 1 Mike: Y'gonna call, you gonna call  
 2 them up en have 'em-  
 3 (0.2)  
 4 Mike: -bring eh-eh- [send a glazer  
 5 Vic: [Oh, en I stuck]=  
 6 Mike: = [up or what.  
 7 Vic: = [the card board=  
 8 James: [Ye (hh) eh!  
 9 Vic: =I stuck the cardboard inna  
 10 do::h,  
 11 James: Yeh, (right)  
 12 Vic: [Y'see the doh's  
 13 op, en?  
 14 James: [WAIDAminnit, I gotta run  
 15 ahead. Dad (gummit), this is,  
 16 at least 'hh eh- fifty thousn

- 17 dolluh ( )  
 18 Vic: [He got iz god d=ehh  
 19 [you got your thing tuhday,  
 20 James: [En I don' give a damn what  
 21 (door cu:z) [I got it heah.  
 22 Vic: [Did you get-  
 23 Vic: → Lemme [ask yih dis.  
 24 James: [AHHH hah hah  
 25 [hah- yeh- heh-heh!  
 26 Vic: [Didju getchor thing tuhday,  
 27 James: Wha:t.  
 28 Vic: Your thing.  
 29 (0.6)  
 30 (Mike): ° ( )  
 31 James: Mah thing?  
 32 Vic: Yea:h=  
 33 James: =I keeps my thing with me  
 34 aw:l [the ti me.  
 35 Mike: [No: no [-no (man),  
 36 Vic: [I'm  
 37 not [talkin about dat  
 38 Mike: [He means- he means-  
 39 James: [AHH hah hah hah!  
 40 Mike: He means dat  
 41 (ti:ng.) nhinhh!  
 42 Vic: [Di:dju getchor thing,  
 43 t'da:y,  
 44 James: [Yeh I got it,  
 45 Vic: (Well, Oh Wo::w )!  
 46 James: [Yeh, I got it, I know whatchu  
 47 mean I dus kiddn (hh) ehh heh  
 48 heh! 'hh I got it  
 49 (owrigh t)  
 50 Vic: [Okay.)  
 51 James: A(hh)heh a'ri. I got  
 52 [my thi:ng,  
 53 Rich: [(What's this thing),  
 54 (waitaminnit.) ehh hmh hmh!  
 55 James: Ehh heh heh [heh heh  
 56 Vic: [Ta:x. Yihknow,  
 57 James: Yeh.  
 58 Mike: Tax re turn,  
 59 James: [E(hh)h!  
 60 Mike: Mm hm, (hmh hmh)  
 61 James: [Return.  
 62 (0.5)  
 63 James: Yeh. E(hh)h!  
 64 Mike: Yih he got alluh

- 65           them-all them=  
 66           [<sub>o</sub>(            )  
 67 Mike:     =lottery tickets (            ) =  
 68 James:    [<sub>o</sub>Yeh right I got-  
 69 Mike:     =iz t(h)ax ret(h)u::rn.  
 70 James:    <sup>o</sup>Yeh (sir) =  
 71 Mike:     [<sub>o</sub>Ye(h)e(h)h  
 72 James:    = [You ain't kiddin tha' that's  
 73            what I'm smi:lin so about dass  
 74            why I got this heuh.  
 75 Vic: → I got [mi:ne, about a month =  
 76 James:    [<sub>o</sub>(Yeh I got some here).  
 77 Vic:       =ago.  
 78 Vic: → That's how I got my (ca(h) =  
 79 James:     [<sub>o</sub>Gotta nice,  
 80 Vic:       = (h) ar!  
 81 James:    = [nice piece a' change comin  
 82            back.  
 83 Vic: → (Caught myself up.)  
 84 James:    E(hh)h!  
 85 Vic:       Y' know,  
 86 Mike:     [<sub>o</sub>Yihknow Richard?dntchu?

At line 23 there is a question projection, which is followed directly by a question. It appears to be the question projected. For one thing, Vic has just tried (line 22) to ask that question, and before that tried two other versions of a related utterance, in one of which (line 18) he is noticing something about James to a third party (“He got”) and in the other of which (line 19) he is remarking about it to James himself (“you got”). Each of these prior attempts has been implicated in an overlap and has had its hearing or understanding possibly impaired thereby. “Lemme ask yih dis” thus appears to be used here to “make room” for an unimpaired asking of the question that has hitherto had its every asking interfered with. Such an analysis is related to the earlier observation that an action projection may be used to get treatment as a “pre” for an utterance that had previously failed to get such treatment; here it would be used to get a *hearing* for an utterance that had previously failed to get it. Such an analysis also seems promising in that not a few of the instances of action projections in the collection occur in the environment of overlap. The action projection, on this view, can “absorb” overlap with another ongoing utterance; if it is successful, the prefaced question will be “in the clear”; if it is not

successful, another “try” at the question will not have been “used up.” Scanning forward from the action projection in fourteen quite a few turns, we do not find anything to which “Didju getchor thing tuhday” might have been preliminary—not within the span in which such *sequelae* have been found in the other segments we have examined.

If, however, we scan yet farther ahead, we find at lines 78, 80, and 83 talk by Vic that may well be related. Although the “mine” at line 75 can and should be understood as in the first instance referring to, and requiring reference to, the “this heuh” at the end of James’ prior turn, it should also be noticed that it echoes back to Vic’s turns at lines 18, 19, 22, 26, 42, and 43. Indeed, we can see that the stresses on “he” (line 18), and “you” (lines 19, 22, and 42) project the contrast that “mine” realizes. It appears that “didju getchor thing tuhday” was indeed used as a preliminary. It serves as a vehicle for that device by which a speaker approaches talking about some matter as it pertains to himself or herself by first raising it as it pertains to a coparticipant. Because of the inter-poleation first of a joke sequence (lines 31–52) and then of a clarification sequence (lines 53–63), the structure and character of this sequence are somewhat obscured. Being led to examine it for what the marked preliminary might be preliminary to can help lead us to find this sentence.

### Pre-Delicates

In another and final set of instances, a question projection is followed by a question, by *the* question, and that question does not appear to be preliminary to anything further. In all these cases, the projected question is, or is marked as, a delicate one.

In some cases for example, (15 and 16 below), the marking of the question as delicate is in other respects made explicit:

- (15) [Erhardt: 8: 1]
- |   |        |                           |
|---|--------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Vicky: | Yeh is Pam there?         |
| 2 |        | (0.7)                     |
| 3 | M:     | Uh:: (1.5) Yes she is.C'n |
| 4 |        | I tell her who's calling. |
| 5 | Vicky: | Yeh̄ this is Vicky.       |

- 6 M: Hang on please?  
 7 Vicky: °°Okay, °°  
 8 (8.2)  
 9 Pam: H'llo::,  
 10 Vicky: Hi:: Vicky.  
 11 (0.4)  
 12 Vicky: You ra:ng?  
 13 Pam: → Oh hello there yes I di::d.  
 14 °hh um I need tuh ask you a  
 15 questio:n?  
 16 (0.4)  
 17 Pam: → en you musn't (0.7) uh take  
 18 it personally or kill me.  
 19 (0.7)  
 20 Pam: I wan to kno:w, (0.7)  
 21 whether you: will(b) would  
 22 be free:, (.) to wörk o:n um  
 23 tomorrow night.  
 24 (0.4)

## (16) ["Hart to Hart," TV mystery]

A has been told that B might have been having an affair with Norman, a murder victim.

- 1 A: → I want to ask you a question that  
 2 → may seem a bit indelicate, but I  
 3 have to know.  
 4 B: Go ahead.  
 5 A: Exactly how did you feel about  
 6 Norman.

In other cases, the question marked by the projection as delicate is of a sort treated in the official culture as delicate; for example, it concerns sex (see segment four above), or it involves a personal question to a stranger (see ten above), or it involves asking recipients if they know something treatable as common knowledge (see 17 below) or it makes the complaint that the recipient has served one ill (see eighteen below).

## (17) [BC, Red, 194]

Talking about hailing taxis.

- 1 A: Not unless you get the number.

- 2 B: But he goes by you.  
 3 A: But if he-  
 4 B: How c'n you get the numbuh.  
 5 A: Well, it's up on the to:p,  
 6 B: Oh:::. I see whatchu mea::n.  
 7 You see, this is why, when they  
 8 tell you-  
 9 A: Now waita secon'.  
 10 A: → Wai'sec'n. Lemme ask you  
 11 something.  
 12 B: Yes  
 13 A: → You are aware of how that light  
 14 → works on top aren'cha,  
 15 B: We::ll, n- uh I know that it  
 16 says 'off duty' when they're off  
 17 duty,  
 18 A: Well, did you al-  
 19 B: An' I know it's lit up when  
 20 they are, available  
 21 A: When they're empty. Right.  
 22 B: C'rrect.

## (18) [Openings, #91]

Joey has called mother long distance and is asking about an investment she either advised him to make or made on his behalf.

- 1 M: Hello  
 2 J: Hello  
 3 M: Hi  
 4 J: Hi  
 5 M: How are ya.  
 6 J: Fine, how are you.  
 7 M: Uh okay,  
 8 J: Guess what.  
 9 M: What.  
 10 J: I dunno, I j(h)us wanted you ta  
 11 guess. 'hh no- eh heh How are you.  
 12 (0.?)  
 13 M: I'm fine Joey, how are you.  
 14 J: → heh heh heh Fine. Uhm (0.?) Can  
 15 → I ask you something?  
 16 M: Yeah.  
 17 J: → What has happened to Standard  
 Prudential.

Obviously, the questions in (17) and (18) are not intrinsically delicate. Nor is it the case that a standing as delicate in some public or official culture entails that “these parties” will share in that view, or will do so “now,” or will do so with one another, or will take it that a coparticipant does and so on. Nor, even if all these were the case, does it follow that a speaker must *display* such an orientation on a given occasion. But projecting the question does the work of displaying that a question hearable as subject to delicate treatment once heard, has been so treated on this occasion, by this speaker, for this recipient. Consequently, one possibility that a question projection can prefigure is that a delicate question is forthcoming. As is suggested by some of the citations above, this possibility is not alternative to, but is additive with, the “pre-pre” usage of action projections discussed earlier; sometimes what follows the projection is both delicate and a preliminary to something further, which may also be delicate. But it can also be not hearable, not treatable, as delicate and can be marked as only a preliminary by the action projection. It can also be not preliminary, but hearably delicate. In the last-named case, the action projection operates not as a “pre-pre” but simply as a “pre.” But note that it operates as a “pre-delicate” and not merely as a “pre” to the action it projects (not simply as another form of pre-request or pre-announcement).

It is worth noting that pre-delicates may introduce more into a sequence than the delicateness they mark; they may display knowledge on the speaker’s part that quite alters the character of what is going on. What might otherwise be a simple request for information, for example, in segment eighteen about the current fortunes of a stock, becomes something of a complaint or a tease when it is displayed that the speaker knows that question to be treatable as a delicate one (knows, for example, that the stock is doing badly). A question about the recipient’s relationship to a third party (as in segment sixteen) when marked as delicate, hints that the asker knows something, and aspects of what asker knows. Pre-delicates, then, potentially display their speakers to know whatever it is that might make the projected action delicate.

### Working-Through

Action projections are employed both as “pre-pre’s” and as pre-delicates. When employed as “pre-pre’s,” they may be used

either to insert preliminaries before the action they project or to mark that action itself as preliminary. It does not appear that these several uses (some of which can be co-operative in a segment of talk) are discriminated and differentially prefigured in the form or placement of the action projection. Which use is being made of an action projection on any given occasion is something worked through by the parties in the ensuing talk. A recipient may have to entertain the full range of possibilities momentarily, using the immediately following talk to find out what sort of sequence is in progress. Should a possibly delicate question follow directly, then the action projection may be treated as having so marked it. Should a "D'ya remember . . ." type of question follow the action projection, then a "pre-pre" analysis may result, with the projected question being waited for through a set of preliminaries. It is expectable that, in this working-through, errors, misunderstandings, and efforts to head them off will occur. Recipients may hear projections designed to be pre-delicates as "pre-pre's" and ones designed as "pre-pre's" as pre-delicates. Speakers who find that they have produced an action projection and are in the course of producing an instance of the projected action, which is thus possibly subject to hearing as delicate, can find ways of dealing with that potential analysis by recipients. It will be useful to examine several such occurrence.

Segment nineteen is taken from a didactic psychiatric interview, videotaped to instruct trainees in psychiatry about schizophrenia:

## (19) [Treasure Seeking Car, 5-6]

- 1 Dr.: Okay. Now I wann<sup>a</sup> jus' =  
 2 P.: Uh:-=  
 3 Dr.: =shi- (t) shift for a minute.=  
 4 P.: =Nyeah. Sure.  
 5 (0.4)  
 6 Dr.: → I wanna tell you- very frankly,  
 7 → very ho:nestly something. Okay?  
 8 → Mu:ch of what you've said, I  
 9 could not follow.  
 10 P.: Mm hm  
 11 Dr.: I tried.=I tr,ied very hard,=  
 12 P.: Right



- 13 Dr.: =concentrating, (.) an' listening  
 14 tuh what you said, an' I wz  
 15 tryin tuh make some sense out  
 16 of it, an' I could make guesses  
 17 an' all, but really, it wasn't-  
 18 the way people usually talk,  
 19 an' the sense they usually make.  
 20 (0.5)  
 21 P.: Me the:n?=  
 22 Dr.: =Yeah, innuh las' ten minutes  
 23 or (if) lets say five  
 24 minut<sub>es</sub> (or )  
 25 P.: <sup>l</sup>No:, 'cause ah'm  
 26 Dr.: Izzit ( ) do you=  
 27 P.: <sup>l</sup>Uhh-  
 28 Dr.: =understa:nd that or izzat=  
 29 =stra:nge tuh you (tha way-)=  
 30 P.: =U-uh- ah know ah don' sound  
 31 mah normal self raht no:w.=  
 32 Dr.: =You do.=  
 33 P.: =Ye:s.  
 34 Dr.: Ahhh  
 35 P.: Lu:ng congestion, head co:ld,  
 36 ( ) runny no:se,

The psychiatrist has elicited from the patient some moderately bizarre and discontinuous tales, “fantasies,” and “delusions.” The segment reproduced here may seem at first a further demonstration of the patient’s incompetence, for he apparently fails to recognize the import, and potential ominousness, of the psychiatrist’s assessment of what has preceded. He responds merely “mm hm” and “right” to a complaint or negative assessment (lines 8–11) to which, it might be thought, he would at the very least have responded with surprise. Note, however, that the psychiatrist has marked his complaint with an action projection, one that seems to have been intended as a pre-delicate. The patient, however, has not treated it that way. If the patient does not hear the assessment that follows as “delicate,” then there is a basis in the normal practices of conversation for him to hear the action projection as a “pre-pre.” Hearing it that way involves hearing it as potentially exempting what follows it from treatment as said in its own right and having it treated as a preliminary. One way of showing that one has so treated it is by producing a continuer, and that is what

the patient does. There may be slippage here, and this patient may be "insane." But the slippage he is involved in here is not arbitrary, random, or irrational. It is a slippage along orderly channels of hearing and analysis.

Segment twenty is somewhat more involved:

(20) [SJ: I: 6: 1-2]

- 1 Hank: Hello,  
 2 Pete: Ha::nk?  
 3 Hank: Ya:h.  
 4 Pete: This's Pe:te f'm down't the  
 5 Drum Corps.  
 6 Hank: Oh: ya:h.  
 7 Pete: How are yuh.  
 8 Hank: Pretty goo:d.  
 9 Pete: Yih gon'be down inna morning?  
 10 Hank: → Well sir now I'm gon'tell yih  
 11 sum'n. I'm runnin a g'rage sale  
 12 here.hh  
 13 Pete: Yer havin a g'rage sale,  
 14 Hank: Yeah.hh  
 15 Pete: Well fer cryin out loud.  
 16 Hank: If I c'n possibly get away  
 17 I'll be do:wn.  
 18 Pete: We:ll h<sub>o</sub> k a y w-  
 19 Hank: {If I: ey eno' ugh other  
 20 he:lp so I don'have t'stay  
 21 here.  
 22 Pete: Oh I see, 'hh,h  
 23 Hank: {But u,h  
 24 Pete: {We:ll we  
 25 just tryin tuh contact  
 26 everybody t' see if they're=  
 27 Hank: {Yeah.  
 28 Pete: =gonna show up down there,=  
 29 Hank: {Oh su:re. Well I-  
 30 Pete: =cuz,  
 31 Hank: {I w'anna come Pete.  
 32 Pete: {hh  
 33 (.)  
 34 Pete: → Wuh listen uh: lemme ask yih  
 35 sump'n are you gonna go tuh  
 36 Vegas?  
 37 Hank: Oh yah I'll be in Vegas Pete.  
 38 Pete: {Oh-  
 39 Pete: Oh I see. 'hh Well I got all

- 40 th'dope down'ere t'day=  
 41 Hank: [Yeah.  
 42 Pete: =down't the Temple.so we'z  
 43 gonna discuss it tihmorruh  
 44 see,=  
 45 Hank: =Uh huh,  
 46 Pete: 't'hh Well anyway ah:'ll tell  
 47 uh Ace ('n them) thet eyuh you  
 48 k- if you c'n make it chu'll  
 49 be down.  
 50 Hank: Yah.  
 51 Pete: Oka:y uh- Hank  
 52 Hank: [But ju c'n see  
 53 my poi:nt,h  
 54 Pete: Yah.  
 55 (0.3)  
 56 Pete: Okay Hank ah'll see yih. ]  
 57 Hank: ( ) we h a d so  
 58 much stuff we just had tuh  
 59 clear ou:t.h  
 60 Pete: Yeah. [Okay Hank,=  
 61 Hank: ( )  
 62 Hank: =Yih'know yih try t'k- w'y'  
 63 combine two households you  
 64 really got it.  
 65 Pete: Ahh hhuh huh huh huh 'hhh  
 66 Yeh ah'll tell I'm bout it,  
 67 Hank: Yah Oka: yee,  
 68 Pete: [Awr i'Ha: n k ,  
 69 Hank: (You bet)  
 70 Hank: Pete=  
 71 Pete: =°Yah.°=  
 72 Hank: =B'bye.

At line 34, Pete projects a question. Is it being used as a “pre-pre,” as a pre-delicate, or as both? Note, on the one hand, that Hank has treated the possibility of his not coming to the meeting as something requiring an excuse (see the “pre-pre” usage at line 10–11 that puts the excuse in as a preliminary); that he has protested that his possible absence is contrary to his desire (“I wanna come,” line 31); and that this protestation has overlapped an attempt by Pete to explain that this call is being made to everyone for a particular reason (lines 24–26, 28, 30) and not because of past delinquencies on Hank’s part, a possibility that Hank’s “defensiveness” suggests he is entertaining. Pete’s turn at lines 24–26, 28, 30 not only is not

completed, but the part of it that gets said is apparently heard and responded to as, at least in part, a complaint. The talk that follows Pete's action projection (lines 39–44) appears to be the “reason” he was trying to give at lines 24–26, 28, 30. The reason for the meeting is discussion of the Vegas trip, and the preliminary question is directed to establishing whether this is relevant for Hank, or whether Hank is an appropriate recipient for this check-out. (It is in this respect like “Are you a Christian” in segment ten above).

Note, on the other hand, that Hank replies to the “Vegas” question at line 35–36 with what appears to be a reassurance, a promise of sorts (that is, that even should he miss the meeting “inna morning,” he will certainly attend the Vegas trip). He does not appear to treat the “Vegas” question as a preliminary, but as a possible delicate. When, furthermore, Pete delivers the turn to which lines 34–36 appears to have been (for him) preliminary, it is not heard by Hank as the end of a whole unit, an explanation of the calling. Rather than following with some “full” turn of his own, he does a continuer (line 45), thus treating what preceded as some not-yet-completed talk project. Pete then abandons the sequence and begins to edge toward closing the conversation.

It appears that in this segment what Pete produced as a “pre-pre” was heard by Hank as a pre-delicate, with the expectable further consequence that when Pete produced that to which his preliminary was preliminary, Hank was not in a position to hear it as something that had been led up to and so heard it as something leading to something further. Segments nineteen and twenty show that both sorts of misunderstanding by recipient—of pre-delicate as “pre-pre” and of “pre-pre” as pre-delicate—are potential vulnerabilities of action projections.

In twenty-one we can see how a speaker can orient to the potential analysis a recipient will make of the talk as an action projection is worked through and what can be done to head off potential misunderstandings:

- (21) [#19, SBL 1: 1: 12: 2]
- 1 A: So I'm uh I just thought I'd-  
 2 wanted to share that with you,  
 3 B: Yeah, well, good.  
 4 A: Cause-

- 5 B: Say, tell me something, Bea,  
 6 what is the uhm I always feel  
 7 sorry for someone when they lose  
 8 their husband or the husband  
 9 loses the wife,  
 10 A: Uh huh,  
 11 B: What uh is this wife, what is  
 12 she going to do.  
 13 A: Oh well she has always worked.

At lines 1–3, A and B have produced the crucial elements of a topic/sequence closing sequence—a little sequence employed collaboratively to bring a longer topic or sequence to a close. Directly after such a sequence is a ripe position for a new sequence start. In the sequence thereby closed, A has been telling B about the ease with which she has rented a property she owns, the property having been vacated by a woman whose husband had died. At line 5, B appears to be initiating a new topic/sequence. The “Say” with which she begins is an instance of a regular occurrence in such positions—a marker in turn-initial position in a new-topic-initial turn (other such tokens include “Hey,” “Listen,” “So”). One job that the action projection that follows could be doing is displaying the type of topic/sequence being initiated. But, in line with observations earlier in this paper, we could also see it as marking that what follows is preliminary to the projected question, that the projected question that follows is preliminary to something that may follow *it*, or that what follows is possibly delicate.

There is reason to think that the question begun and abandoned at line 6 (“what is the uhm”) is a version of the question asked at lines 11–12 (“what is [the wife] going to do”). The reason is that speakers regularly use a “same start” to exhibit that a subsequent utterance is the same as was intended in an earlier, abandoned effort (a device regularly found, for example, when a speaker has dropped out of an overlap or yielded to an interruption). Asked at line 6, this question is available to analysis as the projected question being used as a preliminary, or as a question marked as delicate. (It seems less available to analysis as preliminary to the projected action, since it is not of the form regularly employed for that operation.) There is nothing in the ensuing talk

to suggest that B is employing the question as a preliminary, but there are grounds for its being heard as a potential delicate: both A and B are older women for whom this may be a sensitive matter, and these may also be grounds for avoiding an analysis of the question as delicate. Note then that B suspends the question in mid course and inserts talk that is analyzable as a preliminary. The sort of preliminary that is undertaken is fitted to the status of the turn as initiating a new topic.

Topic-initial turns are regularly not only characterized by a marker in turn-initial position (as noted above) but they regularly also usually have some sort of “hitch” in them; as a rule, that hitch occurs just before a key reference for the new topic (Schegloff, 1979b, pp. 270–71). When the utterance is examined with that observation in mind, it can be noted that the “uhm” and the abandonment of the question in line 6 occur just before reference to the key referent of the new topic, “the wife.” But this reference refers to someone not mentioned in the immediately preceding topic/sequence; it, apparently, reverts to earlier talk. “What is the wife going to do” is potentially vulnerable to an understanding problem: “What wife?” Then note that the preliminary inserted after abandonment of the question refers to “losing the wife,” that the resumption of the question refers to “this wife,” and that the final, “clean” version of the question uses the pronoun reference “what is she going to do.” In characterizing the first set of instances in the collection, we found that “reference preparation” was one common job that preliminaries were occupied with and that, regularly a reference prepared in a preliminary eventually appeared in the projected action in pro-term form. And so it is in twenty-one, which thus ends up constituting a thoroughly “pre-pre” usage.

Finally, one potential virtue of having developed an account of how action projections operate—as “pre-pre’s” and as pre-delicates—is that that bit of “machinery” may allow access to elements of what is going on in segments of interaction that are not otherwise accessible. Laying bare in a general and formal way how some conversational device operates should not end our interest in it, since a tool is thereby made available that should enhance our capacity for analysis and be enhanced by application to analyses not necessarily concerned with it directly. Consider this segment:

(22) [A.A. #7, 17-18]

- 1 Al: Marijuana is very cheap.  
 2 Stan: Very cheap et fifty cents a  
 3 joint? en a dollar a joint?  
 4 is very cheap?  
 5 Al: You-about a- eh about a third  
 6 of a joint gets yuh high.  
 7 Stan: So?  
 8 (1.0)  
 9 Stan: The difference is  
 10 thet(shu need'm so much).  
 11 Don: [How long will a third of a  
 12 joint keep yuh high.  
 13 Stan: When 'e doesn' have it  
 14 ( )  
 15 Al: [Uh, uh the average marijuana  
 16 smoker, uh:::: is a very-  
 17 Stan: [This ( )  
 18 stealing is-is like a hunner'  
 19 dollars ( ).  
 20 Al: The average marijuana smoker,  
 21 varies- eh uses marijuana  
 22 maybe once, a week or once  
 23 every two=  
 24 =weeks something like that.  
 25 (Stan): [Yer talking off the top a'  
 26 yer head cuz you don' know  
 27 anything about it.  
 28 Al: Yeh I know a good deal about  
 29 it.  
 30 Don: Y'know, (I have a position).  
 31 I didn't call ( )  
 32 once a week.  
 33 Stan: [You just came up with statistics  
 34 like that. Right=  
 35 off the top a' yer head.  
 36 Don: =[Y'know, those kids take it two  
 37 en three (h) ti(h)mes a d(h)ay(h).=  
 38 Al: → =Well, lemme uh::: what knowledge  
 39 d'you have of this.  
 40 Stan: I've worked with kids.  
 41 (who use)  
 42 Al: [So you've-  
 43 Al: So you've worked with kids  
 44 Al: oka:y but uh::: uh do you  
 45 think in the work thet you've

46           done, you've gotten a good,  
 47           sample, of uh y'know there  
 48           are thousands 'n thousands 'n  
 49           thousands of marijuana smokers  
 50           from all kinds of uh walks of  
 51           life.  
 52    Stan: Right.

Note that at line 38, Al begins his turn with “Well, lemme” and then drops that beginning—and what it is a beginning of—in favor of another. Note as well that what follows is a challenge of sorts to Stan, questioning his competence on the topic under discussion. A challenge of this sort is potentially delicate, and, in view of the materials examined in this exercise, there are grounds for supposing that the first beginning of this turn was the start of an action projection such as “Lemme ask you a question”—a projection that would have been shown directly by what followed to be a pre-delicate. However, Al’s challenge follows a challenge to *his* competence by Stan (at lines 25–27, 33–34), one even stronger by virtue of its outright assertion and one unmarked for delicateness. There are, thus, grounds for Al not to mark as delicate what might otherwise be so marked. By starting with a form that is immediately revealed to have been addressed to the possible delicateness issue and then dropping it, Al introduces the relevance of that issue and displays his orientation to it, while at the same time ending up not having lent the tone of delicateness to the challenge he does. What he does is not so much a matter of “masking the delicateness” as of “doing masking of the delicateness,” which is not masking at all.

### A Caution

In one instance in the collection of materials we have been examining, an action projection occurs that does not appear to be used as a “pre-pre.” Moreover, its immediately following talk is not in any clear way delicate (although it is possible that, by reference to what the parties know but we don’t, it is delicate for them).

(23) [Core/BA: II: 1: 29]

1   Ussery: → Mmuh- May I ask a question  
 2           on this, to what extent



- 3           dihyou involve the counseling  
 4           systems in the high school(s)  
 5           f' selection of these persons.  
 6 Bill:     Very little.  
 7 Ussery:  [who get intuh this program.  
 8 Frank:   Very little.  
 9           ((pause))  
 10 Bill:    The counseling system usually  
 11           uh::, counselors usually  
 12           suggest thet thee, bright  
 13           young people go on to college.  
 14           Buh we usually get these  
 15           people (up) from the junior  
 16           colleges.  
 17           ((pause))  
 18 Ussery:  How d'you- How d'you make  
 19           contact.  
 20 (        ): (        )-

This segment is taken from an arbitration session in which one speaker of the action projection is the arbitrator. In the context of a different kind of turn-taking system, one in which talk by the various parties is differentially “valued” and the arbitrator’s participation is minimized, the action projection takes on a semblance of being used as something of a request for permission. In another instance that is not available for inspection but was reported to me anecdotally, a European guest on an American television “talk show,” having already been interviewed and sitting by while the next guest was “on,” began an intervention with “Can I ask a question?” Here too something like “request for permission” seems relevant; here too a turn-taking system other than the one employed in ordinary conversation is involved. It is worth noting that the “request for permission” account of utterances such as “Can I ask you a question?”—the sort of account that speech-act theoretic analysis might yield—appears relevant when turn-taking systems other than the one used for ordinary conversation are involved; that is, turn-taking systems in which next-speakership, and rights to it, are (or may be) differently organized.

“Request for permission” does not appear to be yet a third type of use to which action projection can be put. Rather, it seems to mark another type of delicateness—not the character of the projected question or other action, but the possibly violative or

special character of the party in question talking at all is what is relevant here. Still, this type of delicateness is notably rare in the collection we have examined.

It should not be taken to follow from these observations that “request for permission” will be a common use of action projections in interactions employing nonconversational turn-taking systems, especially ones that partially restrict participation for some parties or constrain the form of talk for different parties. It may be tempting to use such occurrences as evidence for claims about such restrictions or for claims about differential rights, status, power, and so on. For example, interviews appear to allocate to one party the asking of questions and to another party the giving of answers. Sometimes, as in doctor-patient clinical interactions, this organization is mapped onto what is seen to be a differential in status or power between the two parties. Then the use of an action projection by the patient may seem to display an orientation to just such a differential allocation of turn-types and to just such differences in power if the action projection is treated as a request for permission to do the projected action. Segment (24) might be a case in point:

(24) [Frankel 4-80: LOG 10750]

- Dr: Very good. (0.4) very good=lemme  
see yer ankle.  
(2.2)
- Dr: Pt. 'hhh VERY GOOD.  
(1.1)
- Pt: → I wanna ask yih som'n.  
Dr: What's that.  
(0.6)
- Pt: Pt. 'hh (0.5) I have - (0.6)  
(this) second toe (·) that was  
broken. (0.4) But I wen' to the  
p'diatrist (·) becuz i couldn' find  
a doctor on th' weekend. (0.4) En  
he said it wasn' broken.=it was.  
So it wasn' (·) taken care of  
properly. 'hh N' when I'm on my  
feet, I get a sensation in  
→ It.=I mean is anything (th't) c'n  
be do:ne?  
Dr: How long ago d'ju break it

Pt: Mmh two years.  
Dr: Yih c'd put a metatarsal pad  
underneath it...

Note, however, that the action projection is followed directly by preliminaries, setting forth the “context” for the question in something like a story format, and that the question requires reference to the preliminaries when it is done. This segment, which is very much like the first instances examined in this paper, is available to analysis both by the recipient of the projection and by us as a “pre-pre” usage. No reference to “request for permission” is required. This is not to deny that there may be differential allocation of turn-types in interviews or differential status in doctor-patient clinical interactions; the segment may not bear on these issues one way or the other. The point is that caution is in order in too readily taking such materials as evidence of differential allocation or differential status, when an alternative, empirically well-grounded analysis is available.

### **Pre-Pre's, Story Preferences, and the Problem of Extended Utterances**

Some years ago, first in transcribed lectures (Sacks, 1966, 1970, 1971) and then in print (Sacks, 1974), Sacks focused part of his account of storytelling in conversation on what he called “story prefaces.” One theme of his discussion used as its point of departure the fact that stories take more than a sentence to tell and that a problem is thereby potentially posed for prospective tellers of stories in conversation, for the end of a (first) sentence potentially constitutes the end of a turn at talk and is a place at which some other party can elect to try to take a turn at talking (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974). The story preface is a device by which a prospective teller can display an intention to tell a story and yield a next turn to another, with the possible outcome that that other will reselect the prospective teller to talk again, that is to tell the story, in the course of which others will not treat each possible sentence/turn completion as a point at which possibly to take a next turn for themselves.

Many of those themes have hovered over the preceding discussion. In some of segments examined here, participants are also oriented to producing talk that will take more than a single “turn constructional unit.” It may be a question, request, or telling, but it will take some prefacing to do. Or it may be a suggestion, but its appropriateness (or, rather, providing for its nonrejection) will take preliminary work to establish. The contingency whose consequences Sacks elaborated with respect to storytelling is relevant here as well, for the end of the turn unit in which the preliminary is done will be a place where the recipient can start a turn. Indeed, in some cases, the preliminary *is* a story, or part of a story—as in segments one, two, three, and five above. Further, in many cases, the form of the preliminary is such as to especially constrain the recipient to take a turn at its possible completion, for example, when it is a question. (On the one hand, this nearly assures realization of the contingency; on the other hand, it limits and contains it by giving the recipient something quite specific to do in that turn at talk—for example, answer the question—something that may thus promote continuation of the more extended line that the speaker is trying to develop.)

To that aspect of the contingency that involves the possibility that another might talk after a first sentence and in that talk select someone other than the storyteller to talk next, so that the storyteller does not get to continue, another aspect has been introduced. That aspect is that when the recipient of a first part of an intendedly extended line gets a chance to talk, what he or she says will regularly be directed to what preceded, in whatever understanding of it has been achieved. And what preceded can be subjected to understanding not only as the first part of something more extended whose point and rationale have yet to come (for which treatment as a “preliminary” is in order), but also as a potentially complete utterance, a “something in its own right.” What (or which) “something in its own right” it will be analyzable as can well be something to which a speaker, constructing it as a preliminary, may not have attended in his or her construction of it. Thus, the speaker may find the recipient puzzled about the “why that now” for what has been said, taken as a thing in its own right. Worse, the recipient may not be puzzled, but the speaker may find reason for

distress at what he or she has been heard to say or do when their talk is treated as complete rather than preliminary. It is not enough just to have further rights to speak; what is needed is further rights to speak in order to do further what one had set out to do, and that means getting an understanding for what has been said so far as “something that has been said so far,” that is, as a preliminary.

It needs to be remembered, or recognized, therefore, that “story prefaces” and the sequence-organizational exigency to which they are in part responsive are special cases. They are special cases of the generic problem of producing multiunit talk projects in which an opportunity to talk will be afforded a recipient in their course, and in which early parts can have disjunctive, and radically different, understandings as parts and as wholes. “Stories” are one such sort of project—ones that perhaps have this property intrinsically. But talk projects other than stories can also have this character, and their “preliminary parts” can themselves be prefaced so as to aid in getting them understood and treated (in the talk by others that may follow them) as preliminary parts, and not as things to be treated in their own right. Where preliminary parts of stories are involved, that work can be done by story prefaces. Where prefaced requests, questions, and tellings are involved, it can be done by “pre-pre’s.”

At the same time that, in this respect, stories may appear to be a subset of a larger class, in another respect the considerations of this paper suggest a partitioning of stories into two types that may turn out to have different sequential properties and may present different sequential problems in the telling. Some stories may have a structure in which all that precedes the “point” or “punchline” or “crowning episode” is of no separate interest other than for its contribution to the “point”; these are single-peak stories. In this regard they resemble the types of sequences we have been examining in which the preliminaries are (to be) of no interest other than as preliminaries. Other stories are multiple-peak stories; they have several episodes, each of which can be appreciated in its own right, as well as figuring in the progressive development of the story as a whole. In these, a topical burst of talk in which several parties participate and in which the interest and appreciation of a preceding episode is developed may be allowed by the teller, even solic-

ited, whereas this is not the case in single-peak (or intendedly single-peak) stories. Indeed, part of the work of storytelling may consist in displaying the story in its course to be single or multiple peak, for what recipients figure they should do may vary accordingly, and, with that, the sequential contingencies with which the teller will have to deal. These possibilities await empirical exploration.

### What is “Interactional”?

This exploration of a turn format in which an action projection—most commonly a question—is projected but not done within its turn unit has found two uses to which this format is put, two environments in which it occurs. One of these uses is to provide for the “preliminariness” of what directly follows, the other to mark the “delicateness” of what follows. The latter of these, as well as the subvarieties exemplified by the segments examined in connection with it, is an instance of what is sometimes referred to as “what an utterance is *doing, interactionally*.” The former is of a sort sometimes characterized as “sequential machinery,” “technical,” “formal,” or “system requirement.”

There is a contrast implied in such characterizations between what is “real life,” “human,” and “what utterances are *really* doing,” on the one hand, and what is “lifeless,” “mechanical,” and the imposition of disciplined study, on the other. The former characterizations are termed “interactional,” with the implication that the latter are not, and are of lesser reality or relevance on that account.

The contrast is drawn especially when both sorts of analysis can be applied to the same segment of talk. This is commonly, even generally, the case because the work of sequential organization is generally done not by separate bits of talk or action, but as an intrinsic part of the utterance whose placement, construction, and work are in question. Then, after a “technical” analysis, for example, of repair formats occurring in the segment, the question is asked, “But what is this doing *interactionally*?”—as if the “technical” analysis supplied a mere substrate or armature to carry the real payoff, which is something else.

(A history may lie behind this. In the early years of this form of analysis, it was not uncommon to begin with an observation or claim about what some bit of talk was doing “interactionally”; for example, to say that it was an invitation, a complaint, and so on. In undertaking to “prove” that claim, or explicate the way in which the observation was the case, recourse was regularly necessary to “technical” features of the organization of interaction. An utterance was doing an “invitation” by virtue of its placement relative to the structure of interaction or of openings. As accounts regularly required reference to such technical features of the organization of interaction, investigation of these (for example, turn taking or repair) came to be undertaken without the occasioning motive of accounting for some vernacularly named action. It is such accounts, of a sort previously arrived at from a starting point in vernacular interaction, that deprived of that starting point, are now found lacking. The connection to vernacular terms of interaction is now insisted upon.)

In the materials explored in this exercise, the “technical” sequential account is not a substrate on which an “interactional what is really going on” is to be placed. Although in some instances “pre-pre” and pre-delicate usages are seen to combine, in others they do not, and which of them is the relevant analysis on that occasion is something the parties work out from, and in, the talk. An analysis of an action projection as a “pre-pre” does not occasion the question, “And what is it doing interactionally?”; *that* is what it is doing interactionally. It is done to achieve a coordination on turn-taking issues concerning the projected multiunit size of the turn and when, accordingly, it will be the recipient’s turn to address himself or herself to a completed-for-response utterance. It is done with an orientation to the contingencies of hearing and analysis that obtain for the recipient and to the potential consequences of these, as well as to the recipient-design considerations of what the recipient does or doesn’t know. All these considerations that underlie the “pre-pre” type of use of action projections are thoroughly interactional. Although different orders and levels of analysis may be involved between sequential “machinery” and what some speaker is “doing” to a recipient, it is not “interactionality” that differentiates them.

### Conclusion

The caution entered earlier about the interpretation of utterances such as “Can I ask you a question?” as reflecting an orientation to differential power or status may seem to have blunted the sociological point of this exercise. But this would be overly to restrict the “sociological” to traditional and familiar themes.

It is true that, in the past, most of the concern with social structure and social organization has had persons, groups or aggregates of persons, or analytic representations of persons or parts of persons (notions such as “role”) at its core. A consequence has been, as others have also noted (for example, Giddens, 1979, although in a somewhat different sense), that sociology substantially lacks a theory of action, despite some forty years of theorizing about social action and its structure. This is so in part because such theorizing opted early for a theoretical construct of a “unit act” and decided against the study of actual, particular social actions and organized sequences of them (Parsons, 1937).

Such investigation is now possible, however, and it can be both detailed and rigorous. It can be undertaken on action in the primordial scene of sociality—interaction. The organization of social action in interaction is a social organization, and its units are units of social organization. Conversational “turns” and “sequences” are such units, and their study is properly, though not exclusively, sociological. This exercise, in aiming at a small contribution to our understanding of these units, is intended as an exercise in sociology.

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