

# Two Preferences in the Organization of Reference to Persons in Conversation and Their Interaction

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*In conversation, persons have occasion to refer to other persons. Sacks and Schegloff examine here two preferences in such references. The first, minimization, involves use of a single reference form and the second, recipient design, involves the preference for "recognitionals," e.g. name. Names may be used not only because the person is known but also in preparation for subsequent use in the conversation even when the person is not already known by the recipient/hearer.*

*When recognition is in doubt, a recognitional with an accompanying (questioning) upward intonational contour, followed by a brief pause (or "try-marker") may be used. The argument advanced by the authors is that members' uses of these, and succeeding try-markers in sequences, provide evidence for the preferential structure of efforts to achieve recognition in reference to other persons in the course of a conversation. Thus, the close examination of members' conversational interaction can*

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*reveal not only the organized, methodical practices they use but also the structure of preferred solutions to particular problems that arise in conversation.*

1. Research into the social organization of conversation has, as one type of product, the isolation of a "preference" operating for some domain(s) of conversation and the depiction of the organizational machinery through which that preference is effected. A variety of such preferences and their organizational instruments have been studied. It regularly turns out that various of them are concurrently relevant, concurrently applicable, and concurrently satisfied.

However, on some occasions in which some such two preferences appear to figure, the actually produced talk does not concurrently satisfy them.<sup>1</sup> Examination of such materials is particularly useful. They can, for example, give support to the proposal that *separate* preferences are involved, a possibility that the regularity of their concurrent satisfaction obscures. Furthermore, examination of such materials permits the extraction of a "second order" organization directed to an *integration* of preferences on occasions when their potential concurrent satisfiability is not realized.

The study of various such second order devices suggests that they do provide resources which organize adjustment of the concurrently applicable preferences when both are not satisfiable. What is more interesting is that the second order devices themselves represent *types* of solutions, a common one being to prefer satisfaction of one of the applicable preferences, the other being relaxed to such a point as will allow the preferred to be achieved: *The nonpreferred of the two is not suspended but "relaxed step by step."*

We have found this type of solution in a variety of domains in conversation,<sup>2</sup> operating on occasions when two concurrently relevant and applicable preferences that are usually concurrently satisfiable, do not happen to be. Here we shall address this problem and describe its solution on one of those domains—that of reference to persons by the use of reference forms.

2. Two preferences which we have found widely operative in conversation are those for "minimization" and for "recipient design." Each of these is relevant and applicable in the domain of "reference to persons." Each has an expression specific to that domain.

The specification of the general preference for minimization in the domain of reference to persons is of the following sort: *On occasions when reference is to be done, it should preferably be done with a single reference form.* The point is this: For reference to any person, there is a

large set of reference forms that can do the work of referring to that one (e.g., he, Joe, a guy, my uncle, someone, Harry's cousin, the dentist, the man who came to dinner, et cetera). Reference forms are combinable, and on some occasions are used in combination. But massively in conversation, references in reference occasions are accomplished by the use of a single reference form. [As in: (1) Did *Varda* tell you what happened this weekend? (2) Hey do you have a class with *Billy* this term? (3) *Someone* said at the end of the class "Could you pl-please bring in a microphone next time?" (4) If *Percy* goes with *Nixon* I'd sure like that.]<sup>3</sup> Thereby a preference for minimization is evidenced.

The specification of the general preference for recipient design in the domain of reference to persons is: *If they are possible, prefer recognitionals*. By "recognitionals" we intend, such reference forms as invite and allow a recipient to find, from some "this-referrer's-use-of-a-reference-form" on some "this-occasion-of-use," who, that recipient knows, is being referred to. By "if they are possible" we mean: If recipient may be supposed by speaker to know the one being referred to, and if recipient may suppose speaker to have so supposed. The speaker's supposition will be evidenced by, for example, use of a first name, first names being a basic sort for recognitionals. Several easily observable phenomena attest the operation of this preference. Having noted that first names are a basic sort for recognitionals, suffice it to remark that they are heavily used. The point is this: In view of the aforementioned availability of a large set of reference forms for any possible referent, nonrecognitional forms (and indeed minimized recognitional forms—e.g., "someone") are available to any speaker for any recipient about any referent. Against the background of those resources, the heavy use of first names evidences a preference for recognitionals. Furthermore, names are not only heavily used when known: they may be introduced for subsequent use when not already known to recipient, thereby arming him with the resources he may thereafter be supposed to have. The strength of the preference should therefore be appreciated to involve not only maximum exploitation of the use of recognitionals consistent with some current state of "if possible," but to involve as well an interest in expanding the scope of possibility. From recipients' point of view also, the preference is extendable. For instance: a nonrecognitional having been done, recipient may find from other resources provided in the talk that he might know the referred-to, while seeing that the speaker need not have supposed that he would. He may then seek to confirm his suspicion by offering the name or by asking for it, characteristically offering some basis for independently knowing the referred-to, as in the following:

- (5) B: Wh-what is yer friend's name.  
 B: Cuz my son lives in Sherman Oaks.  
 A: Uh Wenzel  
 B: (Mh-mh) no.  
 B: And uh,  
 B: If she uh  
 A: She lives on Hartzuk.  
 (1.6)  
 B: No I don' even know that street.

These and other such phenomena evidence the recipient design preference which, to repeat, is: If recognition is possible, try to achieve it.

From this last discussion it should be apparent that there are extensive resources which provide for the compatibility of the preferences with each other, i.e., which allow the two preferences to be concurrently satisfied. The compatibility can be appreciated from either preference's point of view: names are prototypical and ideal recognitionals in part because they are minimized reference forms as well; and the stock of minimized forms includes a set (of which names are only one sort) which are for use as recognitionals. (It should be noted that names do not have their uniqueness of reference serve to account for their recognitional usage—for they are, of course, not characteristically unique.)

Massive resources are provided by the organization of reference to persons through reference forms for references that satisfy both preferences concurrently, and those resources are overwhelmingly used.

3. Turning to incompatibility, that possibility is structurally recognized, sometimes engendered, and potentially restricted in size via a form available to intending referrers, which involves use of such a recognitional as a first name, with an upward intonational contour, followed by a brief pause. We shall call this form a "*try-marker*." Use of such a form is understood to be appropriate if a speaker anticipates that the recognitional form being used will on this occasion, for this recipient, possibly be inadequate for securing recognition. If recipient does recognize the referred-to, such success is to be asserted in the brief pause which the referrer will have left for such assertions. (An "uh huh" or a nod can be used to do this.) A recipient's failure to insert such an assertion in the pause evidences the failure that the try-marker evidenced suspicion of; recognition is supposed as absent, and in that case a second try is in order. A second try will be treated as in aid of recognition, and also obliges that its success be acknowledged or a third try is in order etcetera, until either they agree to give up or success is achieved.

- A: Ya still in the real estate business, Lawrence  
 B: Wah e' uh no my dear heartuh ya know Max Rickler  
 h (.5) hhh uh with whom I've been 'ssociated since  
 I've been out here in Brentwood// has had a series  
 of um--bad experiences uhh hhh I guess he calls it  
 a nervous breakdown. hhh  
 (6) A: Yeah ((at double slashes))  
 A: Yeah
- A: . . . well I was the only one other than than the uhm  
 tch Fords?, Uh Mrs. Holmes Ford? You know uh//  
 the the cellist?  
 (7) B: Oh yes. She's she's the cellist. ((at double slashes))  
 A: Yes  
 B: ye//s  
 A: Well she and her husband were there. . . .

The existence and common use of such a form obviously bears on a consideration of the concurrence of the preferences for minimization and recipient design, and it bears as well on a consideration of their relative strengths. Since the try-marker engenders a sequence, involving at least recipient's assertion of recognition (an occurrence which is in marked contrast to the usual use of recognitionals which do not have success asserted by recipient), and perhaps involving a multiplicity of reference forms as well, and since it generates a sequence whose desired outcome is "recognition," the try-marker is evidence for the preference for recognitionals being stronger than the preference for minimization. (Were minimization stronger, then, when recognition via a minimal recognitionals were doubtful, a minimal nonrecognitionals would be preferred.)

Note, however: the try-marker engendered sequence has a minimal form used first, even when its success is doubted, and when others are available for combination with it; and in each subsequent try also uses a single form; and between each try it provides a place for the assertion of recognition, the occurrence of which stops the sequence. Thereby, the try-marker evidences the nonsuspension of the preference for minimization, and that it is relaxed step by step in aid of recognition and only so far as the achievement of recognition of this referent by this recipient obliges.

Note, finally, that since the try-marker involves the use of an intonation contour applied to a reference form, and followed by a brief pause,

its use is not constructionally restricted to some particular recognitionals or to subsets of them; whatever recognitional is otherwise available can be try-marked, and thereby used by referrer to initiate a recognition search sequence.

An initial second-order device for coordinating an adjustment between locally incompatible preferences having been found, it is common to find others. Consider then the use of "who."

- (8) A: Hello?  
 B: 'Lo,  
 B: Is Shorty there,  
 A: Ooo jest- Who?  
 B: Eddy?  
 B: Woodward?  
 A: Oo jesta minnit.  
 (1.5)  
 A: Its fer you dear.

Note about it first, that it is done as a full turn by a reference recipient after an unmarked (without upward intonation or a pause) recognitional. More precisely, it occurs as a next turn on the completion of one in which a recognitional reference figures, which its use locates as unrecognized. Note further that its use engenders a sequence very similar to the one initiated by a try-marker, in which recognitionals are tried by referrer, one at a time, a pause between each for an assertion of recognition, and a stopping of the sequence by an evidencing of recognition by recipient. Then, the principle of a preference for recognition, with a relaxation but not suspension of minimization, is preserved when an incompatibility between the two, consequent on the use of a minimal recognitional that does not yield recognition, is noticed by recipient. A reconciling device is then available for initiation by referrer or by recipient.

Certainly there are differences between the referrer-initiated and the recipient-initiated recognition search sequences. The second try in the "who" engendered sequence is very commonly a repeat of the problematic reference form. The try-marker engendered sequence does not have that feature, is in that regard potentially shorter, as it is also by virtue of its first try potentially working. On the other hand, "who" engendered sequences very commonly occur as inserts into other sequences, and when they do, the assertion of recognition can be dispensed with in favor of recipient, on recognition, proceeding with his next move in the sequence his "who" interrupted. In that move he will characteristically display, but not assert, his recognition in a way alike to how he proceeds if no failures had been involved.

- B: I'll get some advance birthday cards. heh  
heh ((pause)) and uh Ehhh Oh Sibbi's sister  
had a baby boy.
- (9) A: Who?  
B: Sibbi's sister  
A: Oh really?

While there are differences, then, between the referrer-initiated and recipient-initiated recognition search sequences, both evidence the type of solution to a preference incompatibility which it was our aim here to notice and characterize.

## NOTES

1. For simplicity of exposition we consider such a case as involves just two preferences here.
2. See e.g., Harvey Sacks, Emanuel A. Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, "A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking in Conversation," *Language* (1974): 696-735.
3. These fragments and those cited subsequently are drawn from a large and varied collection of recorded ordinary conversations. For transcription conventions see Appendix I.