WHAT'S IN A 'NYEM'?

GAIL JEFFERSON

IN THIS brief paper I'll suggest a possible orderliness to what might be treated as merely sloppy talk; specifically, an orderliness to the occurrence of lax pronunciations of affirmative/negative tokens.

We can note that while 'strict' tokens for each member of the set, e.g. [yes or yeah] and [no] are quite acoustically distinct, one from the other, a range of 'lax' pronunciations of each can result in objects which are almost identical, one to the other, e.g. 'nuh' and 'yuh', 'neh' and 'yeh', etc. Also we can find sounds like 'mnyeh,' 'neuh,' 'nyem', etc., which are used for both affirmative and negative. The result is that the token itself may not be usable to decide which member of the set is being produced.

It appears that for the most part such tokens are no problem. On the occurrence of one of them, a hearer can decide which member of the set has been produced, and, as in the following fragment (line 5), can produce a sequentially appropriate next utterance.

```
(1)      [TG:3:r]  A telephone call
1        Ava:     You sound very far away.
2                        (0.7)
3        Bee:     I do:?
4        Ava:     →Ne:uh.
5        Bee:     nNo: I'm not,
```

In this instance, while 'Ne:uh' has acoustic features which might urge for a hearing of [No], its sequential features (that it occurs in a position in which an affirmation of a queried prior utterance is expectable)[1] provide for a hearing of [Yes]. Here, the local sequential context is used to decide which member of the set has been produced.

In general, it appears that resources other than the token itself can be used to make such a decision. For example, in the following fragment, the question 'Have you seen the new building yet?' itself provides resources; i.e., the new building is something to be seen, and time enough has elapsed to have done so. An appropriate answer is [Yes], the lax token ('Nyem,') is treated as [Yes], and a sequentially appropriate next utterance is produced (line 3). In this instance, the one who produced the token asserts that it was intended as [No]; i.e., that the token was mis-heard.

```
(2)      [FN]     Walking side by side
1        Pete:    Have you see the new building yet?
2        Dora:    →Nyem,
3        Pete:    What's it like.
4        Dora:    ((laughs)) I said no.
5        Pete:    ((laughing)) Oh I thought you said yes.
```

Now, given the possibility of wrong decisions, we can expect to find other procedures used on the occurrence of a lax token; procedures which orient to the possibility of mis-hearing.

So, for example, in the following fragment, a recipient of a lax token ('Mnuh.') produces an 'understanding check' (line 3).

(3)   [FN]   In an office building. Two men, Jason and Mike are walking together toward Jason's office which is right next door to the coffee room. Jason announces he is going to have a cup of coffee and enters the room. Mike continues on towards Jason's office. Then:

1   Jason: You want coffee?
2   Mike: →Mnuh.
3   Jason: Yes?
4   Mike: *No.*
5   Jason: O(h)h okay.

In Fragments 2 and 3 we find what turns out to be a common phenomenon: prior to the hearing problems we find lax tokens, and in the display and resolution of problems we find strict tokens. In general, it appears that lax tokens are used in the expectation of understanding, strict tokens in the environment of trouble.[2] Now, obviously, speakers expect to be understood. But the use of a token which is itself not decisive can be doing special work. It can be observably relying upon, and referring its recipient to, various events, facts, relevancies, etc., via which an understanding of the token can be achieved. Thus, a lax token can embed some bit of talk into a context common to these participants; can provide both that the talk is grounded in that context, and that various, perhaps disparate, events, facts, etc., are to be seen as cohesive, in that they form a context for this bit of talk.

Now, the contextual-embedding work of lax tokens is of particular interest when such tokens occur as answers to questions. If the asker of a question is now being informed that he has sufficient resources to achieve understanding, then he is being informed that he knows the answer to his own question. It is by knowing the answer that he can find it in the token. In interactional terms, such an object can be a 'complaint'; i.e., can be proposing that the answer is so obvious that the question need not have been asked (e.g., Fragment 1, '*Ne*:uh' can be proposing, 'Obviously you sound far away; I just said so.', Fragment 2, 'Nyem' can be proposing 'Obviously I haven't seen the building; if I had, I would have told you.', and Fragment 3, 'Mnuh' can be proposing, 'Obviously I don't want coffee; had I wanted some I would have joined you in the coffee room.').[3]

In the following fragment (an expansion of Fragment 1) we find a lax token ('Nyuh,' line 9) which may specifically be exploitative of the 'answer is obvious' feature, accomplice to the withholding of information implicated by the question 'Yer home?' (line 6) to which the token is produced as an answer.

(4)   [TG:3:r]
1   Ava: You sound very far a*w*ay.
2   (0.7)
3   Bee: I do:?
4   Ava: *Ne*:uh.
5   Bee: nNo: *I*'m not,
6   Ava: Yer home?
7   (.)
8   Ava: .hhh ⌈*Oh* muh⌉ mother wanduh know how's yer grandmothuh.
9   Bee: →   ⌊Nyuh, ⌋
10   Bee: .hhh *Uh*::, (0.3) *I* don'know I guess she's aw- she's
11   awright she went to thee uh:: *h*ospital again tih*d*a:y,

As it happens, the question is a touchy one. Caller (Bee) is not at home and is unwilling to

say where she is. The above Fragment and Fragment 5 (below) are heavily occupied with negotiations in which Called (Ava) tries to get the information without officially asking 'Where are you?' and Caller tries (successfully) to withhold it.

Now, the lax token might be relying upon and referring to a usual state of affairs, thus (mis)leading asker to find a [Yes]. There is a further possibility. For such a question as 'You home?' an appropriate next is, either an affirmative, or a negative plus the correct item.⁴ The fact that only a token occurs might (mis)lead asker to hear that member of the set which properly occurs alone; i.e. [Yes]. We do not see what asker makes of the token because, simul-taneous to it, asker abandons the question–answer sequence she herself had initiated, with an abrupt topic shift (line 8).

It appears, then, that both participants simultaneously attend to and find ways to deal with the touchy question; answerer by producing a possibly misleading token, asker by providing that the question is no longer sequentially implicative.

The matter comes up again, much later in the call, with a reissue of the question.⁵

```
(5)       [TG:21:r]
 1    Ava:     You ↑ ho:me?
 2                   (0.4)
 3    Bee:   →No,
 4    Ava:     Oh I didn't think so.
 5    Bee:     nNo,
 6                   (0.9)
 7    Bee:     You are,⌈h h u h h⌉ .hhhh⌉
 8    Ava:           ⌊Y'sounded⌋ too f ⌋ a⌈r a(way)⌉
 9    Bee:                                ⌊Ri:ght?h⌋
10    Ava:     =Yeh.=
11    Bee:     =See? hAh:ah'm doin somethin right t'ay finally, ⌈hh
12    Ava:                                                       ⌊(Mm)
13    Bee:     I finally said something right.
14                   (0.2)
15    Bee:     You are home. hmfff
16    Ava:     Yeh I believe so. ⌈Physically anyway.
17    Bee:                       ⌊°°hhm hhh°°
18    Bee:     Yea-a-h. °Not m'ntall(h)y(h)thoug(hh)h, °
19    Ava:     °No,° khhh!
20    Bee:     °hmhhh° .hh So yih gonna be arou:n this weekend?
21    Ava:     Uh::m. (0.3) Possibly.
```

Two sorts of things may be noted. For one, the answer is, now, done with a strict token ('No,' line 3). This may constitute a shift from lax to strict tokens in the environment of trouble; i.e., the reissued question, whatever else it is doing, displays that the lax token was not under-stood. And in such a circumstance in general, a strict token is an appropriate next. Thus, although this segment occurs much later in the conversation, it is technically produced as a 'next' to the earlier segment.⁶ Secondly, the answer is, still, done with just the token, where the appropriate form for a negative is, token plus correct item.

Now, while the prior segment's lax-token-only (Fragment 4, line 9) might be examined for its truth value and treated as akin to a lie, it might better be seen for its interactional delicacy; i.e., as an attempt to have the fact that answerer is not giving the information, not constitute a recognizable refusal to give it. (That is, had the lax token led asker to find a [Yes], then it would not be relevant for answerer to give the information; where, not being relevant, it is not being refused.) Similarly, while this next segment's strict-token-only might be appreciated as telling the truth, it might better be seen for its interactional toughness; i.e., as providing for the

relevance, and thus for the observable absence, of the information. (That is, the strict token [No] ought to be followed by answerer's providing the correct information, where, not providing it, answerer is recognizably refusing to tell.)

The foregoing sketch has suggested an orderliness to the occurrence of lax tokens for affirmation/negation, noting that the token itself may not be decisive for which member of the set is being produced, thus relying upon and referring its recipient to other materials for its understanding. The invocation of these other materials simultaneously embeds current talk in a context common to participants and knits together otherwise disparate events, facts, etc., as a common, relevant context. In this way, lax tokens can be one of the ways in which talk is constructed to be coherent and participant-specific. Further, that such tokens occur as answers to questions has as a particularly interesting feature that asker is informed that he knows the answer and can thus find it in the lax token. It was suggested that this feature can be deployed for rather delicate interactional work. In a range of ways, then, it has been suggested that 'sloppy pronunciation' is to be treated as a serious resource in the construction of interaction.

Notes

1. A standard, massively occurring sequence runs off just this way: a statement followed by a query followed by an affirmation of the queried statement. For a consideration of some such sequences, see Terasaki, 1976.
2. The shift from lax to strict forms can be found in another corpus of affirmative/negative tokens, objects like [can/can't], [would/wouldn't], etc., where a dropped or unstressed [t] brings the two members of the set very acoustically close.
3. In Fragments 2 and 3 it appears that what is 'obvious' to answerer is not at all obvious to asker; i.e., there may be conflicting uses of context. An account of how asker might have arrived at a [Yes] for Fragment 2 has been offered. In Fragment 3, it is possible that Mike is hearing in the question a proposal that he retrace his steps and get himself a cup of coffee, while Jason is making an offer which would have Mike continue on to the office while Jason brings coffee for both of them. Mike, then, producing an Nth declination to get himself coffee, Jason hearing the lax token as a response to the offer he has just now made.
4. Sacks talks about this phenomenon in several ways, for example, as the 'correction-invitation device' in which asker produces a candidate item 'and thereby solicits as its correction, another' (Sacks, 1964 and 1966). He also talks about ['No' plus] answers vis-a-vis an observable 'line of direction' evidenced in a prior question (Sacks, 1971).
5. We are interested in 'triggered' or 'touched-off' talk (see, e.g., Sacks, 1968 and Jefferson, 1977). We also have an interest in the 'poetics' of everyday talk (see, e.g., Sacks, 1972, lectures *passim*, and Jefferson, 1977(*a*)). These interests converge when we find talk triggered by, e.g., 'association'. The reissued query 'You ho:me?' may be an instance of this phenomenon. Specifically, the query may have been triggered by a prior utterance which contains 'your house' (line 02).

```
(h)      [TG:21:r]
01    Bee:     There's only one time that I r-hh .hh- thet they really
02             →looked happy wz the time they were etchor houhhse.
03    Ava:     →Oh:. Yea:h. Didn' they look ha:ppy. ⌈h o  h o⌉.ho:. ⌉
04    Bee:                                          ⌊hhh-huhh⌋.hhhh⌋ =
05    Bee:     =hhunh⌈hunhh .hh
06    Ava:           ⌊Tha' wz about ez happy ez they ge:t. eh-hu:h,
07    Bee:     .hh Really °(rea lly)°
08    Ava:                        [They have a prob'm.
09                      (0.4)
```

```
010   Bee:    Mm.
011           )o.5)
012   Ava:    Definite pro:b'm,
013   Bee:    We:ll, .hh
014           (0.3)
015   Bee:    I don'know.
  1   Ava:    →You ↑ ho:me?
```

Further, we find materials in which reference is being made to something, where the talk about it uses sounds of its name. So, for example, in the following fragment, someone referring to the actress Ann Boujeau, not having used her name, describes her as 'absolutely exquisite' (line 1).

```
(i)   [Schenkein:II:64]
  1   Ellen:  →. . .she is just absolutely ex⌈quisite.
  2   Lori:                                  ⌊(That was      )—
  3   Bill:   She's in that too?
  4   Ellen:  →No Ann Boujeau.
  5   Bill:   Oh I thought⌈uh
  6   Ellen:              ⌊a little French⌈actress.
  7   Lori:                               ⌊Mmhm.
```

We are interested in the acoustic relationship between 'Ann Boujeau' and 'absolutely'. Now, in the 'You ho:me?' fragment, Ava responds to Bee's 'at your house' utterance with an ironic laugh, 'ho ho ho:.' (line 03), the sounds of which bear a strong relationship to 'home.' In this case, while producing a sequentially appropriate response to a prior, a speaker is using sounds of something which has been triggered by that prior but which is not itself being talked of. (It is not being talked of, yet, but is awaiting an appropriate occasion, like the topical 'lapse' which occurs here). In this fragment, then, we may have access to the fact that, having been triggered in a just-prior utterance, a something is, technically observably, on someone's mind.

6. Note also the reference to the earlier segment's line 1, in this segment's line 8. Also, the intonation contour of this segment's line 1 (the heightened pitch and amplitude) may display an orientation to the earlier occurrence in the prior segment's line 6; i.e., may be produced as a next. This may be another instance of intonation patterning across some substantial distance mentioned in Jefferson, 1977.

References

JEFFERSON, G. 'Sequential Aspects of Storytelling in Conversation', in J. Schenkein (ed.), *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction*. Academic Press (in press).

—— 1977. 'Poetics of Ordinary Talk', a paper presented at the International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis. Boston University (June).

SACKS, H. 1964. Lecture, Tape 5, Side 2 (5 October).

—— 1966. Lecture 15 'retyped' (spring), pp. 8–9.

—— 1968. Lecture (17 April), p. 16.

—— 1971. Lecture, SS 158Y (24 May), pp. 10–12.

—— 1972. 'On Some Puns: With Some Intimations', in R. Shuy (ed.), *Monograph Series on Languages and Linguistics*. Georgetown University School of Languages and Linguistics (25 November).

TERASAKI, A. 1977. 'Announcement Sequences'. UCI Orangeback series.