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GROUP COHESION, TRUST AND SOLIDARITY

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SEQUENCE AND SOLIDARITY

Steven E. Clayman

ABSTRACT

This paper develops a conversation analytic perspective on social solidarity, focusing on the organized practices through which solidary relations are maintained within interaction. Previous research on preference organization is reviewed and synthesized, and it is demonstrated that this robust mode of organization tends to suppress discordant actions while promoting solidary actions. The suppression of discordant actions involves practices that: (1) mitigate such actions, as well as; (2) minimize the likelihood of their occurrence. Conversely, solidary actions tend to be: (1) not mitigated; and (2) delivered in ways that maximize the likelihood of their occurrence.

INTRODUCTION

This paper illuminates the phenomenon of social solidarity from a perspective that is not usually represented in theoretical discussions of this concept, namely that of conversation analysis (henceforth CA). It may at first seem that CA would have little to contribute to this area, given its concern with the fundamental organization of talk-in-interaction and its preference for naturalistic observation over formal theorizing. However, as Heritage (1984, pp. 265-280) has observed, a range of CA findings have clear implications for the problem of solidarity from the standpoint of how solidary relations are achieved and maintained within actual social situations in which persons are interactionally engaged (see also Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 38-41; Holtgraves, 1992). This

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represents a distinctive contribution to the understanding of this core sociological phenomenon. Most approaches to the problem of solidarity are fundamentally *motivational* in emphasis. Those in the Durkheimian/Parsonian tradition focus on shared values and internalized norms of conduct, while rational choice theorists emphasize calculations of expected utility, but both are primarily concerned with the question of what motivates or drives individuals to act in a minimally conflictual/maximally cooperative manner. CA, in contrast, offers what might be termed a *procedural approach* to the problem of social solidarity. Here motivational theorizing is subsidiary to examining what interactional participants actually do — identifying and analyzing the practices they engage in to avoid conflict and promote solidarity relations.

A similar emphasis on the procedural foundations of solidarity can also be found in Brown and Levinson's (1987) study of the language of politeness. However, the verbal strategies identified by Brown and Levinson operate exclusively at the level of the design of individual actions or turns at talk, whereas CA studies incorporate a concern with the level of *sequential organization*. Here the focus is on the design of sequences of action and of turns-within-sequences as they bear on the maintenance of solidarity. In a variety of ways, interactants exploit these sequential arrangements as resources for suppressing actions that are uncooperative, disaffiliative, or otherwise discordant, while systematically promoting actions that are relatively harmonious.

This paper will review a range of sequential phenomena that figure in this process. These phenomena have been analyzed under the rubric of *preference organization*, which is one of the most thoroughly researched areas within conversation analysis (Heritage, 1984, pp. 265–280; Schegloff, forthcoming) and refers to a conventionalized set of practices through which certain interactional outcomes are promoted or favored vis a vis other outcomes. While not all manifestations of preference organization are relevant to the accomplishment of solidarity, a substantial subset does have this import and forms the focus of the present analysis. Extending the analysis developed by Heritage (1984, pp. 265–280), the objective here to provide an up-to-date synthesis of the findings in this area, draw out the implications for solidarity, and explore the scope and generality of this organization of human interaction.

SEQUENTIAL OUTCOMES AND SOLIDARITY

While most actions produced within interaction are in some way consequential for what others may do in response, some actions are especially confining in that they establish the relevance of a narrow range of responses (Schegloff, forthcoming). Consider those sequence-initiating actions that call for a response

in either of two diametrically opposed forms. Assessments (e.g., “The dinner was wonderful”) may be followed by either agreement or disagreement; invitations (e.g., “Let’s have lunch on Thursday”) may be either accepted or declined; requests (e.g., “Pass the salt please”) may be either granted or refused; and so may offers, proposals, and the like.

These alternative responses differ in their implications for relations between the interactants, with the first alternative (agreement or acceptance) generally supportive of solidarity relations, while the second (disagreement or rejection) is discordant and threatening to solidarity (see Table 1).

This point may seem obvious, but it is worth dwelling for a moment on how it is so. The response alternatives differ, first, in terms of their cooperativeness. By accepting a request or agreeing with an assessment (that is, by producing one of the responses in the middle column of the table), one advances the course of action that has been initiated and thus collaborates with the agenda being pursued by the prior speaker; rejections and disagreements (grouped in the right column of the table) are by contrast distinctly uncooperative. The responses also differ in terms of their affiliativeness. While acceptances and agreements may be taken to indicate that the respondent is aligned with and has some positive regard for the prior speaker, rejections and disagreements are experienced as disaligning and hostile. In short, both on dimensions of cooperativeness and affiliativeness, the response alternatives have substantially different ramifications for relations between the interactants.

These ramifications can be understood in terms of different aspects of “face” identified by Erving Goffman (1967) and elaborated by Brown and Levinson (1987) as basic human desires characteristic of all competent adults. Within that framework, *negative face* refers to the desire to be free from imposition and to have one’s autonomy and prerogatives honored and respected. *Positive face* refers to the desire to have an favorable self-image that is validated by others. Against this backdrop, the cooperativeness and affiliativeness dimensions discussed above bear directly on negative and positive face, respectively. Insofar as acceptances and agreements are cooperative, they respect the prior speaker’s

Table 1.

Initial Action	Solidary Response	Discordant Response
assessment	agreement	disagreement
invitation	acceptance	declination
request	granting	refusal
offer	acceptance	rejection
proposal	acceptance	rejection

prerogatives and thus affirm that speaker's negative face. Insofar as acceptances and agreements are affiliative, they display positive regard for the prior speaker and thus affirm that speaker's positive face. Conversely, rejections and disagreements are threatening to both aspects of face.

Given the diametrically opposed ramifications of different sequential outcomes, these sequences of action constitute an ideal environment in which to investigate the achievement of solidarity in interaction. Such sequences facilitate a comparative analysis of how, within a common environment of action (e.g., following an assessment, or a request, etc.), subsequent face-affirming and face-threatening actions are managed and dealt with.

As it turns out, interactants do not treat these alternative response types equally; they tend to act in ways that systematically favor or promote the first type of response while disfavoring the second type of response. That is, they treat the first response type as *preferred* vis à vis the second. The term "preference" here has a technical meaning that differs from its vernacular usage. It refers not to the subjective feelings of the interactants, but to public forms of conduct that are recurrent and institutionalized, and that systematically favor certain interactional outcomes over others. The entire array of practices that differentiate among interactional outcomes is what is known as preference organization, and we shall examine these practices in turn.

RESPONSIVE ACTIONS: ASYMMETRICAL DESIGN

The alternative responses outlined above tend to be designed in systematically different ways. Agreements and acceptances ordinarily are produced *promptly* following the initiation and in a *straightforward* manner, whereas disagreements and rejections tend to be *delayed* and more *elaborate* or *complex* (Davidson, 1984, 1990; Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987; Wootton, 1981). To illustrate these differences, compare the following request sequences, the first involving acceptance and the second rejection. (A guide to the transcription symbols appears in the Appendix.)

(1) [Davidson, 1990, p. 150]

A: We:ll, will you help me [ou:t.

B: [I certainly wi:l.

(2) [Wootton, 1981, p. 63]

Ch: I want a'apple .hh two p.hh apples each

(1.6)

M: Half an apple each = I don't think we've got so many apples.

In excerpt 1, B accepts A's request for help in a brief and unqualified manner, and the acceptance begins a bit early, overlapping the last word of the request. In contrast, the rejection in excerpt 2 is not only delayed by a 1.6 second silence, but it is built as a partial rejection, and is followed by an account that explains and justifies the rejection.

A strikingly similar asymmetry may be seen in the following invitation sequences, involving an acceptance in excerpt 3 and a rejection in excerpt 4.

(3) [Heritage, 1984, pp. 265-266]

A: Why don't you come and see me
some[times

B: [I would like to

(4) [Heritage, 1984, p. 266]

1 A: Uh if you'd care to come over and visit

2 a little while this morning I'll give

3 you a cup of coffee.

4 B: hhh Well that's awfully sweet of you,

5 I don't think I can make it this morning

6 .hh uhm I'm running an ad in the paper

7 and-- and uh I have to stay near the phone.

Both sequences begin with an invitation to get together ("come and see me" in 3 and "come over and visit" in 4). Although the initial action is quite different from the first two examples -- involving an invitation rather than a request -- the responses exhibit a similar asymmetrical pattern. The acceptance in 3 is prompt and straightforward, while the rejection in 4 is delayed by an audible outbreath and an initial expression of appreciation (line 4), such that the rejection proper does not begin until line 5. When the rejection is finally delivered, it is qualified in various ways -- marked with pro forma uncertainty ("I don't think") and as conditional on the time of day ("this morning"). Finally, the rejection is followed by an account (lines 6-7) that provides an explicit rationale for the rejection.

In general, following the framework elaborated by Heritage (1984, pp. 266-267) and Levinson (1983, pp. 334-335), dispreferred responses such as disagreements and rejections tend to include the following features:

- *Delays*: silences preceding the delivery of the response; prefaces of various kinds; and insertion sequences which displace the response over a series of turns.

- *Prefaces*: discourse markers such as "uh" or "well"; token agreements, appreciations, and apologies; and other forms of hesitation.
- *Accounts*: explanations for the disagreement or rejection.
- *Disagreement/rejection is itself mitigated*: marked as uncertain, conditional, or indirect.

Asymmetries of this kind are by no means limited to distinctions between sequential responses, nor do they appear only for acts that are clearly affiliative/disaffiliative (cf., Sacks & Schegloff, 1979; Schegloff, 1979; Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977). Nevertheless, the relevance of preference organization for relational solidarity is highlighted by the fact that, when affiliation/disaffiliation is involved, the same asymmetrical design features recur across a wide variety of a sequence types (e.g. responses to assessments, requests, invitations, offers, proposals, and so on). Furthermore, in particular environments where the polarity of affiliation/disaffiliation is reversed, the pattern of asymmetry may be reversed as well. Although agreements are generally prompt and straightforward while disagreements tend to be delayed, mitigated, and accountable, agreeing/disagreeing responses to accusations (Atkinson & Drew, 1979) and self-deprecations (Pomerantz, 1984) have precisely the opposite design features. Here, where an agreement would be face-threatening, it is treated as the dispreferred alternative. The association between the design of the action and its and relational function is thus quite robust. But how do these asymmetries actually promote solidarity?

Mitigating Discordant Responses

Each of the design features associated with discordant responses work to soften or mitigate the force of that action. Consider first the phenomenon of *delay*. The generic practice of delaying a disagreement or rejection may be taken to indicate a modicum of "reluctance" to engage in that action. Of course, such delays may in fact be generated by any number of factors, but in this environment – just before some form of rejection – they are hearable as indicating a certain lack of enthusiasm for the action in progress (cf. Lerner, 2001). This plainly softens the threat to face embodied in the rejection.

Moreover, when the response is delayed by *prefatory talk*, the preface frequently involves a face-affirming display of "positive politeness" (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, when invitations are rejected, the rejection is often prefaced by an expression of appreciation to the prior speaker for having extended the invitation (see Example 4 above). Correspondingly, disagreements are often prefaced by token agreements (e.g. "Yes that's true, but..."). The

import of such prefaces is that, insofar as they are face-affirming, they counter-balance the ensuing face-threatening action and by being produced first are given temporal priority over it.

When *accounts* are offered to explain why a request, invitation, etc., is being rejected, such accounts overwhelmingly involve reference to circumstantial factors that prevent the speaker from accepting. Speakers thus present themselves as unable, rather than unwilling, to accept (Heritage, 1984, pp. 269–273). In Example 4 above, an invitation to get together is rejected on the grounds that the respondent has a newspaper ad running and so she "has to stay near the phone" (see also Example 2). Thus, out of all the possible reasons that could in principle explain a rejection, speakers select "no fault" accounts which propose that the rejection should not be taken as a sign of disregard toward the prior speaker.

Finally, insofar as the disagreement/rejection is itself *mitigated*, it is plainly reduced in force. In Example 2 above, the mother only partially rejects her child's request for apples, and in Example 4 the invitation to get together is marked as slightly uncertain ("I don't think...") and conditional on the time of day ("this morning").

These various practices combine to mitigate the threat to face and solidarity relations embodied in disagreements and rejections. Conversely, the absence of such features in agreements and acceptances means that these solidary actions are produced with greater forcefulness and impact.

Avoiding Discordant Responses

One particular design feature – delayed positioning – not only blunts the force of an uncooperative/disaffiliative response, but also facilitates the avoidance of such responses altogether. To see how this is so, consider that the asymmetries of preference organization are commonplace and institutionalized, so that interactants, having been exposed to these patterns since birth, have at least a tacit grasp of them. On this basis, interactants can anticipate the type of response that is forthcoming purely on the basis of its initial form. Thus, following the completion of an assessment, request, etc., any delay in responding – even mere silence – may be interpreted as the first move toward some form of disagreement/rejection. This pattern of inference is illustrated in the following excerpt from a telephone conversation, in which C's invitation (line 1) is followed by a 0.4 second silence (line 2).

(5) [Davidson, 1984, p. 105 (simplified)]

1 C: Well you can both sta:y.

- 2 (0.4)
3 C: Got plenty a' roo:m.

C deals with the silence (line 3) in a way that reveals her understanding of what it portends. She counters a possible reason for rejecting the invitation (i.e. insufficient room to accommodate houseguests) by reassuring her recipient that this is not a problem. In so doing, she shows that she hears the antecedent silence as indeed rejection-implicative, as foreshadowing a trouble or problem with the invitation that she then seeks to address. A similar pattern may be observed in the following – an initial invitation (line 1) receives only silence (line 2), which the recipient treats as rejection-implicative (line 3).

- (6) [Davidson, 1984, p. 105]

A: C'mon down he:re, = it's oka:y,

(0.2)

A: I got lotta stuff, = I got bee:r en stuff 'n

In short, delay in this sequential environment can be an early harbinger of interactional discord.

Furthermore, such delay provides the initiator of the sequence with what is, in effect, an opportunity space that can be used to forestall the incipient rejection/disagreement. The first speaker can, upon hearing a rejection-implicative delay, withdraw the initial action or revise it so as to make it more acceptable. In Examples 5 and 6 above, the party that extended the invitation subsequently elaborates it in such a way as to entice a reluctant recipient and thus push for acceptance. Similarly, the author of an assessment may, upon hearing a disagreement-implicative silence, back down from the assessment in a way that facilitates agreement:

- (7) [Pomerantz, 1984, p. 77]

1 B: ... an' that's not an awful lotta fruitcake

2 (1.0)

3 B: Course it is. A little piece goes a long way.

4 C: Well that's right.

Here a pessimistic assessment of the quantity of available fruitcake (line 1) is followed by a full one-second silence (line 2). This silence both foreshadows disagreement and provides the first speaker with an opportunity to revise her assessment so as to render it more optimistic (line 3). Consequently, what might have led to an expression of disagreement results instead in agreement (line 4).

In a variation on this theme of delay as providing an opportunity space, the initiator of the sequence may also respond to delay by "guessing" or collaboratively completing the rejection, in effect articulating much of the rejection before the recipient has a chance to do so (Lerner, 1996). Such a maneuver is disarming in its import. For instance, consider this telephone call in which Jennifer calls her friend's mother – Molly – and asks to rent the latter's garage (lines 1–5). Molly initially displays some confusion as to what is being requested, asking if the purpose is to actually live in her garage (line 9). When Jennifer confirms this (line 10), Molly hesitates before responding to the now-clarified request. She first pauses for 0.3 seconds (line 11), takes an audible inbreath, and produces just the beginning of a response ("It's just . . ." at line 12), but then trails off. After allowing a full 1.0 second silence to elapse, Jennifer interjects (line 14) in a way that collaboratively completes the core component of the rejection (adding a tag question to mark it as a guess): "not possible huh."

- (8) [Jennifer & Molly, p. 2]

1 Jennifer: I was just wondering y'know.hhh (0.3) could

2 (.) d'you think you might (.) wanna rent (.)

3 you know like the bottom part a yer: (.)

4 g'ra:ge like to me: fer a whi:le, a sump'm

5 like that.

6 (0.3)

7 Molly: Wu|l-

8 Jennifer: [I think [(

9 Molly: [Oh- you mean for] i'iving in: Jennifer?

10 Jennifer: Ye:ah

11 (0.3)

12 Molly: .hh It's just

13 (1.0)

14 Jennifer: no:t possible.=h[uh

15 Molly: [Ye:ah we- Tina tri:ed that one

16 time . . .

Here the sequence does contain a rejection of sorts, but that action has been fundamentally transformed and in effect detoxified. The rejection is articulated, not by the recipient, but by the initiator of the sequence herself. This in turn enables the recipient to deliver a subsequent response that is laminated as confirmatory and affiliative (beginning with "yeah" at line 15).

Thus, beyond softening the blow of a discordant response, delay also provides a systematic opportunity for its avoidance. Conversely, because solidary actions are done promptly, they are not easily forestalled. This structural asymmetry has clear implications for the aggregate realization of response types over time. The promptness of solidary responses systematically *maximizes* the likelihood of their occurrence, while the tendency to delay discordant responses *minimizes* the likelihood of their occurrence (Pomerantz, 1984). What might first have seemed like a small and insignificant detail concerning the precise timing of alternative responses turns out to have far-reaching ramifications for the tenor of interactants' relations with one another.

INITIATING ACTIONS: PRE-SEQUENCES AND OTHER PRELIMINARIES

Just as responses are geared to promote solidary relations, initiating actions are as well. Central to this process, once again, is the constellation of practices that lead up to a focal action. One such practice is the *pre-sequence*,¹ which contingently precedes and foreshadows actions (e.g. requests, invitations, etc.) that initiate a *core* or *base sequence*. Consider the following pre-invitation sequence.

(5) [Terasaki, 1976, p. 35]

A: Whatcha doin'

B: Nothin'.

A: Wanna drink?

Here the first speaker asks a question that is obviously not seeking information for its own sake, but is preliminary to some as-yet-unrealized action. Moreover, this preliminary character is recognized by the second speaker, who does not provide a literal answer to the question, but a "go ahead" response that prompts the first speaker to proceed to the main business at hand, which turns out to be an invitation.

Pre-sequences do not seem to be as commonplace as the asymmetrical response patterns discussed above – speakers sometimes choose to launch into an invitation or request "out of the blue," without such preparatory work. Nevertheless, when pre-sequences are employed, they are similarly geared to the minimization of discordant responses in the base sequence. Moreover, as we shall see, pre-sequences also provide for the avoidance of the base sequence altogether. This is significant because the entire sequence can strain the interactants' relationship – not only does the initiator face possible rejection,

but the respondent is to some degree imposed upon (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For simplicity, the ensuing discussion will focus mainly on preliminaries to base sequences involving requests and invitations, although other pre-sequences and other preliminary practices will also be considered.

Testing the Waters

Pre-sequences often begin with a question that makes reference to some matter that might affect the outcome of the base sequence, namely acceptance or rejection. Most often, these matters concern the same sort of circumstantial factors that are typically used in the accounts that accompany rejections (Heritage, 1984, pp. 278–279; Levinson, 1983, pp. 357–358). Thus, pre-invitations (like extract (5) above) often ask whether the respondent is busy or occupied; pre-requests often ask if the respondent has or is using the requested item; and so on.²

These preliminary questions can thus be seen as a way of "testing the waters" to determine in advance if the request or invitation will be accepted. If the preliminary receives a favorable response, the speaker ordinarily proceeds to the invitation or request, as in extract (5) above. Moreover, the speaker can do so with some confidence that, having ruled out the most common grounds for rejection, an acceptance will probably be forthcoming.

On the other hand, if the preliminary receives an unfavorable response, the invitation or request is generally abandoned, along with the base sequence that would otherwise follow. For example:

(6) [Sacks, 1992, p. 686]

Jack: How ya doin'. Say, what're ya doin'.

Judy: Well, we're going out. Why.

Jack: Oh, I was just gonna say come out an' come over here and talk to the people. But if you're going out you can't very well do that.

In response to Jack's pre-invitation query, Judy indicates that she will be unavailable. Jack then abandons the invitation, mentioning it only as a prior intention which has now been relinquished.

This type of outcome – abandonment of the base sequence altogether – is advantageous for both parties and relations between them. Not only does the respondent avoid having to reject the initiator outright, but the initiator avoids imposing upon the respondent with an unwanted invitation, these goals having been accomplished under the guise of merely (on the surface at least) "seeking

and providing information." Even respondents who are in fact available for the social event in question, but who simply don't wish to be involved, may be drawn to provide a forestalling response. Confronted with a pre-invitation query, such a respondent may well choose to fabricate a face-saving account (e.g. "I already have plans") rather than tell the truth and then be forced to resort to a less benign account when the actual invitation is extended (Heritage, 1984, pp. 278-279). Thus, there are clear incentives for both parties to make use of this sequence as a way of forestalling an exchange that could strain their relationship.

Pre-sequences and related practices can be exploited in more subtle ways to facilitate a solidary outcome. An initially forestalling response can be probed (e.g. "How long will you be out?") in pursuit of material that is more conducive to subsequent acceptance (Maynard, 1989, 1991). The design of the base sequence initiation may be subtly adjusted in light of the particulars of the pre-sequence response so as to make it more acceptable (Maynard, 1992). Finally, the initial utterance may be designedly opaque as to its preliminary character, so that any exploratory "testing of the waters" occurs off-the-record and is not accountable as such (Drew, 1984).

Reversing the Initiative

We have seen that pre-sequences are exploited to increase the likelihood that the base sequence will have an solidary outcome. Beyond this, pre-sequence initiations can engender another kind of interactional trajectory that also enhances solidarity. The recipient of a pre- may choose to take the initiative and do, or offer to do, what the pre- foreshadows. For instance, following a pre-request, a recipient may offer the requested item without waiting for the actual request to be delivered:

(7) [Merritt, 1976, pp. 324-325]

C: Do you have the pecan Danish today?

S: Yes we do. Would you like one of those?

C: Yes, please.

Here, what could have required four turns is reduced to three, there is a reversal of interactional initiative for the core action, and this action is transformed from a projected request to an offer.

This is a recurrent pattern in pre-request sequences, and it amounts to another order of preference operating at the level of sequence-initial actions – namely, a systematic preference for offers over requests (Sacks, 1992, pp. 685-692).

The realization of this preference plainly enhances solidarity. Because offers involve the transfer of a good or service from speaker to recipient rather than the reverse, they are generally less imposing on the recipient than requests. Moreover, an offer in this environment – after a pre-request rather than "out of the blue" – plainly has an increased likelihood of being accepted.

An even stronger reversal of initiative, resulting an even more compact trajectory, occurs when the recipient of a pre-request not only offers the requested item, but actually provides it then and there.

(8) [Merritt, 1976, p. 339]

C: Do you have coffee to go?

S: Cream and sugar? ((starts to pour))

In this case, the pre- is treated as standing on behalf of the request itself, and becomes functionally equivalent to a conventionally indirect – and hence less imposing – request (Brown & Levinson, 1987).³

Reversals of initiative also occur in invitation sequences, with preliminaries to invitations prompting self-invitations and proposals from recipients (Drew, 1984). Once again, an affiliative outcome is extremely likely, and is achieved without the first speaker having to impose on the recipient with a formal invitation.

Finally, preliminaries to bad news announcements can enable the recipient to guess what the news is (Schegloff, 1988; Maynard, 1996). Here the relational implications are somewhat different. In guessing correctly, the second speaker shows him- or herself to be "on the same wavelength" as the first speaker, and partially relieves that speaker of what is often a difficult and burdensome task.

It should now be clear that pre-sequences and related practices systematically favor solidary outcomes, and they do so in at least two basic ways. They enable anyone contemplating a request, invitation, etc. to determine in advance whether it is likely to be accepted, and then proceed with the projected course of action only if the prospects for acceptance are good. Pre-sequences also facilitate reversals of initiative by creating an environment where that becomes a safe and ultimately less imposing course of action.

LEVELS OF PREFERENCE: THE CASE OF QUESTION-ANSWER SEQUENCES

Having reviewed similar forms of preference organization operating across a wide range of action sequences, we turn now to consider one ubiquitous type of sequence in greater detail: namely, the question-answer sequence. Here,

although the ramifications for solidarity are less prominent (the questioner's positive face often is not at issue) such ramifications remain in terms of the questioner's negative face (i.e. the desire to have one's prerogatives respected). Thus, responses to questions may cooperate fully with the agenda established by the question and thus honor the questioner's prerogatives in launching the query; or responses may in varying degrees resist the questioner's agenda. These response alternatives are ordered by structures of preference operating at varying levels of scale.

Preference for Answers Over Non-Answers

At the most macro level is a preference that operates on the gross alternatives of answering vs. not answering. This preference favors answers over non-answers, and it is manifest in ways that parallel some of the practices outlined above. While answers are non-accountable – respondents rarely explain why they are answering a question – non-answers typically are explained and justified (Heritage, 1984, pp. 249–251; Clayman, 2001). For example, while M does not provide the information requested by J's query, she furnishes a warrant for her failure to do so:

(9) [Heritage, 1984, p. 250]

J: But the trai:n goes. Does th'train go o:n th'boa:t?

M: .h.h Ooh I've no idea:. She ha:sn't sai:d.

Moreover, the accounts offered in this context tend once again to be no-fault accounts that are minimally face-threatening to the questioner. While many accounts could in principle be offered for a refusal to answer, speakers tend to select accounts that cast themselves as unable rather than unwilling to answer, thereby implicitly validating the appropriateness of the question. In the previous example, the query concerns a third party's travel arrangements. M first declines to answer J's query on the grounds that she doesn't know the answer ('I've no idea'), and this lack of knowledge is in turn accounted for by reference to the fact that the traveler "hasn't said." She thus presents herself as willing in principle to cooperate with the agenda of the question – thereby validating the question as not inappropriate or overly intrusive – but unable to do so due to circumstances beyond her control.

Even in institutional environments characterized by pervasively adversarial relations between participants, a similar response pattern is maintained. In news interviews involving journalists and public figures, refusals to answer are

generally warranted by reference to exogenous circumstances (e.g. insufficient time, the delicacy of ongoing negotiations, etc.) rather than by attacking the legitimacy of the question or the motives of the questioner (Clayman, 2001). Such accounting practices, when used in the context of what might otherwise be a face-threatening refusal, are plainly disarming in their import.

Preference for a Particular Type of Answer

One step below the preference for answers over non-answers is a preference that operates on the distinction between different types or categories of answer. While there is no generic preference for answers of a given type, questions can be designed in such a way as to favor one type of answer vis a vis its alternatives. This is most easily seen for the case of yes/no questions, which can be polarized or "tilted" so as to invite either an affirmative or negative response (Heritage, forthcoming a, forthcoming b). Consider the following question, which was put to President Reagan during a press conference. After some prefatory remarks (lines 1–9), the journalist asks (at lines 10–11) whether it's time for Reagan to take "strong action . . . to get interest rates down."

(10) [Reagan, 19 Oct 1983, p. 28]

1 JRN: Mr. President, new figures out today show that
2 housing starts were down pretty sharply last month,
3 and the number of building permits went down for
4 the second month in a row. Analysts are saying to
5 this could mean the economic recovery is going to
6 level off, maybe kind of peter out next year.
7 And more people are becoming concerned about
8 high interest rates. And given the big deficits
9 being projected by your own administration,
10 isn't it time for some strong action by you to
11 get interest rates down?

This question strongly invites an affirmative answer, and it illustrates two distinct resources through which a preference of this sort can be encoded within a yes/no question. Consider, first, the prefatory remarks. The journalist leads up to the question by reporting a recent drop in housing starts and building permits (lines 1–4), noting that this may be a drag on the economy more generally (lines 4–6), and that interest rates are becoming a matter of widespread concern in light of projected budget deficits (lines 7–9). This prefatory material, taken

together, implies that there is indeed a compelling need to reduce interest rates and thus favors an affirmative answer to the question.

A similar preference is encoded in the linguistic form of the question itself (line 10). Notice that the question is negatively formulated – instead of asking “is it time for some strong action,” the journalist asks “isn’t it time . . .” Heritage (forthcoming b) has demonstrated that negative interrogatives strongly invite an affirmative answer. Other linguistic forms for designing questions also embody a pronounced tilt (eg., tag questions and b-event statements; see Heritage forthcoming a), but negative interrogatives do so in the strongest way. Indeed, such questions are often treated as if they were asserting an opinion rather than merely asking a question (Heritage, forthcoming b). For instance, President Clinton’s initial response (“I disagree with that”) to a negative interrogative (line 3) plainly treats it as an assertion to be disagreed with, rather than a question to be answered.

(11) [Clinton, 7 March 1997, Simplified]

- 1 IR: Well Mister President in your zeal (.) for
- 2 funds during the last campaign.hh
- 3 didn't you put the Vice President (.) and Maggie
- 4 and all the others in your (0.4) administration
- 5 top side in a very vulnerable position, hh
- 6 (0.5)

7 BC: I disagree with that. hh u- How are we vulnerable
8 because . . .

As Heritage (forthcoming a) has observed, for interviewees who choose to resist the tilt of the question and answer in some other way, strongly polarized questions establish a higher threshold of accountability. Interviewees thus “find themselves responding in a more defensive or self-justifying way than might otherwise be the case.”

Preference for Particular Lexical Items

At a still finer level of detail is a preference that bears on the specific lexical items contained in the response. Yes/no interrogatives embody a systematic preference for answers that actually contain either yes or no, or a roughly equivalent lexical token, within them (Raymond, 2000). This preference for what Raymond has termed “conforming answers” over “non-conforming answers” is apparent in a variety of ways, including the fact that responses

lacking either yes or no tend to be infrequent and are specifically warranted by the speaker in the course of responding.

Consider the following pair of exchanges, both taken from interactions between health visitors – British medical professionals who routinely visit homes with newborn children – and new mothers.

(12) [HV, 5A1]

HV: How about your breast(s) have they settled
do:wn [no:w.

M: [Yeah they 'ave no:w yeah.

(13) [HV, 1C1]

HV: Are your breasts alright.
(0.7)

M: They're fi:ne no:w I've stopped leaking (.) so:

Both questions concern the condition of the new mother’s breasts, and both are designed as yes/no questions, but they are responded to rather differently. While the first question receives a conforming response in the affirmative (note the turn-initial “yeah”), the second question receives a broadly affirmative but nonetheless non-conforming response. The differential uptake appears to be a consequence of the somewhat different manner in which the prior questions are formulated and the presuppositions that they embody as a consequence. While the first question inquires into the changing condition of the mother’s breasts (“have they settled down now”) and thus presupposes some prior difficulties, the second references only the current state of the mother’s breasts (“are your breasts alright”) and thus does not presuppose any prior difficulties. In the latter case, a simple yes-type conforming response could foster the mistaken impression that the mother has had no problem whatsoever with her breasts. To counteract the presuppositional loading of the latter question, the mother offers a non-conforming response that portrays a trajectory of improvement and thus alludes to earlier difficulties.

As Raymond (2000) has demonstrated, non-conforming responses embody a subtle but very real challenge to the “definition of the situation” that is engaged or presupposed by the question. Responses of this sort are not entered into casually or haphazardly; they are done only “for cause,” and they are designed in such a way as to specifically warrant or justify the departure from conformity. In summary, questions exert pressure for a response that takes a specific and identifiable form, and this pressure can occur at varying levels of scale – not only for answers over non-answers, but also for answers that perform a

particular action (i.e. affirmation) over alternative actions, and even for answers that contain particular lexical items (i.e. yes or no) over those that do not. While the first order of preference is engaged by the production of a question *per se*, the second and third orders of preference are engaged by the specific manner in which the question is formulated and in particular the lexical and grammatical resources employed within it. Questions thus initiate a course of action with multifaceted constraints on what should be done in response. Correspondingly, responses that resist one or more of these constraints – and are thus uncooperative and threatening to solidarity – are treated as accountable and tend to be explicitly or implicitly justified, sometimes in ways that validate the legitimacy of the question and the manner in which it was framed. Uncooperative responses thus tend to be managed in such a way as to preserve solidarity relations between the interactants.

GENERALITY

The various practices underlying preference organization are recurrent and deeply institutionalized features of interactional conduct. A wide range of evidence supports this conclusion. Consider, first, the fact that strikingly similar practices are found across a large number of diverse sequence types, including assessments (Pomerantz, 1984), invitations (Drew, 1984), requests, offers, and proposals (Davidson, 1984, 1990). Moreover, such patterns do not appear to be particularly sensitive to status differences among interactants. Thus, when parents reject the requests of their two year old children, they tend to employ the same mitigating features as adults do when rejecting one another (although childrens' subsequent persistence tends to elicit more forceful rejections from parents; see Wootton, 1981).

Preference structures are not only robust; they are also robustly linked to solidarity outcomes. As noted earlier, in particular environments where the implications for solidarity are reversed, the organization of preference may be reversed as well. Thus, while assessments generally prefer agreement over disagreement, when the assessment involves a self-deprecation, disagreement becomes the face-affirming response and it is treated as preferred over agreement (Pomerantz, 1984). Similarly, following a complaint or accusation, denial of wrongdoing – a form of disagreement – becomes the solidarity response and is generally preferred over an admission (Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Garcia, 1991), although there appear to be additional complexities in accusatory contexts (Dersley & Wootton, 2000).⁴

Of course, disagreeing and rejecting responses become more blunt and unmitigated in the context of an ongoing argument (Goodwin, 1983, 1990; Kotthoff,

1993). Some have suggested that preference structures are actually reversed in argumentative contexts (Kotthoff, 1993). However, given that arguments tend to be bounded and relatively short-lived episodes within interaction, it may be more accurate to say that an episode is constituted as an argumentative departure from "normal" interaction by breaching the institutionalized asymmetries of preference organization (cf. Dersley & Wootton, 2000).

Similar patterns have been found beyond the domain of ordinary conversation, although with some variations. Preference structures are sensitive to specialized contingencies found in some institutional contexts. Thus, broadcast news interviewers cannot agree with their guests without departing from the turn taking system for news interviews (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991) and undermining the neutralistic posture that they are professionally obligated to maintain (Clayman, 1988, 1992), and interviewer silence is not taken as a harbinger of disagreement (see also Atkinson, 1992 on arbitrators in small claims court). Similarly, in various gatekeeping environments – such as intake interviews at people-processing organizations – expressions of agreement may implicate a gatekeeping decision and may thus be suppressed (Lazarton, 1997). Granting these variations, preference structures strikingly similar to those in ordinary conversation have been documented in contexts ranging from courts of law (Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Garcia, 1991) to scientific laboratories and conferences (Jacoby, 1998; Lynch, 1985).

Such patterns can also be found in public speaking contexts in which a single speaker interacts with a mass audience. Collective episodes of applause and booing have asymmetrical design features that parallel those of agreement/disagreement, acceptance/rejection, and so on (Atkinson, 1984; Clayman, 1993; Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986). Farther afield, preference structures have even been found in written discourse – in the letters written by scientists to one another, agreements and disagreements are similarly asymmetrical (Mulkey, 1985).

The cultural boundaries of preference organization are somewhat more difficult to assess. Research has thus far been limited mainly to data drawn from the United States and Britain. However, no substantial differences have been detected between these two cultures. Moreover, the few studies that probe beyond the Anglo-American context find substantial similarities. Thus, in a study of Swedish conversations, Lindstrom (1997) demonstrates that a particular discourse marker – a distinctively-intoned *ja* – functions as a common preface to rejection, hearably projects rejection, and facilitates avoidance of that action. All of this closely parallels the organization of rejecting responses among English speakers. More cross-language and cross-cultural research is needed to ascertain the true scope of preference organization and to identify possible adaptations to varying linguistic and cultural contexts.

The form of organization described in this paper does not appear to be restricted to interactions involving human beings. Behavior patterns formally similar to at least some aspects of preference organization have long been described in studies of animal communication. Ethologists and behavioral ecologists have noted the tendency, across a wide range of species, for the behavioral antecedents of aggressive acts to become ritualized and/or conventionalized in ways that render them more conspicuous and hence effective at conveying in advance – whether truthfully or not – an intention to attack (eg., Daanje, 1950; Moynihan, 1955; Smith, 1977, Chap. 11). Because animals are attentive to even quite subtle “intention movements” in others and adjust their behavior accordingly (Davis, 1975), such movements have clear implications for the avoidance of conflict (Maynard Smith, 1974; Maynard Smith & Price, 1973). Since physical aggression is intrinsically risky to both aggressors and their opponents – injury is always a possibility – ritualized or conventionalized pre-aggressive behaviors reduce this risk by first intimidating the opponent and thus increasing the likelihood of an appeasing response that forestalls further aggression. Displays of threat and conciliation thus stand on behalf of outright conflict and provide for its avoidance.

When potential combatants are conspecifics and members of the same social group, there are further ramifications for group cohesion. Such behavior patterns represent a generic and effective solution to a fundamental problem confronted by any social group: how to maintain the cohesion and persistence of the group and its constituent social relationships in the face of potentially conflictual encounters between group members. Since even mildly competitive exchanges have the potential to escalate into relationally damaging and at times deadly conflict (Luckenbill, 1977), the integrity and persistence of the group is always at risk. Given that the problem is so widespread, it is perhaps not surprising to find a correspondingly widespread solution in parallel organizations of interaction across social species.⁵

CONCLUSION

Preference organization does not offer a theory of the motivations that drive interactants to act in a solitary manner. Nevertheless, it does embody, in its own way, a theory of solidarity, albeit one whose frame of reference lies squarely within interaction itself. It offers an empirically based account of the organizational features of interaction that systematically promote solitary actions while suppressing discordant ones. It describes the asymmetrical properties of cooperative/affiliative actions vs. uncooperative/disaffiliative actions, demonstrates that these asymmetries are produced and oriented to by

interactants themselves, and shows how interactants exploit these asymmetries in a way that maximizes the occurrence of the former type of action relative to the latter. In short, it is a mode of social organization that operates within interaction and is implicated in the real-time process by which solitary relations are achieved and maintained.

For those seeking a further explanation of the existence of preference organization itself, a rational choice framework may prove useful, insofar as it leads to consideration of the expected utility of engaging in the practices described in this paper. Indeed, the initial origins of preference organization may be explicable in terms of varying incentives associated with relationally consequential courses of action. However, a purely instrumentalist account will ultimately be insufficient, for it overlooks the extent to which the practices associated with preference organization are thoroughly institutionalized and in some respects normative in character. Indeed, the effective implementation of these practices would seem to require such institutionalization. The practices in question are finely coordinated, with interactants inferring one another's intentions on the basis of extremely minimal fragments of behavior – often just the initial trace of an action in progress – and adjusting their own subsequent behaviors accordingly. None of this would be possible without a well-established framework of interactional conventions on which to base such inferences. Accordingly, preference organization is not properly understood as the aggregate result of an array of individual calculated decisions; its asymmetries are institutionalized methods of interacting that are oriented to by interactants themselves and are centrally implicated in the process by which interactants produce these selfsame asymmetries and deploy them in pursuit of solidarity.

NOTES

1. Studies of pre-sequences and allied practices include Atkinson and Drew (1979), Sacks (1974, 1992, pp. 685–692), Schegloff (1980, 1988), and Terasaki (1976). Pre-sequences have also been analyzed in relation to conversational openings (Schegloff, 1968) and closings (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). For other sequence-preliminary practices, see Drew (1984) and Maynard (1989, 1991, 1992, 1996).
2. In a somewhat different vein, pre-announcements often seek to determine whether the recipient has heard some items of news.
3. Several analysts have noted the close relationship between pre-sequences and conventional indirectness (Heringer, 1997; Levinson, 1983, pp. 356–364; Schegloff, 1988).
4. Other departures from the usual pattern for agreement/disagreement have been documented for responses to compliments (Pomerantz, 1978), responses attempts to huss bad news (Schegloff, 1988), and responses in argumentative environments (Goodwin, 1983, 1990, Chap. 7; Kotthoff, 1993).

5. Such parallels do not necessarily mean that preference organization among humans is neurologically based or that it necessarily evolved from antecedents among evolutionary ancestors (although this is a possibility). My agnosticism is signalled by my use of both the biological concept of "ritualization" and the sociological concept of "conventionalization" in the previous paragraph. The claim here is merely that preference organization, whatever its origins, is an effective and recurrent solution to a very general problem of organized social life.

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APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPT NOTATIONAL CONVENTIONS

Interaction excerpts were transcribed with notational conventions adapted from those used in conversation analysis. The transcripts capture the details of speech and audience behavior, although the excerpts in this paper have been slightly simplified to enhance readability. Below is a guide to the transcription symbols used here; for a more detailed exposition, see Atkinson and Heritage (1984, pp. ix-xvi).

- A: That's my view. Underlined items were markedly stressed.
- A: That's my:: view. Colon(s) indicate the prior sound was prolonged.
- A: THAT'S my view. Capital letters indicate increased volume.
- A: That's my- my view. A hyphen denotes a glottal stop or "cut-off" of sound.
- A: .hhh That's my view. Strings of "h" mark audible breathing. The longer the string, the longer the breath.
- A: hhhh At least for now. A period preceding denotes inbreath; no period denotes outbreath.
- A: That's (.) my view. Numbers in parentheses denote elapsed silence in tenths of seconds; a period denotes a micropause of less than 0.2 seconds.
- B: But should it be? Equal signs indicate that one event followed the other with no intervening silence.
- A: That's [my view.] Brackets mark the onset and termination of simultaneous activities.
- B: [But shou]ld it Open parentheses indicate transcriber's uncertainty as to what was said.
- A: That's my () Words in parentheses represent a best guess as to what was said.
- At (least for now).