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Grammar in Everyday Talk

Building Responsive Actions

Sandra A. Thompson, Barbara A. Fox, and Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen

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Grammar in Everyday Talk

Drawing on everyday telephone and video interactions, this book surveys how English speakers use grammar to formulate responses in ordinary conversation. The authors show that speakers build their responses in a variety of ways: the responses can be longer or shorter, repetitive or not, and can be uttered with different intonational contours. Focusing on four sequence types: responses to questions ("What time are we leaving?" – "Seven"), responses to informings ("The May Company are sure having a big sale" – "Are they?"), responses to assessments ("Track walking is so boring. Even with headphones" – "It is"), and responses to requests ("Please don't tell Adeline" – "Oh no I won't say anything"), they argue that an interactional approach holds the key to explaining why some types of utterances in English conversation seem to have something 'missing' and others seem overly wordy.

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For Mack and Taylor and Rainer

Figures

2.1	Mary looking at table	*page* 24
3.1	Lines 11–12 of (3.23) "Harry was gonna play"	67
3.2	Lines 1 + 3 of (3.24) "Bud just left"	68
3.3	Lines 8 + 10 of (3.25) "Bud had to work Friday"	70
3.4	Lines 15–16 of (3.26a) "Playing golf"	72
3.5	Lines 5 + 8 of (3.26b) "Play golf Thursday"	73
3.6	Lines 3–4 of (3.27) "Marlin fishing"	74
3.7	Lines 4, 5, 7 of (3.28) "Bud just left 3"	76
3.8	Lines 8 + 10 of (3.30) "Saucer eyes"	78
3.9	Line 5 of (3.31) "Cigars"	79
3.10	Lines 1 + 3 of (3.54) "Working"	105
3.11	Lines 4–5 of (3.55) "Trip to Italy"	107
3.12	Lines 6 + 9 of (3.59) "Staff nursing"	112
4.1	Diagram of four facets of responsivity in assessing	146
4.2	Diagram of five facets of responsivity in assessing	149
4.3	Donna: *although track walking is s:o boring* (line 1 of 4.10)	156
4.4	Donna: *EVEN with headphones* (line 5 of 4.10)	156
4.5	Michelle: *it is* (line 7 of 4.10)	157
4.6	Shane: *°this's very good (Viv)°* (line 1 of 4.13)	161
4.7	Michael: *it is* (line 5 of 4.13)	162
4.8	Michael: *where'd you shop* (line 1 of 4.14)	163
4.9	Shane, leaning past Nancy: *we went to Alpha Beta* (line 3 of 4.14)	164
4.10	Nancy: *↑yah they ↑a:re* (line 7 of 4.14)	165
4.11	Maureen: turns to poster (4.16)	170
4.12	Terry: *that's my favorite poster right there* (line 1 of 4.16)	170
4.13	Terry: *>but I think< it's coo:l.* (line 13 of 4.16)	171
4.14	Michelle: *it (was) just ↑pretty cool* (line 15 of 4.18)	174
4.15	Laura: *that is cool* (line 16 of 4.18)	175
4.16	Luke: *they're not sweet* (line 7 of 4.26)	186
4.17	Agency in three grammatical formats	190
4.18	Lucy's *mhm* (line 28 of 4.37)	204

5.1 Early onset of line 3 in Extract (5.18) 228
5.2 Upgraded prosody in line 15 of Extract (5.17) 229
5.3 Delayed onset of line 9 in Extract (5.21) 230
5.4 Prosodic upgrading in line 36 of Extract (5.22) 232
5.5 Embodied post-completion stance marker at the end of line 36 in Extract (5.22) 233
5.6 Well-timed onset of line 5 in Extract (5.37) 249
5.7 Recognitional onset of line 10 in Extract (5.37) 249
6.1 Auer's structural latencies 304

Tables

1.1 Types of initiating and responsive action discussed in this book *page* 4
1.2 Alternative formats for 'plus'-action responsive turns 11
2.1 Response types for QWI sequences 17
2.2 Continuum of trouble indexed by answers to Specifying Questions 37
2.3 Response types for Telling Questions 38
3.1 Response types for Informing sequences 53
3.2 Informing responses most and least like repair initiation 62
3.3 Minimal Clausal responses broadly categorized by syntactic order and intonation 92
3.4 'Simple' Minimal Clausal responses, broadly categorized by syntactic order and intonation 103
3.5 Comparison of rising and falling Minimal Clausal responses with and without *oh*-prefacing 108
3.6 Response types for informing sequences 114
3.7 Continuum from highly inferential response to candidate understanding 129
3.8 Syntactic-prosodic formats for Minimal Clausal responses and Expanded Clausal responses 136
4.1 Response types for our two sequential environments involving assessments 140
4.2 Michelle's second assessment with downgraded prosody 157
4.3 Kyle's second assessment with downgraded prosody 159
4.4 Michael's second assessment with downgraded prosody 163
4.5 Nancy's second assessment with minimally upgraded prosody 164
4.6 Stacy's second assessment with upgraded prosody 169
4.7 Monica's second assessment with upgraded prosody 173
4.8 Lottie's second assessment with wider pitch range than Emma's first assessment 182
4.9 Grammatical formats for agreeing second assessments in relationship to their first assessments 194

5.1 Response forms for request sequences 223
5.2 Request response types and their frequencies 224
5.3 Syntactic type of request with complying Particle responses 224
5.4 Syntactic type of request with Minimal Clausal responses 239
5.5 Syntactic type of request with Expanded Clausal responses 244
5.6 Syntactic type of request with Graded Clausal responses 247
5.7 Syntactic type of request with Unrelated Clausal responses 253
5.8 Request response forms and their affordances 257
5.9 Requests made with strong claims to deontic rights and their complying responses 265
5.10 Requests made with weak claims to deontic rights and their complying responses 265
6.1 Norms for response type across sequences ('plus'-action turns only) 273
6.2 Alternative formats for responsive turns ('plus'-action only) 274
6.3 Lexico-syntactic and semantic–pragmatic dependency of response types 277
6.4 Types of initiating and responsive action discussed in Chapters 2–5 288
6.5 Response-type alternatives for each sequence type 289
6.6 'Paradigm' of possible response types for information-seeking QWIs 291
6.7 'Paradigm' of possible response types for Informings 291
6.8 'Paradigm' of possible response types for first Assessments 292
6.9 'Paradigm' of possible response types for Requests 292
6.10 Series of responses to a Telling QWI in enchronic time (with line numbers) 294
6.11 Series of responses to a first Assessment in enchronic time (with line numbers) 295
6.12 Series of responses to an Informing in enchronic time (with line numbers) 296
6.13 Series of responses to a Request in enchronic time (with line numbers) 297
6.14 Formats documented for preferred 'plus' (+) and dispreferred 'minus' (−) responsive actions 305

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Contents

List of figures *page* x
List of tables xii
Acknowledgements xiv

1 Introduction 1

2 Responses in information-seeking sequences with 'Question-word Interrogatives' 16

3 Responses in informing sequences 50

4 Sequences with assessment responses 139

5 Responses in request-for-action sequences 215

6 Conclusions 271

Appendix: Transcription symbols 318
Bibliography 321
Index 337

1 Introduction

1. Background for this study

In research on talk-in-interaction, it has long been acknowledged that interactional data reveal "a deep connection between what has been traditionally viewed as the 'internal' structure of a language – the distinct grammatical forms of individual sentences or turns, for example – and its use in sequences of action" (Raymond 2003: 941). In other words, there is an increasing body of evidence showing that the way a first utterance is grammatically built makes a crucial contribution to what kind of action it is understood to be implementing and consequently to what kind of response is expected next (Curl 2006; Curl and Drew 2008; Drew and Holt 1988; Couper-Kuhlen 2007; Couper-Kuhlen *et al.* 2014; Freed 1994; Freese and Maynard 1998; Heinemann 2006; Heritage 2012a; Kärkkäinen and Keisanen 2012; Lindström 2005; Selting 1992, 1996; Vinkhuyzen and Syzmanski 2005; Weber 1993; for a summary, see Lee 2013). While much work has been done on the grammar of **initiating** actions, in this book, we focus on **responsive** actions in English.

Our study was originally inspired by an inquiry into the interactional differences between 'short' (e.g., *Germany*) and 'long' (e.g., *he was from Germany*) utterances as responses to 'WH-questions' (Fox and Thompson 2010).[1] Coming from discourse-functional linguistics, we were concerned about the inclination within much of linguistics to approach differences such as these mechanically, in terms of the notion of 'ellipsis,' with the shorter form being thought of as a 'truncated version of,' or as 'derived from,' the longer form (as discussed further below). Fox and Thompson's study of responses to WH-questions in actual interactions proposed an alternative account in terms of Schegloff's (1996a) notion of a 'positionally sensitive grammar.'

From there, the three of us became interested in how a positionally sensitive grammar might explain the grammatical differences among formats responding to other initiating actions. Here we were also inspired by the groundbreaking work of Heritage (1984, 1998, 2002), Pomerantz (1984), and Raymond (2003)

[1] A more comprehensive treatment of that issue appears as Chapter 2 of this book.

into the grammatical forms of responsive actions in English. Heritage analyzed the work of the ubiquitous English *oh* and *oh*-prefaced response forms, Pomerantz revealed the pervasive role of preference in sequence organization, and Raymond, introducing the notion of type conformity in responses to polar interrogatives, demonstrated the relationship between polar interrogatives and the grammatical formats they mobilize in their responses.

Building on this and other recent research into the relationships between initiating actions and the forms and sequential implications of responses in languages of the world (see especially Sorjonen 2001a),[2] this book specifically explores the morphosyntactic and prosodic design of responsive actions in four sequential environments:

(a) Information-seeking sequences (initiated by question-word (QW-) interrogatives)
(b) Informing sequences
(c) Sequences involving assessments
(d) Request sequences

Why precisely these four sequence types? Bühler (2011 [1934]) suggests three basic linguistic functions: (i) representation, (ii) steering or appeal, and (iii) expression; we can understand these as roughly relating to epistemicity, deontricity, and evaluation. Jakobsen (1960) and Searle (1976) appeal to similar sets of three linguistic functions, and Tomasello (2008: 84–88) postulates three elementary motivations for human communication: (i) Informing, (ii) Sharing, and (iii) Requesting. The four sequence types considered in this book, then, can be argued to be initiated by actions that are among the most central for human sociality. Our 'Information-seeking' and 'Informing' sequences correspond to Tomasello's (i) 'Informing'; our 'Assessing' sequences are related to his (ii) 'Sharing'; and our 'Requesting' sequences to his (iii) 'Requesting.'[3] With our examination of these four sequence types, we thus hope to have covered some of the most basic response types in human languages.

2. What is a 'response'?

Responses, as we are conceptualizing them, are 'positionally sensitive' (Schegloff 1979, 1996a, 1996b, 2007), and sequence-specific. That is, they

[2] Other important research on the design of responsive actions includes Ford (2001a), Ford *et al.* (2004), Goodwin and Goodwin (1987, 1992), Heritage and Raymond (2005), Local (1996), Ogden (2006), Raymond (2000), Heritage (1998), Levinson (1983), and Schegloff (2007).

[3] We suggest that it is no accident that Sorjonen (2001a), the groundbreaking study of responsive actions in conversation, in discussing the Finnish responsive particles *joo* and *niin*, considers their use in precisely these four sequence types.

are responsive to a specific initiating action.[4] But responsive actions, in the understanding adopted here, are not simply actions occurring in next position. Responsive actions have in common that they first and most importantly take up the action of an initiating action, and second that they are 'typed,' i.e., they are specific to a particular type of initiating action that they are understood to address (Schegloff 2007).[5,6]

There are at least two types of action occurring in next position that do not qualify as responsive in the sense used in this book. For one, the action of passing the floor, e.g., remaining silent or producing a continuer, subsequent to an initiating action is **not** a sequence-specific responsive action, but rather one that could be done at many sequential junctures. Similarly, the action of initiating repair in next position is not a response in our understanding. Like a floor pass, repair initiation is not specific to a particular type of initiating action, but is instead omnirelevant and can be implemented at any point in time (Schegloff 1982, 2007).[7]

Responses, as we understand them, are also distinct from reactions. While the latter can be wholly non-verbal and need not come at transition relevance points, responsive actions come in slots especially designed for them. Although responses may be produced in partial overlap with the turn they are directed to, the overlap is typically of the 'recognitional' or 'terminal' sort (Jefferson 1984). In other words, in order to respond, a participant must have ascribed some action to a prior turn, even if that ascription is only a best guess. 'Responses' that are in full overlap with initiating turns are accordingly not possible.[8] We have framed our study, then, in terms of the real-time choices faced by any recipient to an initiating action, "What are my options for responding to this action?" With sequences as the vehicle for getting an activity accomplished, for each initiating action, a recipient can either do (a) a next action that "embodies or favors furthering or the accomplishment of the activity" (a 'plus'-action) or (b) a next action which does not (a 'minus'-action). (Schegloff 2007: 59ff.) Table 1.1

[4] With one exception, responses can come in either 2nd or 3rd position, as we will discuss in the chapters to follow.

[5] We therefore exclude here discussion of 'response tokens' that are treated without attention to sequence-specificity (as in, e.g., treatments of German *jaja* by Golato and Fagyal (2008) and (2011), of English *no no no* by Stivers (2004), or of Danish *nåja* by Emmertsen and Heinemann (2010)).

[6] An exception is assessment responses in extended tellings; we take these up in Chapter 4 (Section 3), where they are compared to sequence-typed assessment responses, i.e., second-assessment responses to first assessments.

[7] Enfield (2011: 286) thus has a broader understanding of 'Response' than ours: 'Response' for him "has a more general sense, i.e., that which follows and is occasioned by, and relevant to, something prior."

[8] As we will see in Chapter 4, the situation is again somewhat different for assessing first actions. Here agreeing second assessments are expectable **before** the TRP and may even come before a recognition point has been reached (Goodwin and Goodwin 1992).

Table 1.1. *Types of initiating and responsive action discussed in this book*

	Responsive action	
Initiating action	'plus' response	'minus' response
Information-seeking (WH)	Answering	Non-answering
Informing	Treats informing as (partially) unknown	Treats informing as already known
Assessing	Agreeing	Disagreeing
Requesting	Complying	Non-complying

summarizes the initiating and responsive actions for the sequences examined in this book.

Responses can of course take the form of bodily–visual movements, including, e.g., nods, facial gestures, and pointing to or retrieving an object, but because of the nature of our investigation into the grammatical formats[9] of responsive actions, in this book we will not be considering responses that are done solely with bodily–visual means.[10] However, our analyses do include such bodily–visual movements that **complement** vocal responses (see Ruusuvuori and Peräkylä (2009) on story assessments, M.H. Goodwin (2006) on directive responses, and Ford *et al.* (2013)).

On the whole, in establishing our collection of responses we have focused on the first turn-constructional unit of a next turn.[11] On occasion this turn unit is through-produced with a preface, e.g., *oh, well*, or the like, in which case we have acknowledged the import of this preface in our discussion. Cases in which a turn-initial *oh, well*, or the like, is not through-produced but forms a prosodic unit of its own we have tracked and dealt with separately.

We can think of the relationship between the form of an initiating action and the form of a response to it in terms of a variety of metaphors, including 'format tying' (Sacks 1995, vol. 1; Goodwin and Goodwin 1987; M.H. Goodwin 1990; and C. Goodwin 2010),[12] 'fittedness' (e.g., Stivers 2010; Stivers and Hayashi

[9] Throughout this book, we will use the terms 'grammar' and 'grammatical' to refer to (morpho) syntax plus prosody, reserving the terms '(morpho)syntax' and '(morpho)syntactic' for non-prosodic linguistic patterning. We will furthermore use the shorter terms 'syntax' and 'syntactic' to mean 'morphosyntax' and 'morphosyntactic' respectively.

[10] Research on bodily–visual responses includes Rauniomaa and Keisanen (2012), M.H. Goodwin and Cekaite (2013), Ford *et al.* (2012), M.H. Goodwin (1980), Haddington (2006), Kent (2012), Levinson (2010), Mondada (2009), and Rossi (2012).

[11] The multi-unit responses to Telling QW-interrogatives discussed in Chapter 2 are an exception.

[12] M.H. Goodwin (1990) primarily uses 'format tying' to refer to oppositional contexts, but in this book we are using it in the sense of C. Goodwin (2010), to refer to any reusing of materials from the initiating action.

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