

Conversation Analysis

Studies from the first generation

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“At first I thought”

A normalizing device for extraordinary events*

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The Phenomenon

Recurrently, in their talk about various sorts of events, people include an item that can be roughly formatted as ‘At First I Thought X, Then I Realized Y’.

A Brief History

Among the scores of phenomena that the late Harvey Sacks collected (from ‘dreams’ to ‘shopping lists’, from ‘intonation’ to ‘mock facts’ to “How are you?”, from Caryl Chessman to ‘cigarettes’ to ‘symmetry’), some folders containing no more than a single instance and a brief preliminary consideration, others bursting at the seams, was ‘Joke/Serious as an Oriented-to Contrast Class’. It is a hefty folder with dozens of instances and a variety of considerations.

One of those considerations was included in a lecture he gave in Fall 1967, in which he used ‘Joke/Serious’ as a way to approach the issue of Ambiguity. Here is an excerpt from that lecture (Sacks 1992, Vol. I:671–672).

One tends to think about ‘ambiguity’ that, for example, a word could mean this or that, or a sentence could mean this or that, or it could mean this, or that, or God only knows what else. Now, the sort of ‘ambiguity’ that I’m interested in specifically, is sequentialized ambiguity, where the issue is what sort of thing should go next, turning on what *this* thing might have been. For example, on the occurrence of some first pair-members (such things as questions, offers, requests, etc.), there can be a particular sort of sequential ambiguity present, the alternatives: Is this serious or is it a joke. And we can find such next utterances as “Are you kidding?”, “Are you serious?”, “You’re joking!”. Now, what

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such an utterance is specifically attending is the issue of what sequence the first utterance should generate. Are you doing an 'insult' to which I should do a 'return insult'? Are you doing a command' which I should accept or reject? Are you making an 'offer' which I should accept or reject? Do you want me to marry you? Or, for any of these, are you just kidding. We are not, then, talking about the issue of an ambiguity of meaning in the sense of is it this term or is it that term, but the issue of does it have this sequence appropriate after it or that sequence appropriate after it; a possible acceptance of the proposal, or laughter. Thus, the decision that someone is kidding, that something is a joke, means effectively: Whatever sequence this thing might generate if it were 'serious' does not apply.

That is the excerpt. In that lecture there is no particular piece of data mentioned, but after Sacks' death in 1975 as I began to go through his research notes, in the folder with the 'sequential ambiguity' consideration I found newspaper clippings, excerpts from books, etc., all lumped together under the general topic 'Joke/Serious'. Some of them are clearly the sort of thing Sacks must have been referring to in his lecture. For example:

- (1) [SPC Materials:1964]
((Woman talking about her husband who has threatened suicide))
I just acted like I thought he was just kidding. I didn't want him to think I was taking him seriously. He said "Well Joey run down to the police station before I do something I don't want to do." ... I says "Joey run outside. Daddy's only kidding."
- (2) [New York Times, November 20, 1964]
Two women ran into a Bronx drugstore yesterday morning and one remarked: "Imagine! We just saw three men go into the bank with masks and a gun." Andrew Mack, owner of the store, which is directly across the street from the bank, looked up and said: "Aw, you're joking." But the women were right, and Mr. Mack phoned the police ...
- (3) [New York Times, July 19, 1965]
((Two boys walking down the street; one is killed by a sniper's bullet))
He staggered several steps after the bullet hit him and collapsed on the concrete. His companion, 17-year-old Thomas Wilson, said later that he had heard "a light pop" but thought nothing of it. When Peter fell, the police said, his friend turned to him and said, "Cut out the kidding - don't kid me." Thomas then saw blood trickling from his companion's arm and ran to a nearby tavern to phone the police.
- (4) [New York Times, July 13, 1968]
Police commissioner Howard R. Leary apologized yesterday to a Bronx

clothing store owner who called the police on Thursday evening to tell them that a man was shooting at people on East 138th Street outside his shop. His call was met with disbelief. Three men were killed in the shooting. Leo Llonch, the store owner, said that when he called the police on the new citywide 911 emergency number, the policeman he spoke to asked, "Are you pulling my leg?"¹

- (5) [Excerpt from Kafka's *The Trial*, pages 7-8]
Who could these men be? What were they talking about? What authority could they represent? ... one could certainly regard the whole thing as a joke, a rude joke which his colleagues in the Bank had concocted for some unknown reason, perhaps because this was his thirtieth birthday, that was of course possible, perhaps he had only to laugh knowingly in these men's faces and they would laugh with him ...
- (6) [New York Times, 1968]
News of the invasion of his homeland fell like a crushing weight on Jan Kavan, a principal student leader in the Czechoslovak reform movement. ... The 22-year-old student said he thought the first reports of the invasion were a joke. When they were confirmed, he said in an interview yesterday, he went into a state of shock.
- (7) [From *The Witnesses*. Testimony of Abraham Zapruder]
I heard the first shot and I saw the President lean over and grab himself like this (holding left chest area). ... For a moment I thought it was, you know, like you say "Oh he got me" ... you've heard those expressions, and then I saw - I don't believe the President is going to make jokes like this, but before I had a chance to organize my mind I heard a second shot and then I saw his head open up and the blood and everything came out and I started - I can hardly talk about it. (The witness is crying.)

Now, several of these fragments happen to have, not only the 'Joke/Serious' alternation, but another feature: *Reports of 'first thoughts'*. In fragments (6) and (7) the reported 'first thought' is that it's a joke. But, for example, in fragment (3) we have built into the report that the youngster "heard a light pop but thought nothing of it". This, in a context where readers already know, and the boy already knew when he made this statement, that the "light pop" was the sniper's gunshot.

And it appears that Sacks was beginning to attend this feature in its own right, independent of the 'Joke/Serious' alternation. Specifically, in the folder marked 'Joke/Serious' are a couple of items which have nothing to do with that, but which are instances of these reported 'first thoughts'. For example:

- (8) [From *The Witnesses*.]
 ((Testimony of William R. Greer, the secret service agent driving the Presidential limousine.))
 Well, when we were going down Elm Street, I heard a noise that I thought was a backfire of one of the motorcycle policemen. . . . And then I heard it again. And I glanced over my shoulder. And I saw Governor Connally like he was starting to fall. Then I realized there was something wrong.

This, and fragments like it, although they were stuck into the 'Joke/Serious' folder, have no mention of joking. And in my experience this is a fact, and a pleasure, of collecting instances: Inevitably one comes across materials that don't fit under the heading one has set oneself to collect on some particular data-run, but which seem to be related; 'ballpark phenomena' that might cast some light on the focal phenomenon and/or point to independently interesting issues.

Again, then, the material I show as fragment (8) is simply stuck into the 'Joke/Serious' folder although there is no reference to joking in it. And it appears that while the phenomenon was beginning to emerge, it had not yet 'surfaced'. So, in a lecture in May, 1968 dealing with the workings of verbs, Sacks focuses on the 'Thought/Realized' alternation, using a piece of 'first thought' data which he refers to as his only case. Here is an excerpt from that lecture, the first time he presented this material (Sacks 1992, Vol. I: 787–788).

Verbs seem to be one routine area for doing such a thing as 'showing an intention of the truth of some statement'. I have a case in mind, and although it's the only case I happen to have, I don't think it's peculiar. It's from the *New York Times*, November second, nineteen sixty seven, headed "New Auto Fines System in Effect; First Public Reaction is Sour".

- (9) [*New York Times*, November 2, 1967]
 At about ten thirty a.m. yesterday an Adelphi College student parked his car at a meter on 78th Street between 5th and Madison Avenues, and went to pick up his girlfriend. A half hour later the student, David Searles, returned to the street with his girl and found the car was missing. At first he thought it had been stolen. Then he realized it had been towed away by the police, and still later he realized that he was one of the first victims of the new, higher parking fines that went into effect yesterday.²
 Focusing on "... then he realized it had been towed away by the police". In characterizing what he did as 'realized', what's being said is that it turned out to have been correct. That is, in the use of 'realized' the correctness of his thoughts is proposed. Were the report to be delivered at the time

that he did his considerations about where the car is, we wouldn't get "I realize the car has been taken by the police." What we would likely get is, "I (guess, bet, wonder if) the car's been taken by the police", or "Maybe the car's been taken by the police", and things like that. So what we have is something like: 'Realize' stands in opposition to 'thought' by reference to the fact that 'thought' is used when it turns out to be wrong. "At first he thought it had been stolen."

That is the excerpt; the first time Sacks presented this sort of material. One thing that often happens is that someone presents a phenomenon, and thereafter others begin to come up with cases. After this lecture in late May of 1968, I found myself noticing and clipping materials in which the word 'thought', and things like it, are used when what was 'thought' turns out to be wrong. For example:

- (10) [*Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1969]³
 ((The R. F. Kennedy assassination inquest; testimony of a bystander who was shot))
 "I felt someone kick me", said Stroll, adding that he didn't know at first that he had been shot. "Then I noticed – because I had on blue pants – that one of my legs was red."
- (11) [*Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 1969]
 A Pepperdine College security guard fatally shot Larry Kimmons, 16, without warning, four companions of the youth testified at a Los Angeles Coroner's inquest Thursday. . . . [One companion] said his first reaction was that the guard was kidding and that he had only fired a blank shell as he yelled at Kimmons, "Come on Larry, get up, get up."
- (12) [*Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1970]
 ((Interview with a last-minute substitute for the Pro Bowl football game))
 Caught in traffic, Larsen reached the Coliseum five minutes before the kickoff. Changing into uniform, he charged out of the tunnel at 1:10 p.m. A loud roar greeted his appearance. "For a second", he said, "I thought the cheer was for me. Then I realized that the West had just gotten the ball for the first time."

And for this latter fragment, I had a companion piece: Some years earlier, a friend of mine, a novice actress, had described her reaction to a traditional occurrence at an Opening Night party in New York City: Every member of the cast, no matter how minor a role they have, is applauded when they enter the restaurant. This was her first experience of it.

- (13) [Verbatim Report; a novice actress, ca 1962]
When they started applauding I thought Mimsy [the star of the show] was behind me or something. I did one of these [she turns and looks behind her]. Nobody there. They were applauding for me!

These materials were simply marked as instances of the 'Thought/Realized' alternation that Sacks had talked of in his lecture; specifically, as materials which could be roughly formatted as a sequence: First I thought X, then I realized Y.

And I began to develop some preliminary notes on *reported* first thoughts, as having an obscure relationship with – and not necessarily giving access to – what people are actually thinking. Reported first thoughts as assertions, as subject to social organization, i.e., as 'selected appropriate first thoughts'; thoughts appropriate to some situation and/or Membership Category, for example, the striking fittedness of a football superstar's asserted reaction to the roar of a crowd (as something he was due and accustomed to) and a novice actress's asserted response to applause ('surely not for little me'). Each, then, achieving the 'arrogance' or 'modesty' appropriate to their respective Membership Category.

Other issues started coming to mind. For example, that while people don't go around reporting each and every thought, on whatsoever, and especially not volunteering their *wrong* thoughts; and while the mass media do all sorts of editing-out of ramblings and irrelevancies in interviews, here were these objects, again and again, not only reported by people but *preserved* in the media.

And I began to look at those reported 'first thoughts' in detail. One thing I noticed was that the offered 'first thought' in fragment (11) seemed far-fetched. Consider what sort of pre-planning and coordination it would require for this unknown guard and this boy, Larry Kimmons, to bring off a joke in which the guard suddenly fires a blank shell, and the boy, with appropriate timing, falls to the ground.

Nevertheless, as a whole it seems perfectly acceptable, plausible, does not stimulate inquiry into its constituent features. I wondered if it might not be that this plausibility has to do with the context, i.e., has to do with what the reality turned out to be. By contrast to the extraordinary facts of the matter, the reported 'first thought' in fragment (11) and others, stand as unremarkable, usual, etc.

I began to get a sense that these reported 'first thoughts' were products of a search/selection procedure for a formulation of some problematic event, where the search was geared to finding a likely, i.e., non-extraordinary formulation of the event.

And counter-cases came to mind. Such things as 'crank calls' to the police, the burglar-under-the-bed phenomenon, etc. That is, there is a known set of things one should *not* make of a situation.

As it happened, at that time and place (1969–1970, Irvine, California), there was a relevant recurrence: Again and again there would be disparaging mentions in the newspapers and on the radio, of people who would call the police asking if we were being invaded every time a nearby missile base sent up an experiment – some of which were spectacular to see.

So there seemed to be a business here. Roughly, a *reported 'first thought' recurrently constituted an innocuous, ordinary alternative to an extraordinary actuality.*

It turned out that Sacks had been struck by that aspect of the phenomenon. Here is an excerpt from a lecture about the achieved status of 'being ordinary' that he gave in Spring, 1970 (Sacks 1992, Vol. II:220).

It's really remarkable to see people's efforts to achieve the 'nothing happened' sense of really catastrophic events. I've been collecting fragments out of newspapers, of hijackings, and what the airplane passengers think when a hijacking takes place. The latest one I happened to find goes something like this: "I was walking up towards the front of the airplane and I saw by the cabin, the stewardess standing facing the cabin, and a fellow standing with a gun in her back. And my first thought was he's showing her the gun, and then I realized that couldn't be, and then it turned out he was hijacking the plane. And another goes (this was a Polish plane hijacking), a passenger reports: "I thought to myself, we just had a Polish hijacking a month ago and they're already making a movie of it." And a classically dramatic instance is, almost universally the initial report of the J. F. Kennedy assassination was of firecrackers. Just imagine the Old Testament in its monumental events, with ordinary people having gone through it. What would they have heard and seen, e.g., when voices called out to them, when it started to rain, etc. There is at least one place in the Old Testament where that happens. Lot was warned of the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, and was permitted to bring his daughters and sons-in-law out:

- (14) [*Genesis*, Chapter 19]
And Lot went out, and spake unto his sons in law, which married his daughters, and said, Up, get you out of this place; for the Lord will destroy this city. But he seemed as one that mocked unto his sons in law.

And they stayed behind.

That is the excerpt. A few years ago, Paul Drew came up with a case from the Book of Samuel. As it happens, this case fits a bit more closely to Sacks' de-

scription of “ordinary people” reacting to such things as “voices calling out” than does *Genesis:19*. In *Samuel:I:3* the “nothing happened” reaction is not, as between Lot and his sons-in-law, to the voice of a fellow human, but (albeit by a child) to the voice of God.

(15) [*Samuel:I:3*]

And the child Samuel ministered unto the Lord before Eli. And the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision.

And it came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place, and his eyes began to wax dim, that he could not see; And ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was, and Samuel was laid down to sleep;

→ That the Lord called Samuel: and he answered, Here am I. And he ran unto Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou calledst me. And he said, I called not; lie down again. And he went and lay down.

→ And the Lord called yet again, Samuel. And Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And he answered, I called not, my son; lie down again. Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, neither was the word of the Lord yet revealed unto him.

→ And the Lord called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And Eli perceived that the Lord had called the child.

In a sense, this is a double instance, i.e., not only does Samuel make the most ordinary sense of this voice in the night, figuring that Eli wants some service of him, but Eli, by his laconic treatment of Samuel, seems to figure that the boy is just dreaming – it takes God three attempts before Eli ‘perceives’ the extraordinary facts of the matter.⁴

Reviewing the foregoing excerpts, we find that over the years Sacks used the same sort of material in three different sorts of presentations:

- Fall 1967: As a basis for considering the ‘Joke/Serious’ alternation in terms of sequential ambiguity.
- Spring 1968: As a basis for considering the ‘Thought/Realized’ alternation, where “...‘thought’ is used when it turns out to be wrong.”
- Spring 1970: As a basis for considering ordinary perception of catastrophic events.

It was the Spring, 1968 lecture that had started me collecting cases of ‘at first I thought X, then I realized Y’, from which I’d begun to develop some consid-

erations. But it was the Spring, 1970 lecture that clicked the phenomenon into place for me.

The assertion, and preservation/transmission, of these ‘wrong’, sometimes really far-fetched, ‘first thoughts’ about terrible events was a device; an incantation; a ritual used to manage, *to put into normal perspective*, something that might otherwise be disruptive. As Sacks has it, “to achieve the ‘nothing happened’ sense of really catastrophic events”. In the sequential terms posed in the Fall, 1967 lecture, if these things could not be put into normal perspective, some action would have to be taken about this new reality.

In the couple of weeks following the April 2, 1970 lecture, I found two more instances:

(16) [*Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1970]

Mrs. Martha Harmon will never forget the sound of her children’s voices screaming in the night. “At first it sounded like they were just fussing,” she recalled with a shudder Tuesday. “But then I heard the oldest one yell fire. That woke me.”

(17) [Television interview. Witness to a shooting at a student demonstration, Isla Vista, California, April 18, 1970]

He said “I think I’ve been hit”, or “I think I’ve been shot.” Whatever he said, he wasn’t sure. . . . I thought he’d been hit by a rock or something. . .

And I’d begun to work up a consideration of the phenomenon. Following is a rough sketch of the phenomenon, the result of work done partly by Harvey Sacks, and partly by me.

Notes on “At first I thought”

In the aftermath of some problematic events we recurrently find reports in the mass media which include people’s ‘first thoughts’ about the event – ‘first thoughts’ which turned out to have been wrong.

Given what the event turned out to be, the wrong ‘first thoughts’ can be seen as plausible (although scrutiny might reveal them to be odd, far-fetched, etc.). Their plausibility resides in that they stand as innocuous, ordinary, Anybody’s Alternatives to what turned out, on some particular occasion, to be the actuality, i.e., they assert what any one of us would, could, should make of such an event.

Asserting the wrong 'first thought' reaffirms, in the face of some actuality, the *in-principle correctness of the ordinary alternative*. In effect it is proposing that the wrong 'first thought' should have been right.

Now, the phenomenon of Reported First Thoughts is very much a matter of extraordinary events, witnesses, and mass media; people speaking for the record, their words being preserved and transmitted, etc. But to get a sense of what I'm proposing to be the in-principle-correctness work of these media objects, I'll turn to the realm of utterly ordinary conversation about altogether trivial events. For here, in ordinary conversation, is the principle and wellspring of the resources being deployed on those more rarified occasions.

Consider, for example, the way "I thought" is recurrently used in ordinary conversation.

I'll start off with a fragment in which someone produces the same "thought" for two consecutive participants; a little girl, and then the little girl's father. Here, the little girl, Sharon, has phoned to invite her friend Stephanie to the beach, where Sharon and her family are spending their vacation. Her friend Stephanie isn't home, and Sharon finds herself speaking to Stephanie's mother, Fran, and eventually handing Fran over to her father (and Fran's friend), Ted.

(18) [NB:III:1:2-4:Standard Orthography]

Fran: ↑Well when did you guys go::.

Sharon: Ah: Saturday?hh

Fran: → ↑Oh: for crying out loud. I thought it was the e:nd of the mo:nth you were go::i:[ng.

Sharon: [Mm-mm,hh

Fran: ·hhhh ↑Oh:.....

. ((ca 50 lines omitted; Sharon's father is now on the line))

Fran: → Well I thought you weren't going down til next seh-u-the weekeh:-I mean the end of the mo:nth.

(0.4)

Ted: ↑No:, we're down here for: two weeks,

Fran: ↑Oh::: well you lucky gu::ys.

(I have kept the fragments as brief as possible. Let me just note that each of the "I thought" interchanges terminates after Fran's "Oh:..." response, each with a return to the 'reason for the call', each return initiated by Fran – that with Sharon by saying "Well goodness sakes it's too bad she's not home, 'cause

she'd sure love to come down," and that with Ted by saying "Well Sharon said something about Stephanie coming down and...").

As laymen, just reacting to the materials, we might get a feeling that Fran's (repeated) reference to her wrong notion is somehow searching for an account, an explanation, i.e., is proposing "Somehow I got that impression. Did I misunderstand? Or was it originally so and your plans were changed?"

And we can make at least one, rather more technical, observation; that each recipient of Fran's proffered wrong 'thought' *denies* it; Sharon with "Mm-mm," and Ted with a more elaborate "↑No:, we're down here for: two weeks,.". That is, each recipient of the proffered wrong 'thought' treats it as *here-and-now operating on an assertion of fact*, rather than, e.g., an interesting, amusing, puzzling commentary on the recipient's state of mind.

This turns out to be a recurrent sequence: Someone proposes that X is the case, a recipient produces "I thought Y", and the prior speaker denies the Y, sometimes supplying an account, sometimes not. Here is a series of instances of the [X is the case, "I thought Y", denial of Y] sequence. (For easier access to the phenomenon, the transcripts have been simplified.)

(18a) [Holt:2:12:1-2]

Joyce: In that envelope, there's an NHR program.

Leslie: → Yes it's for anbody who's not got one.

Joyce: → Oh. I thought perhaps you'd left yours in there inadvertently.

Leslie: → No. She's left one in, in case anybody got left out.

(18b) [BAC5R:ms:33]

Jessup: But my point is, that was the question to them.

Course: → Alright.=I thought you meant the question °here.=Ex[cuse me.]°

Jessup: → [N o .]

(0.2)

Course: Go [ahead.]

Jessup: → [N o] ↓::=So ↑therefore...

(18c) [Frankel:TCI:1:26]

Sheila: → Michael's in the midst of moving this weekend.

Geri: → Thought it was last weekend.

Sheila: → No::, he had some: complications.h

(18d) [TCI(b):16:8-9]

- Alice: → Well Steven's hair's the same color as Craig's,
 Fran: Is it?
 Alice: ↑Yeh
 Fran: → I thought Craig's was lighter.=
 Alice: → No I don't think so Craig's hair isn't

(18e) [Gold:3]

- Jane → But I couldn't arrange that because Thomas is coming again.
 Reva: → I thought Thomas was going away to Ohio. To school.
 Jane: → No; that's not until after he graduates from high school.

(18f) [Schenkein:II:226-228:R]

- Lori: Next time you go to Fedco, I think I got this at Fedco. Get
 me a bunch of them.
 Ben: → The ones at Fedco are different.
 Lori: Where did I get them. I'll have to try to remember I
 → thought I got those at Fedco,
 Ben: → [No:.
 Lori: I guess I got 'em someplace else.

(18g) [Frankel:GS:X]

- Alan: Still growing. It's got buds 'n everything else on it.
 Nell: Oh has it?
 Alan: → Buds. No[t bugs.]
 Nell: → [Oh buds]. I thought you said bugs.
 Alan: → No. I don't see any bugs. It might have, but I can't see any

(18h) [Goodwin:DP:21]

- Beth: 'n one thing they said in the article that was really
 intriguing was, in the United States at this point, there are
 → over a hundred thousand people who are over a hundred
 years old.
 Jan: No!!
 Beth: M-hm?
 Jan: → I thought they kept track and there were only a few people.
 Beth: → No: there's over a hundred thousand according to this article.

(18i) [SBL:3:2:R:5]

- Claire: → Well they're not coming, unless they can find someb[ody].
 Sara: [Oh=
 Sara: → =I thought they were coming.
 Claire: → No they're not coming unless they can get another couple.

(18j) [Schenkein:II:177-8:R]

- Ben: Yeah but Bill they came in from Corona del Mar.
 Pat: No we didn't come from Corona del Mar.
 Ben: You came in on MacArthur Boulevard
 Pat: Yeah MacArthur, but we hit uh:
 Ben: Coast Highway.
 Pat: Yeah.
 Ben: → Right. [That's Corona.
 Bill: → [That- [That's Corona del Mar
 Pat: Oh is it?
 Bill: Right where it hits the Coast Highway
 Pat: → Oh I didn't realize I thought that was already:
 Ben: → No.

(18k) [NB:IV:11:R:1-2]

- Emma: I was over to see you yesterday but you must've been taking a
 nap I rang the bell and then I called you: later in the evening,
 (0.7)
 Emma: I don't know where you were m[ay-
 Gladys: [Oh: I'll tell you I heard the
 → phone I was watching television by the time I got out here it'd
 stopped ringing.
 Emma: → Yeah well I let it ring about ten times I thought well now maybe
 you're in the ba:]thtu:b.
 Gladys: → [N o n o : ,]
 Gladys: → No: uh with the television on you know half the time you don't
 hear it.

(18l) [Adato:2:4-5]

- Jay: He said the first chance::: he gets. Meaning a certain time period.
- Jim: → Oh no. The first of next month.
- Jay: → Oh. I thought you said he was going to put you in for a raise the first chance he gets.
- Sy: → [Uh-uh].
- Jim: → [No. First of the month.
- Jay: Oh the first of the month. Oh.

The foregoing dozen cases show a recurrent sequence: [assertion that X is the case, "I thought Y", denial of Y]. In these sequences the "I thought" is treated as here-and-now operating on the prior assertion of fact, and not a report of some perceptual glitch by the recipient.

As to the sense one might get that "I thought Y" is deployed in pursuit of an account, we can at least note that in a few of those dozen cases (18c, 18e, 18k) the denial is followed by an account. And in the following 3 cases, with or without a 'denial' component, there is confirmation that the materials presented as "I thought Y" are not merely reasonable, but were at one time correct, and that some unreported change had occurred.

(18m) [TCII(b):38:3-4]

- Lasche: Did you go out there last weekend
- Seaton: No,
(0.4)
- Lasche: → Oh I thought you were.
- Seaton: → I was going to I was gonna go out there this weekend too but uh:
- Lasche: ↑ hhuh huh-huh↑
(1.2)
- Seaton: I just c-c-can't get going hhuh-hhuh

(18n) [Frankel:TCl:1:8]

- Sheila: ·t-hhh Michael went to San Diego today,
- Geri: → Thought you were going.
- Sheila: → No,
(0.3)
- Sheila: → I changed my mind, I have to work tonight,

(18o) [SBL:3:R3]

- Claire: We'll just have the two tables unless she's fou:nd uh
another cou:pl[e or]
- Sara: [Yeh.] Well-
- Sara: → Oh you I thought you said you were gonna have your
neigh:↓bors.
- Claire: → ·tk·hhh u-No they couldn't co:me.

And in the following fragment, "I thought Y" is specifically being used to elicit a self-correction from a coparticipant.

(18p) [SPC:10(a):14]

- Desk: but it's at- on three o'clock and she might just be free or
between interviews.
(1.0)
- Mr. O: w-What time is it now sir?
- Desk: Three isn't it?
(0.7)
- Mr. O: → (We:ll?) I thought it was earlier than that,
(0.3)
- Desk: → It's two o'clock I'm sorry.
- Mr. O: Yeah.
- Desk: I got the hour wrong.⁵

Given the foregoing materials, I would argue that such an assertion as "I thought" need not be, and routinely is not, just a factual report, but is operating to propose the relevance and in-principle correctness (and on occasion, as in fragment (18p), the actual correctness) of the matters being formed up as "I thought Y".

Such a possibility enriches the 'Thought/Realized' alternation proposed by Sacks in his Spring, 1968 lecture. Now, not merely that "...thought' is used when it turns out to be wrong", but that 'thought' is used when it turns out to be wrong *but is being pursued as in-principle correct*, reasonable, right.

What, then, is going on when the 'At First I Thought X, Then I Realized Y' format, with its innocuous alternative to an extraordinary reality, is deployed?

By asserting the in-principle correct, ordinary alternative, the what-actually-happened is shown to be odd, surprising, exceptional; to be in-principle wrong. That is, although this thing did happen, it merely happened. It is an incidental occurrence. In principle, things like this do not happen.

In one of his earliest lectures, given in the Fall of 1964, Sacks touches on just that issue, by reference to how decisions are made about whether a death was suicide or not. He says (Sacks 1992, Vol. I:62):

My own feeling about such matters is that a range of decisions are made in terms of 'odd events' versus 'normal events'. And odd events, by and large, are just not added together. So that if one has a notion that some X is a normal event, then the fact that occasionally or two or three times in a row something else happens, that doesn't provide for a shift. One doesn't now say "Well, maybe X isn't the normal event." But, in part perhaps by way of the fact that what is normal gets incorporated into things like proverbs and becomes very stable, odd events are just sloughed off.

And rummaging through my own ever-increasing horde of newspaper clippings and hastily scribbled notes from news broadcasts, I've come across two lovely instances of "At first I thought" being used explicitly to propose 'things like this don't happen'. In both of these cases the reported 'first thought' is disbelief.⁶

- (19) [ITN 7:00 News: November 30, 1985, Prime Minister Thatcher]
 ((During a miner's strike, a taxi driver in Wales is driving one of the working miners, when a concrete block is dropped onto the cab from an overpass and the driver is killed.))
 Thatcher: At first I could scarcely believe it. It was murder. And I almost went to new depths of despair. That such things could happen in Britain. ... It *isn't* British. This calculated malice is alien to us.
- (20) [*Leeuwarder Courant*, November 13, 1991]
 A bomb attack early this morning caused heavy damage to the home of Minister of Justice Aad Kosto in the North Holland Grootshermer. "I am extraordinarily grateful to the Alkmar police for taking the bomb threat seriously. ... In the first instance I thought: it will surely be a false alarm. I didn't want to believe that such a thing can happen in The Netherlands", said the Minister.

In these two cases we're seeing the work of "at first I thought" at its most explicit – not to mention grandiose, if not just plain elephantine: Things like this don't happen here.

Now, in Sacks' 'Joke/Serious' folder were some materials, again having nothing to do with joking, but a matter of 'first thoughts', in which people assert that their 'first thought' *was* the catastrophic actuality. What is wonderful about these is that they specifically orient to the impropriety of these as 'first

thoughts', marking that Anybody would not/should not have made that of it. Here is the most explicit version, from Sacks' folder.

- (21) [From *The Witnesses*, page 3, Yarborough]
 As the motorcade went down the side of Elm Street toward the railroad underpass, a rifle shot was heard by me; a loud blast, close by. I have handled firearms for fifty years, and thought immediately that it was a rifle shot.

Note that this witness marks his perception as specifically *not* Anybody's by providing an account ("I have handled firearms for fifty years"). Further, he specifically marks his thought as *not* an eventually arrived at 'realization' by providing a contrast term ("immediately"). The immediacy marker conveys that what ordinarily is, and is to be arrived at as, a 'realization', i.e., under the burden of additional, convincing evidence of something out of the ordinary (see, e.g., fragments 3, 8, 10 and 16), was in this case not so arrived at. It happened "immediately". And the offering of credentials explains why the ordinary, perhaps proper, procedure was not carried out.

It turns out that the combination of credentials and immediacy markers is recurrently used.

- (22) [Notes on an item on BBC News, ca 1985]
 An English nightclub dancer was caught in the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, in a small town in Iraq where she experienced all sorts of war-related sights and sounds. She and her colleagues moved on to Baghdad, expecting it to be undisturbed, but at around 2:00 a.m., coming out of the hotel disco, they heard a huge explosion. She says, "I knew straightaway it was a bomb."

So: In her story, she builds in credentials: She was in a place earlier where she experienced the sounds of bombs. And with "straightaway", she marks the immediacy which contrasts with the ordinarily necessary and proper steps to knowledge of that sort.

- (23) [*de Telegraaf*, February 12, 1992, re the crash of an F16 in Henglo]
 Aviation hobbyist Laurens Rorink, who for the last 20 years has closely followed the comings and goings of all that flies, and witness to the air disaster during a demonstration in the German city of Ramstein, knew immediately what was going on. "I recognized the sound. Vroom, such a typical noise. Damn, I thought, that's a crash."

Again: Credentials, both of a general sort ("for the last 20 years...etc."), and built into a description specific to this event ("...such a typical noise.") And the immediacy marker ("immediately") – here, supplied by the writer of the article. And although we don't get such a marker in the witness' statement, perhaps the exclamation "Damn" ("*Verdorie*") with which he precedes his reported thought works in a similar way.

So what happens if one has no credentials and is reporting a correct catastrophic first thought? You use what you do have available, i.e., the immediacy markers. Here is a dramatic and eloquent instance.

- (24) [From *The Witnesses*, page 14, Governor Connally]
 We had just made the turn, well, when I heard what I thought was a shot. I heard this noise, which I immediately took to be a rifle shot. ... I immediately – the only thought that crossed my mind was that this is an assassination attempt.

Again, the "immediately"s and "the only thought that crossed my mind" convey that these are not Anybody's Proper First Thoughts. You get a sense that they came unbidden into his mind; that Connally himself is surprised at having had these as first thoughts. By forming it up in this way, he preserves his status as a normal, reasonable, ordinary man.

Indeed, it appears that routinely persons without any particular credentials to offer, will, when reporting a correct catastrophic first thought, accompany it with an immediacy marker, thus invoking the proper alternative – that this should have been a later 'realization'.

- (25) [*Algemeen Dagblad*, April 14, 1992 re an earthquake – rare in The Netherlands]
 F. van Duijnhoven: "We were woken by an enormous din; everything around us was moving, it was as if something huge was rumbling by, under the house. It lasted fifteen seconds; short to be sure, but if you're sitting in the middle of it, an eternity. I knew immediately: This is an earthquake."
 (26) [*de Telegraaf*, October 5, 1992]
 ((re the crash of an El Al aircraft into a housing development))
 "It must have been around a quarter to seven. We had just eaten. We heard a terrible roaring sound. Naturally we looked outside at once. I thought immediately: An airplane is crashing."

Given the recurrence of, at least immediacy markers, if not credentials plus immediacy markers for things that are not Anybody's Proper First Thoughts, we can return to fragment (7), the Zapruder testimony, in which he simply

produces a 'naked' report of his experience of the first shot, "I heard the first shot". Period. Interestingly, the matter of the shots is not what he is focusing upon. He is focused on the next event, the President's reaction to the shot. And this he handles in what is emerging as the canonical fashion, i.e., with a version of "at first I thought", in Zapruder's testimony, "For a moment I thought...".

Canonical it seems to be. Here are a dozen or so cases of the cases gathered between the next-to last (ca 1982) and last rewrite (1992) of this paper.

- (27) [BBC News, September 3, 1985] ((A witness to the Glifada grenade incident))
 There was a big bang and we thought – We were just having some fun round the poolside, and we thought for just a moment that it was a firecracker.
 (28) [ITN 9:00 News, October 8, 1985]
 ((Statement of a young policeman who was shot in the stomach during the Tottenham, London disturbances of Sunday, October 6th, the first time in mainland Britain that the police had encountered gunfire during a civil disturbance.))
 Police Constable Patt: "First of all I thought it was a brick."
 (29) [BBC News, the night Indira Gandhi was assassinated]
 ((Telephone interview with Peter Ustinov who, with some other people, had been waiting to meet Mrs Gandhi in her garden when the shooting started.))
 Ustinov: "At first there was speculation about firecrackers."
 (30) [*de Volkskrant*, March 1, 1990] ((contributed by Martha Komter))
 ((In Arnhem, February 18th, a discussion at an outdoor café got out of hand...))
 ...and S. shot his former comrade dead right before the eyes of hundreds of terrace-visitors. They thought that it was part of a performance of two street artists and burst out in loud applause. Later it became evident that S. had discharged lethal shots.
 (31) [BBC News, May 22, 1991, rebroadcast of an item on India TV]
 ((re the bomb blast that killed Rajiv Gandhi))
 "...Initially it was mistaken for the burst of a cracker, to welcome him."
 (33) [*Algemeen Dagblad*, May 23, 1991]
 ((Bhagwan Singh, eyewitness to the bomb blast that killed Rajiv Gandhi))
 "A bright flash of light and a deafening blast. Splinters from wooden crush-barriers flew all around. My first reaction was that followers of the Congress Party had ignited an oversized firework."

- (34) [*de Telegraaf*, February 12, 1992] ((the Henglo F16 crash, cf fragment 23))
“I thought first of a gas explosion”.
- (35) [Nederland 1, 4:00 news, February 12, 1992] ((the Henglo F16 crash))
“I didn’t believe it at first, but there you are.”
- (36) [*de Volkskrant*, February 12, 1992] ((the Henglo F16 crash))
“I didn’t believe what I had seen, it was like a film.”
- (37) [*de Telegraaf*, March 7, 1992] ((3 charred bodies were found in a field))
The bodies were found by a supervisor of the recreation facility Voorne-Putten. He was alerted by smoke, which he thought was produced by burning reeds. Upon closer investigation of the marshy ground, he came across the mutilated, still smoking bodies, whereupon he immediately brought in the police.
- (38) [*de Telegraaf*, October 5, 1992] ((the El Al crash))
Mrs Augustinus: “We were sitting watching Studio Sport when we saw a dark spot approaching from Diemen with a weak sound of a motor. A second later the windows on the opposite side of our block of flats were lit up orange. Originally we thought that the garage was hit. If only it were just the garage...” she said.
- (39) [*Algemeen Dagblad*, October 24, 1992] ((the El Al crash))
Ayesha Alhassan (28): “We were sitting watching TV when it happened. I, my cousin, her friend, and a sub-tenant. We were blown across the living room by the blast . I thought that there was an earthquake.”

(There is a nice contrast between fragment (25) above, with its immediacy-marked *correct* ‘first thought’ by F. van Duijnhoven about an earthquake in his native Netherlands, a place where earthquakes are rare, and fragment (39) here, by the immigrant Ayesha Alhassan, also about an event in The Netherlands, in which “earthquake” is reported as the *wrong* ‘first thought’. Perhaps Ayesha Alhassan came to this land from one in which earthquakes are more or less normal occurrences.)

- (40) [*de Telegraaf*, December 1, 1992] ((A train was derailed at Hoofddorp))
When [the road-mender from Leiden, Izaak] Colpa arrived in the twilight at his workplace just across from the disaster area and heard an enormous racket, he thought at first that one of the cranes had toppled over. “When we went to take a look at what was going on, we could see the destruction. ... Everything was wrecked. Normally, you only see such a thing on TV, don’t you?”

- (41) [*Leeuwarder Courant*, December 22, 1992] ((the Faro air disaster))
Mrs G. Voorthuis from Augustinusga, eyewitness to the disaster: “I was on the telephone and suddenly heard a very loud bang. Because it was extremely bad weather, I thought it was a lightning strike. After that, we saw, about 200 meters away, an enormous flame, and a bit later we heard an explosion. Then you think that a tank-truck exploded.

Such materials give a strong sense of the notion that there are oriented-to and used, proper first thoughts; those which affirm the normal, Anybody’s procedures for perceiving what is going on. A sharp bang is a firecracker, smoke coming from a field is burning reeds, a painful thud against your body is a rock or brick, etc. etc. Then there are things which are oriented to as improper first thoughts; those which turn out to be the bizarre, catastrophic, extraordinary facts of the matter, i.e., those which comprise the proper ‘then I realized’ component.

Thus, one is a ‘crank’ if one produces such a report as, “At first I thought it was a shot, then I realized it was a firecracker.” One is a crank – or someone who has been exposed to a drastically altered reality. Such a case was witnessed by my colleague Judy Davidson years ago in Hawaii. A small group of American soldiers on leave from the fighting in Vietnam were walking along a Honolulu street on a day that happened to be Chinese New Year, when a celebratory bunch of firecrackers went off. To a man, the soldiers hit the ground. But this is an extreme case. The reporting of such first thoughts – not to mention such overt behavior – is heavily constrained and negatively sanctioned.

I witnessed something similar, yet significantly different, by a pair of ordinary New York City-dwellers. Ten or maybe fifteen years ago on a visit to New York, I was walking down West 86th Street with two old friends of mine, longtime residents of New York, whom I thought ought to get to know each other, since they lived only a block or two apart. There was a bang. I heard it as a backfire and kept walking. These two people, who had never met before, simultaneously ducked.

Now, the fact that they simultaneously ducked is similar to the extreme case of the Vietnam G.I.s. The fact that they *only* ducked, that they checked themselves and did not hit the ground, is significantly different; testimony, perhaps, to the power of the constraint against being a ‘crank’.⁷

Earlier we glimpsed that sort of constraint in the credentials and immediacy markers of fragments (21)–(26). For another sort of glimpse we can start off with a news clipping sent to me by Anita Pomerantz.

(42) [Oxford Times, March 19, 1982]

UFO Reports Stream In

Mysterious purple lights were seen moving across the sky last Friday evening to the amazement of witnesses. Mr Derek Mansell, of Crown Road, Wheatley, said he saw a large red light steadily moving across the sky above his home. The light suddenly shot upwards and disappeared. "I thought it was an aircraft at first," said Mr Mansell who is UFO research officer for Contact International UK, "but an aircraft could never have shot upwards like that so quickly." People from Oxford, Maidenhead and Cirencester saw the lights and contacted the police and Mr Mansell [who] has been cataloguing UFOs since 1964.

For nearly 20 years, this man's work has been the sighting of UFOs. Surely he would be entitled to a credentials-plus-immediacy-marker report. But perhaps his was the optimal choice when it comes to the phenomenon of UFOs, i.e., 20 years of UFO experience might well point towards rather than away from the 'crank' possibility.⁸

Alright, then, what about that Secret Service Agent, in fragment (8), the driver of the Presidential limousine, William R. Greer, who reported that he thought the gunshot was "a backfire"? Well, maybe he's more to be thought of as a chauffeur than a steely-eyed, professionally paranoid Secret Service Agent. I more or less held onto that image of Greer until I read Bonar Menninger's *Mortal Error* (1992: Appendix A, pp. 297-375.). One of the appendices in the Menninger book is a series of spoken and written statements to the Warren Commission by the Secret Service Agents accompanying the President. Quite a few contain an "at first I thought":

(43) [Warren Report, Testimony of Clinton J. Hill, SS, p. 305]

((Hill was riding in the follow-car, behind the Presidential limousine. His assignment was to pay special attention to Mrs Kennedy.)

Spector: Now, as the motorcade proceeded at that point, tell us what happened.

Hill: Well, as we came out of the curve, and began to straighten up, I was viewing the area which looked to be a park. There were people scattered throughout the entire park. And I heard
→ a noise from my right rear, which to me seemed to be a firecracker. I immediately looked to my right, and, in doing so, my eyes had to cross the Presidential limousine and I saw President Kennedy grab at himself and lurch forward and to the left. ... I jumped from the car, realizing that something
→ was wrong, ran to the Presidential limousine.

(44) [Warren Report, Written Statement, William R. Greer, SS, p. 320]
((Greer was driving the Presidential limousine))

I was looking at the overpass that we were about to pass under in case
→ someone was on top of it, when I heard what I thought was the backfire of a motorcycle behind the President's automobile. After the second shot, I glanced over my right shoulder and saw Governor Connally start to fall.
→ I knew then that something was wrong and I immediately pushed the accelerator to the floor...

Here we have an indication that Greer was not merely a chauffeur, but a working SS-man, alert to possible trouble. Maybe Hill and Greer should be drummed out of the Secret Service as hopelessly naïve. Or maybe what they've done is to produce a powerful display of their retaining the normal perceptions and reactions despite the paranoiac nature of their work. Those guys in the Secret Service? They're just like you and me.

Another SS-man's statement is produced with a bit more professional distance:

(45) [Warren Report, Written Statement, Roy H. Kellerman, SS, p. 322]
((Kellerman was riding next to Agent Greer in the Presidential limousine))

We were still traveling at the normal rate of speed from 12 to 15 miles per
→ hour when I heard a noise, similar to a firecracker, exploding in the area to the rear of the car, about 12:30 p.m.

The statements in the following 3 fragments provide a sort of middle ground between 'ordinary man' and 'professional'. They do not formulate the thing as a 'first thought', but on the other hand, in contrast to Agent Kellerman's disengaged statement in fragment (45), they do give an experiential description – albeit with the self-reference elided:

(46) [Warren Report, Written Statement, John D. Ready, SS, p. 343]
((Ready was standing on the right front-door running board of the follow-car))

At about 12:30 p.m. we began the approach to the Thornton Freeway traveling about 20-25 mph in a slight incline. I was about 25-30 feet from President Kennedy who was located in the right rear seat. I heard what
→ appeared to be firecrackers going off from my position. I immediately turned to my rear trying to locate the source.

- (47) [Warren Report, Written Statement, Glen A. Bennet, SS, p. 353]
 ((Bennett was riding in the right rear seat of the follow-up car))
 [A]bout 12:25 P.M., the Motorcade entered an intersection and then proceeded down a grade. At this point the well-wishers numbered but a few; the motorcade continued down this grade en route to the Trade Mart. At this point I heard what sounded like a fire-cracker. I immediately looked [away]from the right/crowd/physical area/ and looked towards the President...
- (48) [Warren Report, Written Statement, George W. Hickey Jr., SS, p. 355]
 ((Hickey was riding in the left rear seat of the follow-car))
 Just prior to the shooting the Presidential car turned left at the intersection and started down an incline toward an underpass followed by [the follow-car]. After a very short distance I heard a loud report which sounded like a firecracker. It appeared to come from the right and rear and seemed to me to be at ground level. I stood up and looked to my right and rear in an attempt to identify it.

By 'elided self-reference', I'm pointing to such phrases as "what appeared to be..." (fragment 46), "(what/which) sounded like..." (fragments 47 and 48); the elision being the absence of "...to me", i.e., "what appeared to me to be"...", "which sounded to me like..." (cf. Hickey's "...and seemed to me to be at ground level" in fragment 48). It's this referring to what one made of an occurrence without explicitly identifying oneself as the interpreter that places those reports in a middle ground between Anybody's spontaneous "I thought it was X", and Kellerman's studied "It was similar to an X".⁹

Across these materials we are seeing, in stronger or weaker forms, the positing of 'normal' in the face of the extraordinary.

In a 1971 lecture, Sacks did a consideration which bears on this issue – by reference to, of all things, teenage dating practices, and for a different sort of device; 'We were going to [X], but [1, 2...etc.] so we [Y]' (Sacks 1992, Vol. I: 455–457).¹⁰

About 'We were going to [X]', Sacks says, "I raise the question, why put in a rejected alternative?" In answering that question he uses a phrase which resonates with a phrase of Karl Menninger's that Sacks refers to in one of his earliest lectures (Sacks 1992, Vol. I: 66): "loyalty to reality". In his 1971 lecture, Sacks speaks of the naming of the rejected alternative as showing one's "commitment to the normal".

It's a lovely phrase, and it's obviously relevant to the UFO-spotter's and Secret Service Agents' handling of their encounters with the extraordinary. It

may also be an underlying issue for whomsoever, since we are always in the business of exhibiting our "commitment to the normal", and devices like 'We were going to [X]' and 'At first I thought [X]'; are resources for doing that.

An overview of the Sacks materials I've so far referred to reveals that across time and disparate 'topics' (suicide, verbs, hijackings, teenage sex), in bits and pieces, here and there, are the elements of a unified analysis.

In his answer to his own question raised by a bit of data to do with teenage dating practices – Why put in a rejected alternative? – Sacks characterizes it as a matter of using what we know to be "normal" as a way to "specifically locate what happened here as distinctly unusual". Forget about the specific topic. This is an abstract, generalizable notion. Take the 1964 discussion of determining which deaths are or are not suicide (page 146, above). Forget suicide, there is an abstract, general notion about 'odd events' versus 'normal events', where odd events don't count, are "just sloughed off", do not "provide for a shift" in how things are to be perceived or managed.

Now, put these two together, i.e., that naming a rejected alternative provides that what happened here is distinctly unusual, plus that unusual, odd events don't count. With those two notions we can come to see, technically, what can be involved in Sacks' 1970 proposal that one aspect of 'being ordinary' is the achieving of "the 'nothing happened' sense of really catastrophic events" (page 137, above).

It appears that ordinary people, wheresoever we find them, will search for some normalizing alternative to the extraordinary actuality, whereby they can both exhibit their "commitment to the normal", and provide that, in principle, things like this don't happen; that what actually happened merely happened, is an incidental occurrence. No "shift" has occurred or need occur; we can go about our business as usual.

And this normalizing device, reinvented time after time by all the Anybodies who have been involved in something extraordinary, is, time after time, preserved in the media and sent out to do its work among everybody else.

The sheer tenacity of the device may be seen in a program note for a BBC 2 documentary, "The Day the Sun Blowed Up", sent to me by Pomerantz back in 1982. The 'first thought' in question occurred 37 years earlier:¹¹

- (49) [TV guide program note, BBC 2, August 6, 1982]
 Yesterday's Witness in America
 The Day the Sun Blowed Up
 Narrated by James Cameron

On 16 July 1945 at 5:30 in the morning, the world's first atom bomb was experimentally exploded in the desert of New Mexico. This is the story of the fateful days of secret preparation for the test. It is told by some of the scientists and soldiers who were intimately concerned . . . The story is also told by some of the local inhabitants for whom the birth of the nuclear age came as a total and alarming surprise.

→ "I heard the explosion and thought something had blowed up in the yard out in front of the store. I went out and there was a man just standing there looking kind of dumbfounded and I asked him, 'What blowed up out here?' And he said, 'Look over yonder,' (looking to the east of us) 'the sun blowed up!'"

Postscript

I stopped adding new data to my presentations of the "At first I thought..." phenomenon in 1992, but couldn't resist sticking clippings and hastily jotted notes into the "At first I thought..." folder as further cases cropped up. Here is a chronologically-ordered sampling of the next decade's materials.

- (50) [caught in passing, BBC News, late October, 1993(?)]
In troubles-torn northern Ireland, men in black clothing with Balaklava masks break into a house, run past a young girl, and shoot her brother. She reports that her first thought was that they were friends of her brother's, dressed for a Halloween party.
- (51) [*Leeuwarder Courant*, December 8, 1994]
((A young woman passenger on the cruise ship Achille Lauro that burned and sank, kept a diary))
While the two young women were dancing in the discothek, the Achille Lauro caught fire. Shirley van Haaster wrote: "Suddenly one of the pursers began to run to the exit. I thought that there was a fight. Until I got near the door and a cloud of smoke drifted in."

The following fragment resembles fragment (30), in which the reported first thoughts of witnesses to a shooting is that it is part of a performance. Here, the reported first thoughts are those of people not merely witnessing, but overtaken by, the event.

- (52) [*Leeuwarder Courant*, March 21, 1994]
Earthquake didn't belong in the Oscar show

Los Angeles (AP) – The earthquake yesterday in Los Angeles was taken as part of the show during a rehearsal for the Oscar-presentations. Just as a mock-up of a dinosaur handed over the envelope for the winner of the Oscar for 'special effects', the lamps began to swing and the seats in the hall to shake.

→ The public treated it as a successful part of the celebration until several technicians raced to the podium and screamed "earthquake!". There was no damage, and the rehearsal continued after a short break.

Earlier, noting a contrast between fragment (25) with its immediacy-marked *correct* 'first thought' about an earthquake in The Netherlands, a place where earthquakes are rare, and fragment (39), also about an event in The Netherlands, in which earthquake is reported as the *wrong* 'first thought', I remarked that perhaps Ayesha Alhassan, the woman reporting the latter, came to this land from one in which earthquakes are more or less normal occurrences. And indeed, we can find people accounting for their wrong 'first thought' having been of an earthquake by announcing that they're from California (see, for example, fragment 57 below).

But in fragment (52) above, and in the following fragment, people involved in a California earthquake are reported to have had wrong 'first thoughts'. In (52), it appears that the standard and correct account (earthquake) was superceded by the possibility of Hollywood special effects made relevant by the fact of the rehearsal in progress. In the following fragment it appears that the standard and correct account was superceded by possibilities made relevant by the fact that the young couple involved were on a freeway overpass in a moving car when the earthquake struck.

- (53) [Caught in passing: CNN January 18, 1994]
((A young man, passenger in the car driven by his girlfriend when the L.A. earthquake of January 17th struck. They were on the Highway 14 overpass onto Highway 5, as it started bucking prior to its collapse.))
"...she thought it was a high wind, I thought initially it was a blow-out..."

The following fragment, and several others in this series (59, 60, 63, 66, and 68), have a similar character to the anecdotes of the Vietnam G.I.s in Hawaii and the pair of New York City-dwellers walking down West 86th Street, reacting to firecrackers and backfire as gunshots (page 151).

- (54) [*Leeuwarder Courant*, December 10, 1994]
Peres fall causes consternation in Norway

Oslo (Reuter) – The Israeli minister of foreign affairs Shimon Peres stumbled over a trolley track yesterday evening during a walk through the inner city of the Norwegian capitol Oslo. The minister took a hard fall and suffered a wound near his eye. The fall led to great consternation among the massed security agents.

Peres and the Israeli Prime Minister Jitzak Rabin – together in Oslo with PLO leader Jasser Arafat to receive the Nobel Peace Prize – were walking to their hotel after attending a service in the capitol's synagogue. The Jewish sabbath forbade them from making use of the secret service automobiles.

→ At the moment the Israeli minister fell, members of the eight-hundred man security service shouted "Stand still, don't move". The area was immediately searched for possible attackers. Bodyguards helped Peres to his feet. The minister had nothing worse than a bleeding wound near his right eye.

The following fragment is nice for the issue of 'commitment to the normal'. Of all people, the Dutch painter Rob Scholte would not consider himself an ordinary man. He's a creative, even a maverick. But when it comes to telling about the day four months earlier, when he lost his legs to a bomb planted in his car, he's an Anybody.

(55) [*de Volkskrant*, February 11, 1995]

((An interview with the painter Rob Scholte, four months after a bomb planted in his car exploded.))

"When I drove out of the parking spot, I heard three short ticks." He ignored them. He'd hardly turned the corner when something happened that he describes as "a gray, yellow light, it was an implosion".

...

→ "It didn't occur to me that it was a bomb. I thought that the garage had done something wrong. The car hadn't been driven for five days."

(56) [*de Telegraaf*, April 20, 1995]

Bomb attack Oklahoma

Bewildered office personnel were able to save dear life by ducking under a desk or a table, which protected them from flying glass and collapsing ceilings.

→ "I thought that it was an earthquake", said an official of the Department of Agriculture. "I had just ducked under the desk when glass from the windows clattered all around me."

(57) [*NRC Handlesblad*, April 20, 1995]

((re the Oklahoma auto bomb))

"I thought that an earthquake had taken place. I'm used to that because I come from California", said another survivor.

(58) [*de Telegraaf*, September 25, 1995]

Boy (16) murders eleven people in France

Toulon (AFP, DPA) – A sixteen year old boy murdered eleven people and wounded eight others...in the village of Solliès-Pont and the nearby town of Cuers, north of the southern French city of Toulon.

...

[During the night, he killed several of his family members in Solliès-Pont by beating their heads in with a hammer and a cudgel.] After that he went 6 kilometers further to Cuers, where, early in the morning he began to randomly shoot at people on the street.

...

→ A resident of Cuers said that he thought at first that the boy was igniting fireworks, then that he was shooting at pigeons. "Then we saw a man with a wound in his leg."

I would add the following case of an El Al commander whose aircraft began to fall apart, to that of the Vietnam G.I.s in Hawaii (page 151), who hit the ground when firecrackers went off.

(59) [*de Volkskrant*, January 27, 1996]

((A review, including a moment-by-moment account taken from cockpit recordings, of the crash of an El Al Boeing 747 into an apartment building in the Bijlmer on October 4, 1992.))

...[I]n the cockpit of the Boeing the explosions on the right hand side of the aircraft were heard. At the same moment, the craft made several wild, swerving movements. I'm taking over!" cried Fuchs to his co-pilot. While he struggled to regain control of his aircraft, the captain wondered what could have happened. His first thought was that his craft was hit by a rocket, fired by Palestinian terrorists.

→ And how about residents of Sarajevo, not so long ago a war-torn shambles, now a site for making films about that war. The following is a polar opposite to the case cited by Harvey Sacks, where the wrong 'first thought' was that a filming was in progress (page 137). Here, that's what is in fact going on.

(60) [*Friesch Dagblad*, June 29, 1996]

"They're only shooting a film..."

Sarajevo – What is burning in the city center? Why is there a tank with Serbian markings next to the Presidential building? Who put up the barricades again near the former front line? Cars were being stopped by police agents.

Residents of Sarajevo look around them, concerned and wondering.

→ “They’re starting to shoot again”, asks a passerby of an agent. “Yes”, answers the policeman, “a film”.

Sarajevo has become a popular location for making films. Bosnian and French directors have already filmed two movies there this year. This time [it’s] an American crew...

On the other hand, “some” residents of south-east Drenthe in the Netherlands, who “thought that a bomb had fallen” when in fact an earthquake had occurred, come off as perhaps just a bit crankish in the newspaper article which reports those ‘thoughts’. In this particular article, the ‘bomb’ possibility (arrow a) is succeeded by one which, in comparison not only to the reality of the earthquake, but now to the ‘first thought’ of “some” people, is normalcy itself (arrow b).

(61) [*Algemeen Dagblad*, February 21, 1997]

In the Drenthe village Roswinkel fear was everywhere after Wednesday evening’s earthquake.

The KNMI registered 3.4 on the Richter Scale. Never before was a quake of that magnitude measured. The blame is being placed on the Dutch Oil Company. The extraction of gas in that area is considered to be the cause of the quake.

...

(a) → Many concerned telephone calls were received by the police on Wednesday evening. “About a hundred people phoned. Some thought that a bomb had fallen.”, according to Bert Peters of the police in south-east Drenthe.

...

(b) → Eddy Venema from Ter Apel, a village five kilometers further away, didn’t know what had happened to him. “My first thought was that the back part of my building had collapsed.”

And the following fragment can be added to those cases in which credentials are not cited, but an ‘immediacy marker’ is produced (e.g., fragments 24, 25, and 26).

(62) [*de Volkskrant*, March 22, 1997]

Tel Aviv – On the spacious terrace of the popular café A Propos on Ben Gurian Street, a bomb exploded. The huge parasols slammed to the ground, glass flew though the air.

...

[A woman helping clear the damage is interviewed] Because she lived nearby,

→ she heard the explosion and at once ran outside. “I knew immediately that it was an attack”, she said angrily.

And here is yet another case similar to the Vietnam G.I.s (page 151), the Oslo security agents, the El Al commander and the Sarajevo residents of fragments (54), (59) and (60), above.

(63) [*Leeuwarder Courant*, February 6, 1997]

Children with firecrackers cause panic

Jerusalem (AFP) – A small group of children setting off firecrackers was the cause of great consternation yesterday in a shopping center in the northern Israel harbor city of Haifa. The shopping public thought at first that it was an attack, and became panic stricken. A large contingent of police immediately closed off the shopping center until the source of the ‘explosions’ became clear.

And the following fragment joins ranks with the shooting which was applauded as street theater (fragment 30), and the earthquake in the midst of an academy awards rehearsal which was initially taken to be part of the show (fragment 52).

(64) [*Leeuwarder Courant*, March 16, 1998]

Singer dies during performance

London (ANP/DPA) – The Reggae star Judge Dread died Saturday as the result of a heart attack that he suffered during a performance in the British Canterbury. The approximately fifty year old singer, whose real name is Alex Hughes, collapsed at the end of the show. Many in the audience thought that his collapse was part of the performance.

Note, by the way, that in fragment (61) it is reported that “some” people thought an earthquake was a bomb, while in fragment (64) it is reported that “many” thought a singer’s collapse was part of the performance, while in fragment (63), the report has an entire population responding in identical fashion, “The shopping public thought at first that it was an attack...”. The point being that how any of these formulations measure the actual segment of each of the relevant populations is utterly obscure; their work seems to be directed to con-

veying the character of the response; crankish, as conveyed by fragment (61)'s "some", or, say, reasonable under the circumstances as conveyed by fragment (64)'s "many", not to mention fragment (63)'s global characterization, "the shopping public" – to which we might add the characterizations "to a man" in the VietNam G.I.s anecdote and the reference to the New York City-dwellers ducking as "simultaneous" (page 151).

(65) [*de Telegraaf*, December 8, 1999]

Dismay among students after shooting tragedy in Veghel schoolroom
At the Veghel Leigraaf College feelings are dominated by incomprehension. After all, according to the school director R. Martinoh, the suspected shooter, the seventeen-year old Ali D., was not known as an aggressive boy. The director was sitting upstairs in a meeting at around two o'clock in the afternoon when he heard a series of loud reports.

→ "I thought at first that someone was throwing firecrackers", declared a visibly shaken Martinoh. "I immediately ran downstairs. But at the bottom of the staircase, I came across the first victim. In the hall and in the computer area I found the other casualties bleeding on the ground. It was terrible, what I saw ..."

The following fragment, involving yet another earthquake, might also be added to the growing sub-corpus of 'first thoughts' that under different circumstances would be crankish, not to mention paranoid, i.e., the Vietnam G.I.s. and the New York City-dwellers of page 151, and the Oslo security agents, El Al commander, and Sarajevo and Jerusalem residents of fragments (54), (59), (60) and (63); as well, perhaps, as the Tel Aviv resident of fragment (62) with her 'immediacy'-marked report.

(66) [*Algemeen Dagblad*, January 29, 2001]

Victims first thought of a Pakistani bomb

Mahendra Thakker accompanied politicians who visited the disaster area.
→ He told Kinhsuk Nag of *The Times* of India: "When the earthquake started, we took it for an enormous bomb explosion. We thought that Pakistan was making trouble on the Day of the Republic that we were celebrating." Bhu lies on the border with Pakistan.

Having arrived at the year 2001 in my heap of cases, I found one striking absence. I had nothing at all from September 11th. I mentioned that to Gene Lerner, wondering if it was a feature of the event itself, or perhaps how it was covered. Whatever the reason for this gap, Lerner consulted internet, and

emailed back some cases he'd found. Here is just one – I include this particular one because it resembles my own experience with the event.¹²

(67) [*Marietta Times*, September 15, 2001]

→ I was in the shower that morning and my wife told me about what happened," Hugh Hopper, 66, of Marietta, said. "At first I thought it was just a small plane that accidentally hit the building and I told my wife, 'Don't let it bother you. Those buildings can't come down.'"

A half a year later, Pomerantz sent me an e-mail with yet another member of the Vietnam G.I.s in Hawaii, et al., sub-set. This, now, involving a New Yorker.

(68) [E-mail from Anita Pomerantz, March 11, 2002]

→ TV coverage of a fire at a tire dump – big flames in the background. Some young guy was interviewed. They only had one line of his: "I thought it was a terrorist."

What does that say about normal these days?

And finally, the two most recent additions; in 2002, the Washington, D.C. snipers (at the time that the article excerpted in fragment (69) appeared, still being treated as a single "shooter"), and in 2003, the space shuttle Columbia disaster.

(69) [*Algemeen Dagblad*, October 21, 2002]

Shooter for the first time active in the weekend

The uncapturable sharpshooter who has terrorized the Washington, D.C. area for almost three weeks, struck for the first time on a weekend. A 37-year old man was hit in the stomach on Saturday evening on the parking lot of a highway restaurant, 140 kilometers south of the American capitol. He was taken to a hospital in critical condition.

→ The attack took place in front of the Ponderosa Steakhouse, where the victim and his wife had been eating. "I heard a bang like an automobile exhaust sometimes makes. My husband was able to take three more steps before he collapsed", according to the deeply shocked wife.

(70) [CNN, February 1, 2003]

((Texas witness to the space shuttle Columbia disaster))

"I live by the railroad tracks, and at first I thought a train had blown up."

Just one more. Although I hadn't planned on adding any further cases after the book went into the final stages of preparation, this one was just too rich to ignore:

(71) [*Algemeen Dagblad*, January 14, 2004]

((At lunch break, a high school student walks into the school's crowded cafeteria and shoots a teacher in the head))

'The master lay in a pool of blood'

→ Den Haag – They heard a bang and thought that rowdies (*rotjongens*) were at it again with fireworks. When youngsters began screaming and running, they looked around. To their astonishment they saw [vice-principal and economics teacher] Hans van Wieren lying on the ground. Around his head, a pool of blood. "A teacher shouted 'Call 112, call 112!' But I was too nervous to grab my mobile phone", says Fatoush Benkalid, a pupil at Terra College, who was witness to the tragedy in the school canteen.

→ Van Wieren was shot in the head from close range. According to witnesses, by Murat, a 17-year old pupil in the vocational middle school. "Before the bang I heard people behind me shouting 'Joke, joke'. I think everyone thought that the pistol was fake", says [Fatoush's] friend Mimoush Handi.

And so on...

Notes

* Between 1970 and 1995 I presented versions of this paper any number of times. I've never wanted to publish it; for one, the matter of authorship is problematic – Harvey Sacks had so much to do with it, And secondly, it became a sort of pet. I didn't want to let go of it; just kept piling up instances over the years. But this collection is the obvious place for it to appear – if anything is a First Generation paper, this one, with its materials spanning almost four decades, is.

1. Note that the account of the policeman's response to the call is built into the report, i.e., the emergency number is "new" – perhaps some people have been treating it as a new toy, placing joking calls for help. Furthermore, the account is pre-positioned and thus comes off as a 'description', as 'setting the scene', rather than, e.g., a 'defense'.

2. While in fragment (4), that a facility is "new" serves as a possible account of a wrong 'first thought', here it may be that this particular wrong 'first thought', about a car towed away by the police, would not have been reported in the paper at all had it not been tied to something newsworthy (about which there is no reported 'first thought'), i.e., the introduction of "new" higher fines.

3. A noticeable difference between Sacks' clippings and mine is that, although he now lived and worked in Los Angeles, he subscribed to the New York Times (see fragments 2, 3, 4, 6, and 9), while I contented myself with the local rag, the Los Angeles Times.

4. The wrong 'first thought' in this case is, in a sense, doubly accounted for. In the first place, Samuel, the recipient of the voice of the Lord is a child, who couldn't be expected to know any better. Secondly, we get a similar sort of pre-positioned account as that of fragment

(4). Here, we are specifically advised that this was a time when such occurrences were rare (and thus not even the adult, Eli, would be prepared for it): "And the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision." (Had my first encounter with the text been the version which appears above, I would not have known what to make of it. As it happens, I first encountered it in a Dutch bible; roughly translated: "In those days the word of the Lord was scarce; there were not many visions.", which I took to be a reference to the rarity of such apparitions. I recently checked with the American Standard Version of the Holy Bible, and got "...there was no frequent vision.", and the Artscroll's Stone Edition of the Tanach sent to me by Jenny Mandelbaum, has it as "vision (i.e., prophecy) was not widespread." And incidentally, the Artscroll version has, not that "Eli perceived...", but the verb discussed by Sacks (page 6), i.e., that "Eli realized...").

5. These materials begin to resonate with the 'fishing device' considered by Anita Pomerantz (1980:186–198). Roughly, such things as accounts can be elicited from a coparticipant, by reporting one's own experience of the coparticipant's circumstances. For example, "Your line was busy" routinely gets such responses as "Oh I was talking to so-and-so". This, in contrast to, e.g., the 'correction invitation device' (Sacks 1992, Vol. I:21–23, 380–381), where such information is elicited from a coparticipant by making a guess, e.g., "Were you talking to Larry?"; "No, I was talking to...".

6. Fragments taken from the newspapers *de Volkskrant*, *Algemeen Dagblad*, *de Telegraaf*, and *Leeuwarder Courant*, and from the television broadcast of *Nederland 1*, are roughly translated from the Dutch.

7. One of these two friends of mine was the late Jim Schenkein, in many ways a maverick, but his instantaneous response on that occasion was identical to that of my other friend, a far more conventionally-oriented person.

8. In his book *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry* (1972:15), J. Allen Hynek reports "...my work with UFO reporters of high caliber indicate (sic) that they wish to see or to explain their observations in terms of the familiar. A typical statement is: 'At first I thought it might be an accident up ahead on the road – the lights looked something like flasher beacons on squad cars. Then I realized that the lights were too high, and then I thought maybe it was an airplane in trouble coming in for a crash landing with power off, since I didn't hear any sound. Then I realized it was no aircraft.'" For Hynek, "this process of going from the simple, quick description and explanation, step by step, to the realization that no conventional description would suffice (escalation of hypotheses)" argues powerfully that the many UFO reporters who employ it are not cranks (p. 15). As it happens, 17 of the 70 relevant fragments in this paper resonate with Hynek's "process of going from the simple, quick description and explanation, step by step, to the realization that no conventional description would suffice", to which he gives the elegant title, "escalation of hypotheses". Specifically, we find as a recurrent – although far from defining feature of the 'at first I thought' phenomenon, reference to what it was that *occasioned* the shift from 'ordinary first thought' to 'extraordinary realization' (See fragments 3, 7, 8, 10, 13, 16, 37, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 51, 52, 58, 63, and 65). Only two of those cases, however, converge with Hynek's "typical statement", with its series of escalating possibilities – *fragment 9* (a multi-stepped report by a witness of an air disaster; step 1 "I thought it was a lightning strike", step 2, "Then you think that a tank-truck exploded.", with no mention of how she came to realize that an airliner had crashed) and

fragment 15 (a multi-stepped report by a witness to a series of random shootings; step 1, “[he] said that he thought at first that the boy was igniting fireworks”, step 2, “then that he was shooting at pigeons.”; and step 3, “Then we saw a man with a wound in his leg.”) In the rest, we find reference to a *single, decisive feature* of the situation; that feature – perhaps recognizably, relevantly for production purposes – being adequate for realization. Even Mr. Derek Mansell, UFO research officer for Contact International UK, who might well qualify as one of Hynek’s “UFO reporters of high caliber”, offers, with his “I thought it was an aircraft at first...but an aircraft could never have shot upwards like that so quickly.”; a one-step, single-feature-adequate/decisive move from the ordinary ‘first thought’ to the extraordinary ‘realization’ (see fragment 42). (Of course it’s possible that in the various newspaper articles, the serial character of the arrival at realization has been edited out – which itself would be interesting; that would mean that across time and in various cultures news personnel take it that one step is adequate/decisive. But then, that would mean that their readership accepts one step as adequate, which would suggest that the persons making the quoted statements – presumably members of the population for which the articles are written – did offer the reported one-step adequate/decisive accounts.)

9. I just want to note, without knowing what to make of it, that in fragments (44), (46) and (47), Agents Greer, Ready and Bennett provide immediacy markers – in each case, not for a perception, but for an action: “I immediately pushed the accelerator to the floor”, “I immediately turned to my rear trying to locate the source”, and “I immediately looked [away] from the right/crowd/physical area/ and looked towards the President”, respectively.

10. From the Kennedy assassination to teenage dating practices! From the monumental to the miniscule. But, given teenagers’ attentiveness to normalcy, it’s not surprising that in the teenage-talk Sacks was examining, such a device showed up. (In this case, the device was used for a change from the usual smooching venue, the guy’s car, to a guest-house in back of the girl’s family home.)

11. As with the case of Samuel and Eli in fragment (15), what we have here is a double; an ‘ordinary’ first thought by one person, followed by an extraordinary next by someone else. However, in this case the extraordinary next goes beyond the facts of the matter, and resonates with the anecdote about the Vietnam G.I.s on leave in Hawaii (page 151) in the sense that the man who provides the extraordinary next has just been confronted with an altered reality, the Atomic Age.

12. My reaction to the earliest computer graphics on CNN – at about 10:20 a.m. New York time, 3:20 p.m. over here – was that the scale was altogether wrong. They were showing some huge thing that would have to have been maybe a Boeing 747, but the early descriptions of the aircraft were of a “private plane”, which I took to be something like a little Cessna.

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