

## A Note on Resolving Ambiguity

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*Rinsumageest*

Just about twenty years ago, working on materials in which people talk about their troubles, I came across a possible phenomenon: Someone inadvertently produces an ambiguous utterance, then attempts to disambiguate it without speaking explicitly. Although it was clear to me that something like that was going on, I found that I had no analytic resources to develop a case for it. I gave a talk to some colleagues at the University of Manchester, presenting the phenomenon as something intriguing but that my conversation analytic resources gave me no handle on, and was told in no certain terms that my much-vaunted conversation analytic methods had utterly failed to handle it. They're a lively bunch! Even agreement turns into open warfare. At some point, someone suggested that we just go have a drink. So ended my presentation.

Since that time I've every now and then come across another candidate case (and although the original instances occurred in the materials I happened to be investigating at that time, the phenomenon is not exclusive to troubles-talk). Recently I took another shot at it—not that I can handle the thing any better now than I could twenty years ago—but just trying to suggest that such a phenomenon might exist, and that this or that fragment of data might comprise an instance of it.

Perhaps Robert Hopper's phrase "roughing up the ground" best describes what I'm up to.

I'll start out with a few fragments in which it seems to me that one participant has produced a characterizably problematic utterance, then resolves the problem, whereupon a recipient produces an appropriate next utterance.

- (1) [Goodwin:60:C:1-2]  
 ((Two women at a block party, chatting about college days and characters they have known.))
- 1 Lauren: We had this one girl she w'z from Flo:rida. Un  
 2 I swear t'Go::d, she wannid t'be on the bes'  
 3 dress' list.  
 4 (0.4)
- 5 Lauren: En'er parents apparently weren'even that  
 6 wealthy. En she wen'out'n she bought tons of  
 7 clothes so she c'd be on th'bes'dres-She even  
 8 → came t'college inna pegnoi:r se:t.  
 9 (0.2)
- 10 Lauren: → Y'know. u-mean who goes tih college inna with a=  
 11 Tanzi: → =[Who even o:wms] one.right?  
 12 Lauren: [ pegnoir set.]

Problematic here is that Lauren seems to be describing a young woman's arrival on a college campus wearing a negligee ("in a pegnoir set", Lines 7-8). There may be good grounds for Tanzi to figure that Lauren means to be saying something less drastic, that is, that the young woman brought with her, among her "tons of clothes," a pegnoir set. She didn't arrive "in" one, but "with" one. The story structure itself may be angled toward the less drastic alternative; a story about someone showing up on campus wearing a negligee would probably look different from the start. On the other hand, funny things do happen at college. So, Tanzi may be holding off taking a position.

We may be seeing Lauren discovering her error as she recycles the punchline with its problematic "in a" and immediately thereafter produces the problem-resolving "with a" ("I mean who goes to college in a with a", Line 10).

Whereupon Tanzi produces a next utterance appropriate to the "with a" alternative, addressing herself to the ostentation of having such a thing rather than, say, the brazenness of wearing it. And this is 'whereupon' in a strong sense. Not just somewhere afterwards, but immediately upon the occurrence of the clarifying phrase.

- Lauren: who goes tih college inna witha □  
 Tanzi: □ Who even o:wms one.

While the problem in the preceding fragment does have to do with alternatives, it doesn't involve the sort of ambiguity I'll be focusing on, where a single item could mean one thing or another.

The following two fragments do involve that sort of ambiguity. As in the preceding fragment, immediately upon the occurrence of disambiguation, we get an appropriate next utterance.<sup>1</sup>

The first of the two fragments comes out of a telephone conversation between two men on duty at different locations during the 1964 Anchorage, Alaska, earthquake. They refer to each other by their locations: "City" is the Anchorage fire department and "Elmondorf" is an outlying army base. They've been connected by a short circuit in the telephone system, and have taken the opportunity for a chat. In this course of that chat, the following occurs:

- (2) [FD:Finger:2-3]
- 1 E'dorf: D'you know w't-w't kinda news'ere broadcastin'  
 2 down'n th'States et (.) pres'nt?  
 3 City: I: heard d'fir:st  
 4 Squawk: [ xxxxxxxx ] [xx] [xxxxxx]  
 5 City: [----- (2.0) -----] [The  
 6 firs'one thet dey uh, (0.7) broadcas' w'z sixty  
 7 tuh thr-  
 8 E'dorf: [Ver loud'n clear Muldoon Tower,  
 9 (2.0)  
 10 E'dorf: Pard'n?  
 11 City: I heard d' firs'broadcas' Stateside,  
 12 Squawk: [(xx)] x [xxxxxx]  
 13 E'dorf: [Justa minnit.  
 14 (1.4)  
 15 E'dorf:→ Go'head.  
 16 (1.9)  
 17 E'dorf:→ Go'head.  
 18 (0.2)  
 19 E'dorf:→ Ci\_ty,  
 20 City: [Ye-u- ah heard d'firs'broadcas'state det deh  
 21 w'z bout sixty t'three hunner'dea:d 'n (0.4) city  
 22 of Anch'rage is on dih grou:n'

Just as City starts to answer Elmondorf's question, a squawk box on the Elmondorf side starts up with a report from Muldoon air field (Lines 1-4). And we can watch City's work by reference to the squawk box. He initially drops out (lines 3-4) and then, perhaps because he gets no indication from his coparticipant that he should maintain his silence, he may take it that someone else on duty is handling it, and he starts up again (Lines 3-6). But it turns out that his coparticipant is handling the squawk box, and interrupts him to respond

<sup>1</sup> These two fragments and my discussions of them are taken from Jefferson (1986).

to it (Lines 5–8). And City drops out, remaining silent until he’s invited back by Elmondorf’s “Pardon?”, to which he responds immediately (Lines 8–11).

That City hears Elmondorf’s “Pardon?” as directed to him and not to Muldoon Tower may be, at least in part, because “Pardon?” is a ‘conversational’ object, in strong contrast to the instrumental “You’re loud and clear” with which Elmondorf responded to the squawk box.

But again, just as City gets going the squawk box starts up, and Elmondorf, again with a conversational object, “Just a minute,” indicates that City should drop out and give the squawk box priority (Lines 10–14).

Now comes what I’m proposing to be the ambiguity. In his next utterance, Elmondorf uses “Go ahead,” which is both conversational and instrumental. This may generate a problem for City: which of them is being told to “Go ahead,” he or Muldoon tower? And it appears that Elmondorf comes to see that there is a problem and what the problem is. After two such invitations go unanswered, he shifts to a non ambiguous item, naming his selected coparticipant: “City”. Whereupon City responds—and ‘whereupon’ in a very strong sense, that is, after the first syllable of the identificatory word:<sup>2</sup>

- 1 E’dorf: Go’head.  
 2 (1.9)  
 3 E’dorf: Go’head,  
 4 (0.2)  
 5 E’dorf: Ci  
 6 City: □ yē-ə- ah heard. . .

In the following fragment, the “whereupon” feature may be really exquisite. And for this fragment I’m preserving the initial consonant and vowel of the actual names of two of the participants, Jesse and Joan, in order to show just how delicate this business may be.

The fragment is taken from a group therapy session for teenagers. This particular session is being observed from a room behind a one-way mirror.

(3) [GTS:I:2:19:R:5]

((Jesse is reporting a success with his parents; they have stopped interrogating him about his comings and goings.))

- 1 Jesse: Nob’d<sup>dy</sup> sez inning yih jis keep °whha:lkin’ °.  
 2 hh °yihknow °  
 3 (0.2)

<sup>2</sup> Jefferson, (1986), the whole point of the exercise was that one cannot be certain that City starts to talk by reference to “Ci” and not by reference to the prior “Go ahead,” his response merely incidentally occurring at a “recognition point” for the identificatory word. The same reservation, on an even finer scale, holds for Fragment 3.

- 4 Jesse: it’s °↑bghuggin° ↓mhhe(h)now [ hm hm ]  
 5 Joan: [↑Don’ta llk tih them  
 6 talk t’u:s:..  
 3 (1.3)  
 8 Jesse: No. (.) th- (0.4) drapes er closed now I c’n see  
 9 through that liddle crack et th’window over there  
 10 (2.0)  
 11 David:→ Yer very ↑°conscious’v° th’m being in the:re.  
 12 Je sse.  
 13 Joan: → [He keeps: [↑talk [in’↓there. ]  
 14 Jesse: [°ih° [ It doesn’ ] rilly bother me,

This may be a very touchy moment. Joan having raised the issue of observers in the first place, (Lines 5–6), it is possible that David’s remark (Line 11) is addressed to her. Indeed, the appending of Jesse’s name by David may be directed to clearing such a possible ambiguity, similarly to Elmondorf’s work in Fragment 2 with his shift from “Go ahead,” and Lauren’s work in Fragment 1 with her shift from “in a” to “with a.”

(But whereas Lauren’s shift, involving as it does a mid utterance substitution, is clearly a self-repair, Elmondorf’s is less obviously a matter of repair, in that after a bit of silence he produces a legitimate next component for a single utterance, that is, “Go ahead (0.2) City.” And David’s shift is even less obviously a matter of repair, coming off as a through produced sentence-utterance with the disambiguating name in tag position: “You’re very conscious of them being in there Jesse.” We’re left with some intonational details, the standard ending intonation of “in the:re.,” which might lead us to wonder if the disambiguating “Jesse” was not appended to a completed sentence-utterance specifically in order to resolve a just discovered ambiguity.)

And, similarly to City in Fragment 2, Joan could be monitoring for which of the two candidate addressees (in this case, which of the two who have shown themselves to be “conscious of them being in there”) is being addressed.

But the recognition work in this case would have to be a bit finer than that proposed for City in Fragment 2, because in this case the name of the other candidate addressee starts with the same consonant as does Joan’s. Involved in this case, then, would be response upon occurrence of the crucial differentiating vowel, at which point, and no sooner, selection is achieved. And it is at just that point that Joan launches a next utterance appropriate to Jesse’s being the one addressed by David:

- David: Yer very °↑conscious’v° th’m being in the:re.  
 Je □ He...  
 Joan:

And that is 'whereupon' in a very fine sense.

In the following four fragments, the circumstances become murkier. In each of them it seems to me that someone, having produced an ambiguous utterance, then tries to achieve disambiguation without the sort of explicitness found in the prior materials. That failing, in three of the four we do get—perhaps specifically as a last resort—a disambiguating utterance.

In the first of the four—a leisurely conversation between two neighbors, Reva and Jane, in the laundry room of their apartment building—the talk has turned to an allergy that Jane's husband is suffering from. At some point thereafter, the following occurs:

(4) [Gold:MS:16-17]

- 1 Reva: En it's annoying. 'cause you-jih-you-you figure  
 2 you nevuh had it befaw 'n all'v a sahd'n yih  
 3 getting all dih sy:mptoms,  
 4 Jane: [ °Mm:, ° [ nYah I know.  
 5 (1.0)  
 6 Jane: I think it has a lo:t t'do wih tha:t.  
 7 (1.2)  
 8 Jane: En the fa:ct thet (.) they don't know what eez  
 9 allergic to yet.=  
 10 Reva: =Ih makes (a ),  
 11 (0.4)  
 12 Jane: °( )°  
 13 (0.6)  
 14 Reva: → En my sistuh call'me today she siz to me how is  
 15 → ev'rything out the:re how is it is ev'ry thing  
 16 unduh control?  
 17 (0.4)  
 18 Reva: → Ah sid I guess it is the planes ah le(h)nding I  
 19 say I don'knoh:.  
 20 Jane: uh-huh eh-heh eh-heh.

Reva presents her sister's question as a multi component utterance, "How is everything out there, how is it, is everything under control?" (Lines 14–16). This may be a faithful rendering of her sister's words. It may also comprise serial attempts by Reva to disambiguate what she has come to see as a possible reference to some sort of illness-related problem topically coherent with the prior talk, when what she intends to be referring to is a dramatic but short-lived strike by the city's air traffic control personnel. (In the first place, "out there" may be fitted to a trouble of the area in general, in contrast to, e.g., "with you." And perhaps at the subsurface, poetics level, "is everything under control" came to be produced via its resonance with air traffic control.)

In this case, activities that may be attendant to a problem and its solution are embedded in bland colloquy; Reva quoting an exchange between her and her sister consisting of a multicomponent question and a similarly constructed answer (Lines 14–19), in which one component of the answer, "the planes are la(h)anding," happens to be an explicit reference to the topic; Jane responding, not thereupon, but after a next component, "I say I don't kno:w" (which, contributing nothing substantive may work as a recompleter), with a mild laugh (Line 20) that, although it occurs at a distance from the disambiguating component may yet be fitted to it, given the laugh particle in "la(h)anding."

So although matters in Fragment 4 are worked out in a more dilatory fashion than in the prior three fragments, there is still some evidence of a problem and its solution—for both speaker and recipient.

In contrast to the foregoing where, in the first three fragments we have the recipients' 'whereupon' responses and in the fourth, a response that, although not immediately 'thereupon,' may yet show its relationship to the solution-bearing component, in the remaining three fragments we lose the recipient as a resource. As far as I can tell, their responses are completely opaque for the problem-solution issue.

The following fragment and its consideration is taken from the work I did on troubles-talk and is one of the cases in which I first noticed the possible phenomenon (Jefferson & Lee, 1980).

The situation is this: The adolescent son of divorced parents has driven down from Palo Alto where he lives with his father, to visit his mother in Los Angeles. At some point in the visit, his car is vandalized. He's left the car with his mother and is flying home unbeknown to his father who is expecting his arrival by car and has phoned the mother to find out his son's estimated time of arrival, only to be given the news.

(5) [MDE:MTRAC:60-1:2:R:1-2]

- 1 Sheila: Hello:?  
 2 Monty: Hi: Sheila?  
 3 Sheila: ↑YA:H<  
 4 Monty: How are you.  
 5 Sheila: ↑FI:NE.  
 6 (.)  
 7 Sheila: Did JOEY GET HOME YET?  
 8 Monty: I w'z wondering wen'e left.  
 9 (0.3)  
 10 Sheila: °'t'hh° Uh(d) did ↑OH:.h Yer nod in  
 11 on wut ha:penhhnt.  
 12 Monty: No(h)o (wut he-)  
 13 Sheila: [He's flying.  
 14 (0.2)

- 15 Sheila: En Nadine [Joe's girlfriend] is going to meet  
 16 im: =Becuz the ↑TOP w'z ripped o:ff'v iz  
 17 car which is tih say someb'ddy helped th'mselfs.  
 18 Monty: Stolen.  
 19 (0.5)  
 20 Sheila: Stolen.=Right out'n front'v my house.  
 21 Monty: °Oh fer c:rying out loud° En eez not g'nna- eez  
 22 not g'nna bring it ba↑:ck?  
 23 Sheila: 'h No so it's parked in: thih gihrage c'z it w'z  
 24 so damn ↑co:ld. <and ez a mattuh fac' snowing  
 25 on the Ridge Route.  
 26 (0.4)  
 27 Sheila: hhh So I ↑took him↑ to the airpor' he couldn't  
 28 buy a ticket.  
 29 (0.7)  
 30 Sheila: Bē- he c'd only get on sta:n'by.  
 31 (0.4)  
 32 Monty: Uh hu: h,  
 33 Sheila: [En I left him there et abayou:t noo:n.  
 34 (0.5)  
 35 Monty: Uh ha:h.  
 36 (0.5)  
 37 Sheila: Ayund uh,h  
 38 (0.4)  
 39 Monty: Wut's 'e gun'do go dow:n pick it up later? er  
 40 someth'n like [ey- B't that's ↑AW ] ↓f'l  
 41 Sheila: [hh[ His friend- ]  
 42 Sheila: Yeh [ his °friend S t e e-° ]  
 43 Monty: → [ (Boy) that really makes] me ma:d,  
 44 (0.4)  
 45 Sheila: 'hhh Oh it's dis↑gusti'ng iz a mattera'f, a:ct.  
 46 Monty: → [P o o r J o e y.]  
 47 Sheila: I- I:, I ↑told my ↑ki:ds- who do this: down et  
 48 the Drug Coalition ah want th'TO:P ↓ba:ckhh.  
 49 (1.1)  
 50 Sheila: ↑SEND OUT THE WO:rd. hh°hkhuhh°  
 51 (0.3)  
 52 Monty: Yeah.  
 53 (0.3)  
 54 Sheila: Bu:t (.) hhghuh: his frien'Ste:ve en Brian er  
 55 driving up.  
 56 (.)  
 57 Sheila: right after::< (0.3) school is out. En then hill  
 58 drive dow:n here with the:m.  
 59 Monty: Oh I see  
 60 Sheila: So: in the long run 'hhh it (.) probly's g'nna  
 61 Save a liddle time 'n: energy.  
 62 Monty: Okay

As Sheila described what happened, Monty exhibits what seems to be more concern for the car than concern for his son; for example, his response to Sheila's initial announcement, "He's not going to bring it back?" (Lines 21–22), his non response to her report of icy cold weather in which Joe would have to be driving in a car without its convertible top (Lines 24–26), and his non and minimal responses to her report of Joe's troubles at the airport (Lines 27–32).

Which is to say, Monty's treatment of Sheila's report raises as a possible issue that the boy has been irresponsible, simply abandoning a problem as adolescents are wont do do .

Focusing on the arrowed series of assessments, the initial one, "But that's awful." (Line 40), may be an attempt to repair what might look like a display of more interest in the car's return than in the boy's circumstances. It occurs immediately after a statement of concern for the car's return, prior to completion of the utterance in which that statement is packaged: "What's he going to do, go down and pick it up later? Or something like ey- But that's awful." (Lines 39–40). In that rapid juxtaposition is an echo of Fragment 1 with Lauren's shift from "in a" to "with a." And as Lauren may there be discovering her error, Monty, hearing himself expressing concern for the car (for the second time, cf. "And he's not going to bring it back?", Lines 21–22), may be discovering the infelicitous direction of his concern, attempting to repair that with a self-interruptive display of concern for the boy.

However, the assessment he uses is non selective; it could apply to either concern. And following on the heels of an expression of concern for the car as it does, it might conceivably be heard as assessing his son's abandonment of the vandalized car.

As it happens, Monty's assessment occurs in overlap with something Sheila has started to say (Lines 41–42). She, having cut off her overlapped utterance, minimally acknowledges Monty's talk with "Yeh" and starts again, now overlapped by his next assessment, which starts up immediately after her "Yeh" (Lines 42–43).

The "Yeh" is at best no help to Monty in deciding if his initial assessment has been heard by reference to the vandalism or to his son's irresponsibility. At worst, it may be weighted toward the latter, hearable as Sheila, in the interests of keeping the peace, accepting—if most minimally—his assessment of the boy's (and her own) handling of the situation.

And conceivably it is in response to the non- or wrongly committal "Yeh" that Monty makes a next attempt at disambiguation. But, as in Fragments 2 and 4, rather than producing something more selective of one or the other relevant alternatives than was his "But that's awful," he offers another item of the same sort, "(Boy) that really makes me mad" (Line 43) cf. Elmondorf's repeated "Go ahead" and Reva's added ". . . how is it, is everything under control?" And it may be that the offering of a same or similar item can alert a

recipient to a problem in their response to the initial item while preserving non explicit reference.

But in this case, whereas, for example, an expression of anger on his *son's* behalf such as "Boy I bet he's mad" might not only have done such re-offering work but could have fostered selection of the vandalism alternative, Monty's expressing his *own* anger allows for (and perhaps even promotes) selection of the irresponsible-kid alternative.

And given the persistent bivalence of the talk so far, Sheila's concurring "Oh it's disgusting" (Line 45), which does not select for one or the other alternative but refers to whatever "it" is that Monty is referring to, could at least possibly be concurring with his prior utterance as an assessment of the boy's abandonment of the car and not the vandalism.

For Monty's assessments and Sheila's concurrence to be unequivocally understood as addressing the vandalism and not the boy's behavior, we need to refer to and rely upon our shared knowledge of the conventional proprieties—for example, that a father cares more about the welfare of his son than about a chunk of Detroit metal—and assume that the speaker and his recipient share those proper concerns.

It appears that in this case the father does not feel able to depend upon those conventional proprieties for deciding how his ex wife is hearing what he's saying, or for him to decide what she is saying.

And what occurs next is an utterly explicit utterance that resolves any possible ambiguity, "Poor Joey." (Line 46).

This utterance is positioned in just the way Pomerantz described for second assessments, that is, with "minimization of gap between its initiation and prior turn's completion"; in this case, as in several of those she showed, occurring in slight overlap (Pomerantz, 1984):

Sheila:           Oh it's disgusti ng  
Monty:   [ Poor Joey.

That is to say, as a sequential object "Poor Joey" comes off as an understanding/agreeing response to Sheila's utterance, and not at all as some sort of repair.

Nevertheless I would argue that "Poor Joey" is indeed some sort of repair; this expression of pity, so unlike the sort of talk that Monty has been producing throughout the interaction, being enlisted specifically to resolve the as-yet-unresolved ambiguity.

In armchair-psychological terms, "Poor Joey" may have been generated out of the fact that Monty does blame his son and is in fact angered by the boy's just walking away from the vandalized car, and thus can hear his own words and those of his recipient as at best not clearly enough *not* blaming the boy. It may

be that he has found himself forced to produce something so drastically over solicitous to make himself heard through the crescendo of blame that has only intensified with each next utterance.

The following fragment also involves the relational-pair categories parent-child, with the attendant conventional proprieties. Again the disambiguation does not come off as a 'solution' or 'repair', and again the recipient's responses are inscrutable.

Here's the situation. Christmas is approaching. Two young mothers, Ann and Linda, are chatting on the telephone and talk has turned to presents for the kids. Ann has already bought some for her own kids, and also some for Linda's kids. At one point she's remarked that "what I've got for them there's no way you're going to be able . . . to get it in your car", which sounds pretty impressive.

As the fragment begins, Linda is asking what Steven, one of Ann's children, wants for Christmas. To Ann's "I don't know" she responds "I don't know either" (Lines 1-5); that is, she speaks of herself as a candidate gift giver in search of the right gift (and perhaps something pretty special) for her friend's little boy.

- (6) [TCI (b) :16:25-26]
- 1 Linda: So:: ↑What'd Stev'n ↓wa::nt.  
2 (0.2)
- 3 Ann: 'hhhhhh Oh::(m) 'tch I: don't know,  
4 Linda: [ 'tch I don't  
5 know eether. [ I  
6 Ann: [(B't) he keeps tellin' yihknow  
7 before he mentioned thet he said he wannid uh  
8 (.) 'tch a tra::ctor.  
9 Linda: [ Mhm,  
10 Ann: [ 'hhhh En, I don'know'f they have those liddle  
11 To:nka things? b't he's go-ot two a'these (.)  
12 grader uh not graders b't tra:ctor things  
13 out here.  
14 Linda: [ Y e a : : h?  
15 Ann: [ 'hhhh An'that's a'only thing yihknow  
16 he kept telling s- u- Donna one day she went with  
17 me tih the store en she stayed in th- car with  
18 th'kids en then I 'hh-'hh did the sa:me fer he:r,  
19 → 'hhhh a:n' uh:m sh- 't she said thet s- Steven  
20 said he wannid the tra:ctor.=  
21 Ann: → [= hhhh (h) y (h) ihkno (h) w ]=  
22 Linda: [ M m : : : . . ]

- 23 Ann: → = 'hh Oh that's ni:ce hhuh heh heh heh h<sub>[uh- ù ]</sub>  
 24 Linda: [heh he] h=  
 25 Ann: → =He ain't gett'n one, heh<sub>[heh]</sub> hhhh hh=  
 26 Linda: [Ye: a h .]  
 27 Ann: =Bu:t. I don't know I rilly(d) (0.2) 'p'hhh He's  
 28 so ha:rd. tuh figure out (.) what tih git  
 29 im<sub>[this year]</sub>  
 30 Linda: [ eYea:h.]  
 •  
 • ((ca 8 lines omitted, in the same vein))  
 •  
 38 Ann: I got im a lotta things tih jis:siddo:wn  
 39 en:  
 40 Linda: [Ye:a:h.=  
 41 Ann: = 'pk en do things. I do:n't I don'know I really  
 42 don't wannim tuh hhave a lotta stuff . . .  
 43 So::(m) 'tlk 'hhh I don't know just (0.2) ga::me  
 44 yihknow books'n:: stu<sub>[ff he c'n]</sub> do stuff 'hh  
 45 Linda: [M m : : .] [ Yeah.

Linda as candidate gift giver in search of a gift for Steven may be what sets up the ambiguity problem here. When Ann does mention something Steven really wants, a toy tractor (Lines 16–20), one question might be whether Linda is listening to the anecdote that that information is embedded in as a story recipient or as an information seeker. And what may be happening in Ann's series of utterances following "Steven said he wanted the tractor" is an attempt to convey to Linda that she's neither to run out and buy the kid a tractor nor to feel accountable for not doing so, without saying so in so many words. (While Ann might have avoided the whole problem by simply not mentioning the story of Steven's telling their friend Donna that he wanted a tractor, she might forsee Donna's mentioning it to Linda and be trying to head off whatever problems that might entail.)

Ann's initial attempt to defuse "Steven said he wanted the tractor," a don't take this seriously marker, the laughing recompleter "(h)y(h)ou kno(h)w" is overlapped by Linda's simultaneous appreciative "Mm::." To the mention of the tractor (Lines 21–22). (That the next place Linda produces that sort of utterance is at the fragment's end, when Ann summarizes the foregoing talk by mentioning some things that she'd like Steven to have, "So, I don't know, just game you know, books and stuff" (Lines 43–45) suggests that its initial occurrence might also be produced as a "response to a gift suggestion" made to her by Ann.)

Ann's next attempt, her ironic self-quoted response to the storied announcement that Steven wants a tractor, "Oh that's nice huh heh heh heh" is received by Linda with a little laugh (Lines 23–24).

That is, Linda's responses give no indication that she sees herself off the hook when it comes to the toy tractor.

Ann's problem here may be the reverse of Monty's in Fragment 5. That is, whereas Monty may be not at all sure that the conventional proprieties are working for him so that he'll be understood to be more concerned for the boy than for the car, Ann may be discovering that the conventional proprieties are working too well, that she's not being heard as *not* wanting her child to have the toy he so much wants for Christmas.

And it is, perhaps, therefore that we get the disambiguating "He ain't getting one, heh heh" (Line 25).

I have a feeling that this utterance is as uncharacteristically callous as Monty's "Poor Joey" in fragment 5 is uncharacteristically solicitous. But in this case the callousness may specifically be produced to be taken lightly, not only with the appended laughter, but with the "ain't." She's to be heard as doing 'talking tough to get a point across.' And a bit further on, the possible callousness of "He ain't getting one" is shown to have been a matter of motherly concern; that instead of toys, she'd prefer him to have game books; things that promote activity (see Lines 41–44).

A quick note about "ain't." I've transcribed two phone calls between these two women; this very long one (ca 45 minutes) and another, shorter one. This is the only occurrence of "ain't." All other utterances that *could* be done with "ain't" are done with standard syntax.<sup>3</sup> Not long after I'd put together an earlier draft of this exercise, I began watching coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial. Several times I heard "ain't" used in the way Ann uses it. And in some instances, the "ain't" was embedded in language a cut above the ordinary. For example:

(6.a.) [TV news, caught in passing]  
 ((Cindy Adams, New York Post columnist))

Adams:→ If there's a better system anywhere I ain't found it yet. But there's something inherently wrong with what's happening in this case.

(6.b.) [CNBC Special Report, 4-24-95]  
 ((Manny Medrano, commentator, asked about the

<sup>3</sup> For example (and these are all by Ann):[TCI(b):16] p. 1, "I'm not g'nna have it done.", p. 15, "I'm not worryin' about it.", p.57, "It's not rilly like a cowboy thing", p. 60, "that's not yours," p. 79, "he's not doing that." [TCI(c):12] p. 5, "We're not answering.," p. 13, "yer not talking tuh someb'ddy:...."

feasibility of using professional jurors.))  
 Medrano:→ That also (.) ain't gonna happen f' the feeruh-r-  
 f' The reason that it rilly flies in the face of  
 Constitutional protections,

And just recently, looking through some medical data collected in 1992, I came across a physician making similar use of "ain't."

(6.c.) [HospSite:PIS:8-27-92:21-22]  
 ((Senior attending physician Slater is commenting on intern Fitch's suggestion that a patient be scheduled for a "psych consult"))  
 Slater: It ↑might be worth it 'cause . . . it might be  
 Y'know kind of an unstable mo<sub>0</sub>ment where  
 [°Mm° [ Mhm  
 Fitch: 'hhh just getting on a waiting list'n having an:  
 Slater: (0.7) 'hhh (.) something happen in a couple  
 → months just (.) ain't gonna do the jo: b.  
 [ Yeah.  
 Fitch: 'hhh It's not that she's got a crisis it's just  
 Slater: → this is the m- the right ti:me  
 (.)  
 Fitch: M<sub>0</sub>hm  
 Slater: [period in which something ought to happen.  
 Fitch: [ Mhm.

(Especially nice here is that having used "ain't gonna do the job" to make his point, Dr. Slater returns to the standard syntax of "It's not that she's got a crisis . . .")

These sorts of materials can lead us to see Ann's "He ain't getting one," not as an expression of callousness, but as an idiomatic resource she's put to work to make herself utterly clear in an environment of persistent ambiguity. And in that regard, then, it may well be that Monty's strikingly solicitous "Poor Joey" is a similar sort of resource being put to similar work in a similar environment.

The final case and its consideration, like Fragment 5, comes out of the early work on troubles-talk (see Jefferson & Lee, 1980). As in the preceding three fragments, we get a series of ambiguous utterances. Unlike the preceding three, this one has no explicit, last-resort component. Things—if they *are* adrift—remain adrift.

In this section of the troubles-talk report, the point being made is that although troubles-talk seems to have the potential for progressing as an orderly

sequence, it appears to be enormously susceptible to contamination by other types of activities. One such contaminant is the negotiating of a plan, in which one participant's trouble is the other's obstacle.

In the following fragment, someone has phoned with a project in mind (leaving her little boy to be looked after for a while so that she can go shopping) and discovers that the intended coparticipant in the project (the babysitter) has a trouble that may be consequential for that project (she's got the flu). And once again, the issue of proper parental concern for a child seems to be involved.

(7) [TCI(b):7:1-2]  
 ((Call opening unrecorded; Lily is the caller and is now identifying herself to Cora.))  
 1 Lily: Jo:dy's mothe:r?  
 2 (0.6)  
 3 Cora: Oh ye<sub>0</sub>h ((very hoarse, here and throughout call))  
 4 Lily: [ Jo:dy Lih- tempi,  
 5 Cora: Oh: yeh,  
 6 (0.2)  
 7 Lily: Are you si::ck,  
 8 Cora: 'tch ù-yeh ah got the flu.  
 9 Lily: aOh:::uh [hnh hnh ha<sub>0</sub> ha-ha-ha  
 10 Cora: [h- [ hhhhh] hh-hh-hk  
 11 (.)  
 12 Cora: 'hh  
 13 Lily: [Wul that ni:ps it'nna bu:d, 'hh ah w'z gonna ask  
 14 yuh if yih c'd keep Jo:dy fer a c(h)ouple hours  
 15 but yih can't if yih got the flu::-  
 16 Cora:→ 'tch Ah wouldn't wan'im aroun'me ho:n, 't=  
 17 Lily: ={nNo:::,}  
 18 Cora:→ ['hhhhhh]hh 'Cause uh: ah'v really ghhot it.  
 19 Lily: (.)  
 20 Lily: yo<sub>0</sub>u sure-  
 21 Cora: [A h - ]  
 22 (.)  
 23 Cora:→ But ah'd be glad=do it if I wasn't sihhck.  
 24 Lily: è-You sure sound aw:ful. [ (hoarse.) ]  
 25 Cora: [ 't Oh:: ]my God  
 26 ah been 'hhh running th'highes'tempihtures you  
 27 ever sa:w.  
 28 Lily: Omy go:sh well let me hang up'n letchu git back  
 29 tuh be:yudh=  
 30 Cora: =eh huh [uh uh] h h ù- ]=  
 31 Lily: [So:rry]I disturbed you. ]  
 32 Cora: =Ha'yih doin' hhon=  
 33 Lily: =Oh jes fi:ne.



Across the fragment, the trouble is talked about by reference to its consequences for Lily's project; that is, will the fact that Cora has "the flu" stand in the way of her minding Lily's little boy. The presence of a symptom (hoarseness) and the announcement of 'the flu' does not in itself terminate the possibility that the project can be carried out. This is perhaps because a feature of the term 'the flu' is that it gets applied to almost anything and may here be naming something quite mild, and a feature of hoarseness is that it can be residual and not at all debilitating. So the sheer assertion "I've got the flu" (Line 8) and the presence of hoarseness are in a range of ways unreliable indices.

And it appears that although Lily announces absolute withdrawal of the project, "Well that nips it in the bud" (Line 13), she is allowing for and perhaps specifically pursuing its being carried out. For one, several alternative courses are available to her. She might at this point introduce the "Sorry I disturbed you," which eventually closes off discussion of Cora's flu (Line 31). Less drastically, she might now initiate the diagnostic inquiry that occurs midway into the discussion, "You sure sound awful" (Line 24). Instead, having announced abandonment of the project, she goes on to describe it: "I was going to ask you if you could keep Jody for a couple of hours" and her grounds for abandoning it: "but you can't if you've got the flu" (Lines 13-15).

And in the description of the project is at least one detail that might tend to urge for its being taken on by Cora; that is, there is mention of the briefness of the intended period of babysitting ("a couple of hours"), where, that something will take but a little while is a routine component of such negotiations.

Then there is the proposed reason for abandoning the project, "but you can't if you've got the flu." This utterance strikes me as a proposal offered for confirmation or disconfirmation, perhaps because stating it makes it sequentially relevant; a response to it is due.

Also, the proposed grounds for abandonment of the project are specifically disattentive to what ought to be a crucial concern if 'the flu' is being taken seriously; that is, it ought not to be that this sick woman "can't" take on the job, but that if she is sick the child ought not to be exposed to her.

So, in this utterance that announces itself as abandoning the project, there is a minimizing not only of the task (just a couple of hours) but of the obstacle (no concern about contagion), and the babysitter has been put into a position of confirming or disconfirming that she "can't" take on the job.

Now we come to the target series. In the utterance that confirms that the project ought to be abandoned, it appears that Cora is addressing the seriousness of 'the flu' by reference to possible contagion with "I wouldn't want him around me, hon" (Line 16). She is in effect hanging up a quarantine sign.

But the utterance is ambiguous. It is at least conceivable that what is being referred to is the child as a nuisance to a sick person rather than (or as well as) the sick person as a source of contagion for the child.

This is a very real issue, and it does show up in conversation—but interestingly, at least in the cases I've noticed, not as a person-to-person assertion, but as a third-party report. So, for example, in the following fragment a woman is talking about her daughter Janet's very ill father-in-law.

(7.a) [NB:IV:13:R:5-6]

Emma: Janet s'd he ɹlooked (.) awf'lylly ba:d though b'course  
 Fred ditn say 'e ɹlooked so ba:d but uh: (0.4) what  
 kinyih do:, he's ho:me en yee ah mean they can't have  
 → the kids aroun' distur:b yihknow. . .

And in the following fragment a woman is talking about her daughter-in-law's "mum," who has yet to see her newborn granddaughter.

(7.b) [Holt:88U:2:4:3]

Mattie: And uh (0.2) her mum rang me this morning 'n (0.3)  
 they could get from Salsb'ry just uh within a day  
 but sh' sez I can't go 'n see 'er I've got  
 bronchi:ti:s

Leslie: [ Oh dear what a sha↓:me.

Mattie: → Sh's'z I ca:n't go anywhe(h)re nea(h)r them an'  
 → she do(h)n't feel like it anyway you know,

Leslie: [nNo::h

Fragment 7.b is especially instructive. We get both aspects specifically referred to, that is, sick person as a source of contagion (again with the self-quarantining, stay away formulation: here, "I can't go anywhere near them," in Fragment 7 "I wouldn't want him around me"), and sick person as in any event unwilling.

Further, the covert character of the latter is interestingly invoked; that is, while Mattie quotes her fellow new grandmother as saying "I can't go and see her, I've got bronchitis," she does something else with the unwillingness aspect, not quoting but asserting "and she don't feel like it anyway." How ever she may have come to that conclusion (whether the other woman actually said it, or some sort of common knowledge is being invoked; i.e., no ill person would "feel like it"), Mattie is not ascribing those very words to her, but providing a sort of buffer by forming it up as a statement *about* her and not by her.

So, returning to Fragment 7, it appears that the understanding of Cora's "I wouldn't want him around me, hon" as an assertion of self-quarantine in the interests of protecting Lily's little boy from contagion is based on a conventional

public propriety. But there turns out to be that covert aspect, that is, that behind the 'quarantine' sign is one that reads 'do not disturb.'

Compounding that, is the local context, specifically, that Lily herself is exhibiting no concern about 'quarantine.'

Given these factors, Cora, having said "I wouldn't want him around me, hon" and receiving a drawn-out, sympathetic "nNo:::", (Line 17), may have good grounds to suspect that she is being heard to be invoking the 'do not disturb' alternative.

A quick note about "nNo:::", Comparing British and American uses of "No" as a response token (not an answer to a question), I found that whereas British speakers use "No" for negatively framed priors, for example:

(7.c) [Wheatley(1):16]  
 Kath: So ah don't kno::w, (.) yihknow when she's  
           com<sub>1</sub>ing  
 Polly: [No::,]

Americans deploy "Uh huh," "Yeah," and so on, not only for positive but for negative priors, for example:

(7.d) [SBL:2:2:R:1]  
 Jean: Allen doesn't know anything new out there eether.  
 Clara: Uh huh,

(7.e) [TCI(b):8:2-3] ((re: allergy medication))  
 R.J.: En I don't know where she keeps that sorta stuff,  
 Dick: Y:ah

reserving "No" for *affiliation*; for showing sympathy, solidarity, and so on, often where values and morals are concerned, for example:

(7.f) [JG:II(a):3:2] ((Maggie blacked out at party))  
 Maggie: she asked me if it w'z becuz I'd had too much t'  
           dri:nk en I sid no<sub>1</sub> becuz et the t<sub>1</sub>i:me. . .  
 Dawn: [N o : : : : :]

(7.g) [NB:II:2:R:19] ((Nancy knows that André lied.))  
 Nancy: becuz André never stayed home all day tih call  
           ↑anybuddy<sub>1</sub> y, h' hhh<sub>1</sub> hh  
 Emma: [n::No:,]

In any event, the "nNo:::", with which Lily receives Cora's "I wouldn't want him around me, hon" is not unequivocally selective of either alternative

('quarantine' or 'do not disturb' and, as in similar circumstances in Fragments 4, 5, and 6, another non disambiguating item is offered, "Because I've really got it" (Line 18), Cora perhaps attempting to alert her recipient to the existence of a problem while remaining non explicit.

But, in contrast to the prior fragments with their disambiguating third items, Cora produces yet another non explicit utterance, "But I'd be glad to do it if I wasn't sick" (Line 23), and the ambiguity is left unresolved: Is she expressing concern for the child or for herself?

It is certainly possible that she is using ambiguous talk to pursue attention to her troubles while not explicitly saying poor-me-and-the-devil-take-your-kid.

On the other hand, the ambiguity may be a by-product of an attempt to avoid being seen as trying to instruct a mother on the proper grounds for abandoning the project; that is, that it's not that Cora "can't" baby-sit, but that the child should not be exposed to her—and that that ought to have been the mother's first concern.

In which case, across a series of attempts, this speaker might be characterized as invoking, while specifically declining to explicate, the proprieties in hopes that the recipient will come to see that her prior talk exhibited a misalignment to those proprieties and now produce talk that will exhibit correct alignment.

And whereas in each of the preceding fragments the problem can be ascribed to the one who is producing the ambiguous talk, in Fragment 7 it may be that the trouble lies with the recipient.

In which case, whereas in each of the preceding fragments the one who produces the ambiguous talk solves the problem with a disambiguating utterance, in Fragment 7, as the recipient appears to remain dense to the problem, the speaker may be deciding that tactful ambiguity is preferable to possibly confrontational disambiguation.

A closing note. One thing we can notice is that whereas in Fragment 7 disambiguation (possibly for good reason) did not occur, in the preceding materials we did see an eventual move to explicitness.

One question that raises is, why do we not see an *immediate* move to something explicit? Why, for example, in Fragment 2, do we get "Go ahead" *again*? Why, in Fragment 5, do we get *another* indexicalized complaint ("That's awful" followed by "That really makes me mad")?

This may have to do with a general feature of interaction, something that might be called 'understanding assumed,' which involves that the way in which we're talking to each other is in principle adequate for understanding. Where, then, on any given occasion, resolving some particular problem by explicating, explaining, and so on, could constitute a rupture of that in-principle condition of understanding each other.

In one of his lectures, Sacks talks of how “monumental in its import” it is that in their interaction “people suppose that what we’ve been talking about all along, you know in the way I told it to you, and I suppose that in producing any next thing I say.” He goes on to offer a rhapsodic description of a possible consequence of that assumption; that “without thinking about it, the work I do is to find for any item you say—no matter how grossly it misunderstands what I say, how well it understands what I say” (Sacks, 1992, p. 184).

The materials I’ve been exploring here may involve a rather more prosaic working out of ‘understanding assumed’ on particular occasions when that assumption falters. Specifically, when an initial non explicit reference seems to be getting into difficulty, its speaker may attempt to alert its recipient to the problem while preserving the utterance’s original, non explicit character, and thereby preserving the assumption of understanding—it being only when *that* attempt fails that the assumption is breached and explication is brought to bear.

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## In Honor of Robert Hopper

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