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Oh-prefaced responses to inquiry

JOHN HERITAGE

Department of Sociology
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1551
heritage@soc.ucla.edu

ABSTRACT

In responses to English questions, prefacing with the particle *oh* indicates that, from the viewpoint of the answerer, a question is problematic in terms of its relevance, presuppositions, or context. In addition, oh-prefacing is used to foreshadow reluctance to advance the conversational topic invoked by a question; it may also be part of a "trouble-premonitory" response to various types of *How are you* inquiries in conversational openings and elsewhere. (Conversation analysis, English, utterance design, particles.)*

Do you think about sex too much? ☐ Yes ☐ Oh, yes!
[from the front cover of *Glamour* magazine, September 1990]

It is now well established that the particle *oh* is frequently used to acknowledge new information, e.g. answers to questions (Heritage 1984, Schiffrin 1987);[1] and that it commonly functions as a minimal "third turn" expansion, i.e. one with sequence-closing import, to question/answer adjacency pairs (Heritage 1984, Schegloff 1995a). In such contexts, where *oh* is produced as a response to information of some kind, it functions as a "change of state" token; it registers, or at least enacts the registration of, a change in its producer's state of knowledge or information.[2]

However, *oh* may be used to register changes of state other than those of knowledge or information. Prominent among these are changes of state of orientation or awareness (James 1972, 1974, Jefferson 1978, Heritage 1984, Schiffrin 1987). For example, in ex. 1, *oh* is used to register a noticing; then the object of the noticing is named (*that teeshirt*), and this is used as the basis for a storytelling, which is thereby depicted as "touched off" (Jefferson 1978) by the noticing.

(1) [Jefferson 1978:222] ((Three people are walking together; someone passes them wearing a photograph teeshirt))

1 N: Oh that teeshirt reminded me [STORY]

A related phenomenon can be seen in ex. 2, where B becomes a co-participant in an extended search for a name.

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(2) [SBL:1:1:12:23]

1	A:		Uh she asked me to stop by, she brought a chest
2			of drawers from um
3			(4.0)
4	A:		What's that gal's name? Just went back to Michigan.
5			(1.0)
6	A:		Hilda, um
7	B:	→	Oh I know who you mean,
8			(1.0)
9	B:		Grady–Grady.
10	A:		Yeah. Hilda Grady.

Here B is given clues about the elusive name by A's overt difficulties (lines 4/6) and is thus drawn into the search. At line 7, B claims to recognize the person whose name is being sought, and she follows this with the name itself (line 9). Her claim to recognition is marked with *oh*. Here a particle that is specialized for claiming "changes of state" is used to assert success in a subjective process of recollection or recognition.

In this article I examine a further specific context in which *oh* is produced: in turn-initial position in response to a question.[3] This environment is specific in regard to (a) the position of *oh* within a larger turn-constructional unit, and (b) the position of the oh-prefaced turn within the sequence in which it participates.

FIRST, only *oh*s that preface additional turn-components will be considered. By "prefaced," I mean that the *oh* must occur in turn-initial position, and it must be followed by additional elements within the same intonation contour. Cases like ex. 3 are specifically EXCLUDED from the corpus of oh-prefaced responses to inquiry that this paper addresses. In ex. 3, two women are making arrangements to visit a local town, in the company of a third who will drive them by car. Ivy describes the arrangements for the outward part of the trip (lines 1–2); but then, prompted by Jan's equivocal response at line 4, she raises a possible problem for Jan – the timing of the outward journey (line 5). Jan's response rejects this as a difficulty but raises another potential obstacle – the timing of the homeward journey.

(3) [Rah:C:1:(16):3]

1	Ivy:		An' then (.) she'll pick you up on the way: down then as
2			I said.
3			(0.3)
4	Jan:		Well it's a [bit eh in a[h it
5	Ivy:		[Is [Is that too early.
6	Jan:		eh– No: no it's not too early it's jist uh how long is she
7			gon' to be in Middles[ber. Thi[s's the th[ing.
8	Ivy:	→	[.hhh [Oh:. [She's got tuh be
9			ho:me by .hh i– jis turned half past eleven quarter tih
10			twelve.

Ivy's responses at lines 8–10 perform two distinct actions, each responding to one of Jan's prior actions. The initial *oh* (line 8) is produced with its own falling

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intonation contour.[4] It constitutes, and is designed to constitute, a free-standing turn-constructional unit in its own right. With it, Ivy acknowledges Jan's response to her question at line 5. Ivy's second turn-constructional unit (concerned with how long the driver plans to be in Middlesborough) addresses the issue that Jenny raises. Thus Ivy's *oh* is designed to be separate from the remainder of her turn, and to perform a distinct task: acknowledging Jenny's response to her earlier question (Heritage 1984).

In the remainder of this article, I will consider only *ohs* that are clearly produced in turn-initial (or effective turn-initial) position,[5] within the intonation contour of turn-constructional units that contain additional turn components.[6]

SECOND, the environment of oh-prefaced turns to be considered here is specific in terms of the sequential organization of the talk in which the oh-prefaced turns are embedded. This paper considers only oh-prefaced turns that respond to sequence-initiating actions, i.e. turns occurring in "second position" in a sequence (Schegloff 1995a). Specifically, only turns that are produced in response to questions are considered here.[7] The sequences examined in this paper thus involve a question followed by a response prefaced by the production of *oh*.

In what follows, I shall continue to argue that *oh* generically proposes a "change of state," here of orientation or awareness; but that its sense and the associated purposes of its use are particularized distinctively in this question-answer context.

AN INITIAL CHARACTERIZATION

My first noticing of oh-prefacing as a phenomenon occurred during a celebrity interview involving a member of the British royal family, HRH Princess Margaret. The context was a British radio show called "Desert Island Discs." Its format involves questioning guests about their lives and achievements, the discussion being punctuated with records selected by the guest. At a relatively early stage in the program – in which a section of talk was leading up to, as it turned out, the playing of a record by the Band of the Royal Marines – Princess Margaret was asked if she liked brass band music. *Oh yes*, she replied, *one was brought up with it*.

Initially, that reply struck me as almost stereotypical in its combination of social superiority, condescension, and dismissiveness toward the interviewer. But that thought was immediately followed by a second: that the question to which Princess Margaret responded was hardly profound. After all, both Princess Margaret and the radio show host know that she has selected a piece of brass band music to play next, and that it is reasonable to suppose that she likes this type of music. Moreover the British royal family spend a large proportion of their time at public ceremonial occasions, which very often involve brass bands, so they might be said to have an obligation to "like" brass band music, or at least to assert that they do. Thus the response *Oh yes*, in the way that it differs from the production of just *yes*, might arguably have offered a kind of fugitive comment on the ques-

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tion – proposing that it was inappropriate or inapposite; that the question questioned something which could (or should) be taken for granted, or which is unquestionable, or should not be questioned, or is "beyond question."

That hunch about oh-prefacing received support from a second example, taken from a similar radio show, in which Sir Harold Acton, a celebrated English aesthete, was interviewed by British broadcaster Russell Harty. This segment of the interview is preceded by some talk about the exceptional courtesy of the Chinese and Acton's teaching modern poetry at Beijing University. Our focus is on the question *Did you learn to speak Chinese*? and Sir Harold Acton's reply.

(4) [Chat Show:Russell Harty–Sir Harold Acton]

1	Act:		.... hhhh and some of thuh– (0.3) some of my students
2			translated Eliot into Chine::se. I think thuh very
3			first.
4			(0.2)
5	Har:		Did you learn to speak (.) Chine[:se.
6	Act:	→	[.hh Oh yes.
7			(0.7)
8	Act:		.hhhh You ca::n't live in thuh country without speaking
9			thuh lang[uage it's impossible .hhhhh=
10	Har:	→	[Not no: cour:se

Given the environment of this question – that Acton taught modern poetry at Beijing University, and that his students were the first to translate T. S. Eliot's work into "Chinese" – it is evident that the interviewer's question is potentially problematic. Acton's *Oh yes* response, uttered with real finality, treats it as obvious that he would have learned the language, and thereby implies that the inquiry questions something that might have been presupposed in virtue of the prior talk. Indeed, both interviewer and interviewee subsequently address the self-evident nature of the point. Acton goes on to explain briefly why it was essential to learn the language to live in China (lines 8–9). This explanation, in turn, is acknowledged by the interviewer with a sotto-voce *Not no: course* (line 10), in a way that treats the answer to his question as, after all, having been self-evident.

So here we have oh-prefacing as a feature of turn design which, however fleetingly, can indicate a difficulty about a question. In this case, it foreshadows the other elements of Acton's turn (and his interlocutor's response) which indicate that the question was less than appropriate: Such a person as Sir Harold Acton could not conceivably have done this work without learning Chinese.

But if that intuition is correct, how might such a sense be carried by the production of *oh yes* rather than just *yes*? Oh-prefacing of a response is a means by which the "change of state" proposal, carried by *oh*, can be deployed to indicate that a question has occasioned a MARKED SHIFT OF ATTENTION. Conveying a marked shift of this kind can imply that a question was unexpected, unlooked for, or "out of left field", and hence imply the existence of presuppositions which could have, or indeed, should have informed the question's design on this occa-

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sion. Oh-prefacing can thus be a practice through which a speaker indicates a problem about a question's relevance, appropriateness, or presuppositions.[8]

A further example underscores these points and introduces an additional consideration: the inexplicitness of oh-prefacing as a marker of the difficulty that it indicates. In this case, the interaction takes place in the administrative offices of a sociology department where B is engaged in working with student records and other potentially confidential documents. When A asks B if she is a "sociology major," B responds with an oh-prefaced *no* response, with the *no* emphatically duplicated. As is clear from the subsequent talk, B treats it as self-evident that she couldn't be a sociology major, in virtue of what she is physically engaged in doing at the time the question is asked.[9]

(5) [SC:FN] ((To an undergraduate student working with undergraduate records in a sociology office))

1	A:		Are you a sociology major?
2	B:	→	Oh no no.
3	A:	→	Gee, I didn't mean to be insulting.
4	B:		Oh no, I didn't mean it that way. Sosh majors can't
5			work in the department. Think about what I do.
6			(1.0)
7	A:	→	Oh, I get it, 'cuz you ((gesturing))

Here we can observe that, while B's oh-prefaced response embodies her presumption of the transparent impossibility of her being a sociology major, A's turn at line 3 (*Gee, I didn't mean to be insulting*) by no means shows a grasp of that presumption. His turn clearly treats B's *Oh no no* as pointing to some significant difficulty with his initial question; but A is not able, at least initially, to infer the nature of the problem. It is only after B elaborates, by inviting A to reflect on her work tasks, that the presuppositional disparity between A and B is unveiled and A, as he says, "gets it." Here, then, B's oh-prefaced response successfully indicates some inappositeness or difficulty about a prior inquiry, while being quite inexplicit about the issue involved. Her oh-prefaced response, for a time at least, leaves the source of the difficulty as something to be searched for and resolved by the questioner – the person who, from the oh-prefaced response producer's point of view, is the one who might have known better in the first place.

Here, then, is a dramatic example of oh-prefacing's inexplicitness. The nature of the problem is not disclosed for a while, and as we see, the co-interactant experiences some difficulty in determining what it is. This inexplicitness in the indexing of a problem or difficulty is a GENERIC feature of oh-prefacing, and as later examples will confirm, this inexplicitness is by no means confined to cases like ex. 5.

As the last of these initial observations, it can be noted that oh-prefaced responses to inquiry can embody a kind of ego-focused or self-attentive quality. They are grounded in, and presume, the respondent's world and its presuppositions as the basis for response; they shift the focus of the talk from the relevances

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of the questioner to the relevances of the question recipient. Oh-prefacing is indexical of this shift. Consider the following case – the context of the question is that Lesley is a "substitute teacher."

(6) [Holt 1:1:10]

1 Mum: wuh:– yih– (.) Are you teaching this week?
2 Les: Oh I don't know I never kn:o::[w.
3 Mum: [°Ri:ght.°

In her response to Mum's question, Lesley makes no direct attempt to address the basis on which the question was asked; after all, substitute teachers can sometimes project their work schedules in advance. Instead, Lesley elaborates her oh-prefaced response with a simple generalization about her own experience.

This business of proposing the answerer's world and its relevances (rather than those of the questioner), as the terrain from which the answer is designed, is also clearly visible in earlier examples. For example, in celebrity interviews like Sir Harold Acton's (ex. 4), a significant problem for interviewers is that of introducing information already known to interviewer and guest, but now to be shared by third parties – the "overhearing" audience. The "transparent" question that makes this kind of known-in-common information explicit is one vehicle through which such information can be topicalized. The Lord Acton segment ended with Acton singing a song in Mandarin, an activity that may have been prearranged. Acton's *oh yes* does not orient to the interviewer's need to introduce known-in-common information. Instead, in focusing on the presuppositions of his world, Acton's turn highlights the inappositeness of the question while remaining oblivious to the interviewer's tasks and relevances. In short, Acton's *oh yes* overlooked, as Princess Margaret's *oh yes* also overlooked, the interviewer's tasks in moving the discussion forward while "talking for an overhearing audience" (Heritage 1985).

In sum, an oh-prefaced response to an inquiry can indicate that the question to which it responds is inapposite in some way, and it can do so inexplicitly and self-attentively. These characteristics, I suggest, are basic to oh-prefaced responses to inquiry as a conversational practice, though significant modifications and particularizations will be presented. In what follows, I will argue that oh-prefacing, in response to an inquiry, can do the following:

(a) Indicate that the inquiry being responded to is problematic as to its relevance, presuppositions, or context.

(b) Foreshadow reluctance to advance the conversational topic invoked by the inquiry.

(c) Be a component of "trouble-premonitory" responses (Jefferson 1980) to various types of "how are you" inquiries in conversational openings and elsewhere.

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INAPPOSITE INQUIRIES

In this section I will point to three main classes of cases in which oh-prefaced responses address questions that are treated as problematic. The first two of these classes involve inquiries into matters that are treated by the respondent as "already known" either from the prior talk of the participants, or from antecedent contexts of joint understandings that are invocable, and in most cases invoked, as taken for granted. The third set of cases involves questions that are poorly or inappositely fitted to the sequential contexts in which they are asked. These three sorts of inappositeness are not, of course, mutually exclusive, and many cases combine them in various ways. In discussing all three types of cases, I will show ways in which the problematic status of the inquired-into matter is available from the prior talk or its context, and/or is made evident through the subsequent talk of the participants. I will conclude this section with some comments about whether the use of oh-prefacing can be a general means of intensifying or emphasizing responses to questions.

Questions rendered inapposite by prior talk

Oh-prefaced responses are common in environments where questions address matters on which the respondent has already conveyed relevant information either explicitly or by presupposition. Here, where the information is (or should be) "already known" to the questioner, respondents commonly answer such inquiries with oh-prefaced responses.

In examples 7–8, explicit assertions (1→) are questioned (2→). In each case, the subsequent reassertion (3→) is oh-prefaced. In 7, Ivy, who has already twice stated explicitly that the chicken has been cooked – in overlap at line 4, and retrieved from overlap at line 6 (1→) – is met with a questioning repeat from Jan (2→).

(7) [Heritage:01:18:2]

1	Jan:		.t Okay now that's roas:' chick'n isn't. Th[at]=
2	Ivy:		[It–]=
3	Jan:		=[roasting chick'n<]
4	Ivy:	1→	=[i t h a s bee:n] cooked.
5			(.)
6	Ivy:	1→	It's been co[oked.
7	Jan:	2→	[Iz ↑BEEN cooked.=
8	Ivy:	3→	=Oh yes.
9	Jan:		Oh well thaz good....

Ivy's response [3→] to Jan's query of her (twice) asserted position is a compellingly minimal reassertion: *Oh yes.*

Ex. 8 exhibits a similar pattern. Here Norman states a misapprehension (lines 1–2) about the size of the dogs that Ivy's dog Tessa has been mated with. Ivy corrects the misapprehension at lines 3–4 and 6 (1→):

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(8) [Heritage 1:11:4:17–33]

1	Nor:		Anyway. hh hh:: yih– ye:s. I see, ye:s. But they're quite
2			big are they real[ly,
3	Ivy:	1→	[Uh well they're not (.) weeny WEEny
4		1→	↓lit[tle thi:n:gs you kno:w=
5	Nor:		[°Nu:h,°
6	Ivy:	1→	=they'r– they're smaller th'n Tessa is.
7			(0.7)
8	Nor:	2→	Oh [they a::re.]
9	Ivy:	3→	[Both of them.] Oh yes.
10	Ivy	3→	Both a'th'm uhr smaller th'n °Tessa.°
11			(0.2)
12	Nor:		°Oh I [see°
13	Ivy:		[°Ye:h.°
14	Nor:		°Ye:s.°

Here Norman's delayed "newsmark" (Jefferson 1981:62–66, Heritage 1984) minimally queries Ivy's assertion that the (male) dogs are smaller than Tessa (2→). Ivy begins (3→) with an increment to her prior turn (*Both of them*) in overlap with Norman; and then, notably, she responds to Norman's overlapped newsmark (*they a::re*) with an oh-prefaced reassertion of her position. She continues with a second turn-constructional unit (line 10) that retrieves her earlier overlapped reference to *both* of the dogs in a fully restated assertion of their size in relation to Tessa.

This pattern (assertion → query → oh-prefaced reassertion) is also apparent in ex. 9, where Mike's claim that *a guy at work* has two Cords is questioned by Curt with *Not original*. A Cord is a rare automobile that was briefly manufactured in the United States in the 1930s and is now copied as a "classic car." Curt's question may be deployed merely as a means to register the out-of-the-ordinary nature of Mike's claim; but it may also, and alternatively, be taken to indicate doubt whether the "two Cords" are of original manufacture or modern replicas.[10] Mike's response to Curt's question is occupied with (re-)asserting the originality of the cars, and once again is oh-prefaced:

(9) [Auto Discussion:13:04–13:15]

1	Mik:		Lemme ask a guy at work. He's gotta bunch a' old
2			clu[nkers.
3	Gar:		[Y'know Marlon Liddle?
4			(0.2)
5	Mik:	1→	Well I can't say they're ol' clunkers 'eez gotta Co:rd?
6			(0.1)
7	Mik:	1→	Two Co:rds,
8			(1.0)
9	Mik:		[And
10	Cur:	2→	[Not original,
11			(0.7)
12	Mik:	3→	Oh yes. Very origi(h)nal
13	Cur:		Oh:: reall[y?
14	Mik:		[Yah. Ve(h)ry origi(h)nal.
15	Cur:		°Awhhh are you shittin m[e?
16	Mik:		[No I'm not.

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Mike's response is composed of two turn-constructional units. The first unit, *Oh yes*, is accompanied by a lateral and disagreeing headshake. It clearly reasserts his earlier claims of lines 5/7. The second unit, *Very origi(h)nal*, strongly upgrades that assertion.[11]

The same pattern is apparent in the following, more complex instance. Here Mary and Susan are discussing the poor result of Susan's LSAT test.[12] Susan's response (at line 12) to Mary's persistent questioning about whether she will take the test again (and why) incorporates the remark that *I've I've stopped crying uhheh-heh-heh-heh-heh*. Her subsequent response to Mary's next question, which topicalizes the presupposition of that remark, is oh-prefaced (3→).

(10) [F:TC:I:1:4] (Concerning a poor LSAT test result)

1	Mar:		Sih yih g'nna take it agai:n?=
2	Sus:		=nNo.
3			(0.5)
4	Mar:		No:?
5	Sus:		°No.°
6			(0.3)
7	Mar:		Why no:t.=
8	Sus:		=.t.hhhhh I don't rilly wan'to.
9	Mar:		Yih don'wanna go through all the ha:ssle?=
10	Sus:		=.hhhh I don'know Mary,
11			(.)
12	Sus:	1→	I've I've stopped crying uhheh-heh-heh-heh-heh
13	Mar:	2→	Wuh were you cr[y:ing?
14	Sus:	3→	[.hhhhhh Oh I wz hysterical.
15			(0.4)
16	Sus:		Yihknow how much I p't out fer this?

Here Susan's oh-prefaced turn reasserts her earlier statement, and in upgraded fashion.

In exx. 7–10, where the item which is queried – if only, as in 8, in a minimal, "newsmarking" fashion – has already been clearly asserted or presupposed, the oh-prefaced confirmation achieves a reassertive quality and thereby "holds a position" against a query which it reflexively constitutes, at least in a minimal way, as embodying inapposite doubt.

Replies to questions that overtly inquire into the presuppositions of previous statements also often attract oh-prefaced responses. For example, in 11, a news interviewer's "B-event" inquiry – a declarative turn construction that questions by describing information or experiences that are primarily known to the recipient (Labov & Fanshel 1977, Heritage & Roth 1995) – attracts a slightly elaborated oh-prefaced confirmation. In this case, a boy aged about twelve is being interviewed about a school initiation ceremony in which he was thrown over a railway embankment, breaking both arms.

(11) [BBC Radio 4: World at One: Initiation Ceremony]

1	Int:	Now why d'you think they did it.
2	Boy:	Well I don't know it's j'st a sort'v traditional:uh
3		↑cerem'ny that th'do.=It's ↑always 'appened at that

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4			school.=
5	Int:		=Did they do it to everybody?
6	Boy:	1→	u– Well all the newcomers ye:s,
7			(0.5)
8	Int:	2→	So there were other lads as well (.) being thrown
9			up in the air as well,=
10	Boy:	3→	=Oh yes,
11			(0.4)
12	Boy:		Quite a lot of them ...

The interviewer's question (lines 8–9) is patently designed to underline and perhaps topicalize an implication from the previous Q-A pair at lines 5–6; but it is treated, at least initially, as recycling already given information. The boy's oh-prefaced response treats it as self-evident from his previous answer (concerning *all the newcomers*) that *other lads* were treated in the same way.

A similar response emerges in 12, where Edward has called to offer sympathy and assistance after hearing that Richard's wife has hurt her back. In this sequence, Richard underscores the absurdity of their situation by juxtaposing the circumstances of the injury – how simply it happened, and on *Christmas morning* – with the fact that *it hezn't happened fuh ten yea:rs.*=".[13] Edward's "B-event" inquiry, however, addresses only the immediate import of Richard's statement at line 8, rather than its juxtaposition with his earlier remarks at lines 2–3, and thus "unpacks" only the most banal of its implications.

(12) [Heritage:0II:2:4]

1	Edw:		W'l what a frightf'l thing How did it happen.
2	Ric:		She jus' bent o:ver as we w'r getting ready tih go out h
3			on Christmas [morning.]
4	Edw:		[O h : :] my God.
5			(0.2)
6	Ric:		.h Yhes i[t hent–]
7	Edw:		[uhh hu:]hh, hu[:h ho:.
8	Ric:	1→	[It hasn't happened fuh ten yea:rs.=
9	Edw:	2→	=ukhh huukhh ukh >Oh she's had it be↓fore.<
10	Ric:	3→	Oh yes b't not fih te(h)n y(h)ea(h)[a(h)s.]
11	Edw:		[O h: :]: Lord.

Richard's confirmation is, once again, oh-prefaced.

Other inferences from prior talk can attract similar treatment. In 13, the topic of conversation is the late media magnate, Robert Maxwell:

(13) [Holt:2:3:9]

1	Ste:		Well he didn't either 'ee had a bad start I mean 'ee had 'iz
2		1→	(0.3) .t.k.hh father shot by the Nazis 'nd 'is uh .hh mother
3		1→	died in: Auschwitz yih kno:w [so
4	Les:		[Oh really:?=
5	Ste:		=So 'eez [had the: ( ))–
6	Les:	2→	[Oh 'z a Je:w] is he Je:w?
7			(.)
8	Ste:	3→	Oh yeah.
9			(.)
10	Ste:		He's had k– eez a Czechoslovakian Jew so ...

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Here Steven's description of the deaths of Maxwell's parents engenders from Lesley the slightly delayed inference that Maxwell is Jewish. Steven's confirmation is oh-prefaced, again treating this inference as self-evident, though he does elaborate on it slightly at line 10 and beyond.

In the following case, a middle-aged woman (Nancy) is describing a celebration with a group of much younger university students to mark the end of a class she has taken with them. She describes going to a bar with two younger women who then depart, leaving her with the men:

(14) [NB:II:2:R:7]

1	Nan:		....hhh one a'the other girls hadda leave
2		1→	fer something en there I sit with all these (h)you(h)ng
3		1→	fellas I fel'like a den [mother.
4	Emm:		[°Uh huh°
5	Nan:		.hhh[hh
6	Emm:	2→	[Are you th:e ol:dest one the cla:ss?
7	Nan:	3→	°Oh: w– by fa:r.°
8	Emm:		↑Are yih rill[y?↑
9	Nan:		[°Oh: ya:h.°
10	Emm:		Didju learn a lo:t'n cla:ss?

Nancy's description of feeling like a *den mother* with *all these young fellas* attracts the query: *Are you th:e ol:dest one the cla:ss?* As Sacks observed (1992:538), this is the kind of question that is normally asked only if the questioner has good reason to think that it may be true, and in this case the questioner clearly has the resources to support such a belief. Nancy's response incorporates the expression *by fa:r*, which provides that her age relative to the other students would be self-evident to an observer. Indeed Sacks (ibid.) notes that her answer indicates that her relative age is "at a glance determinable." Her response is also oh-prefaced, providing a fugitive indication that this will be self-evident to the questioner too.[14]

In all these cases, the matter that is questioned is already available – either directly stated, or by inference – from the respondent's prior talk. When such already available matters are questioned, regardless of their seriousness or triviality, they are recurrently met with oh-prefaced responses.

Questions rendered inapposite by context

Oh-prefaced responses are also recurrent in cases where the respondent treats the object of an inquiry as self-evident by virtue of its physical context, or of persons' cultural or personal knowledge. In ex. 15, Jan comes to the phone and gives a cough (1→). Ivy's subsequent inference (2→) gets an oh-prefaced confirmation (3→).

(15) [Rah:A:1:(2):1]

1	Jan:	1→	khhhh– huh khh– huh khh .hhh Hello there I[vy. .hhhh
2	Ivy:		[Oh: dea:h me:.
3	Jan:		khh=

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4 Ivy: 2→ =A[h(r) you still'v got i:t.
5 Jan: [khh
6 Jan: 3→ Oh yes. I wz pretty bad y(h)estiday.[.hhhh–
7 Ivy: [Oh:: dih–
8 Ivy: Yih not in bed are you,

This phenomenon can also be found preserved within reported speech that depicts interaction. In 16, a Christian narrates the beginning of an interaction that occurred with a stranger on a bus. As she depicts it, her religious affiliation was clear to her interlocutor from the fact that she was physically engaged in reading the Bible (referred to as *the Word* in lines 1/6):

(16) [#22, Sugihara: 32–6]

1 J: I was readin' the Word one time an' this guy sittin' next
2 tuh me I y'know ( ) an' he said "Hey can I ask you
3 → something? Are you a Christian?" "Oh yeah," "Why don't
4 [we uh
5 M: [He was readin' the Word next to ya?=
6 J: =No I was readin' the Word and asked me if
7 I wuz a Christian y'know
8 M: Uh huh=
9 J: → I said "Oh yeah" an' we started sha:ring and ...

As the speaker narrates it, the reply she made to her fellow Christian is oh-prefaced (lines 3/9). Thus, in her reported speech, she animates the fact that, from her viewpoint at the time, the nature of her religious beliefs should have been self-evident to her co-interactant, and that she comported herself in those terms.

In a related set of cases, the oh-prefacing respondent invokes putatively known-to-questioner information as the basis for the response. For example, in 17, Nan follows her oh-prefaced reply to Lesley's question with an elaboration, treating it as self-evident that Lesley should know she can't *phone out* when she says *I-:: (.) can't speak tuh anyone on the phone as you kno-:w.*

(17) [Holt 1:5:5]

1 Les: .hh Are you going tuh phone 'i:m?
2 (0.3)
3 Nan: → Oh no: I–:: (.) can't speak tuh anyone on the phone as you
4 → kno:w, .hh but uh–: (0.3) if he will ca:ll, (0.2) and have
5 a look an' see: if there's a leak.h up the:re,

In 18, the recipient of an invitation to the beach responds with an oh-prefaced rejection followed by an account that invokes known-to-recipient circumstances.

(18) [NB:I:5]

1 T: 1→ [INVITATION TO THE BEACH]
2 F: 2→ .hhh Oh: come o:n. [I could]n' j's come down=
3 T: [H m : ?]
4 F: 2→ =the:re, hn .t.hh I got two other kids. Remember?
5 T: 3→ Oh:: that's ri[:ght,]
6 F: [eYe::]::::ah::

In this case, unlike ex. 17, the account is acknowledged by the inviter with an utterance (3→) that accomplishes a "recollection" of these circumstances (Heritage 1984:338).

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In 19, a similar oh-prefaced rejection is responded to (3→) with an even more explicit acknowledgment that the circumstances informing the rejection are in fact known to the recipient.

(19) [Frankel TC:1:1:15-16]

1	Sus:	1→	.hhh So if you guys want a place tuh sta:y.
2			(0.3)
3	Mar:	2→	.t.hhh Oh (w–) thank you but you we ha– yihknow Victor.
4	Sus:	3→	↑OH that's ↑RIGHT.=
5	Mar:		=That's why we were going [(we)
6	Sus:	3→	[I FER↑GO:T. Completely.

In each of these three cases, the oh-prefaced responding party invokes a candidate known-to-recipient account for the response; and, in 18–19, the respondent displays a "remembering" of the grounds invoked in the account.[15] In these cases, the oh-preface foreshadows a treatment of the prior inquiry as problematic in virtue of information which, it is later asserted, could (or should) have been known to the questioner. Again, the self-attentiveness of these responses – inviting the questioner to consider a specific aspect of the respondent's circumstances, which the questioner should have taken into account – is quite vivid.

Questioners, of course, may anticipate the likely or even self-evident nature of the responses they expect. But they may still find that those responses are oh-prefaced. In 20, the questioner builds this anticipation both into the design of her initial inquiry, and into her receipt of the oh-prefaced response it attracts.

(20) [Frankel:TC:I:1:17]

1	Sus:	=Yeh you guys er g'nna drive up aren'tchu,
2	Mar:	Oh yea:h.
3	Sus:	That's what I figu[red.
4	Mar:	[Yeh,=

In 21, we see the phenomenon in reported speech. Here Emma is telling the wife of the Larry Fridee mentioned here about a conversation she had with, as it turns out, a mutual acquaintance. Her inquiry, as she presents it in this narration, was built to anticipate the likelihood that her recipient knew Larry Fridee:

(21) [NB:VII:7]

1	Emm:	... I s'd– .hhhhh "Ged I have the most wonderful
2		neighbours down the street– frie::nds'n" .hhhhhhh
3		I said "you know probly kno:w Larry Fridee"
4		'e s'z "Oh: a'course I do."

In this latter case the oh-prefaced response (line 4), at least as represented in Emma's account, also manages an element of emphatic embellishment (see below).

If these cases involve respondents' (and sometimes questioners') invocations of specific circumstantial knowledge, as matters that questioners might "properly" know, other cases can involve oh-prefaced responses by reference to "self-attentive" cultural assumptions that the speaker treats as known in common. For example, in 22 the unquestionable nature of a person's intention to publish his "habilitation" thesis is conveyed with an oh-prefaced response.

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(22) [JH:FN] (Concerning a habilitation thesis)

1	A:		Will he publish this as a book?
2	B:	→	Oh yes.
3			(.)
4	B:	→	Oh yes he will publish it as a book.
5	A:		Uh huh
6	B:	→	It is obligatory in Germany.

At line 6, perhaps in reaction to the recipient's lack of significant uptake, the basis for this response is explicated with the statement that publication *is obligatory in Germany*.

Finally, among these "contextual" cases, it can be noted that there are questions which are not appropriately asked, or responded to, in particular social environments. For example, in the following segment from a British news interview, a trade union leader, whose union is currently on strike, is asked a question that no serious negotiator would address in a public context.

(23) [JH:FN]

1	Int:		Now what do you think the final figure will be.=Six
2			point nine per cent (.) seven point nine per cent.
3	Neg:	→	Oh no.=I'm not going to negotiate with the employers
4			over the radio.

Here the union leader declines to respond to the question, prefacing that declination with an oh-prefaced rejection of the question per se. Thus the entire response treats the question as inappropriate; in so doing, it achieves an emphatic rejection of its agenda as something to which the union leader can, or should, respond.

In sum, these oh-prefaced responses uniformly treat the inquiries to which they respond as inapposite by virtue of relevant information about the physical, social, cultural or personal context of the interaction – information that the questioner could or should have taken into account. Oh-prefacing these responses is a strong means of asserting the unlooked-for or inapposite nature of these inquiries; and it is often associated with the provision, albeit sometimes delayed, of accounts that explicate the basis for that assertion.

Misplaced inquiries

The inappositeness of an inquiry may not, or may not only, be a matter of prior talk, or even of "context" broadly defined. It may also be a matter of specific sequential positioning or "mispositioning" (Schegloff 1990, Drew 1997). Inappropriately positioned questions take many forms. Here I briefly illustrate a few types.

Canonical ordering. Some conversational sequences have components that emerge in a relatively canonical ordering: opening sequences (Schegloff 1968) and closing sequences (Schegloff & Sacks 1973) are among these sequence types. Opening sequences of telephone conversations embody a set of subsequences that are routinely deployed in a systematic fashion, though they can be pre-

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empted to various degrees (Schegloff 1986). The more drastic pre-emptions tend to occur early and to involve questions that can attract oh-prefaced responses. In the following case, a middle-aged woman (Emma) has a beach house near her sister in Orange County, but otherwise lives in Los Angeles.

(24) [NB II:1:R]

1	Emm:		... morning.
2	Lot:	→	Well WHERE'VE YOU BEE:N.
3	Emm:	→	.hhhh OH I'VE BEEN DOW:N HE:RE,
4			(0.2)
5	Lot:		I w'z down there over:: Memorial Day'n you weren't
6			the:re.

Here Lottie deploys an "accusatory" question after a greeting, in the place where a "how are you" sequence might otherwise ordinarily have occurred (Schegloff 1986). While Emma's response substantively addresses the question, its oh-preface indexes the unexpectedness of the question's positioning in the opening of this conversation.[16]

Troubles-tellings. There are topical environments in which "off-topic" inquiries routinely attract oh-prefaced responses. One of these involves troubles-tellings. Jefferson 1984a has detailed a multi-step procedure through which the recipient of a troubles-telling can engage in a stepwise shift to unrelated and inappropriately next-positioned matters. Briefly, initial moves in the shift involve a process in which the teller, having reached the heart of the problem, invokes an issue that, though on-topic with the troubles narrative, is ancillary to it (1→) (Jefferson 1984a:202). Recipients then produce talk, typically questions, that topically stabilize the ancillary matter (2→). Our focus is on the fact that troubles-tellers' responses to these ancillary issue-focused inquiries are very commonly oh-prefaced (3→), as in 25. The context of this example is that Emma's Thanksgiving arrangements have been ruined by a change of plan, in part occasioned by Mr. Cole's illness mentioned at lines 9–10.

(25) [NB:IV:10:18–19]

1	Emm:		If I'd just gone down there and spent my
2			Thanksgiving like, Tillie wanted me to, why
3			I would of had no problems, and hell with the
4			Thanksgiving dinner. I'm through. I'm not gonna
5			do anything anymore.
6			(0.6)
7	Lot:		[[Yeah.
8	Emm:		[[I'm n- ... I'm not gonna plan things anymore. I
9		1→	mean this is ridiculous, course I know Mister
10		1→	Cole's sick, let's God let's hope he gets well, but
11			.hhhhh I know the problem hhh you know, hh
12	Lot:	2→	What does he ha:ve.
13	Emm:	3→	.hh Oh he's got this gallbladder, and uh, they-
14			he's vomiting and everything they took him to the
15			hospital and I don't know how long he's gonna be
16			in or what the t- well he's gonna be eighty four::,

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At line 12, it is Mr. Cole's illness, rather than Emma's dramatically rendered frustrations with Thanksgiving, that Lottie's question addresses. Emma's response to this off-track inquiry is oh-prefaced, embodying an active treatment of the question as off-track or ancillary.

A similar instance is 26. Here Susan is describing a mutual acquaintance's mother's battle with cancer. Her narration climaxes with the suggestion that the mother will abandon all forms of treatment *in a while* (lines 1–2, 4, 1→). After no uptake from her recipient, Susan pursues a response by adding an increment to her prior turn that specifies *a while* in terms of an upcoming family wedding. Rather than addressing this issue, Mary takes up the ancillary issue of whether the mother can attend the wedding (2→). Susan's response to this inquiry (3→) is again oh-prefaced (and, with no immediate uptake, repeated with its preface at line 9).

(26) [FTC:I:1:12]

1	Sus:	1→	.hhhh I personally think tha:t uh (.) yihknow her
2		1→	mother's g'nna have all this stuff turned off in a while,
3			(0.2)
4	Sus:	1→	after her brother's wedding next month. This month.
5			.hhh[hh ( )
6	Mar:	2→	[Kin she go tih the wedding?
7	Sus:	3→	Oh ya:h.
8			(.)
9	Sus:	3→	Oh yuh.
10			(0.8)
11	Sus:		.hhh yihknow, uhm .t.hhhhhhh She lost all 'er hai:r,h
12			(0.4)
13	Mar:		.tch Yeah that's the u– the usual: symptom,=
14	Sus:		=Su:re I don'haftuh(k)– rilly– k– give it tih you in
15			de:tail I'm sure you know what (.) what happens in °cases
16		4→	like this.° .hhhhhh But I rilly yihknow, .hhh many people
17		4→	I've known have jist had all the machines turned off.

After a brief elaboration (lines 11, 14–15), Susan drops the ancillary matter and returns to the focus of her earlier talk: the decision to abandon treatment (4→). Here the oh-prefaced response indexes the off-topic shift initiated by the questioner, a shift which the answerer (Susan) subsequently resists.

Questions. Drew 1997 has described actions which are sequence-structurally incoherent, and which often attract "open" next-turn repair initiators (including *what*, *pardon*, *huh* etc.). Questions are among these actions. For example, Lesley's question (1→) in 27 is one that poses significant difficulties in establishing sequence-structural coherence between adjacent turns.

(27) [Holt 2:9:2]

1	Les:	Yes. Didju get my letter,
2		(0.5)
3	Mum:	Uh yes thank you, I've writ– (.) I've answered it.=

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4	Les:	1→	=.TCH! Oh yes. ↑Wey (.) ↑Can you work it all out,
5	Mum:	2→	Pardon?
6			(.)
7	Mum:	3→	Oh ↓yes. ↑Ye:s yes'v course I could.
8	Les:		What did you thin:k then.
9	Mum:		Uh well ↑wait (.) that(.)'ll be in my ↓letter.

At the beginning of this sequence, Mum replies to Lesley's question about whether she has received Lesley's letter by asserting (line 3) that she has received it and answered it. It is in this context that Lesley's question at line 4 (↑*Can you work it all out,*) is problematic or inapposite. In British English, the phrase *work it out* will be taken to refer to understanding the content of the letter, rather than questioning whether the recipient can manage some plan or proposal described in the letter. Thus, as Drew 1997 notes, the question fails to take into account the fact that if Mum "answered" the letter, then she was probably able to "work it out." After Mum's "open" next-turn repair initiator and a slight hitch, she initiates an oh-prefaced response (line 7). With this preface, she formulates the question in this and other ways (note the ↑*Ye:s yes'v course I could*) as inapposite.

A similarly problematized questioning sequence emerges in 28, where Andrew, a youngest son who is away from home camping in a friend's garden, calls to speak to his mother. His brother Ian picks up the phone and blocks Andrew's request for his mother (line 1) with a counter-inquiry (line 2). Subsequently, Ian speculates about Andrew's reason for phoning: Andrew may be thinking of coming home for tea (line 4).

(28) [Rahman:8:1]

1	And:		Is Mom theh.
2	Ian:		Why:.
3	And:		Ah j's wanna talk to uh.
4	Ian:	1→	Not c'min 'ome f'tea now lad,
5	And:	2→	Eh?
6	Ian:		Yih not thinking y'comin'ome f'tea now lad,
7	And:	3→	Oh no,h ah j's wanna tell'er sommut.h

This inquiry is treated as off the sequential track by Andrew with an "open" next-turn repair initiator (line 5), and subsequent to the repeat of the inquiry, with an oh-prefaced response that clearly indicates that coming home for tea was not on his mind.[17]

Across this set of cases, questions that are mispositioned in various ways attract oh-prefaced responses. Unlike the cases described in the previous two sections, these responses are not normally "unpacked." The nature of the problem or inappositeness that the oh-preface indicates is rarely if ever elaborated. Instead, the oh-preface registers a fugitive and inexplicit indication that, from the respondent's point of view, the question was not aptly or appropriately asked at that point. This brief indication is normally accompanied by a response to the question, and thus it amounts to a momentary resistance at most.

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"Problematic" questions

So far we have considered oh-prefaced responses to questions in environments where the question evidently requests information that is already stated, or available by inference – or where the question's inappositeness, or potential for inappositeness, is apparent in the prior talk of the participants or its context, and/or in the subsequent talk of the participants. These cases clearly establish that oh-prefacing is a practice that is recurrently used to problematize a prior question.

But this practice, like other conversational practices, can be exploited. An obvious possibility would be its use to intensify or emphasize the force of a response to an inquiry. This use of oh-prefacing is most clearly visible when: (a) no sense of the question's inappositeness is available from the question's context or design, or from the response to it, or from that response's sequelae; and (b) descriptive terms in the oh-prefaced response are upgraded relative to the terms used in the question.

Consider the following case. The background is that Jan has been to an event (a film or play, which she later describes as a *right good thriller*), to which Vi was not able to go. She begins the sequence with a pre-announcement that clearly projects a report of a good time (Terasaki 1976).

(29) [Rah:I:5–6]

1	Jan:		Hey listen .hhh You should have come on Tue:sda:y,
2	Vi:	→	Was it goo[:d,
3	Jan:	→	[.hh Oh it was ↑mar:velous=

Her recipient, Vi, responds by topicalizing the pre-announcement with a response, *Was it goo:d*, which evidently anticipates the projected "good time" report. Jan's response is oh-prefaced – indexing the fact that that "it was good" was, from her viewpoint, already conveyed in her pre-announcement. Here, however, whatever redundancy there is in Vi's inquiry is strictly "formal." There is nothing interactionally inappropriate here; the inquiry is entirely fitted to the launching of Jan's narrative about her night out. An additional feature of this example is that Jan's responsive assessment of the event is upgraded from the question's term *good* to her own *marvelous*. Moreover, here (and to a lesser extent in some of the other "emphatic" cases) both the *Oh* and the corollary descriptive term *marvelous* are contrastively stressed, accenting the distinction between Jan's *marvelous* and Vi's *good* to which it responds.[18] Thus Jan and Vi collaborate in constructing a context in which Jan's narrative can begin with a strongly emphatic announcement.[19]

While 29 is a "clean" case in which oh-prefacing manages the achievement of emphasis, uncontaminated by any overtone of inappositeness, other cases are not so clear. For example, 30 looks like a similar case of reasonable or "not inappropriate" questioning, followed (as in 29) by an emphatically upgraded oh-prefaced response. Bee's declarative inquiry at line 5, which clearly anticipates a confirmation of her supposition, is met with an oh-prefaced confirmation, and her pursuit of the issue (line 7) gets another.

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(30) [TG:10]

1	Bee:		Dihyuh have any– cl– You have a class with Billy this te:rm?
2	Ava:		Yeh he's in my abnormal class.
3	Bee:		mnYeh [how–]
4	Ava:		[Abnor]mal psy[ch.
5	Bee:	1→	[Still not gettin married,
6	Ava:	2→	.hhh Oh no. Definitely not.[married.]
7	Bee:	3→	[No he's] decided [defin[itely?]
8	Ava:	4→	[.hhh [O h] no.
9	Bee:	5→	.hh Bec'z [las'] time you told me he said no: but he wasn't=
10	Ava:		[No.]
11	Bee:	5→	=su:re,
12	Ava:		n:No definitely not. He, he'n Gail were like on the outs,
13			yihknow,

This sequence bears all the hallmarks of the use of oh-prefacing for emphatic purposes. A perfectly ordinary "updating" kind of question gets an oh-prefaced response in which the terms of the response, *definitely not married*, significantly exceed the terms of the question, *still not . . . married*. Interestingly, however, it is apparent that Bee, having encountered two successive oh-prefaced responses, feels impelled to defend (at lines 9/11) the relevance of her previous inquiry. Here it can be particularly noted that, having received an oh-prefaced response to her initial question, Bee's second, "confirmatory" question (*No he's decided definitely?*) provides for the relevance of the first by indicating that there was a time when the person being discussed had NOT *decided definitely* (line 7). The oh-prefaced response to this question is the proximate inducement for Bee to state her prior understanding more explicitly, and moreover to name Ava (her current co-interactant) as the source of that understanding. Here, then, "emphatic" oh-prefacing entrains a defense of the appositeness of the questioning to which it responds.

Other cases, while not so explicitly problematized as 30, may involve a similar predicament; oh-prefacing that apparently emphasizes a response is entangled with at least a hint of a difficulty with the prior question. In the following case, two neighbors are discussing some new furniture that was recently delivered to a third, though in damaged condition. Before this segment, Jan has already extolled the quality of the furniture in some detail and has noted the likelihood of its high cost.

(31) [Rah:13:8]

1	Jan:		She was upset. C'z she'd waited sich a long I m– ih tis ih
2			it's (.) beautiful fur:niture it really is lovely.
3			(.)
4	Jan:		.hh En [it makes that room]
5	Ann:	→	[Is it like you]:rs.
6	Jan:	→	.h Oh no: no(h) it's far nicer th'n mine

Here Ann's question tacitly compliments Jan by inviting her to equate her furniture with something she has already described in strongly positive terms. But the compliment is doubly problematic. By inviting a *yes* response, it not only invites her to assert the virtues of her own furniture; it also potentially recontextualizes

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her earlier praise for the neighbor's furniture in a new and morally problematic light. Jan's response emphatically rejects any but a negative comparison between her and her neighbor's furniture. It does so, in part, through her version of the comparison (*far nicer than mine*), and in part by the duplicated *no*. Here the oh-preface, by treating the question as "unexpected" and as not quite apposite, contributes to the emphatic nature of Jan's response, and to a corollary avoidance of the self-praise that might be implied by even a hint of an affirmative response.

Similarly, in 32, Ivy has just started going to a "Keep Fit" class, and Jan inquires at lines 2–3 about her age relative to the other participants. There is nothing informationally inapposite about the question, but Ivy emphatically rejects the possibility, raised by Jan's question, that she was the only older person in the class. She does so with an oh-prefaced response, and with the strongly contrastive assertion that there were *loads* older than her.

(32) (Rah:II:18)

1	Ivy:		It's ↑mahrvelous theh yih kno:w,=
2	Jan:	→	=You– it– ih Were you the only one sort'v uh:: e getting
3			on a bit uhr were the[y all]
4	Ivy:	→	[Oh n]o there's loads oldih th'n me:?=
5	Jan:		=Oh well thaht's a(hh)r(hh)ight th(hh)en

Here too, while there is emphatic rejection of the factual proposition the question carries, there is more than a hint, also indexed by the trouble Jan has in formulating her question, that the social appropriateness of the question is in doubt.

In 33, an older woman (Nan) emphatically rejects the possibility that she's dating:

(33) (NB:II:2:23)

1	Emm:	1→	Y'got any(b) frie:nd boyfrie:nds? er any°thing
2			[goin:g [steady'r:°]
3	Nan:	2→	[Oh::: [°↓h*ell n]*o.°↓
4	Emm:	3→	°Nothin°
5			(0.3)
6	Nan:	4→	.t Oh I've gotta lot'v (0.2) frie:nds,=
7	Emm:	5→	=But n[othin'yer] dating.
8	Nan:		[But n o:]
9	Nan:	6→	.hhhh Oh hu– E:mma ↓I: don't wanna get↓ I=
10	Emm:		=↓Y[eh ((compressed))
11	Nan:		[just am: not emotion'lly:
12			(0.2)
13	Emm:		°Mm-mm[:.°
14	Nan:		[I: don't wanna get invo:lved I: don't wanna go ou:t and
15			.hhhhhhhhh put myself in the p'sition whur: some ma:n's gunnuh
16			think oh boy she's rilly hard up yihknow,hh

Here, at least initially, is the same pattern: A question that is not informationally inapposite (1→) attracts an oh-prefaced denial that is emphatically upgraded by the use of *hell* (2→). Across two rounds of pursuit (arrowed 3 and 4, and 5 and 6), Nan makes more elaborate denials. The first embodies a contrast which is collaboratively completed, the second involves a complex account. Each of them is

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oh-prefaced. Again, in this context and for this question, the oh-preface may be achieving something more than emphasis – specifically that *dating* is something so far from Nan's mind that the question itself, as Nan's remarks at lines 14–16 hint, is problematic.

Finally, in 34 a differently motivated form of emphasis is deployed. Here Ivy seems to mistake the import of Jan's unelaborated announcement (line 1) as implicating an as-yet-untold problem. Jan's son Michael has come home from university for the weekend. Ivy's initial response is to check out whether the person referred to as *Michael* in Jan's announcement is indeed Jan's son – the check-out itself perhaps indexing the unexpectedness of the event. Her subsequent inquiry (line 7) is designed to pursue the possibility that his arrival may be caused by some problem. It is this that is addressed by Jan's oh-prefaced response (line 8).

(34) [Rahman II:7]

1	Jan:	→	Michael's ho:me?
2			(0.5)
3	Ivy:		Yooer Mi[chael.
4	Jan:		[Ye:s: m[m,
5	Ivy:		[Oh:.
6			(.)
7	Ivy:	→	An'– is he a'↑ri:ght?=
8	Jan:	→	=Oh 'eez fi:ne 'ee[: .hnh
9	Ivy:		[<Th'foot,=
10	Jan:		=ehh[he
11	Ivy:		[Is it a brea:k or what[:.
12	Jan:		[eh No 'eez js k't home f'th'weekend.=
13	Jan:		=Long weekend. 'e [doesn'have a]ny lectures on M'nday=
14	Ivy:		[*O h : : .*]
15	Jan:		=so 'eez alright.=

Notably, at line 9, Ivy begins a possibly related inquiry, which she then abandons in favor of a more "normalizing" pursuit of the topic (line 11).[20] This is further developed by Jan, who supplies a more mundane reason for her son's arrival (lines 12–13); she then reconfirms (at line 15) the substance of her original oh-prefaced statement, to the effect that her son is *alright*. Here a "reasonable" inference, incorporated in a tactful inquiry, is emphatically rejected by means of the oh-preface-carried treatment of the question as "unexpected." But there is also a problematic shading: Ivy has "anticipated the worst" and jumped too quickly to a troubles-related possibility.

The exploitation of oh-prefacing as a method of emphatic response to questions is quite common in contexts such as cross-examination in the law courts, where respondents' positions are already a matter of public record. Viewed in terms of "information" alone, the circumstances of these question/answer sequences are rather similar to the "prior talk" cases discussed earlier, with the difference that the respondent is being re-questioned on the issue in an institutionally validated manner. In such cases, respondents often have an interest in

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attacking the questions put. For example, in 35, the speaker – Los Angles Police Department's Officer Powell, testifying in cross-examination in the first Rodney King trial in Los Angeles – deploys an oh-prefaced response in an emphatic rejection of an accusatory question. Here the witness has already testified in direct examination that the blows he struck were appropriate.

(35) [C. Goodwin 1994:618]

1	Pro:	You can't look at that video and say that every
2		one of those blows is reasonable can you.
3		(1.0)
4	Powell:	Oh I can if I put my perceptions in.

Here, of course, the oh-prefaced response is deployed by the witness to rebut the assertion of a cross-examining prosecution question hostile to his position (note the repetition of the questioner's *You can't... can you* in the answerer's *I can*, and the contrastive stress on *can* at the core of that rebuttal). But although it is appropriate to test a witness's testimony in cross-examination, the witness's response gains some of its emphatic force by the oh-preface's implication of inappositeness. By this means, the witness can evoke the fact that the question has already been asked and answered, and in terms quite opposed to those currently in play.

Ex. 36 embodies a related circumstance of public questioning about a stated position. Here Lord Weinstock, the president of a major British aerospace corporation, is questioned about a widespread belief in financial circles that his corporation is undercapitalized for a major project.

(36) [BBC Radio 4: Today: AWACS: Weinstock]

1	Int:		But if you get the go-ahead, are you sure you can
2			fund the development out of your own resources.
3	W/S:	→	Oh yes. There's no difficulty about that.

Asked about his company's publicly asserted ability to fund a complex defense initiative, his oh-prefaced *yes* embodies an emphatic dismissal of the problem, which the continuation of his turn then explicitly states.[21]

In many of the cases discussed in this section, there is a complex interplay between using oh-prefacing to convey the inappositeness of a question, and using it to convey the emphatic nature of a response. In several of the cases we have examined (31–34), oh-prefaces front rejections of inquiries. They contribute emphasis by providing for the "unexpectedness" and "inappositeness" of questions as raising possibilities which, while understandable, are not quite "right." In these cases, oh-prefacing can carry both emphasis and, as part of that, a hint of the question's inappropriateness. In the case of quite proper hostile questioning in a public context, as in 35–36, the "inappositeness" invoked by oh-prefacing can vividly convey emphasis in a response; yet the inappositeness that is conveyed is not completely "exhausted" by its apprehension as emphasis, as the following example, from the *New York Times* coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial, further illustrates:[22]

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(37) [Margolick 1995]

> She [Marcia Clark] also asked Mr. Kaelin whether the place Mr. Simpson took him to eat earlier that evening was not a McDonald's but a Burger King. It was a clear reference to published reports, heretofore entirely unsubstantiated, that Mr. Simpson and Mr. Kaelin went out in the evening of June 12 not to purchase hamburgers and french fries but drugs. "Oh no," Mr. Kaelin replied, almost in wonder that such a question would be asked.

Oh-prefacing can thus manage to achieve not only emphasis for the response but also an imputed sense of inappositeness for the question itself.

It is just this use of oh-prefacing for emphasis that is apparent in the case from the cover of *Glamour* magazine that heads this paper. Here, by comparison with *Yes*, it seems that *Oh yes* is presented as an emphatic, even enthusiastic, response, to the question *Do you think about sex too much?* This intention is further underscored by the typographic addition of an exclamation mark: *Oh yes!* Yet the relevance of the question itself also undergoes an implied attack: "Do you really need to ask?"

In sum, oh-prefacing responses to inquiry work to treat the inquiry to which they respond as "unexpected" or inapposite. Depending on the local context of the response, it is available that they treat the inquiry as raising a matter that is (or should be) self-evident from the prior talk or its physical context, or in virtue of cultural assumptions that anyone should make. Oh-prefaced responses can also be used to mark a question's sequential ill-fittedness. Finally, even when oh-prefacing is clearly used to emphasize a response, it continues to index inappositeness, whether "formal" (e.g. 29) or "substantive" (e.g. 30–37), in various ways.

Across these cases, oh-prefaces retain the characteristic of self-attentiveness, of focusing on how the world looks from the respondent's perspective rather than how it looks from the questioner's. Moreover, oh-prefaces are specifically unaccountable. Producers of oh-prefaced responses cannot be asked why they prefaced their responses with *oh*. The preface is treated as "just done." Finally, oh-prefaces are inexplicit in what they point to in prior questions: whether there is a "problem" with the prior inquiry, and the exact nature of that "problem" remains to be formulated by the recipient – or elaborated by the oh-prefaced response producer, or neither.

SEQUENTIAL PROJECTIONS OF OH-PREFACED RESPONSES

If it is the case that oh-prefaced responses provide an inexplicit, non-accountable, self-attentive comment on the inappositeness of the inquiries to which they respond, do they also project anything for the character of the turn or sequence that follows them? Intuition suggests they should. Specifically, if oh-prefaces routinely point to the inapposite nature of an inquiry, then they may also be deployed or exploited to project reluctance to talk about the topic raised by the inquiry – although this will depend on the kind of activity being prosecuted in the sequence

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in which they occur, and whether the inquiry to which they respond is hearable as opening or extending a conversational topic.[23]

This oh-preface-projected reluctance is evidenced in the data in three ways:

(a) Oh-prefaced responses are minimal, unelaborated, or occasionally even dismissive of the matter raised by the inquiry.

(b) Oh-prefaced-response producers unilaterally shift topic immediately after the oh-prefaced response, or shortly thereafter.

(c) The oh-prefaced-response producers withhold on-topic talk (e.g. by remaining silent).

In all three cases, the oh-prefacing respondent does not engage in a significant continuation of the topic or issue raised by the inquiry. These features are exhibited in cases 38–47 below.

Ex. 38 is a return to the Sir Harold Acton example. In this example, several things are apparent. First, Acton offers a most minimal oh-prefaced response (1→) to the question *Did you learn to speak Chinese*. Second, he withholds further continuation – something that is otherwise virtually obligatory in an interview context (Greatbatch 1988) – for about seven-tenths of a second (2→). Finally, having been "outlasted" in the silence by the interviewer, Acton offers a minimal elaboration of his response, an account for the necessity of learning the language (3→), before he shifts topic (4→).

(38) (Chat Show: Russell Harty – Sir Harold Acton)

1	Act:		... hhhh and some of thuh– (0.3) some of my students
2			translated Eliot into Chine::se. I think thuh very
3			first.
4			(0.2)
5	Har:		Did you learn to speak (.) Chine[:se.
6	Act:	1→	[.hh Oh yes.
7		2→	(0.7)
8	Act:	3→	.hhhh You ca::n't live in thuh country without speaking
9		3→	thuh lang[uage it's impossible .hhhhh=
10	Har:		[Not no: cour:se
11	Act:	4→	=an' you: eh=you miss::: so much an' then what is so
12			entertaining in China, .hhhh wa::s (0.3) going: (0.3)
13			to the (0.2) mar:kets: .hhh a:::nd to the antique shops.
14			.hhh where of course one was always offered uh cup of tea:::
15			.hhhh 'n one talked about e::v'rything except what one
16			r::eally wanted t'talk about.

Here Acton manages the topic shift by unilaterally eliding his account into a new aspect of life in China – the delights of Chinese antique shops.

The same pattern is exhibited in another piece of interview data. Here the schoolboy who was thrown over the embankment at his new school has just finished an extensive description of his injuries. At line 1, the interviewer turns in a marked fashion – with the discourse marker *now* (Schiffrin 1987) – away from the topic of the boy's injuries, and to the question of the motivation for the assault.

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(39) (WAO:Initiation Ceremony)

1	Int:		Now why d'you think they did it.
2	Boy:		Well I don't know it's j'st a sort'v traditional:uh
3			↑cerem'ny that th'do.=It's ↑always 'appened at that
4			school.=
5	Int:		=Did they do it to everybody?
6	Boy:		u– Well all the newcomers ye:s,
7			(0.5)
8	Int:		So there were other lads as well (.) being thrown
9			up in the air as well,=
10	Boy:	1→	=Oh yes,
11		2→	(0.4)
12	Boy:	3→	quite a lot of them
13	Boy:	4→	but not many of them were 'urt. (.) .hhh There w'z
14			only:uhm me an' one of me pals Andrew u– Smith ...
15			(*continues by detailing the latter's injuries*)

In response to the interviewer's question at line 5, we again see (i) the minimal oh-prefaced reconfirmation; (ii) a withholding that is "outlasted" by the interviewer, resulting in a gap before the boy continues; (iii) the boy's production of a very brief elaboration of his reply; and (iv) the boy's shifting back to the topic of injuries, which was in play just prior to this sequence and which the interviewer markedly shifted away from with his *now*-prefaced question at line 1. This time, however, the boy focuses on his friend's injuries rather than his own.

If 38–39 embody a "fully extended" pattern of resistance to the matter raised by a question, other cases embody related forms of resistance. In 40, there is a minimal oh-prefaced response (1→), and rather than shifting the talk away from the matter raised by the question, the oh-prefaced-response producer offers a minimally informative addition (3→), then declines further elaboration without offering any kind of shift (4→). Here it is left to the questioner to initiate a shift, in this case toward closing the call (5→):

(40) [Heritage:0II:2:4]

1	Edw:		W'l what a frightf'l thing How did it happen.
2	Ric:		She jus' bent o:ver as we w'r getting ready tih go out h
3			on Christmas [morning.]
4	Edw:		[O h : :] my God.
5			(0.2)
6	Ric:		.h Yhes i[t hent–]
7	Edw:		[uhh hu:]hh, hu[:h ho:.
8	Ric:		[It hasn't happened fuh ten yea:rs.=
9	Edw:		=ukhh huukhh ukh >Oh she's had it be↓fore.<
10	Ric:	1→	Oh yes=
11	Ric:	3→	=b't not fih te(h)n y(h)ea(h)[a(h)s.]
12	Edw:		[O h: :]: Lord.
13	Ric:	4→	Yes there we are,
14	Edw:		The:re we are.
15	Edw:	5→	[Topic shift into a preclosing sequence]

This case is of particular interest in that, although Edward's understanding check (*oh she's had it before*) seems to grasp the import of the previous turn (*it hasn't happened for ten years*), it fails to grasp the import of the sequence as a whole. As

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indicated earlier, Richard's wife has a back injury. She is somewhat incapacitated, and Richard is describing the situation in troubles-resistant fashion (Jefferson 1988). Rather than dealing with his wife's pain or the disruption of his family's activities, Richard merely describes the manner in which the injury came about (*she just bent over*) and the moment at which it happened (*as we were getting ready to go out on Christmas morning*), proposing it as a nuisance or inconvenience rather than a disaster. Edward's initial serious-to-"laughing" response (lines 4/7) seems to be reasonably well fitted to this characterization. Richard's additional observation (*it hasn't happened for ten years*, line 8) enhances the work of proposing the event as a nuisance rather than a disaster. The way that it juxtaposes the event happening out of the blue, on Christmas morning, with its not having previously occurred for ten years, amounts to: "It had to happen on Christmas of all days." But Edward's understanding check (line 9) is drastically mismatched to this effort to make light of the trouble. First, it is accompanied by a radical change in voice quality, involving an abandoning of his previous "smile voice" and the removal of the laugh-particle infiltration of his talk by a throat clear – in effect, resetting his tone of voice from the "light banter" of his previous turn to "deadly serious." Second, it deals with the content of the prior turn as "new information" to be appreciated in its own right, rather than as a resource to be juxtaposed to, and interpreted in the light of, the earlier talk.

Thus Edward's utterance at line 9 is quite problematic. Designed to "show understanding," it invites Richard to confirm an inference that is self-evident at one level, while effectively failing to grasp the import of the turn to which it responds. In this context, Richard's oh-prefaced confirmation of Edward's "inference" recycles his previous statement, adding nothing to it except to inject "breathy" laugh-invitation components (Jefferson 1979); these give Edward an opportunity to reconsider his previous analysis.[24] Edward responds with a relatively empty assessment (*Oh Lord*) which contains no hint of a revision of his understanding of what Richard has accomplished in making light of the trouble across this sequence. Thereupon Richard produces *There we are*, a quite empty conclusion to the prior sequence. This is is echoed by Edward, and entry is effected into a closing sequence. Thus, again, an oh-prefaced response is projective of a shift away from the matter nominated by the inquiry to which it responds.

In 38–40, the inquiries that attract oh-prefaced responses are all problematic in a way that is relatively available to an outside analyst; but in the following cases, oh-prefacing is exploited as part of a self-attentive determination to decline the topic, or to shift from the topic nominated by the inquiry to a topic preferred by the recipient.

In 41, an inquiry into the state of Agnes's foot receives an oh-prefaced positive response. It appears, however, that the questioner, by inquiring into the foot where there is a known problem, has mentioned an ailment that is less significant for the respondent. It turns out that Agnes has a new and more pressing difficulty to describe: She has a persistent and painful fungal infection in her toenails.

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(41) [NB:I:6:13]

1	C:		How's yer foot?
2	A:	→	Oh it's healing beautif'lly!
3	C:		Goo[::d.
4	A:	→	[The other one may haftuh come off, on the other
5			toe I've got in that.

Here Agnes, having oh-prefaced her response to the inquiry on which she does NOT wish to elaborate, intersects the questioner's responsive assessment with a new bad-news report – about a new infection in the other foot, which was not inquired into. Here again, an oh-prefaced response adumbrates a unilateral shift: away from the good-news topic nominated by the inquiry to a bad-news topic that the recipient treats as more pressing.[25]

Still more abrupt is the shift exhibited in 42. The initial inquiry, which is hearably complete with *How's yer sister*, is met with the initiation of an oh-prefaced response. That response is then abandoned when the inquiry is lengthened to include her husband.

(42) [JG:6:8:2]

1	M:		How's your sister an' [her husband?
2	L:	→	[Oh t'che
3	L:		Well as a matter of fact uh ih Dawn is alright.
4			She had a very very bad cold the last month.
5		→	An' Charlie is: had a very serious operation. Surgery on the
6			gal, g'll bladder. But I guess he's alright. But .hhh at
7			his age maybe it's a little rough hh.
8	M:		No more wild game hunting 'uh?

After the more extended and inclusive inquiry is complete, L restarts her response. Notably, however, she abandons the oh-prefaced format of her previous turn start in favor of a prefatory item (*well*) which, among other things, can standardly project a lengthy response. Having started in this way, she elects to deal with her sister's case first, moving on to deal with the husband as the second, sequentially implicative topic raised by the inquiry. In this example, it is clear that the turn initiation is revised from an oh-prefaced to a *well*-prefaced response in reaction to the changed character of the inquiry. Indeed, it is arguable that the initial oh-prefaced response projected a rapid topic shift from the inquired-after sister to what would otherwise have been the non-inquired-after husband.

Finally, in the domain of topic shifts, in 43 Emma has news: She's been to an event at her country club where she won some liquor. But though afforded every opportunity to elaborate on this news, she shifts topic at line 15 – a shift adumbrated by her initial oh-prefaced response to the initial inquiry.

(43) (NB:IV:14:1–2:SO)

1	Emm:	Oh: I– We:ll we just got do:wn .h
2	Lot:	Oh you di:[d?
3	Emm:	[Yea:uh.
4	Lot:	Oh how co:me.

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5	Emm:	→	.hhhh Oh we had to go to something last night at
6			Buena Vista Country Club I won a bottle of liquor
7			ehh::huh agai:n ehh hh[uh]
8	Lot:		[Go]:d y[ou:'re lu:cky:.]
9	Emm:		[huh huh huh huh] huh
10	Lot:		[[Oh:::::::::]::[:::,
11	Emm:		[[.hh .hh .hh] [Almost everybody won something but,
12	Lot:		Uhh! [huh-hu:h hu]:h,
13	Emm:		[.hhhhhhhhhh]
14			(.)
15	Emm:	→	Ah::: I been to the do:ctor, hhhhhh

In this case, Emma gives a rather minimal oh-prefaced account for *how come* she has just *got down* from the city, and she follows it with a remarkably brief elaboration (especially for this speaker) of the events at the country club. Following Lottie's assessment at line 8 (*Go:d you:'re lu:cky:.*), Emma offers a minimal and self-deprecatory response which she abandons after projecting an additional unit with *but* (line 11). Subsequently, she moves to initiate what is, for her, a much more pressing topic, her doctor's appointment. Here the upcoming shift is indexed by the Emma's oh-prefaced response (at line 5), and her intervening responses to her sister's assessment are brief and truncated.

Association between oh-prefaced responses and topic-shift is also a feature of the sequences discussed earlier involving ancillary topic stabilization. Here, however, the shift involves a shift BACK TO THE PRIOR TOPIC by the oh-prefaced response producer. In 44, Susan's oh-prefaced response to Mary's topicalizing *Wuh were you cry:ing?* is minimally elaborated at line 16, before she shifts topic with a return to her future plans. Here, the primary topical line is labeled (a→), the ancillary topic stabilizing question (b→) and the return to the prior topical line (a→).

(44) [F:TC:I:1:4] (Concerning a poor LSAT test result)

1	Mar:	a→	Sih yih g'nna take it agai:n?=
2	Sus:		=nNo.
3			(0.5)
4	Mar:		No:?
5	Sus:		°No.°
6			(0.3)
7	Mar:		Why no:t.=
8	Sus:		=.t.hhhhh I don't rilly wan'to.
9	Mar:	a→	Yih don'wanna go through all the ha:ssle?=
10	Sus:		=.hhhh I don'know Mary,
11			(.)
12	Sus:		I've I've stopped crying uhheh-heh-heh-heh-heh
13	Mar:	b→	Wuh were you cr[y:ing?
14	Sus:	b→	[.hhhhhh Oh I wz hysterical.
15			(0.4)
16	Sus:		Yihknow how much I p't out fer this?
17	Sus:	a→	.hhhhhhhhh But I feel better a:n' (.) now the neh– th'nex'
18		a→	question is what I'm g'nna do next year.

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A similar pattern is evident in 45:

(45) [F:TC:I:1:12]

1	Sus:		.hhhh I personally think tha:t uh (.) yihknow her
2		a→	mother's g'nna have all this stuff turned off in awhile,
3			(0.2)
4	Sus:	a→	after her brother's wedding next month. This month.
5			.hhh[hh ( )
6	Mar:	b→	[Kin she go tih the wedding?
7	Sus:	b→	Oh ya:h.
8			(.)
9	Sus:	b→	Oh yuh.
10			(0.8)
11	Sus:		.hhh yihknow, uhm .t.hhhhhhh She lost all 'er hai:r,h
12			(0.4)
13	Mar:		.tch Yeah that's the u– the usual: symptom,=
14	Sus:		=Su:re I don'haftuh(k)– rilly– k– give it tih you in
15			de:tail I'm sure you know what (.) what happens in °cases
16		a→	like this.° .hhhhhh But I rilly yihknow, .hhh many people
17		a→	I've known have jist had all the machines turned off.

Here, as noted earlier, Susan's oh-prefaced response treats the inquiry to which it responds as off-topic, a treatment that is confirmed by Susan's return to her previous topic at line 16.

In 46, an off-topic inquiry attracts an oh-prefaced response and a subsequent return to a prior theme. Here a middle-aged woman (Emma) is trying to enlist her daughter's help in contacting her estranged husband, who has recently left her. Across this sequence, the daughter noticeably fails to affiliate with her mother's predicament, and at lines 12 and 22, she launches off-topic "fact-gathering" inquiries.

(46) [NB:IV:7:3]

1	Emm:		YE::S:.h[hh He's] lef' me sin'Sa:turdee night'n I talk't'im=
2	Bar:		[O h :.]
3	Emm:	a→	=la:s'night'n'e still doesn'know weth'eez comin down
4		a→	dihmorrow will you he:lp me wih this hohney I need ju:,h
5			(.)
6	Emm:	a→	.hhhh.hhh Uh::m? .t.hhhhh If he's goana come do:wn er so
7		a→	will you c– reverse a ca:ll duh me dihmorruh morning hhhhhh
8			(0.3)
9	Bar:		↑Ah:'ll pay for't,
10	Emm:	a→	No:, .hhhh ↑En a:sk what the hell is wro:::ng, ah mean
11		a→	this is deh this is: [↓D A : D .]
12	Bar:	b→	[Wen– He we]nt ho:me Sa'rdee ni:ght?
13	Emm:	b→	YE:A:H,
14			(0.3)
15	Emm:		.hhh En I: talk'to'im la:s'night I been kahnda sick about
16			it en:d .hhhhhhh uh::: hIt's a pro:blem I– ah'll ah'll tell
17			you when I ↓see: you ah mean it'll work out I kno↓*:w,hh I
18			don'know whether we're g*unnuh s::eparate I: don't know
19			what the wh*o*:le th*ing's a[b*out]h h]
20	Bar:		[Oh: r]eal]↑ly?

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21	Emm:		.hhh[hh
22	Bar:	c→	[Is this been goin on lo:ng er wha:t.
23	Emm:	d→	OH:::: I DON'T KNOW I JIS CA:N'T SEEM TUH SAY BLUE IS
24			BLUE HE AR:GUES e- WITH ME ER:: *u- (.) u- SOMETHING
25			EN: AH: DON'T DO THIS RI:GHT'n THAT RI:GHT. .hhhhh
26			I NEED hhHE:L:P.hh
27			(.)
28	Emm:	a→	EN BARBRA wouldju CA:LL im dihni:ght for me,h

Emma briefly responds to the first of these inquiries (b→), and then resumes her narrative; but she treats the second of them (c→), which requires a more substantial response, as significantly off-track with an oh-prefaced response (d→), followed by a return to her earlier request for the daughter to help by calling the husband (a→).

In sum, on the evidence to hand, it is clear that in addition to proposing some difficulty or inappositeness about a prior inquiry, an oh-prefaced response may project reluctance to forward on-topic talk relevanced by a prior inquiry. In many cases, though not all, it may project actual resistance to such talk.

RESPONSES TO PERSONAL STATE INQUIRIES

In the final part of this article, I turn to the use of oh-prefaced responses to various types of "How are you?" or personal state inquiries in telephone calls. These inquiries come in various forms. For example, it is important to distinguish some "How are you" questions, which are constructed as unmotivated, from inquiries such as *How are you feeling*, whose design shows that they are based in some background knowledge of the respondent's circumstances and are thus asked "for cause." The design of this second type of inquiry may create a context in which the questioner is treated as pre-aligned as a recipient of bad news or troubles.

"How are you" inquiries occur in at least three distinct kinds of contexts in telephone calls: (i) at the opening of the call (Schegloff 1986); (ii) reciprocating a much earlier first "how are you" that engendered a lengthy period of intervening talk; and (iii) just prior to a movement to the closing of the call, typically in business-focused calls. Although these three contexts can create rather different relevances for the recipient of the "how are you" inquiry, oh-prefaced responses index a common stance taken toward all three types.

The background for these observations comes from Gail Jefferson's work on troubles talk, in particular her paper on trouble-premonitory responses to inquiry (Jefferson 1980). She proposes that troubles talk is marked by a general and continuing tension between attending the trouble and attending "business as usual" – a tension which emerges particularly in the general tendency (and requirement) for the one with the trouble to exhibit an appropriate degree of troubles resistance.[26] This tension manifests itself, among other places, in the opening moments of telephone conversations. Jefferson started from Sacks's observation that a response such as *Fine* to a "How are you" question during a telephone opening is a "conventional" one, indicating that there is no special news to be told

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(at least in response to this inquiry); she then observed that "downgraded" conventional responses to inquiry (like *pretty good*) are generally trouble-premonitory. In this context, she notes two central features of the downgraded conventional response to inquiry:

> First, inasmuch as it may, but only MAY, premonitor a report on a trouble, this response is not itself, on its occurrence, the "telling" of the trouble. It is, on its occurrence, a version of a conventional reply to an inquiry, perhaps shadowed by a trouble – a trouble that may or may not be told. What is being done on its occurrence is the routine business of a conversation's opening by one who might or might not have a trouble, which trouble might or might not be told.
>
> Second, such an object as "pretty good", on its occurrence, can be invoking and attending to business as usual. If there is a trouble (which there might not be) and if it is to be told (which might not occur), then it is being deferred while adumbrated in the interests of the business-as-usual of the conversation's opening, of which "pretty good" is an appropriate component. (Jefferson 1980:162–3)

She concludes:

> A downgraded conventional response, then, can "pass" on introducing a trouble or its like by reference to a primary inquiry, while indicating that things are not quite as they should be. In this way, the response both clears the way for a possible secondary inquiry, and perhaps makes available to a co-participant that a secondary inquiry could locate the trouble that the downgraded conventional response to the inquiry may be adumbrating. (Ibid., 167)

Even a quite cursory examination of the data in Jefferson's paper shows that many of them (around 65%) are also oh-prefaced. The question arises, therefore, whether oh-prefacing plays any role in their workings.[27]

I suggest that, in the specific environment of responses to "How are you" questions, the same tension between attending the trouble and attending "business as usual" is being managed with the oh-prefaced aspect of these responses. I will also suggest that oh-prefacing is a resource in an intricate information game that is played with downgraded conventional responses.

The basic claim is relatively straightforward, given the other observations of this paper. We have seen that oh-prefacing may, by indexing a marked shift of attention, indicate the inappositeness of an inquiry; or relatedly, it may be understood as giving added emphasis to a response. Yet when we consider the response *Oh pretty good* to the question *How are you?* during the opening sequence of a telephone call, a problem arises. There is nothing that is prima-facie inapposite about such an inquiry: Indeed, it is a canonical feature of telephone openings (Schegloff 1986).[28] Yet neither is the "downgraded" response *Oh pretty good* being emphasized through the oh-preface in any sense described in this article. We have also seen that oh-prefacing may routinely be used to project "no further talk" to the particular topic raised in the inquiry to which it responds. Yet this

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oh-preface would seem to be redundant, because "pretty good" also projects that (Jefferson 1980).

We seem to have arrived at an impasse: What is it to display a marked shift in attention, "having one's attention drawn to something," by an inquiry which, far from being inappropriate, is utterly routine? And to do so while at the same time projecting "not to elaborate" on something to which one's attention has been drawn, when the content of the response already indicates "there is nothing to elaborate on"? Evidently the tension Jefferson discusses between attending the as-yet-unstated issue and attending to business as usual is markedly conveyed by oh-prefacing. This suggests that the oh-prefacing of responses to such inquiries may itself represent a contribution to their downgraded character.

In outline, I suggest that responses to "how are you" inquiries can involve the following ranking of alternatives in which oh-prefacing intensifies the downgrading of a downgraded response:

(a) "Conventional", e.g. *Fine* (Sacks 1975).
(b) "Downgraded" by qualifier, e.g. *Pretty good* (Jefferson 1980).
(c) "Super-downgraded" by both, e.g. *Oh pretty good.*

How does this show up in the data? In the cases shown below, oh-prefaced responses to *How are you* and related questions occur as parts of sequences in which troubles emerge sooner or later. In all these cases, the oh-preface is associated with other elements of a "downgraded conventional response." Where this occurs, I argue, it tends to enhance the trouble-premonitory sense of the turn, making it "super-downgraded." The turn will, in effect, contain at least two trouble-premonitory components, the oh-preface and the downgraded conventional response – the one laminating the other. Not surprisingly, these super-downgraded responses very commonly attract inquiries that locate or pursue a trouble.

In the following cases, oh-prefaced downgraded responses for the most part attract immediate inquiries into possible problem situations faced by the oh-prefaced-response producer. Thus, in 47, Lesley's response (a→) contains (i) an oh-preface and (ii) a descriptor *alright*, which is downgraded relative to *fine*. Her response attracts an follow-up inquiry into her wellbeing (b→).

(47) [Holt:May 88:2:4:1]

1	Dee:		... lie?
2	Les:		Oh is that Deena,=
3	Dee:		=↑Hello [dea:r↑[
4	Les:		[.hhh [↑Hello::,[hhh
5	Dee:		[How ↑are yo[u↓:
6	Les:	a→	[.hhhh ↑Oh alright
7			'n you↑hh
8	Dee:	b→	↑Ye::s. You ( ) alright I mean are you
9			we↓:ll.

In 48, the oh-prefaced "super-downgraded" response to an opening sequence *How are you* does not attract an immediate "forensic" follow-up inquiry into a

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trouble source, but trouble is in fact lurking. Here the two participants are acquaintances, rather than friends, and are connected through a mutual female friend.

(48) [DA:2:1:SO]

1	G:		How are you Jessie [and the] fa:mily.
2	J:		[.hhhhhh]
3	J:	→	Oh:: no complaints, thank Go[:d,
4	G:		[Goo:d.
5	G:		[[Wonderful,]
6	J:		[[I mean uh]
7			(.)
8	G:		[[Wu–
9	J:		[[Usual: uh::: (.) wa[y o f l i f e]
10	G:		[How long you go]nna be he:re,

In this case, somewhat later in the call, J tells her co-participant that their mutual friend has just died.

The next two cases involve second "How are you" inquiries that occur at a substantial distance from the *How are you*'s that they reciprocate.[29] In 49, for example, L begins a response with *well* – an item that recurrently prefaces problematic utterances (Pomerantz 1984). She then abandons this start in favor of an oh-prefaced *fine*, and then struggles – albeit in such a pyrrhic fashion (Jefferson 1974) as to be "doing struggling" – via subsequent increments toward a more conventional response. Her co-participant immediately moves to inquire about her husband, who turns out to be the trouble source.

(49) [NB:IV:14:6–10:SO]

1	E:		How've you been.
2	L:	a→	Well– (0.2) oh fi:ne. Ye:ah. Goo:d.
3	E:	b→	How's Ea:rl.
4	L:		Well he le:ft today.
5	E:		I was thinking about it. Y[eah I didn't see his car,]
6	L:		[Y – y e a : : : : : h,]

The inquiry in 50 is similarly positioned, later in the call, and attracts similar treatment:

(50) (Holt:M88:1:5:25) [Leslie is in the midst of a bad allergic attack]

1	Rob:		Ye– ↑What about ↓you now. How're ↓you.
2	Les:	a→	.hh ↑Oh fi: neh– we:ll: nah:– yes I am: fair↓ly fi:ne,
3			(0.5)
4	Rob:		Oh[↓:.
5	Les:		[m—Uh:m
6			(0.9)
7	Rob:	b→	Dare I ask how: the house is or sh'l I not.

Here Lesley's elaborate response to Rob's "How are you" inquiry engenders a follow-up question (b→) that guesses at the problem indexed by her response, though in this case the guess is off-base; Lesley is having serious allergy problems.[30]

Finally, a distinct type of "How are you" inquiry – the type that is designed, often using progressive aspect, as addressing an ongoing problem – can also

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encounter oh-prefaced responses that are treated as trouble-premonitory (b→), and in fact, turn out to be so (c→). In 51, such an inquiry gets an oh-prefaced downgraded conventional response (*oh + pretty good*, and then the further "epistemic" downgrade *I guess*) that attracts the "forensic" pursuit (b→).

(51) [TCI(b):9:1:SO]

1	B:		[How are you] feeling now.
2	J:	a→	Oh::? pretty good I gue:[ss::
3	B:	b→	[Not so hot?
4			(0.8)
5	J:	c→	I'm just so:rt of: waking u:p,
6	B:		Hm:m,
7			(3.6)
8	J:		Muh– ((hiccup)) (0.9) My:(ear),
9	B:		Huh?
10	J:	c→	My: (ear) doesn't hu:rt, (0.4) my head feels (.) better,

Subsequently the troubles-teller responsively launches into a fairly elaborate detailing of her circumstances and symptoms (c→). Here, then, are a set of clear cases in which *How are you* inquiries attract oh-prefaced super-downgraded responses which are, or are treated as, trouble-premonitory.[31]

Super-downgraded responses to "How are you" inquiries apparently achieve their specially trouble-premonitory character in this way: The management of the tension between attending a trouble and attending "business as usual" is made more transparent and self-attentive than would be the case if the oh-preface were absent. Thus an oh-prefaced downgraded conventional response to inquiry can amount to an overt "doing" of that management. In the way that the "doing" of that management comes to be overt, it actually tilts the turn toward the troubles-attentive pole of that tension, thus exerting a non-accountable pressure on a recipient to inquire into candidate problem areas.

This tilting toward the troubles-attentive pole of the tension between attending the trouble and attending "business as usual" is already evidenced by the fact that oh-prefacing is often used to laminate "downgraded conventional responses," and that it frequently prompts recipients to engage in subsequent "forensic" inquiries. It is also evident in another tendency in the data: The one with the trouble, rather than indicating its possibility, and awaiting an inquiry (activities appropriate to aligning a co-interactant as a troubles-recipient, Jefferson 1988), often simply goes ahead with an oh-prefaced response, followed by moves toward announcing the trouble – thus attempting to coerce a co-interactant as a troubles-recipient. In 52, for example, the super-downgraded response (a→) is followed immediately by an announcement of the trouble (b→).

(52) [NB:II:4:1:SO]

1	E:	Hi: honey how are yo[u.
2	N:	[Fine how'r you.

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3 E: a→ .khhhhhhhhh. Oh:: I'm pretty goo::d=
4 b→ =I had a little o:peration on my toe this week.
5 b→ I had to have (.) toenail taken o:off.

This is a simply "pro-forma" use of an oh-prefaced downgraded conventional response. Here the turn initiation proposes that no further talk to this topic will be volunteered, but it is followed by an immediate and unilateral move into a troubles-telling.

Ex. 53 is a similar case, although Lesley's rather elliptical depiction of the trouble (line 6) engenders a pursuit of the issue by Ron (lines 9, 13–14 and 18 [c→]).

(53) [Holt SO88:II:2:2:1] ((Lesley's youngest son, Gordon has just gone to college))

1 Les: Hell↑:o?
2 Ron: Hello Lesley it's Ron Lo:per ↓he↑:[re
3 Les: [.tlk ↑Oh ↑hell↓o↑:
4 Ron: How'r ↓yo[u.
5 Les: a→ [.hh Oh::, alri:ght
6 b→ missing Gordo-:n,
7 (.)
8 Les: .hhhh[hh
9 Ron: [What's happ'ning to ↓Go:r[don.
10 Les: [↑Well he's in naw– (.)
11 i- in um hmhhhh .tch Oh where is 'e now. .hh uh:m: .tl
12 ↑up the No:rth Newcastle. huh huh .hh[hh
13 Ron: c→ [He's at college't
14 c→ Newca[stle.
15 Les: [ihYes:.
16 (.)
17 Les: Ye[s. .hh .hh
18 Ron: c→ [So::– (0.2) that means you're all on your lone[some.=
19 Les: [.hhh
20 Les: =↑Ye:s yes,h↑ Unfortche'ly

This pursuit culminates in Ron's explicit working-out of the import of Gordon's absence (line 18) as the crisis for middle-aged families sometimes known as the "empty nest" syndrome.[32]

In other cases, an oh-prefaced response may be followed by additional efforts to pressure the questioner to assume a troubles-recipient role. In 54, the oh-prefaced respondent's (Jo's) delayed increment to her prior turn *this week* (a′→) more specifically invites the questioner (Mark), who has withheld any reaction to her initial reply for close to a full second, to respond with a newsmark (line 6) and an inquiry (line 9, b→).

(54) [Lerner:SF:I:2:SO]

1 Mar: How you doing.
2 Jo: a→ Oh: pretty goo:d
3 (0.8)
4 Mar: .hhhhhh[( )
5 Jo: a′→ [This week, hhhhhhehh heh heh [.hhh
6 Mar: b→ [.tlk Oh this week?
7 Jo: =hih hheeh, ˙hhh Yea:h. (˙hh-)

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8			(0.2)
9	Mar:	b→	Why what's goin on this week.
10	Jo:	c→	Oh nothing. I'm j'st inna: (·) rilly good mood this ([ )
11	Mar:		[Oh: good.
12			(0.8)
13	M?:		·tlk=
14	Jo:	d→	I have my highs'n lows like .hh having a tough time about two weeks ago b't I'm, (1.0) just, evrything's just (.) lovely, hh

Jo's increment suggests that *this week* represents an improvement on an earlier time period, and thus invites an inquiry that would focus on the trouble that is implied. Mark's responsive inquiry, however, is "troubles-resistant": It topicalizes the "non-troubles" aspect of Jo's talk, which was the vehicle for her indication of a trouble, rather than the trouble which that talk was designed to imply. Jo's response to this inquiry is also oh-prefaced (c→), providing a fleeting indication of the question's inappositeness. As the talk develops, Mark sustains a consistently troubles-resistant position (line 11), while Jo moves towards an overt trouble-telling without having aligned her recipient (d→).

I have argued that oh-prefaced responses to *How are you* questions are strongly trouble-premonitory. First, they are frequently associated with other turn-constructional features that offer downgraded conventional responses to such questions (Jefferson 1980). Second, they very frequently attract "forensic" inquiries from the "How are you" questioner. Third, they sometimes prefigure unilateral moves into troubles-telling by the oh-prefacing, would-be troubles-teller. Here, in the special environment of "How are you" questions, the general tendency of oh-prefacing to project minimal topical elaboration is reversed. Instead, oh-prefacing becomes a resource by which a would-be troubles-teller can unaccountably and self-attentively induce a recipient to adopt the role of a troubles-recipient.

CONCLUSION

The methodology of this paper has involved the pursuit of a specific "non-lexical" item, located in a specific position within the turn-constructional unit, which itself is located in a specific type of sequential context – in second or "responsive" position in question/answer sequences. I have sought to show that oh-prefaced responses markedly indicate that the question to which they respond has occasioned a shift in the respondent's attention. They are recurrently associated with inquiries that address "known information" or other difficulties concerning the appositeness or relevance of a question, and in many cases, they are used to sanction this and other aspects of a question's inappositeness in an inexplicit yet marked fashion. There is evidence that suggests that particles may be used for the same task in languages other than English.[33] Relatedly, oh-prefacing can be exploited to supply emphasis to a response. Oh-prefacing can also be used to project reluctance to elaborate on a topic – though in the specific context of

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"How are you" questions, this projection is reversed. Here oh-prefacing can be used to manage a thoroughly transparent sort of troubles-resistance which can coerce a recipient to address the trouble that is foreshadowed by these means.

This article thus represents an extension of earlier observations about the functioning of *oh* in ordinary conversation. The semantics of *oh* is simple indeed: The particle proposes that its producer has undergone some kind of cognitive "change of state," primarily either of attention or knowledge (Heritage 1984, Schiffrin 1987). In their use of *oh*, speakers rely on contextual aspects of their utterances as resources that permit hearers to determine the sense of the "change of state" proposal being made. Thus variations in the sense of an oh-carried "change of state" proposal are managed through sequential and contextual particularizations of the particle's placement, and they emerge through conversational inference. In the case of oh-prefaced responses to inquiry, I argue that oh-prefacing uniformly conveys the sense that the prior question has occasioned a shift of attention (to the matter raised by the question); it thereby finds a central use in implying the inappositeness of the question to which it responds.

The particle's sense is also shaped by its placement within the turn: at the beginning of a turn, and as an integral part of the intonation contour of its first turn-construction unit. It is this placement that allows *oh* to qualify the entire turn-constructional unit that follows, and to provide a coloring or propositional attitude for that unit's response to the question that preceded it. While *oh* may be additional to, and not part of, the syntax of sentences as traditionally understood (Ochs et al. 1996), it is surely part of the grammar of the turn-constructional unit – a grammar for units of action (Schegloff 1979, 1996b) within which the sentence (among other units) is housed. This essay has aimed to explore one specific intersection of *oh*'s semantic sense, sequential positioning, and location within the syntax of the turn-constructional unit.

NOTES

* This article was first developed at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and was presented to a colloquium at the Department of Sociology, UCLA, in May 1986. It has been presented at a number of universities and conferences since. I would like to thank Steve Clayman, Paul Drew, Charles Goodwin, Marja-Leena Sorjonen, Cecilia Ford, Doug Maynard, and especially Manny Schegloff for very helpful comments on earlier drafts. Geoff Raymond gave valuable help in reviewing various data sets as I began to prepare this article for publication. All errors in this analysis are, of course, mine.

[1] There are some differences between the Heritage and Schiffrin accounts (see Wootton 1989, Schegloff 1993, Heritage 1995, and Local 1996 for further discussion). Drawing on data from sociolinguistic interviews, Schiffrin asserts that *oh* is more likely to be used to receipt an answer to a question when the answer runs contrary to the expectations encoded into the question's design, so that the questioner might be "surprised." Although I did not attempt to quantify this issue, my assertion was, to the contrary, that *oh* receipts are used even when the respondent confirms a statement-formatted request for information, and is not at all "surprised" (Heritage 1984:307–12). An issue to be addressed is whether Schiffrin and Heritage are talking about the same domain of interaction – in which case, there is a disagreement in results that needs to be resolved – or whether their data come

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from different domains (Heritage's from "ordinary conversation" and Schiffrin's from the "sociolinguistic interview"). Given that *oh* receipts may be more restricted in interview and other "quasi-conversational" contexts (Drew & Heritage 1992), it is possible that both accounts are correct.

[2] The utterance of *oh*, of course, may not mark the moment at which "new information" or some other "change of state" was subjectively registered. It may simply mark the point at which that registration was acknowledged in the public world of social interaction (cf. Schegloff 1992:1330–31). Notwithstanding, it appears that, in many circumstances, the subjective registration of a change of state and its outward acknowledgement occur at roughly the same moment.

[3] See Schegloff 1987a, 1996b, for a discussion of the strategic significance of turn beginnings.

[4] On the relevance of prosody in shaping turn-constructional units, see Sacks et al. 1974, Schegloff 1995b, 1996b, Ford & Thompson 1996, Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 1996, and (on *oh* in particular) Local 1996.

[5] By "effective turn-initial position," I mean to identify cases where, although *oh* is not the first (lexical) sound of a turn, it is the "virtual" first sound of a turn. For example, L's turn below is effectively oh-prefaced, because the initial *Well–* is cut off and abandoned as the first item in the turn-constructional unit, in favor of *oh*.

(NB:IV:14:6–10:SO)

E: How've you been.
L: → Well– (0.2) oh fi:ne. Ye:ah. Goo:d.

Similarly, in the following case, middle-aged Nancy is engaged (lines 5–14) in a defense of the social "bona fides" of her much younger fellow students in a university class. At line 13, Emma acknowledges this defense with *Ther not real kookie then.*= At this point Nancy continues with a further, third consideration: *=Sev'ral of th'm are married,h*, continuing a list of points she is making. After this unit, Nancy turns to address Emma's "concessive" remark with *↑Oh no:.h*.

(NB:II:2:11)

1 Emm: I THINK SOME a'these kids need a good JO:B though too:
2 (0.5)
3 Emm: Get ou:t'n: do a liddle wor:k.
4 (.)
5 Nan: Well of course ↑all the kids in this: p'ticular class yih
6 know,h are ee:ther full time stud'nts or they work during
7 th'day en go tuh school et ni:ght,
8 Emm: °M[m h m ,°]
9 Nan: [Lot'v'm w]ork par'ti:me u– [a:nd
10 Emm: [°Mm h[m,°
11 Nan: [go: part day en part
12 ni:ght? .hhhhh uh::m
13 Emm: Ther not real kookie then.=
14 Nan: → =Sev'ral of th'm are married,h ↑Oh no:.h
15 (.)
16 Nan: No:, hah-ah The[y may u– l]ook like
17 Emm: [°Mm:mmh°]
18 Nan: Yihknow. I mean we hev a couple a'ril long hai:rs in.hhhhh

Nancy's shift in orientation is marked by a distinctive pitch reset (indicated by the upward arrow), and a further elaboration about the students' appearance (lines 16–18). Here, although the *oh* prefaces the SECOND turn-constructional unit in Nancy's turn, it is in turn-initial position for the turn which is in second position in its sequence. This second turn-constructional unit involves a shift from the activity accomplished by the first – which elaborates a next item in a list of the speaker's own construction, listing reasons why her fellow students are persons of solid virtue – to a quite distinct "second position" action that responds to Nancy's more recently produced first action.

[6] See Schegloff 1996b, Ford & Thompson 1996 for further discussion of the internal structure of turn-constructional units.

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[7] Another article (Heritage 1998) considers oh-prefaced responses in a related "second position" environment: agreements and disagreements.

[8] These observations are somewhat convergent with Schiffrin's comment (1987:86–87): "Answers to questions are prefaced with *oh* when the answerer reorients him/herself to the information under question – a reorientation caused by the questioner's misjudgment of what information the answerer shares."

[9] I thank Steve Clayman for furnishing me with this example.

[10] Various aspects of this sequence are analyzed in detail in M. Goodwin 1980, Schegloff 1987b, and Heritage 1998.

[11] In one reading, *Very original* may be deployed here as a simple upgrade. In an alternative and less oxymoronic reading, it may address the fact that classic cars can be repaired either with *original* spare parts, or with spare parts of modern manufacture. The use of *very original* (at lines 12/14) may work to convey that this car is the former kind.

Given the evidence of cases 7–8, it might reasonably be thought that Mike's response (at line 14) to the further query of his assertion at line 13 should also be oh-prefaced. A full analysis of this turn would take us too far afield and is offered elsewhere (Heritage 1997). However, the absence of an oh-preface at this point underscores the observation that oh-prefacing is an optional marking of response – not a required, or still less, "routinized" feature of response. Further, as an optional practice, it is used to achieve specific, marked effects.

[12] Non-American readers should know that success in the LSAT test is required for entry into law school. Susan taped this conversation for an undergraduate assignment. Her LSAT result was poor enough for her to erase it from the tape before turning the tape in to her class supervisor.

[13] Richard's conduct through this entire sequence can be understood as exhibiting troubles resistance (Jefferson 1988); see below.

[14] Note that Nancy's second °*Oh: ya:h.*° at line 9 resembles cases 7–10, in that it is an oh-prefaced reconfirmation of her earlier statement which has attracted a "newsmark." See ex. 9 for a contrasting case.

[15] As far as I can determine, oh-prefaced rejections of invitations occur only when grounds that are likely to be already known to the recipient are invoked for the rejection.

[16] It is also possible that oh-prefacing is additionally deployed in this example as a means of conveying the self-evidence of her claim that she's been *down here all along*, thereby serving emphatically to upgrade her rebuttal of the implied accusation. It is certainly possible that the oh-preface can index both kinds of "unexpectedness" in this instance. See below for further comments on the "emphatic" use of oh-prefaces.

[17] In 28 there is a convergence between the use of *oh* as a third-position receipt of repair (Heritage 1984) and its second-position use to index the inappositeness of the inquiry which is repeated as the "repair" in this case. Here the production of *oh* may be said to be "overdetermined."

[18] I am indebted to Charles Goodwin for underscoring the role of stress in some of these sequences, though it cannot be fully pursued here. As he and others have emphasized (Goodwin & Goodwin 1987, Local 1996), *oh* is a superlative "carrier" of stretch, stress, and pitch shifts, and more generally of complex intonation contours.

[19] A nice variant on an emphatic usage of oh-prefacing in a context of "already given" information is found in the following case:

(Rah:A:1:(2):3)

Jen:		Sh'd I pop in on the way back=Will you be ↓in [Ida?,
Ida:		[eYes
		ah'll be in: Jen[ny yes,
Jen:		[Yer not going out.=
Ida:	→	=No no no(h) oh [no huh]
Jen:		[Okay eh]h heh

Here Ida, questioned on an already stated position, reasserts her position with three *No*'s, capping this reassertion with an *oh no*.

[20] Ivy's utterances at lines 9/11 are not hearable as embodying "left dislocation" (i.e. the movement of predicate NPs into sentence-initial position), and the subject of line 11 is not David's foot.

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[21] We have seen that oh-prefacing can accompany the rejection of a question as inappropriate (e.g. in 23). Oh-prefacing can also be exploited to emphasize the rejection of a request – as in the following case, where the recipient rejects an indirect request to participate in a survey interview:

[Maynard & Schaeffer 1997:59]

IR:		I'm calling from the University o'Wisconsin.
		(0.8)
IR:		And (.) we're doing a national (0.4) public opinion study?
		(0.5)
IE:	→	Oh no I don– I'm not interested.
IR:		OH: okay=
IE:		=Thank you
IR:		Alright [bye bye.]
IE:		[Bye bye.]

Maynard & Schaeffer comment that this is the only "not interested" declination in their corpus that is accepted by the interviewer without additional appeals to the respondent to participate. But it is also the only "not interested" declination that is oh-prefaced. It appears, therefore, that oh-prefacing is a particularly powerful means to emphasize rejecting actions.

[22] I thank Charles Goodwin for bringing this case to my attention.

[23] In a case like 29, where a news pre-announcer responds to a topicalizing inquiry with a turn that is oh-prefaced for emphasis, an oh-preface evidently does NOT project reluctance to continue.

[24] This response formulates Edward's "understanding" in an opposite way to that reported by Schegloff 1996a for a repeat – in this case, the repeat would be *She's had it before* – namely, as "confirming an allusion." Rather than confirming Edward's understanding as something aimed at or alluded to in previous talk, Richard goes out of his way to renew the relevance of other aspects of the situation that he has mentioned, but that are not addressed in Edward's show of "understanding."

[25] The association between oh-prefaced responses and topic shift can also be depicted in reported speech. Here Emma is describing to her co-participant, Margy, how she came to find that Al, a work acquaintance of Emma's husband, knows Margy's husband – the Larry Fridee of this segment. Emma's husband has gone for a golf game with Al about 60 miles from her home. Emma has accompanied him and "visited with" Al's wife during the game, and they have stayed for the weekend in a beach motel owned by Al and his wife:

[NB:VII:7]

Emm:		=en I visited with her a li'l bit so fin'lly Al came in fr'm playing golf en ↑oh we got tuh– talking how's the beach'n
	→	evrything I s'z "oh fine" I s'd– .hhhhh "Ged I have the most wonderful neighbours down the street– frie::nds'n" .hhhhhhh I said "you know probly kno:w Larry Fridee" ...

On her way to narrating the discovery that Al knows Margy's husband, Emma depicts a routine initial spate of conversation with Al, who has just arrived from golf (lines 1–2): *how's the beach'n evrything*. She reports her response to this topic: an *oh fine,* which she depicts as dismissive in relation to what emerges as her primary goal in her current conversation – getting to talk about how Al (her interlocutor from the previous conversation) knows her present interlocutor's husband. In this case, it is clear that the oh-prefacing is used as a "literary" device in the reported conversation; i.e., Emma did not "literally and historically" talk in the manner portrayed here. Rather, she uses the oh-prefaced response to portray what is to be merely a backdrop for the "big event" of the narrative: the moment at which Al's knowledge of Margy's husband is disclosed. It need only be added that this entire segment is designed to flatter Margy by reference to her husband, whose career is depicted by Emma in this call as "on the way up."

[26] For an overview of this argument in its general application to "troubles talk," see Jefferson 1988. See also Jefferson 1980, 1984a,b, 1986, Jefferson & Lee 1981.

[27] Downgraded conventional responses to inquiry are occasionally prefaced in other ways, e.g. by *uh*, *ah*, or *well*; but *oh* is the overwhelming preface of choice in this environment. Thus we are not here addressing the role of "prefacing" per se in this environment, but specifically that of oh-prefacing.

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[28] *Of course there may be particular occasions in which a relatively "breezy" How are you* may be inappropriate, e.g. when asked of someone known to be sick. It is for just such occasions that alternatives like *How are you feeling* are designed.

[29] In 40–50, the return *how are you* is delayed well into the call by the pressing and preemptive nature of the other party's issues, which are extensively addressed prior to this point.

[30] In general, away from openings environments, "How are you" inquiries commonly attract oh-prefaced responses, as do inquiries about family members, friends, and even pets. Many of these inquiries are in closings-related environments, and they project optimistic "no problem" responses compatible with their status as a "last action" before entry into closings. The oh-prefaced responses that they attract are often, but not always, trouble-premonitory. In the following case – involving just such an inquiry in a post-business, closings-related environment – an oh-preface projects a unilateral description of a medical problem (a→):

[Holt 2:2:4]

1	Les:		Oka[:y, Are you alright,
2	Bon:		[( )
3	Bon:	a→	Oh not s'bad thank you Graham had iz (0.4) uh:m
4			op'ration f' iz grommets on Monday, so that put us:
5			um (.) .hh uh:–: (.) yihknow
6			(0.5)
7	Les:		Yes.=
8	Bon:	b→	=( ) b't he's e– 'ee eeez fine it (d'zn)
9		b→	bother'im a bit so, nots'bad hnh

In this example, Bon initially responds to the "How are you" inquiry with an oh-prefaced *not so bad* – a downgraded response. She then shifts topic to report the medical situation of a relative briefly, and designs the report to end up with an optimistic conclusion (b→). She completes her account with a repeat of her earlier *not so bad*, which is now recalibrated as optimistic – things could be far worse. Here it should be noted that the initial inquiry *Are you alright*, with its strong preference for an affirmative, "no problem" response, is commonplace in this closings environment. The oh-prefaced status of Bon's brief response, projecting a brief response, is well fitted to what is, after all, a pro-forma inquiry geared to a rapid exit from the conversation.

In these closings-related cases, cross-cutting factors may bear on the production of the oh-preface. The inquiry occurs in a "lawful," recurrent, and thus "expectable" place in the talk, and is thus not "surprising" or contextually inappropriate; however, it does occur in a closings-relevant environment. In such a context, respondents may be disinclined to expand on their replies, even though the latter may embody reports of problems or troubles. Here, then, oh-prefaces may prefigure reports of troubles; but they also defer to the conversation-closing environments in which they occur by projecting the elaboration of those troubles to be brief. In sum, these cases may embody features that we have encountered in previous sections of this article in conjoined and crosscutting operation.

[31] Oh-prefacing can also downgrade a conventional response, e.g. from *fine* to *oh fine*, to yield roughly the same level of downgrade as a downgraded conventional response. However, *oh fine* is quite uncommon in the data to hand; significantly, it seems to be used mainly to respond to the "for cause" inquiries such as *How are you feeling?* Here a different kind of troubles-resistance may be played out. The inquiry's design indicates the questioner's knowledge of and willingness to hear about a trouble. But the respondent's *oh fine* exhibits a somewhat greater degree of troubles-resistance, perhaps calibrated to the greater commitment to hear about the trouble already shown by the questioner. As Jefferson (1980:156) notes, "It appears that 'oh fine' proposes that if the trouble is to be reported on, it will be by virtue of some further pursuit by the inquirer." In context, it can be added that pursuit can normally be counted upon by the troubles-resistant *oh fine* producer:

[TCI(b):7:2:SO:S]

Cor:	How are doing hon=
Lil:	=Oh just fi:ne.
Cor:	.hhhhh We:ll I::, heard about your accident I'm sorry to hear that.
Lil:	Oh::: thank you it's sure been the most painful of all

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my li:fe put together a:ll my: pain does not compa:re
to this foo:t. [eh heh heh,] ha [(ha)
Cor: [C a n you] [Can you wa:lk good now?

In cases like this, it appears that *oh fine* in response to progressive aspect "How are you feeling/doing" etc. is just as designedly ineffectual an expression of "troubles resistance" as *Oh pretty good* is in response to *How are you*.

[32] Other oh-prefaced responses in this environment can invoke troubles, ranging from ephemeral to serious – which, by the end of the turn initiated with *oh*, are presented in an optimistic fashion. The following case contrasts with the more seriously problematic cases shown in the main text:

Heritage:IV:2:12:1

1 Jer: ↑Hello Ron↑
2 Ron: Hi:. Howuh you.
3 Jer: hhh Oh:: wel– hul I'm (0.2) d– I'm doing (0.2) doing s'm
4 (0.2) s'm ahr:ning? b't (0.4) bu:t othuhwi:se okay?hh

Note that, while the oh-preface projects the report of a trouble – the widely unpopular (in these data) activity of ironing – which is indeed told, the turn ends with a more upbeat assessment *otherwise okay*.

[33] Similar functions are proposed for the Mandarin particle *a* in turn-final position (Wu 1997).

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