

P1 2009: Response Tokens in Research Interviews are Interesting

Supervisor: Mr Steven Christensen
Phone: 07 4631 2707
Email: christen@usq.edu.au

Research Purpose: To examine response tokens produced in research interviews.

Research Description: This project makes the qualitative research interview a topic of research. It does this by treating an interviewer's utterances as a topic of interest, and by treating an interviewee's answers as jointly produced by the interviewer and the interviewee.

Response tokens are a pervasive feature of interviews in psychology, and are those minimal responses (e.g., Yeah, Mm hm) to some immediately preceding talk. Typically, interviewers ask questions and interviewees provide responses to them in interviews (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000). Interviewers must also listen and acknowledge the stream of talk that emerges from the interviewee. But does this view adequately display the relationship between interviewer and interviewee? That is, are relations governed by the interviewer simply following the standardised techniques of good interviewing practice (cf., Baker, 1982, as cited in Silverman, 2001, p. 86)?

Several studies have examined response tokens, such as *Yeah, Mm hm, Uh huh, Oh, Okay, Alright, Right*, in ordinary conversation and institutional talk (see Gardner, 2001, 2004, 2007 for a review). These studies show that response tokens have a common function in displaying the position or stance of a listener to a stream of talk. Further, these studies show that specific response tokens convey distinctive types of information to participants. Thus studying response tokens is interesting for at least two reasons. Firstly, they reveal the development of intersubjectivity between participants in a conversation. That is, they display how the talk between two or more participants is developing and the trajectory that it is taking. Secondly, they provide evidence of the co-constructed nature of this talk.

These studies have interested linguists, functional sociolinguists and conversation analysts. Psychologists have largely ignored the findings, and instead maintained a traditional view that treats response tokens as an undifferentiated collection of back channels or signals of continued attention. This view underestimates the diverse and complex tasks that response tokens perform in psychology talk.

This traditional view idealises interview behaviour. Thus it fails to account for actual conduct. It ignores how the socio-organisational contingencies of talk-in-interaction shape listener behaviour in qualitative research interviews. However the dynamic and emergent practices of listening may be revealed by adopting an evidence based practice approach that focus on the contingencies of real-time talk in interaction. So advancing the practice and training of qualitative interviewing.

This project follows criticisms of Lamont-Mills' (2008) paper on confidentiality talk (Mushin, personal communication, November 7, 2008). It examines the form and function of response tokens in a large continuous data set. The study examines the hypothesis that response tokens are oriented to the immediately prior turn, and so provide the speaker with information on how their talk has been received by the listener.

Secondly, that this intersubjectivity can be understood via the intonational contour, sequential placement, and timing of the response tokens in a psychology data set.

Participants: An archival data base will be used for this project so the student will not be required to recruit research participants.

Methodology: The archival data base used for this project is from the transcript of New Zealand Interview 2 (see van den Berg et al., 2003, pp. 232-261).

This interview was originally conducted for a large-scale research project on race and race relations in New Zealand by Margaret Wetherell in the mid-1980's. Wetherell and Potter (1992) display the methods and findings of this earlier study.

The original audiotape of this interview was recently re-transcribed in fine detail for a new project displaying different discursive approaches for analysing talk produced in research interviews. So the student will not be required to transcribe the original interview audiotape for this project.

Data and Analysis: A qualitative analysis will be used in this project. It will examine the sequential organisation of talk produced by the interviewer and a respondent in New Zealand Interview 2 (van den Berg et al., 2003, pp. 232-261). This project will focus on the sequence of conversation that opens the interview (pp. 232-233). This data set begins with the following question.

I: U:hm (1.0) have you travelled a↑t'all or (1.2)
R: I go to see for a living
I: ↑DO: you now
R: Ye(h)ah
I: Ahaa This is gonna be interesting.
R: So
I: So: you- what you::'re a merchant seaman [or what
R: [Yes
I: Yeah (1.0)
R: [mhm

The data will be analysed in three steps. Firstly, it will be screened for the serial, sequential, and adjacency organisation. Secondly, it will identify the type and frequency of response tokens using Gardner's (2001) criteria for classifying tokens and their variants (e.g., Yeah, Yes, Yep). Thirdly, the listener's stance and type of information being provided will be examined by different response token types.

The student will be expected to work closely with the supervisor and other Honours students working on related discursive analysis projects during the analysis phase of this project.

The student will gain the skills and confidence in conducting the analysis by completing the conversation analysis module from the D843 Discourse Analysis course which is offered by The Open University (UK) in the Master of Social Sciences Programme (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001a, 2001b). The supervisor will be responsible for providing this training in conversation analysis.

Student Friendliness: This project is suitable for external and on-campus students. However the student must be available to meet with the supervisor before, during, or after the scheduled Honours Workshop Program so that training in

conversation analysis techniques can be conducted. Weekly supervision sessions will be required during the project. These supervision sessions can be conducted by telephone and email, and will vary in length and content to reflect the student's progress.

Further reading:

Gardner, R. (2001). *When listeners talk: Response tokens and recipient stance*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Gardner, R. (2004). *Acknowledging strong ties between utterances in talk: Connections through Right as a response token*. In I. Mushin (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Australian Linguistics Society Conference, 13-15 July 2004*. Retrieved November 21, 2008, from <http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/115>

Gardner, R. (2007). The *Right* connections: Acknowledging epistemic progression in talk. *Language in Society, 36*, 319-341.

Houtkoop-Steenstra, H. (2000). *Interaction and the standardised survey interview: The living questionnaire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lamont-Mills, A. (2008, November). *Examining the limits of confidentiality in real-life consultations: Concerns and considerations*. Paper presented at the 6th Australasian Symposium on Conversation Analysis and Membership Category Analysis, Brisbane, Australia.

Silverman, D. (2001). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

van den Berg, H., Wetherell, M., & Houtkoop-Steenstra, H. (Eds.). (2003). *Analyzing race talk*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wetherell, M., & Potter, J. (1992). *Mapping the language of racism*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Wetherell, M., Taylor, S., & Yates, S. J. (2001a). *Discourse as data: A guide for analysis*. London: Sage.

Wetherell, M., Taylor, S., & Yates, S. J. (2001b). *Discourse theory and practice: A reader*. London: Sage.

Research Outcomes

The student is expected to: (a) submit his or her completed Honours Thesis to the USQ ePrints archive; (b) submit an abstract for a research poster to the 2010 APS Conference Scientific Committee; and (c) contribute to developing a Masters-level clinical psychology research proposal on response tokens in clinical interaction.

Ethics:

- Ethical approval will be sought by supervisor; or
- Ethics approved – number: EP2009002

Resources:

- Project able to be funded within \$150 departmental limit
- Project not able to be funded within \$150 departmental limit – additional funds will come from: _____

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As of Last Complete Printing
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Number of Words: 1,315 (approx.)
Number of Characters: 7,501 (approx.)