

DISCOURSE STUDIES

Epistemic status and the recognizability of social actions

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Abstract

Although the production and recognition of social actions has been a central concern for conversation analysis (CA) from the outset, it has recently been argued that CA has yet to develop a systematic analysis of “action formation.” As a partial remedy to this situation, John Heritage introduces “epistemic status,” which he claims is an unavoidable component of the production and recognition of social action. His proposal addresses the question, *how is social action produced and recognized?* by reference to another question: *how is relative knowledge recognized?* Despite the importance placed on the latter question, it is not clear how it is to be answered in particular cases. We argue that the introduction of epistemic status builds on a reformulation of the *action formation problem* that unnecessarily de-emphasizes the importance of the sequential environment. Our re-analyses of key sequences cast doubt on the empirical grounding of the epistemic program, and question whether the fundamental role of epistemic status has been convincingly demonstrated.

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Introduction

As pointed out in the introduction to this special issue, as well as in the companion papers, *Epistemics* is undoubtedly the most influential conceptual innovation to emerge from Conversation Analysis (CA) in the past decade. Although epistemic phenomena have been implicated in several core CA topics—such as repair (Bolden, 2013; Robinson, 2013), sequence organization (Heritage, 2012b), and assessments (Hayano, 2011; Heritage, 2002)—the most radical statements have been made in relation to *action formation*, to the effect that *epistemic status* is an omnirelevant, unavoidable, and fundamental component in the production and recognition of action. This proposal was first published in Heritage's (2012a) paper "Epistemics in action: Action formation and territories of knowledge," which develops, redefines, and challenges the field of conversation analysis (cf. Drew, 2012; Sidnell, 2012). Given its critical significance for conversation analysis, we believe that it is important to carefully scrutinize both the arguments and the evidence that are presented in favor of the epistemic program.

By examining the notion of epistemic status—its conceptual foundation, its bearing on the issue of action formation, and, most centrally, its application to singular occasions of interaction—we aim to show how it represents several distinct departures from established procedures and understandings in conversation analysis. These departures include the characterization of "first actions"; the de-emphasis of sequential environment; the re-formulation of the action formation problem; the suggestion that syntax, intonation, and epistemic status constitute the primary elements of information requests; the turn towards cognition and information; the invocation of extrasituational context; and the claim that "monitoring epistemic status in relation to each and every turn-at-talk is an unavoidable feature of the construction of talk as action" (Heritage, 2013a: 565). Although these departures involve conceptual matters, a major part of the present paper is devoted to re-analyzing the *evidence* for the epistemic program. Our principal concern is whether the central claims are convincingly demonstrated; in other words, whether the empirical demonstrations really show that epistemic status is a fundamental and unavoidable component of the production and recognition of social actions.

The recognizability of social actions

How social actions "are done, and done recognizably," (Sacks, 1974: 218; cf. Schegloff, 1992a: xxxix-xlvii) constitutes one of the principal interests of conversation analysis (CA). The

fact that social actions are produced to be recognized by co-participants furnishes an array of researchable topics, such as how members in various settings are “doing a recognizable invitation,” “doing a recognizable complaint,” “doing a recognizably correct observation,” and so on. What was ground-breaking about the approach of Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson and others was not only that such mundane actions were relevant to study, but also that social actions could be systematically explicated through close examination of singular occasions of interaction. In contrast to proponents of speech-act theory (e.g., Austin, 1962, as interpreted by Searle, 1969), CA does not begin with classes or categories of action, with the goal of analytically separating them into their conceptual components (cf. Schegloff, 1992a: xxiv–xxvii).¹ Instead, CA proceeds from the observation that “[t]here *is* a constitutive order to singular occasions of interaction, and to the organization of actions within them” (Schegloff, 1988a: 137, italics in original). When characterizing an action in CA, “the investigator undertakes to establish that the formulation is not an academically analytic imposition on conduct that may have been quite differently understood and experienced by the participants” (Schegloff 1996: 172). Instead of deciding how an action is to be understood on theoretical or conceptual grounds, the project becomes one of demonstrating how the participants display their understandings of previous actions and thereby project the relevance of possible nexts. On the one hand, this places a restriction on the overhearing analyst: all characterizations of actions or sequences of interaction have to be grounded in the actual conduct of the participants, and in what they demonstrably orient to as relevant. On the other hand, it provides conversation analysis with its distinctive way of working—“describing procedurally the production of courses of action” (Schegloff, 1992a: xxx)—and its renowned “proof procedure” (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974: 728–729).

The next turn proof procedure is integrated with the analysis of sequential order in conversation, and trades upon the observation that utterances in conversation are organized into turns-at-talk in which each successive utterance provides conditions for the production of a relevant next. The next utterance, in turn, displays an “analysis” of the prior utterance in the way it responds to it. A relevant response thus provides the overhearing analyst with grounds for characterizing the initial utterance. The analyst’s task becomes one of “showing that it is *that* action which *co-participants in the interaction* took to be what was getting done, as revealed in/by the response they make to it” (Schegloff, 2007: 8, italics in original). Although the proof procedure, and the response of the co-participants, is instrumental for

demonstrating that an utterance is understood as enacting a particular action, the question remains how the utterance comes to be recognized as such, and how it is built to provide for that recognizability. This latter topic has come to be referred to as *action formation*, that is:

[...] what the practices of talk and other conduct are which have as an outcome the production of a recognizable action X; that is, that can be shown to have been recognized by co-participants as that action by virtue of the practices that produced it. (Schegloff, 2007: 7)

As this quotation indicates, action formation concerns both the design and the recognition of actions: how the practices of talk and other conduct are fashioned into recognizable actions, and how a given action is recognized as such by a recipient “by virtue of the practices that produced it.” Regardless of whether one takes it as an issue of production or recognition, action formation centrally concerns the composition of action: the constituent parts and their arrangement. The parts are drawn from the pool of available resources, “the language, the body, the environment of the interaction, and position *in* the interaction” (Schegloff, 2007: xiv), and combinations yield particular recognizable social actions. The action formation problem thus goes beyond that of the next turn proof procedure. As Schegloff (1996: 173) points out, it is not sufficient “to show that some utterance was understood by its recipient to implement a particular action,” since the account also should include “a specification of the methodic basis for the construction, deployment, and recognition of this action.” Accordingly, Schegloff emphasizes the necessity to distinguish the overhearing analyst’s project from that of a recipient of the action. Whereas the overhearing analyst’s account should be grounded in the recipient’s understanding, the understanding of a recipient “clearly cannot be so grounded, for that would presume its own outcome” (1996: 173fn). As we shall elaborate, this relation between the understanding of the overhearing analyst and those of the co-participants is central to our concern with social action, including talk-in-interaction.

The problem of “first actions” and the introduction of epistemic status

Although the production and recognition of social actions has been a central topic within conversation analysis from the time of Sacks’ (1992) early lectures, it has recently been argued that CA has not yet sufficiently dealt with action formation. Levinson (2013: 105) acknowledges that there is “some sterling work” in CA on action formation, but claims that

these studies are too few and far between. According to him, most of the work in CA relies on “intuitive characterizations of the actions embodied in turns,” which are “based on our knowledge as societal ‘members’ or conversational practitioners” (2013: 105). This “loose hermeneutics,” he claims, constitutes the “soft underbelly of CA” (2013: 105). Heritage (2012a: 2) similarly argues that CA has “not progressed very far in developing a systematic analysis of ‘action formation’.” He argues not only that there have been too few studies on the topic, but also that CA has been unable to provide systematic analyses of action formation. This critique mainly applies to how CA has approached “the ‘first’ or ‘sequence initiating’ actions that the speech act theorists had labored to specify” (Clayman and Heritage, 2014: 56). According to Heritage (2012a: 2), how actions such as invitations, complaints, and requests come to be understood as such has largely been treated as “transparent” or through “ad hoc stipulation ‘in the midst’ of analysis.” He maintains that this is partly due to an overwrought reliance on the “resources of sequential analysis”:

[...] to understand the underlying mechanics of first actions, [...] “next turn” will not always be a source of unequivocal validation. It and the other resources of sequential analysis [...] will certainly help us understand *that* a prior turn was, or was not, understood as a request for information, but it may be less informative about *how* that came to be the case. (Heritage, 2012c: 80)

As Heritage notes, and as Schegloff (1996: 173) pointed out earlier, consulting next actions does not necessarily address how an utterance comes to be recognized in the first place as a particular action. It may therefore appear that once we discard the next turn as the “go-to place” for analysis, sequentiality no longer offers a solution to the action formation problem. But the “resources of sequential analysis” cover much more than the next-turn proof procedure. Studies of talk-in-interaction have repeatedly shown how the local interactional sense of a turn is contingent on the previous action or actions. Most clearly, this holds for actions that are produced and understood as seconds (or “nexts”) to a prior action, such as acceptances of invitations, answers to questions, or requests to clarify a question. In these cases, the action that initiated the sequence sets constraints on what constitutes a relevant next, and the next action will therefore be understood in terms of how it orients to the prior: whether or not, for instance, the next turn is responsive to the constraints set by the immediately prior turn. A central question is whether the importance of prior actions also

holds for so-called first actions. Contrasting actions that are produced in second position to sequence-initiating actions, Levinson (2013: 109) claims that the former “in principle come without this clear projective advantage as a clue to the action being performed.” For us, the “in principle” is central, as we shall emphasize that sequence-initiating actions do not emerge out of nothing; they too display an understanding of prior turns and act upon and show understanding of such turns (cf. Schegloff, 1988c: 113). As Levinson (2013: 109) acknowledges, in most cases, “first position turns” are actually produced as next turns, positioned after preceding turns, and sometimes preceded by “preambles of various kinds” that lessen the risk of misinterpretation.

From this discrepancy on the issue of “first” position, we can begin to see how the epistemic program as formulated by Heritage (2012a, 2012c, 2013a, 2013b) diverges from the conversation analytic work of Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, and others. Heritage’s argument is not only that next actions are unable to illuminate how prior actions are understood, but that the “resources of sequential analysis” in general have little bearing on the “underlying mechanics of first actions” (Heritage, 2012c: 80). When the problem is framed in this way, sequence initiating actions are treated as “firsts,” not only in the sense of being the first parts of adjacency pairs, but as actions that are not centrally understood as nexts to preceding turns. By formulating the problem in this way—that is, by downplaying the relevance of both prior and next actions—co-participants as well as overhearing analysts seem to be left with single turns-at-talk and their composition. Disqualifying the resources of sequential analysis thereby reintroduces the problem that previously confronted speech act theorists and other students of language; the ‘problem’ for which *epistemic status* is offered as a solution.

As Heritage points out, the composition of single turns is not sufficient for understanding what those turns are doing in a particular interaction. Heritage (2012a) focuses his discussion on utterances that act as “requests for information,” and builds on previous studies that have shown that utterances with an interrogative form do not necessarily function as questions, and that utterances with syntactic forms other than interrogatives frequently do serve as questions.² Given this lack of a determinate relation between the form of an utterance and its interactional function, Heritage (2013: 3) asks, “how do utterances function as requests for information?”³ Simply put, the proposed answer to this question can be found in a list with three so-called primary elements:

“morphosyntax, intonation, and epistemic domain” (Heritage, 2012a: 4). Only when epistemic domain or “status” is included do speakers and recipients have the resources necessary for producing and recognizing first actions that otherwise would be ambiguous.

Note that sequentiality and other potential resources seem to be taken out of the picture, not only in the formulation of the problem, but also in its proposed solution.⁴ Accordingly, if the sequential environment of the utterance is removed, and only syntax and intonation are considered, any utterance is *in principle* ambiguous with regards to the action it is performing. But this ambiguity, in Schegloff’s (1984) terms, is a *theoretical ambiguity*—a potential ambiguity ostensibly “produced and solved without surfacing”:

Most theoretically or heuristically conjurable ambiguities never actually arise. That could be so because of the operations of a so-called disambiguator, as a component of the brain, as a service of context to syntax, and so on. Or it could be that the theoretically depictable ambiguities are derived by procedures that are not relevant to naturally occurring interaction, and therefore in natural contexts the ambiguities are not there to disambiguate. (Schegloff, 1984: 50)

Through the introduction of “epistemic status,” and the associated idea of “epistemic tickers” (Heritage, 2012a: 25; cf. Lynch & Wong, 2016), the epistemic program produces a “disambiguator”.⁵ In line with Schegloff, we argue that this “disambiguator” actually has little work to do in sequences that are presented as evidence of its necessity.

The recognizability of epistemic status

In publications on epistemics and action formation, Heritage (2012a, 2013a) characterizes sequence initiating actions in terms of syntax and intonation. Epistemic status is then introduced as a way of disambiguating single utterances and determining whether they are providing or requesting information. Grammar and intonation, the two other items in Heritage’s list of primary elements, are also cast in epistemic terms via the notion of *epistemic stance*: “if epistemic status vis-à-vis an epistemic domain is conceived as a somewhat enduring feature of social relationships, epistemic stance by contrast concerns the moment-by-moment expression of these relationships, as managed through the design of turns at talk” (Heritage, 2012a: 6). According to Heritage, the sentence, “Are you married?” expresses the “same propositional content” as “You’re married.” But it encodes a different epistemic stance: “Are you married?” suggests that the speaker is unaware of the

marital status of the recipient whereas “You’re married” proposes prior knowledge on the matter. As already noted, however, the design alone cannot account for what the utterance is doing, and Heritage (2013b: 384) argues that “epistemic status consistently trumps linguistic form in determining whether an utterance will be understood as requesting or asserting information.”

The concept of epistemic status builds upon the idea “that relative epistemic access to a domain will be stratified between two speakers A and B such that they occupy different positions on an epistemic gradient” (Heritage, 2013a: 558). The speakers are positioned as being more knowledgeable (K+) or less knowledgeable (K-) about the domain in question, such relative positioning is referred to as epistemic status. Epistemic status involves the “parties’ joint recognition of their comparative access, knowledgeability and rights relative to some domain of knowledge” (Heritage, 2013a, 558), which means that recognition of social action relies on the recognizability of relative knowledge. Accordingly, in order to recognize a question as a question, it is necessary to recognize the relevant distribution, access, entitlements, rights, and responsibilities in relation to the knowledge in question. And it is not that these issues are only occasionally relevant. According to Heritage, *“interactants must at all times be cognizant of what they take to be the real-world distribution of knowledge and of rights to knowledge between them as a condition of correctly understanding how clausal utterances are to be interpreted as social actions”* (2012a: 24, italics in original). These are indeed bold claims, which raise a number of questions. If interactants need to keep track of epistemic status at all times, how do they do that? How can they keep track of the relevant distribution, access, entitlements, rights, responsibilities, and so on? And how can the conversation analysts gain access to this supposedly constant orientation to “the real-world distribution of knowledge,” and show it to be demonstrably relevant and procedurally consequential to the parties on the occasion of a particular interaction?

In an introduction to epistemics in CA, Sidnell builds on Heritage’s arguments (2012a)⁶ and uses a hypothetical example to argue that recipients regularly draw on epistemic status when deciding whether an utterance is offering or requesting information:

[A] recipient will often draw on assumptions about who knows what (epistemic status) in deciding whether a given utterance is asking or telling. So, for instance, if during a

telephone conversation, the speaker says 'It's raining' (with intonation that does not disambiguate between assertion and question), she may be understood as asking a question if she just woke up and is inside the house while speaking to her friend, who is in the park. If, however, the speaker is in the park while the recipient is still inside, the utterance is more likely to be understood as an assertion. (Sidnell, 2015: 530)

Although Sidnell begins this passage by talking about “who knows what” and “epistemic status,” the example also demonstrates that there is no real need to treat the hypothetical situation in terms of *knowledge* or *epistemics*. Instead, what Sidnell does is to place the same utterance in different imagined contexts, of the speaker being in the park or at home after having just woken up.⁷ In this way, epistemic status becomes a covering statement for all the relevant scenic properties of the occasion. This move can be seen as typical for cognitive theorizing, in that contextual matters of all sorts are transformed into epistemic matters of who knows what (see Lynch & Wong, 2016). What we want to highlight is how the relevance of context is invoked through the notion of epistemic status. If epistemic status is recognized by reference to relevant scenic properties, how does a participant or overhearing analyst assess their relevance? While the context surely is necessary for understanding an utterance, the question remains *what* context, or aspect of context, is relevant on a particular occasion? How do we know the relevance of “being in the house” and “having just woken up,” rather than “having watched the weather forecast,” “being in two different countries,” and so on?

Heritage (2013a: 558) acknowledges that “it may seem that it would be difficult for interactants to evaluate epistemic status relative to one another in domain after domain,” but he nevertheless maintains that epistemic status most of the time “is an easily accessed, unquestionably presupposed, established, real and enduring state of affairs.” Referring to Labov and Fanshel (1977), Heritage proposes that “the thoughts, feelings, experiences, hopes and expectations of persons are generally treated as theirs to know and describe” (2013a: 558). Accordingly, the access, rights, entitlements and so on are established and presupposed state of affairs in virtually any conversation. However, there are few clues for how we, as overhearing analysts, are to ground *our* claims to recognize these matters. Other sources on the matter are similarly vague; Stevanovic and Peräkylä, for instance, argue that “the participants deploy their sociocultural, personal, and local knowledge to make judgments about their relative epistemic statuses” (2014: 190), but they do not discuss how

this sociocultural, personal, and local knowledge is used, or how we might be able to discern, let alone demonstrate, how the participants draw on this knowledge. If the argument is that action formation has not been systematically dealt with in CA, and that the ascription of action has been treated as “transparent” and based on “commonsense,” it should be paramount that the solution itself is not based on “intuitive” and “ad hoc” ascriptions of relative knowledge.

What evidence is there for the fundamental relevance of epistemic status?

In this section we aim to discuss some of the empirical examples originally employed in key publications on the relation between epistemics and action formation. For many of us, the central insight of Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson is that temporality, or sequentiality, is implicated in the organization of action. To move towards an analysis that does not similarly rely on sequential resources therefore constitutes a radical departure from previous work. A first question is thus whether sequential analysis is sufficient for describing how the parties produce the focal actions in these examples, without any need to resort to epistemics to disambiguate them.

It should be noted that Heritage’s argument is not that it is *sometimes* reasonable to take epistemic status into account in order to understand action formation, but that his treatment of empirical materials “offer[s] evidence that epistemic status is fundamental in determining that actions are, or are not, requests for information” (Heritage, 2012, p. 7). The question is thus whether Heritage’s treatment demonstrates empirically “that epistemic status plays a definitive role in deciding whether an utterance will be heard as ‘asking’ or ‘telling’” (Sidnell, 2012: 54). Or, in other words, whether his demonstration with transcribed materials convincingly “shows that participants rely on an understanding of ‘epistemic status’—a presumed-to-be-preexisting distribution of knowledge and knowledge rights—in discerning what ‘action’ a given turn is meant to accomplish” (Sidnell, 2012: 53). Given the claim that epistemic status constitutes an “unavoidable element of action formation” (Heritage, 2012a: 25), there should be little difficulty for an analyst to identify and collect pertinent demonstrations. But, if it is possible to come up with compelling accounts of how the parties evidently understand the constituent actions without reference to epistemic status, one could question the evidence on which these claims are based.

The discussion of action formation is elaborated at length in two articles by Heritage (2012a, 2013a). Each of these articles features 30 separate fragments of transcribed

conversation (many of which feature in both articles). In addition, Heritage (2013b) includes a shorter section on action formation, which is supported by four excerpts. In the remainder of this paper, we focus mainly on some of the most recurrent examples in the three papers. We base our selection on the assumption that Heritage chose these instances in order to clearly demonstrate central claims made in the epistemic program. Our aim is to assess the persuasiveness of this demonstration. When reviewing these materials, we sometimes had access to copies of the original recordings, and we also sought to examine longer versions of the transcripts (when available) from which the fragments were drawn. In what follows, we examine the transcribed fragments together with their accompanying commentaries, in order to trace how the notion of epistemic status is introduced into the analysis. We begin with a fragment from Heritage (2013a: 560; cf. 2012a: 8) that is offered as evidence for the claim that epistemic status is critical for determining the status of an utterance as an action, in this case, the action of doing informing.

(1) [Rah:12:1:ST]
 1 Jen: °Hello?,°
 2 (0.5)
 3 Ida: Jenny?
 4 (0.3)
 5 Ida: It's me:,
 6 Jen: Oh hello I:da.
 7 Ida: -> Ye:h. .h uh:m (0.2) ah'v jis rung tih teh- eh tell you (0.3)
 8 -> uh the things ev arrived from Barkerr'n Stone'ou[:se,
 9 Jen: [Oh:::..]
 10 (.)
 11 Jen: Oh c'n ah c'm rou:nd,hh

This fragment is presented as an example of a declarative utterance that is congruent with the speaker's epistemic status—the things talked about are within the speaker's epistemic domain, so that “the things ev arrived from Barkerr'n Stone'ou:see” is duly heard as “informing.” Here one could note that the phrase is preceded by “ah'v jis rung tih the- eh tell you” (line 7). This means that the lexical and syntactical construction alone provides an evident and unequivocal packaging of the declarative as an informing action. An account of the turn's recognizability can thus be constructed without reference to epistemic matters. In this respect, the fragment fails to demonstrate the *necessity* of determining the relative epistemic status of speaker and recipient before hearing the utterance as an “informing.”

This first exhibit clearly raises a set of questions that will be our main concern throughout this section: is the invocation of epistemic status necessary; is it helpful; and does it do justice to the demonstrable orientations of the participants?

In Heritage (2013a: 560; cf. 2012a: 10) the next fragment is presented as contrasting with the previous one, in epistemic respects: “By contrast, declaratives that address matters that are within the recipient’s epistemic domain are ordinarily construed as ‘declarative questions’ that invite confirmation.” In comparison with the previous example, which was presented as declarative that is within the speaker’s epistemic domain and therefore heard as informing, the following is thus framed as an example of a declarative referencing matters within the recipient’s epistemic domain.

(2) [NB II:2:10(R)]

1 Nan: So: I js took th'second page u' th'letter? 'n (.) stuck
 2 th'fifty dollars: check innit? 'n .hhhhh (0.2) mailed it t'
 3 Ro:l.
 4 (0.3)

5 Nan: No note no eh I haven't written a word to 'im.
 6 (0.3)

7 Nan: I [jst uh,h for'd iz mai:l stick it in th'onvelope'n
 8 Emm: [°Mm:°
 9 (0.4)

10 Nan: send it all on up to 'im en .hhh[hhh
 11 Emm: -> [Yih know wher'e is the:n,
 12 (0.8)

13 Nan: -> I have never had any of it retu:rned Emma,h
 14 Emm: Oh::.
 15 Nan: At a:ll, so: I jist assoom

With reference to line 11, Heritage (2013a: 560) notes that “Emma offers a declaratively framed inference about Nancy’s knowledge of her ex-husband’s affairs.” So, apart from being a declarative that references matters within the recipient’s epistemic domain, the utterance also is understood as an “inference.” Recall that the need for an independent account of epistemic status arises in situations where the sequential organization provides an insufficient basis for determining whether an utterance is delivering or requesting information. But what is an inference if not an action that logically follows from what precedes it—that is, the material from which the inference is drawn? In this example, the inference in question is explicitly marked as such with the inference marker “the:n” (line 11).

Heritage takes this as a potential complication for his account. Could the inference marker, rather than the parties' relative epistemic status, be what accounts for the declarative being heard as a request for confirmation?⁸ To account for this alternative understanding, Heritage (2013a) asserts the following: "While inference markers clearly contribute to increased clarity about which speaker's epistemic domain a particular item of information falls into, they are surely not essential to it" (2013a: 561), and he offers the next fragment as a demonstration.

(3) [MidWest 2.4]
 1 Doc: Are you married?
 2 (.)
 3 Pat: No.
 4 (.)
 5 Doc: -> You're divorced (°cur[rently,°)
 6 Pat: [Mm hm,

Heritage treats "you're divorced currently" as a declarative heard as information-seeking, by *virtue of the epistemic domains in play*. In our view, this treatment is vulnerable to the same alternative understanding as the previous example. When describing this same piece of data, Boyd and Heritage (2006: 153) characterize the fragment as one where "[t]he doctor conducts a comprehensive medical history, including past and current medications, family and social history, and systems review." The participants' objective is thus to go through a series of predefined items on a questionnaire or list. Regardless of whether these items are formulated as interrogatives ("Are you married?," "D'you smoke?"), as declaratives ("You're divorced currently."), or articulated as rudimentary phrases ("Alcohol use?," "Daily?") they are still treated, by the patient, as actions belonging to the same ongoing activity, that is, as actions subjected to the medical review. In line with the understanding of this stretch of talk as a developing sequence of questions and answers, there is little reason to treat line 5 as a "first action" whose sense is independent of its sequential history.⁹ Boyd and Heritage analyze the target line as a "follow-up question [which] nominates a likely, and relatively 'best case,' alternative" (2006: 172). Similarly, Heritage (2012a: 8) describes it as a "next best guess," where we take the "next" to signify a second to a prior. Consequently, the sequential embedding integral to the concept of "inference" is very much in evidence for this as well as the previous fragment. So, rather than demonstrating that inference markers are not

essential for clarifying “which speaker’s epistemic domain a particular item of information falls into,” (Heritage, 2013a: 561), the two examples illustrate instead that various upshots, inferences, and the like can be done with and without inference markers, and also that they can be declaratively phrased.

It can also be noted that, when discussing this fragment, Heritage (2012a, 2013a) oscillates between two different explanatory frameworks, one epistemic and the other sequential. On the one hand, he argues that the “doctor relies upon the patient’s authoritative knowledge of her marital status, and her rights to this authority, to achieve a request for information with a declarative utterance” (2013a: 555). On the other, he maintains that the doctor’s “next best guess” is “[p]rompted by the patient’s response at line 3” (2012a: 8). While we concur with the sequential account, the epistemic argument adds little to what already seems apparent. Intuitively, it might very well make sense to say that the doctor is in K- position with regards to the patient’s marital status. We want to emphasize, however, that the sheer plausibility of the ascription in no way constitutes evidence for the *fundamental* relevance of epistemic status in determining whether an utterance is requesting information or not.¹⁰

Heritage (2012a: 8) introduces the next example to follow up on the “you’re divorced” example: “Similarly in [4], Jan is calling about helping Ivy out with the preparation of a meal. It is of course Ivy’s epistemic priority that drives the interpretation of Jan’s turn at line 7.” The suggested similarity appears to be that both extracts include a declaratively phrased turn; a turn that, nevertheless, is heard as a request for confirmation. And, similarly, Ivy’s epistemic priority over the chicken and what has been done to it (like the patient’s priority over her own marital status) is deemed to account for, and indeed to drive, the interpretation of “Iz been cooked” (line 7) as a request for clarification.

(4) [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-> =[it 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.....

Heritage's commentary on the fragment reads:

Given that Ivy is the person whose cooked chicken is being talked about—a chicken moreover that is located in her kitchen (and not Jan's), Jan's 'Iz ↑BEEN cooked.' (line 7) cannot be understood as other than a request for confirmation—the request in this case being used by Jan to register a revision of her expectations about the chicken and, possibly, her likely cooking obligations. (2012a: 9)¹¹

Heritage thus presents the utterance in line 7 as a sequence-initial action whose sense is fully and completely tied to Ivy's epistemic priority—an action that “cannot be understood as other than a request for confirmation”. This account of a declaratively phrased request for confirmation has no sequential attachments: only formal and epistemic ones. In contrast to this analytic characterization, we suggest another reading, where the sequential embedding of the turn is crucial for understanding Jan's action in line 7. Here, we find what for us is the central similarity between “you're divorced currently” and “Iz been cooked”: they both occur as next turns in a sequence, and both display in their production their indebtedness to the respective sequence. In this case, the target line is part of a repair sequence. Jan's line 7 is proximally a repetition of Ivy's line 6, which is, in turn, a repetition of the latter's line 4, likely prompted by the overlap between 3 and 4 and the lack of displayed uptake (see the micropause in line 5).

In this light, the repeat in line 7 can itself be treated as a confirmation of (finally) having heard what Ivy had earlier answered to the projectable question in line 1. This is not to say that it is not also produced in such a way as to make relevant a further confirmation in next turn (“Oh yes”); the emphasis on BEEN marks the tense as a repairable—a key component that possibly had not been heard during the overlap. So, “Iz BEEN cooked” is produced as a candidate hearing of what had just been said. This differs from saying that it is a declaratively phrased utterance referencing an object to which the recipient has epistemic priority. The latter is a formalist reading of an utterance taken in isolation. Recall that what we are after is an account of why line 7 is *not* heard as delivering information, despite its declarative form. It seems that its status as a production within a repair sequence, oriented to the achievement of common understanding, sufficiently accounts for how it is heard, without recourse to epistemic hierarchies of access to kitchens, chickens, and so on. While for Heritage it is the prospective orientation of line 7, as a sequence-initial declarative, which

is central, we point to its retrospective orientation and the ways in which its formation (both its design and its hearing) draws heavily on the immediate sequential environment.

Heritage (2013a: 563) presents the next fragment as an example where “interrogative syntax is used to frame utterances whose content is primarily known to the speaker.” The fragment is taken from a telephone conversation between Shelley and Debbie. The two friends had planned to attend a football game out of state with a group of other people, but prior to the conversation a mutual friend informed Debbie that Shelley was not going. In the conversation, Debbie accuses Shelley of having cancelled the trip because her boyfriend is not going and, more generally, that she “abandons her ‘girlfriends’ in favor of ‘guys’” (2013a: 563; cf. 2012a: 12, 2013b: 385). Heritage’s introductory commentary on the fragment informs us that “the speaker’s putatively K+ position cancels the possibility that the targeted utterance in line 5 will be heard as requesting information, but will rather be heard as ‘rhetorical’” (2013a: 563). The assignment of the K+ position is the anchor point of his analysis, but for us the assurance that the “content is primarily known to the speaker” does not really seem to be grounded in the displayed orientations of the two parties

(5) [Debbie and Shelley:]

- 1 Shl: So: I mean it's not becuz he's- he's- I mean it's not
2 becuz he's not going it's becuz (0.5) his money's
3 not¿ (0.5) funding me.
4 Deb: Okay¿
5 Shl: → So an' ↑when other time have I ever [done that?]
6 Deb: [.hhh well] I'm jus say:in
7 it jus seems you- you base a lot of things on-on guy:s.
8 (.) I do'know:, it just- a couple times I don- I don-
9 .hh it's not a big deal.

In his commentary, Heritage (2013a) points out that Shelley has privileged access to the epistemic domain of the question, and cites his earlier article on action formation, in which he says the following about the same fragment:¹²

Whatever the action that is derived from this utterance—challenge, complaint, protest, rebuttal—it does not embrace “requesting information.” Thus even if Shelley’s interlocutor had responded by listing occasions in which Shelley had abandoned girlfriends for guys (a course of action she does not undertake here), we would be

justified in viewing this eventuality as the subversion of Shelley's objective in producing the utterance—a case of her being “hoist on her own petard.” (Heritage, 2012a: 23)

This commentary leaves open what the target turn is doing. Note how the characterization is stated in the negative, claiming that Shelley's action “does not request information.” How the action more specifically is produced and understood—whether it is taken as a challenge, complaint, protest, rebuttal, or a combination of these—seems to be outside the scope of the epistemic treatment of action formation. Nonetheless, the argument is that “epistemic status has a controlling influence on how the argument is understood” (Heritage, 2013a: 564). But, if the relative epistemic status of the parties only accounts for whether or not the utterance requests information, the recipient still needs to work out what the action is doing more specifically. Presumably, the recipient would understand the utterance based on its design and sequential environment. And if the recipient is able to use what has been said and done to achieve such understanding, how is it possible that she would not then know, as of those same resources of turn design and sequential environment, whether or not the utterance is “requesting information”? Requesting information should not be regarded as a special case of common understanding or social action, set apart from those achievements. Again, there appears to be two alternate readings of the fragment, one sequential and one epistemic, and we are puzzled by what the latter yields that the former does not.

Not only do we deem the introduction of epistemic status in these cases unnecessary (or irrelevant) for understanding what particular utterances are doing, we also find that it relies upon stipulations of relative knowledge as substitutes for analyses of the sequential organization of the singular episodes. In this last case, all the observations connected to the extract seem to emerge from the ascription of Shelley's “putatively K+ position” to an utterance with interrogative syntax. But this ascription can be questioned, and if the other claims are based on it, rather than on an inspection of the detailed materials in the fragment, the connection between the description and the demonstrable orientations of the participants gets lost. In fact, in relation to each and every claim that Heritage makes about this instance, it is possible to make a case for the opposite position: that Shelley does *not* have privileged access to the domain, that her question *does* request information (or, at least, an account), that it is *not* a rhetorical question, and that listing occasions in which Shelley had abandoned girlfriends would not be a “subversion of Shelley's objective in producing the utterance” (Heritage, 2012a: 23). To make this alternate reading a bit easier

to follow, we will introduce some additional materials from the same recorded conversation. The following fragment begins about one and a half minutes before the previous one.

(6) [Debbie and Shelley 03:22]
01 Deb: → =I do'know, jus don't blow off your girlfriends for
02 → guy:s, Shel.
03 Shl: → De:b I'm not. h[ow man-]e- when have I.=beside ya-
04 Deb: [o ka:y]
05 Shl: I mean you're right a- it w's easier w- with him going
06 because he was going to pay f- for a lot of
07 it.=b[ut]
08 Deb: [ye]ah¿=
09 Shl: =that's no:t .h >I mean< that's not thee reason I'm not
10 going.
11 Deb: mmkay¿
12 (1.0)
(15 lines omitted)
28 Shl: alright, [well don get ma:[d at me.
29 Deb: [.hh [.HH I'M NOT MA:D but it jus
30 → seems like it's like you can't do anything unless
31 → there's a gu:y involved an it jus pisses me o- <I'm jus
32 → bein rea:l ho:nest with ya cuz it's
33 like¿=.hh[h [why wouldn:t- why wouldn't=
34 Shl: → [whe[n
35 Deb: =you go.=becu:z >I mean< that's what Jay Tee told me
36 you told hi:m¿

There are several interesting things in play here, but for our purposes two noticings are particularly relevant. First, the accusation is not only about Shelley cancelling the trip because of her boyfriend. There is also a more general and serious accusation that she, as Heritage noted in his introduction to the previous fragment, “abandons her ‘girlfriends’ in favor of ‘guys’.” In an analysis of the same conversation, Koshik (2003: 54) points out that the accusation in lines 1 and 2, “not only implies that this is what Shelley has been doing in this particular instance, but that Shelley has done this before. She implies this by pluralizing both ‘girlfriends’ and ‘guys’.” Second, one can note how the question “so an’ when other time have I ever done that” (extract 7, line 5) is preceded by somewhat similar questions that address the more general accusation. In response to Debbie’s telling her not to blow off her girlfriends for guys, Shelley first denies the accusation, then begins to formulate the question “how man-“ (presumably as in “how many times”), which is cut off, and through a

self repair reformulated to “when have I? beside ya-“ (line 3), before she returns to the issue of cancelling the trip. When Debbie, a couple of turns later, accuses Shelley of not being able to “do anything unless theres a gu:y involved” (line 30 and 31), and then continues to say that it pisses her off and that she is just being honest, Shelley poses the question “when” (line 34) in overlap with Debbie’s utterance. In neither of these cases does Debbie get an answer, but it is relevant to note how these questions are posed as responses and challenges to the more general accusations. When the question, “so an when other time have I ever done that?” is formulated later on, it can be heard to address the previous accusations that she is unable to do anything without a guy involved and that she regularly blows off her girlfriends.¹³

Returning to the issue of epistemic status, a question here is why Shelley would be considered more knowledgeable about the matters in dispute than Debbie. Heritage tells us that Shelley is in K+ position on the matter of her abandoning girlfriends in favor of guys, but this is far from a settled matter. On the contrary, it is just what both parties pursue in the extended sequence. This touches on one of the most central and problematic moves of the epistemic program. If the recognizability of social action depends on the recognizability of relative knowledge, who is to decide? Heritage (2012a: 6) acknowledges that it might seem as though assigning epistemic status “introduces a contingency of daunting difficulty and complexity into the study of interaction,” but asserts that “in fact relative access to particular epistemic domains is treated as a more or less settled matter in the large bulk of ordinary interaction.” This wide-ranging claim is followed by another: “outside of very specialized contexts such as psychoanalysis, the thoughts, experiences, hopes, and expectations of individuals are treated as theirs to know and describe” (2012a: 6). Our question is whether such claims apply to interpersonal relationships, and to experiences, hopes, and expectations that are shared with others. Is it really clear, in this case, that Shelley has privileged access to what she has done in the presence of others, or for her *reputation* for treating these others a particular way? There must be innumerable circumstances like this where parties have different positions on the matters they talk about: cases where the relative access to the relevant domain is treated as far from settled.

In her earlier analysis of the same conversation, Koshik (2003) sets out to demonstrate that the questions in lines 3 and 34 are produced and heard as challenges to prior utterances rather than information-seeking questions. She notes that the production of the utterance in

line 3 is rushed and that it neither invites nor receives an answer. In addition, she emphasizes how the sequential environment is decisive for the way the two utterances are heard: “These wh- questions are heard as challenges primarily because of their sequential position. They occur in an already-established environment of disagreement, accusation, complaint and the like, where challenging is a sequentially appropriate next response” (Koshik, 2003: 52). Heritage’s (2012a, 2013a, 2013b) writings on action formation make no direct reference to Koshik’s prior treatment of the conversation. While there are parallels between the two, there also are striking differences. Both Koshik and Heritage conclude that there is a difference between information-seeking questions and what could be characterized as rhetorical questions,¹⁴ and both also introduce epistemics into their analyses. Koshik writes that the design of the utterance and its environment “convey a strong epistemic stance of the questioner, specifically a negative assertion” (2003: 52), with the implication that the utterance “when have I” is heard as “I have never.” They differ, however, in the way Heritage discusses the fragment in terms of epistemic *status* and privileged access to an epistemic domain, while Koshik—who also argues that the utterance is heard as a challenge—emphasizes that the sequential environment is decisive for the way in which the utterance is heard. Although Heritage (2013a: 564) acknowledges that the “argumentative nature of the talk may ‘prime’ a question or other contribution to be heard as ‘rhetorical’,” his take-home message is nevertheless that “this priming context cannot override the role of epistemic status in recognizing that a turn at talk does, or does not, request information.” We argue that this assertion is not demonstrated with the materials in this instance. That is, it remains unclear to us why the sequential organization of the conversation that Heritage analyzes fails to “override the role of epistemic status.”

Contrary to Heritage’s (2012b: 32) claim that “expressions of epistemic imbalance drive sequences,” we maintain that the epistemic program is unable to account for the ways in which a dispute, such as the one between Shelley and Debbie, develops sequentially. When Koshik argues that the utterances in line 3 and 34 are not requests for information but negative assertions, she builds her analysis on the design of these particular utterances from within their sequential environments, including how they are responded to: they do not receive “answers,” nor are answers treated as absent. These questions, in some sense, are similar to the one formulated later on, “So an ↑when other time have I ever done that?”—the target utterance for Heritage’s demonstration. However, they are produced and

responded to differently. Just how they differ will become evident when we return to the fragment that was used in Heritage's demonstration, but with a few additional lines included. The continuation of the interaction shows that when Debbie does not come up with any concrete occasions, Shelley pursues the issue by suggesting candidates herself (lines 14-16 and 75-81).

(7) [Debbie and Shelley Extended]

1 Shl: So: I mean it's not becuz he's- he's- I mean it's not
 2 becuz he:'s not going it's becuz (0.5) his money's
 3 not¿ (0.5) funding me.

4 Deb: Okay¿

5 Shl: -> So an' ↑when other time have I ever [done that?]

6 Deb: [.hhh well] I'm jus say:in
 7 it jus seems you- you base a lot of things on-on guy:s.
 8 (.) I do'know:, it just- a couple times I don- I don-
 9 .hh it's not a big deal.
 10 (.)

11 Deb: it's [rea:lly.]

12 Shl: [that's no]t true Debbie. [the onl-] the only time=
 13 Deb: [its not]

14 Shl: -> I t- N-now you're talkin about like (.) me not goin
 15 -> to your party because of Jay, an you're right. that was
 16 -> becuz of him. .hh and that wuz pro[bly

17 Deb: [↑NO I understood
 18 tha:t, I don'care 'bout tha:t.=

((51 lines omitted))

70 Shl: I mean we have made a lot pla:ns and I-↑ don't
 71 know. No:w I feel defensive. Hhh

72 Deb: We:ll ya shouldn't be defensive I mean there's been
 73 pa:rtie:s like here come here do this or
 74 whatever:an [.hhh

75 Shl: -> [You were at the halloween thing.

76 Deb: huh?

77 Shl: the halloween p[arty

78 Deb: [ri:ght
 79 (2.5)

80 Shl: -> W'll- you're right I didn't go to that. an I
 81 -> pro[bly should've]

82 Deb: [>I M E A N]You< don't even c(h)a:ll, I'm I
 83 don't care anymore. It doesn't bother me.

In contrast to the previous two questions (in fragment 6), which did not receive any answers, the question in line 5 does. On what grounds, then, is this a “rhetorical” and not a “proper” or “information-seeking” question? It is true that Debbie does not answer by “listing occasions in which Shelley had abandoned girlfriends for guys” (2012a: 23). Instead, she repeats her previous argument, but in a somewhat weaker form: “it jus seems you- you base a lot of things on-on guy:s.” By saying that it has happened a couple of times, she also provides an answer to Shelley’s earlier cut off “how ma-“ (fragment 7, line 3; as in “how many times”). With reference to how Debbie takes a step back from the previous accusations, and to the way in which she mitigates her answer, it is reasonable to say that she hears the target utterance as a challenge. That Debbie does not list occasions, however, is not strong evidence that the question was heard as rhetorical; and her “I do’know:, it just- a couple times I don- I don- .hh its not a big deal,” could rather be understood as a way to avoid expanding on the topic, and deepening the dispute, rather than as a concession to Shelley’s epistemic primacy. The discussion has gone on for a while, and during this time, Debbie has shown little attention to the details of Shelley’s explanatory accounts. Her minimal responses (like her uses of “okay”) do not convey acceptance of Shelley’s explanations. Instead, she responds by returning to the more general accusation. Given that Shelley is the person who is being accused, and given that the general accusation remains in play even after she has attempted to explain why she cancelled the trip, the utterance in line 5 could indeed be heard as “information seeking.” In the absence of Debbie’s account of the “other times” Shelley let her girlfriends down, she is unable to excuse or explain herself. Although she rejects the accusation, as further demonstrated by her “that’s not true Debbie” (line 12), this does not mean that the question was produced or understood as unanswerable. The very notion of a challenge implies that it can be taken up. It is not clear, therefore, why mentioning other occasions would be a “subversion of Shelley’s objective in producing the utterance” (Heritage, 2012a: 23).

After examining how the interaction unfolds, moreover, it seems strange to claim that, if Shelley were provided with some additional occasions, she would be “hoist on her own petard” (Heritage, 2012a: 23). The fact is that when Debbie does not specify other occasions, Shelley even produces some candidate instances herself. Her “Now your talkin about like (.) me not goin to your party because of Jay an you’re right that wuz becuz of him” (line 14 and 15) is very interesting in this respect. Not only does Shelley present a candidate instance, she

also admits that Debbie was “right.” Shelley makes a similar concession later on, when she mentions the Halloween party that she “probably should’ve” attended (lines 75-81). Given that the conversation develops in this way, Heritage’s (2013a: 563) claim that “the speaker’s putatively K+ position cancels the possibility that the utterance will be heard as requesting information, but will rather be heard as ‘rhetorical’,” does not appear to be grounded in the manifest details of the interaction.¹⁵

Discussion

In the previous section we discussed empirical evidence presented in favor of the epistemic model, focusing on the role of epistemic status in addressing the question of action formation. We asked if the empirical analyses used to demonstrate the model are convincing. The conclusion we draw is that the texture of the interactions themselves, especially when we take into account more of the talk-in-interaction from which the fragments were extracted, provide sufficient analytic resources for professional analysts as well as members, without need to resort to epistemic status as a “disambiguator”. That is, we can account for how the focal utterances came to be treated in action terms, without postulating that recipients assign epistemic status in order to determine, for instance, whether an utterance is requesting or providing information. Our analyses turned, in particular, on the preceding sequences, which appear to dissolve any principled ambiguities ascribed to the focal turn. The epistemic program claims that without knowing the relative and relevant epistemic status, the focal turns would present puzzles for participants. What we attempted to show instead is that the economy of expression evident in these utterances is made possible by the placement of the target utterance in a sequence.

Linguistic form and types of action

Apart from arguing that we were not convinced of the necessity of epistemic status as a disambiguator, we also addressed the consequences of epistemic analysis in particular cases. In one case after another, including many that we did not have space to discuss here¹⁶, when transcribed fragments of interaction were placed under the burden of demonstrating the overarching claims, skewed or reductionist accounts of those interactions tended to result. So, for example, instead of explicating how an utterance came to be produced and heard as a “next best guess,” an “inference,” a “challenge,” and so on, Heritage elaborates whether or not it is requesting information. It would seem as though an account of the former subsumes the latter, and as we have attempted to show here, more

detailed accounts can be produced without recourse to epistemic status. The reductionism evident in the analyses we have reviewed could perhaps be written off as an inevitable restriction of analytic focus, since, after all, no single analysis can take every aspect of an action into account. We would argue, however, that the reduction was instrumental for setting up the very problem of action formation that epistemic status was brought in to resolve. We take it that the practice of restricting the analytic scope to the grammatical format of turns sets up the key conclusions that “epistemic status [is] critical in interpreting their [the turns’] status as social actions” (Heritage, 2013a: 564) and that “epistemic status consistently trumps linguistic form in determining whether an utterance will be understood as requesting or asserting information” (Heritage, 2013b: 384). These conclusions have also been summarized in the form of a table (Table 1), which raises some additional and important considerations for our discussion.

	K+ epistemic status (within speaker’s epistemic domain)	K- epistemic status (not within speaker’s epistemic domain)
Turn design feature	Action interpretation (Given the ‘known in common’ epistemic status of speaker and recipient relative to the targeted state of affairs)	
Declarative syntax	Informing	‘Declarative/B-event question’
Declarative syntax with final rising intonation	‘Continuing’	‘Questioning’
Tag questions	‘Mobilizing support for an assertion’	‘Seeking confirmation’
Negative interrogative syntax	‘Asserting information’ (see Bolinger, 1957: ‘Blinds up’)	‘Requesting information’ (see Bolinger, 1957: ‘Blinds down’)
Interrogative syntax	‘Pre-informing question’ ‘Known answer question’ ‘Rhetorical question’	Request for information

Table 1. The table of "Epistemics and action formation" from Heritage (2013a).

In Table 1, actions associated with a K+ epistemic status are listed in the left column and actions associated with a K- epistemic status are listed in the right column. All actions in the

right column, in one way or another, request information, whereas the actions in the left column do not.¹⁷ But how is one to conceive the relationship between epistemic status and action interpretation? In Heritage (2012a), the categorizations are followed by numbers that point to extracts serving as exemplars of the action types. The table could thus be read as an overview of the “turn design features” and the “epistemic status” of the speakers in a catalog of instances. When the table is reproduced in Heritage (2013a), however, the references to specific cases have been removed, and it looks more like a proposal for a grammar of action than a concluding summary of a set of materials. It would be easy to understand the table as a statement about the necessary and sufficient criteria for what makes an action an action of a particular type. If the speaker uses an interrogative syntax and is in a K- position, for instance, then the utterance should be understood as a request for information. Read in this way, it seems as though we have, at least to some extent, returned to the analytic stance of speech-act theory and that the clear “divergence of these two paths of analysis” (Schegloff, 1992a: xxix) now has been erased (cf. Heritage, 2012c: 77).

As it is formulated in the epistemic program, there is a conceptual relation between epistemic status and action interpretation. The notions of “informing,” “asserting information,” or posing a “pre-informing,” or “known-answer question” can all be understood to imply that information somehow is within the speaker’s domain. And conversely, “questioning,” “seeking confirmation,” or “requesting information” can be understood to imply that the relevant information is not in the speaker’s domain. In other words, assertions are done by speakers who have “privileged access” to the information that they assert, whereas requests for information are done by speakers who lack such access. But Heritage proposes not only that there is a conceptual link between epistemic status and action interpretation, but that epistemic status is a necessary feature in the production and recognition of action (cf. Heritage, 2012a: 24), and that “monitoring epistemic status in relation to each and every turn-at-talk is an unavoidable feature of the construction of talk as action.” (Heritage, 2013: 386).

Throughout this paper, we have suggested another possibility, which is that the recognizability of an action—as, for instance, “a request for information”— provides the overhearing analyst with the resources for ascribing epistemic status to the participants. This, of course, does not “solve” the action formation problem; the analyst must still show how a particular action has been “recognized by co-participants as that action by virtue of

the practices that produced it” (Schegloff, 2007: 7). What we have attempted to show in the re-analysis of the transcribed fragments is that the resources of sequential analysis, despite arguments to the contrary, are adequate for this pursuit.

The recognizability of relative knowledge

Having argued that the evidence for the necessity of the epistemic model appears wanting, that there are some negative consequences of its adoption for analyzing singular instances, and that it embodies an analytic stance that runs counter to the programmatic identity of CA, we now turn to the notion of context, and its relation to the constraints of conversation analysis. Schegloff’s work in particular constitutes a reminder, implicit in the ways in which data are approached in CA, as well as explicit in the form of methodological/analytical practices, such as the next-turn proof procedure. He reminds us that the disciplined treatment of context is a distinguishing quality and strength of CA. In a pointed remark on context, Schegloff argues that, “If some external context can be shown to be proximately (or intra-interactionally to the participants) relevant [...] then its external status is rendered beside the point; and if it cannot be so shown, then its external status is rendered equivocal” (1992b: 197).¹⁸ The Epistemics Program re-introduces the notion of extra-interactional context and attempts to demonstrate its relevance through a consideration of “first actions.” This move is acknowledged as both a risky enterprise and as breaking with CA’s central commitment to ground claims “in the demonstrable orientation and understanding of the parties to the interaction as displayed in their consequent conduct” (Schegloff, 2009: 363).

There is always a risk that this point of view will start to produce generalizations that become unfalsifiable and, hence, nonempirical. [...] However, the gains to be made from understanding some of the “tickers” that are likely contributing to action formation and recognition seem to me to make the risks worth taking (Heritage, 2012c: 80)

If we are to take under consideration the above-mentioned risks, they should minimally be weighed against the promises placed on the other pan of the scale. As should be clear by now, the key analytic innovation advanced by Heritage (2012a, 2013a) is to regard epistemic status as chief arbiter in the face of ambiguous utterances—in other words, it is the *relative knowledge* of participants in conversation, as recognized by those participants, that has the final say in how an utterance should be understood in action terms. This account ultimately

shifts the problem of action formation from hinging on one formidable question to hinging on another: the question of how *social action* is produced and recognized, now comes to rest on the question of how *relative knowledge* is recognized. In the Epistemic Program, the resources utilized to resolve these questions often seem to involve appeals to intuitively plausible generalizations such as the claim that “persons are [...] generally treated as knowing more about their relatives, friends, pets, jobs, and hobbies than others ” or that “relative access to particular epistemic domains is treated as a more or less settled matter in the large bulk of ordinary interaction” (Heritage, 2012a: 6). We question the solidity of the empirical support thus far presented for these general claims. Furthermore, as our re-analyses demonstrate, reliance on them may result in assignments of epistemic status that compromise the ensuing analyses. For instance, if it is assumed *a priori* that people are treated as having epistemic priority over their own actions, then a description of the question “when other time have I ever done that” as “rhetorical” appears seductively natural. As Heritage phrases it, the “speaker’s putatively K+ position *cancel*s the possibility” (2012a: 563, emphasis added) that the utterance is heard in any other way. We believe a construct which thusly prescribes the cancellation of analytic possibilities presents its proponents with a formidable burden of proof.

If our characterization of the EP is valid, and if the solution to the action formation problem is supposedly found by reference to extrasituational relations, then we deem the promised gains of the program negligible, when compared with the cost of giving up CA’s key commitment of adhering to the demonstrable orientation of the parties to the interaction. In our reading, the ostensible need to loosen constraints in this way arises from a self-imposed reduction of analytic resources: most notably, when the resources of sequential analysis are stripped away, it results in analytic puzzles or theoretical ambiguities which may seem to be tractable only by means of a novel set of postulates (Schegloff, 1984). We suggest instead that, rather than constricting our analyses to features of morphosyntax and intonation, we should at least consult and exhaust the full range of “resources of the language, the body, the environment of the interaction, and position *in* the interaction” (Schegloff, 2007: xiv) before even considering the relevance of extrasituational relations.

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Notes

¹ Clearly, this is not the only difference between the two traditions. Among other things, speech act theory is also characterized by its references to speaker intent, use of invented examples, and focus on single utterances rather than sequences of talk-in-interaction (Button, 1994; Schegloff, 1988b; 1992a).

² In Heritage (2013), a similar argument is applied to intonation: questions can be posed without “final rising intonation,” and utterances with a “final rise” can be used for actions other than questions.

³ According to Heritage, this problem is particularly relevant in the treatment of action formation for two reasons. First, he claims that “requests for information” make up “the ultimate paradigm of an adjacency-pair first action” (Heritage, 2012a: 2). Second he maintains that: “[i]n the process of action formation, nothing is more fundamental than determining whether an utterance is delivering information or requesting it” (2013a, p. 557). As demonstrated by Lynch and Wong (2016), both these claims can be contested.

⁴ In this respect, the list of three primary elements can be contrasted with the way Schegloff (2007: xiv) implicates a much more inclusive set in his formulation of action formation.

⁵ Although epistemic status is not explicitly described as a “component of the brain,” and the exact nature of it remains unspecified in EP publications, the associated notion of an “epistemic ticker” that never “can be switched off” (Heritage: 2012c: 76) and a “set of ‘heuristics’, operating concertedly on linguistic form and social context” (2012c: 77; cf. Gigerenzer, 2007) are clearly representative of the kind of cognitive theorizing that Schegloff refers to (also see Lynch and Wong, 2016)

⁶ Or, more specifically, it builds on Heritage’s use of an example from Bolinger (1957: 102) where the utterance “isn’t the sun shining?” is said in two different settings: indoors with the blinds down and outdoors in full sunlight.

⁷ Schegloff's (1988a: 132-133) treatment of Goffman is instructive for considering this example. Among other things, he questions "the basis for this sort of exercise, in which the academic analyst takes some lexically specified target as an invariant point of reference, and varies the contexts around it." One of several problems with this approach, he argues, is that the "phenomena of interest are rarely identified by lexical stability, so these framings cannot seriously be claimed to be 'potentially applicable to the "same" event'."

⁸ In Heritage (2012a: 9), the target line in the prior example (fragment 8 [NB:II:2:R:11]) also ends with the inference marker "then."

⁹ As Sacks (1992: 373) suggested, "once a sequence of questions is started, then it may well be the case that unless some next utterance by, say, the questioner, has a very clear non-question form, it can be heard as a question by virtue of occurring in a sequence of questions." As he then points out, this makes it problematic to characterize such questions as "first actions" that could be understood without reference to previous actions: "Under that circumstance, i.e., that the characteristic of a question is to be found by its occurrence in a list that is hearable as being 'a list of questions,' it would be difficult to warrant an argument which counted them as singly independent objects."

¹⁰ These two examples (fragment 1 and 2) can be usefully compared to Schegloff's (1996) analysis of "confirming allusions." Schegloff describes a sequence in which a declarative produced by A in response to a stretch of talk by B—a declarative that formulates an aspect, gist or upshot of that talk, as something alluded to but not said in so many words—in turn receives from B an exact confirming repeat. Schegloff treats as unproblematic that the prior declarative is "not heard as delivering information," presumably because it offers a formulation of the prior talk.

¹¹ In the transcript, we see notations that are not taken up in the analysis. The arrowed lines 4, 6, 7 and 8 suggest that these turns are all relevant, somehow, but there is no account of how they might be relevant. The notation may be a residue from a previous analysis of "oh-prefaced responses to inquiry" (Heritage, 1998), since oh-prefaced replies to inquiries, such as the "oh yes" in line 8 regularly occur in responses to queries about information that should already be obvious or known to the querying party. So the fact that Ivy has already said, twice, that "it's been cooked" may account for the "oh"-preface on line 8. But there is nothing that should have 'already been known' here; it is a repair sequence, and any utterance is a candidate for repair, and thus repairs are not

“inapposite.” See Heritage (1984: 319) on the production of ‘Oh’ on receipt of a repair, and see (Macbeth, Wong, & Lynch, 2016) for its discussion.

¹² The cited passage in Heritage (2013a) only includes the first of the two sentences.

¹³ In another analysis of the same fragment, Raymond (2004) points out that there is a shift in line 5 from the proximal matters to the more general charge. His discussion, however, focuses specifically on the turn-initial “so” (in extract 7, line 5): “With this most proximate matter apparently addressed, Shelley deploys an unstated upshot ‘so’ (line 5) and then moves on to address the more general accusation (that she can’t ‘do anything unless there is a guy involved’), challenging Debbie to name the other occasion(s) implied by her claim to have observed a general pattern (lines 5–6)” (p. 192).

¹⁴ Koshik (2003) introduces the text by presenting prior work on rhetorical questions, but does not use the notion actively in her analysis.

¹⁵ Heritage (2012a: 23) argues that previous work “tends to stress that these ‘rhetorical questions’ gain their primary force from the fact that their recipients are invited to affirm a proposition to which they have shown themselves to be opposed (often in the context of argument). However, the inverted epistemic positions of the protagonists—in which the questioning is about a matter to which the questioner, and not the recipient, has primary epistemic rights—seems fundamental.” We have looked for, but not found any good example of this. The question “What have the Romans ever done for us?” (paraphrased from Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*) is a typical rhetorical question, which is produced as (but given its function in the skit, not taken as) a negative assertion. But in no way does this rhetorical question presume that the speaker and the recipients have different epistemic rights (and neither do the use of other questions that are typically considered to be rhetorical that we have examined, such as “Is the pope catholic?,” “Are you kidding me?,” and “Who cares?”).

¹⁶ We encourage the reader to see how the fragments from Heritage’s papers on action formation (2012a; 2013a) have been re-analysed in the other contributions to this special issue (Macbeth & Wong, 2016; Lynch & Wong, 2016). The alternative analysis of the conversation between two dog breeders (Heritage 2012a: 17, Ex. (17) [Heritage 1:11:4]) presented by Macbeth and Wong (2016), for instance, seriously complicates Heritage’s (2012a: 14) argument that there are two uses of tag questions that are separated by epistemic status. Furthermore, it appears from our consideration of the sequences employed in building the case for epistemic status that most if not all of them can be

problematized along similar lines. By way of additional examples, we would for instance argue that the utterance, “are you asking me or telling me,” a response made by a Republican strategist to an interviewer’s query (Heritage, 2012a: 11, Ex (12) [CNN State of the Nation 22nd March 2010: 8:56 EST], is not convincingly shown to constitute “a brief, but genuine, moment of confusion.” Although the utterance might be heard in this way if taken literally, it seems to us that *resistance* rather than confusion is in play here. If one considers how the conversation continues, the characterisation made by the interviewer, “On this issue of health care reform, the Democrats will win” (only partially included in Heritage’s transcript) is resisted by the strategist who specifies that “They’re going to win the vote” and then argues that this in no way means that the Democrats will eventually win the issue (the strategist’s response is not included in the transcript). Finally, one can note an interesting shift in Heritage’s treatment of the Family Dinner excerpt originally analyzed by Terasaki (2004 [1976]). Heritage initially treats it as a case that is “exquisite for showing the role of attributed epistemic status in determining how an utterance with interrogative syntax is to be treated in action terms” (2012a: 20). In a publication a year later, he leaves the sequence out of the epistemic analysis of action formation and instead presents it as an example of an utterance that is “grounded in, and indeed triggered by, the preceding sequence” (2013a: 553). It is as if a slightly more careful analysis of pre-sequential context obviates the apparent relevance of an epistemic account in this case, and by implication rids the sequence of its usefulness as empirical support for the epistemic model. What we hope to have demonstrated is that a similar procedure can be applied (with similar results) to many of the fragments presented as evidence of the claims made on behalf of epistemic status.

¹⁷ One can note that the actions in the left column, such as known-information questions, do not necessarily deliver information—at least not more than the actions in the right column do (in a general sense, all utterances, regardless their syntactic form or the epistemic status of the speaker, could be seen to deliver some information). Although Heritage often states that the focus is on “turns that either assert or request information” (2012a: 1), the question is sometimes delimited to the “role of epistemic status in recognizing that a turn at talk does, or does not, request information” (Heritage, 2013a: 564)

¹⁸ Given the way context is discussed in terms of “epistemics,” (see, for instance, the quotation by Sidnell in the introduction of this text) it would make sense to substitute “external” for “epistemic” here.

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