Epistemic status, sequentiality, and ambiguity: Notes on Heritage's Rebuttal

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February 2017

These are some notes in response to Heritage's rebuttal to our paper "Epistemic status and the recognizability of social actions" (Lindwall, Lymer & Ivarsson, 2016).[1] While our treatments of data extracts in many cases were substantially longer than the treatments they were accorded in the papers we cited (Heritage, 2012, 2013), our empirical work is summarily dismissed as mere "gestures at 'reanalysis'" not to be engaged with (Heritage, forthcoming, p. 3). What remains as concerns to be addressed in this response to Heritage's rebuttal are two principal and conceptual issues: sequentiality and ambiguity. The first concerns the role of the sequential environment for analyses of action formation. The second deals with the notion of ambiguity and more specifically the arguments around how actions are built so that ambiguities do not arise in interactions. In the following we will give our view on these two matters.

Sequentiality: Epistemics as already out there

Heritage (forthcoming) phrases our main criticism as having to do with a concern that 'epistemics' is not hidden but is 'out there' in preceding sequences.

> While Lynch and Wong [2016] worry about epistemics as a "hidden order," Lindwall et al. (2016: 507 et seq.) take up a seemingly contradictory position: that epistemics is not "hidden" at all but is already 'out there' in preceding sequences. Their concern is that I resort to a "hidden order" of shared understandings when such understandings are already publically established. (p. 27)

This formulation misses a central point of our argument concerning sequentiality. While it is true that we stress preceding sequences in our re-analyses, we do not conceive of them in epistemic terms at all. Our argument is instead that *a wide range of resources* for the production and recognition of actions are 'out there,' such that the need for epistemics does not arise in the first place. Our driving concern throughout the article is to examine the empirical support for the notion

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[1] Our paper is part of a special issue of *Discourse Studies* that critically examines epistemics in conversation analysis. John Heritage has authored or coauthored the most influential papers on this topic and a substantial part of the special issue is concerned with his work. In a forthcoming issue of Discourse Studies, Heritage responds to the special issue, and argues that that there is "nothing in their [the authors of the special issue] critiques that has the least substantive merit" (p. 2). In this response to Heritage's rebuttal, we focus on the passages where he directly discusses our article in the special issue. For responses to other parts of his rebuttal, see Lynch (2016) "Notes on a display of epistemic authority: A post–closure rejoinder to John Heritage's rebuttal to 'The epistemics of Epistemics'" as well as forthcoming responses by Doug Macbeth and Mike Lynch.

that epistemic status is an unavoidable resource for action formation. We conclude in case after case that it is not, and observe that re-analyses of the sequential environment of focal utterances tend to dissolve the problem that epistemic status is brought in to address.

Not only does the rebuttal reformulate our critique in central ways. For us, there are also interesting differences between the arguments found in the rebuttal (Heritage, forthcoming) and those found in the papers that we discussed (Heritage 2012, 2013). Having characterised our position in the way just described, Heritage continues: "Of course, Lindwall et al. are correct to point out that in several cases that I use, and that they analyze, relative epistemic status is indeed 'out there' in the preceding sequence. In fact, the cases were chosen with just that in mind." Apart from Heritage's 'epistemic rendering' of our argument for the relevance of sequentiality, we find this to be a puzzling statement in an additional respect: In the original texts, the case for epistemic status is built precisely through the presentation of cases where prior turns are said not to be a reliable guide to action formation.

The different treatments of the Family Dinner excerpt, originally analyzed by Terasaki (2004 [1976]) provides an apt illustration of this point. In Heritage (2012, p. 19), the argument is that "whether an interrogatively framed turn is heard as seeking information may ultimately turn on a determination of the relative epistemic status of speaker and recipient." The following case is used to illustrate the necessity of determining the epistemic status of the speaker in order to recognize what a turn is doing:

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(1) (KR:2 aka Family Dinner)
1   Mom:     Daddy 'n I have t- both go in different
2            directions, en I wanna talk t'you about where I'm
3            going (t'night).
4   Rus:     (Mkay,)
5   Gar:     Is it about u:s?
6   Mom:     (Uh) huh,
7   Rus:     <I know where yer goin,
8   Mom:     Whˆere.
9   Rus:     To thuh eh (eight grade  )=
10  Mom:     =Yeah. Right.
11  Mom: ->  Do you know who's going to that meeting?
12  Rus:     Who.
13  Mom:     I don't kno:w.
14           (0.2)
15  Rus:     .hh Oh::. Prob'ly .h Missiz Mc Owen ('n Dad said)
16           prob'ly Missiz Cadry and some of the teachers.
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In his analytical commentary Heritage states that what is at issue in this sequence is whether Mom or Russ is in the K+ position:

> Russ originally treats his mother's turn at line 11 as a reciprocal to his own preannounce-ment at line 7. That is, he hears "Do you know who's going to that meeting" as clearing the way for Mom to deliver an informing about the meeting participants and he cooperates with that project with "Who" (line 12). It is only at line 13 that Russ can see that he has misconstrued his mother's true epistemic status. (2012, p. 20)

Heritage then concludes that "the case 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" (2012, p. 20). In other words, Russ *misconstrues the epistemic status* of his Mother. As we understand it, the central argument here is that status is (incorrectly) "attributed." Thus it is not evidently "out there" in the interaction either for the recipient (Russ) or the overhearing analyst (or at least not until Mom's turn "I don't kno:w").

The same fragment is again introduced in Heritage (2013), but somewhat unexpectedly it does a different job there, which arguably is inconsistent with his earlier characterization. This time, Heritage acknowledges a prior analysis by Schegloff (1988), and presents the fragment as a case where the traditional conversation analytic reliance on manifest interactional "surface" features *does* suffice to account for the analysis made by members, most centrally Russ' two consecutive and conflicting determinations of what Mother intended. Again, Heritage refers to the pre-sequence made up by Russ' own pre-announcement and the cooperative go-ahead from Mother:

> It is this first sequence that, as Schegloff (1988) argues, primes and indeed licenses Russ's understanding of the mother's question at line 11 as prefatory to a similar and reciprocal display of her own. Once it is apparent that this is a misapprehension (line 13), it turns out that Russ has a ready answer (lines 15–16) to what, as it turned out, was intended as a 'real', that is, information seeking, question from his mother at line 11. This misapprehension, of course, is epistemic in character but it is grounded in, and indeed triggered by, the preceding sequence. (Heritage, 2013, p. 553)

Heritage goes on to say that "[o]ther ambiguities and misapprehensions, however, may be grounded in contextual features of the interaction that are less clearly exhibited at the conversational surface" (2013: 554), a passage which marks a movement to his central concerns with cases where immediate contexts of sequential interaction do *not* provide clear-cut resources for addressing the problem of action formation, and which demonstrate the necessity of taking epistemic status into account.

In relation to Heritage's rebuttal, then, his statement (forthcoming, p. 28) that he had "tried to select cases that would allow readers to infer what was the case from the details of the interaction" is, at least in our reading, at odds both with the 'Family dinner' fragment being "exquisite for showing the role of attributed epistemic status" (Heritage, 2012, p. 20) and with its bridging function in Heritage (2013). The cases that follow family dinner in Heritage (2013) are indeed presented as instances in which contextual features of the interaction are "less clearly exhibited at the conversational surface," which seems difficult to reconcile with the argument that the fragments were actually chosen *because* epistemic status is evident in the preceding sequence. Consider the following formulation:

> These attributions [of underlying motive] will shape subsequent responses and the sequences through which they are implemented. However, their contextual grounds, though present to the speakers a priori, may not always become publicly available – incarnate in the talk – prior to the utterances whose interpretation they inform, where they would stand as conveniently overt and irrefutable evidence for conversation analytic observations and findings. Rather, they may only emerge a posteriori in sequences in which the relevant treatment of a prior turn is ratified as appropriate and anticipated. [...] These considerations are apparent in circumstances where persons rely upon known-in-common attributes of one another as a means of constituting an utterance as a social action of a particular type. (Heritage 2013, p. 554-555)

After this passage, Heritage moves on to the doctor/patient "are you married" sequence (which we re-analyze and demonstrate as being in no need of attributed epistemic status [Lindwall et al. 2016: pp. 509ff.]). Other fragments ensue, and our paper partly follows how Heritage (2013) is building his argument. At no point does he say that he selected the fragments as illustrations of how epistemic status is evidently 'there' on the surface of preceding turns. In contrast, and as illustrated by the previous quotation, he explicitly claims the opposite.

So, in his rebuttal, Heritage (forthcoming) grants that our observations about the relevance of preceding sequences are correct, but says that was what he meant all along. If this is the case, that

acknowledgement itself validates our argument against the *necessity* of status-attributions as an analytic resource. Most importantly, it underscores our claim that Heritage fails to provide *empirical evidence* for the fundamental role of epistemic status or to support the associated argument that an "analysis of interaction cannot by any means avoid the fundamental relevance of epistemic status in the construction of action and the management of interaction" (Heritage, 2012, p. 25).

Of course, one is free to argue that preceding turns are relevant for the production and interpretation of later turns, precisely because they inform an ongoing registering and updating of epistemic status attributions, perhaps through a "continually updated epistemic 'ticker'" (Heritage, 2012, p. 25) or through "'fast and frugal' heuristics" (Heritage, 2013, p. 565). But introducing such machinery appears to be an unnecessary and surely a cognitivist move—that we build our understanding of current utterances not *directly* through an appreciation of the embedding sequence, but *indirectly* through the representation of status which that sequence has allowed us to construct. To us, it makes more sense to say that "ah'v jis rung tih teh- eh tell you" (cf. Heritage, 2012, p. 8; Lindwall et al., 2016, p. 508) projects telling as a next action, than to say that it contributes to the establishment of the relative epistemic status, which then is used to determine that the talk that follows is providing rather than requesting information.

In his rebuttal, Heritage (forthcoming, p. 28) argues: "In general, of course, I have absolutely no problem with the notion that epistemic status is established and managed sequentially." But again, why argue that it is a thing called 'epistemic status' which is managed sequentally? Why not simply 'the recognizability of social actions'? And again, in the fragments we reanalyse it is not the case that we show how epistemic matters are present in preceding turns, but that the recognizability of the focal turn can be accounted for in purely non-epistemic terms.

Having acknowledged the relevance of sequence, Heritage continues with presenting problems with our position:

> granted that in a preceding sequence relative epistemic status was staked out and acknowledged, there still have to be means by which the *stances and statuses of the preceding sequence were achieved*. Thus the issue tends to be preserved and pushed back to an earlier point. If preceding sequences were the *only* resources by which epistemic status in a current turn is established, we (and the participants) would be faced with a problem of infinite regress. (p. 28, emphasis in original)

But this problem only arises if we assume that statuses and stances need to be achieved *at all*, for the recognizability of actions to be possible. Our argument is that epistemic status is an unwarranted theoretical construct in the first place, not that in the fragments used by Heritage "it" was established a few turns earlier in the interaction. Saying, for instance, that the doctor and the patient in the "are you married" sequence are already, at the point of the fragment, involved in a comprehensive history taking is not the same as saying that epistemic status was established before the fragment began. Rather, it points to the activity they are involved in and that they contribute to through their coordinated production of questions and answers. The fact that questions and answers are what doctor and patient respectively produce, and that they uphold an orientation to their respective contributions as questions and answers almost irrespective of how the questions are phrased (e.g., "alcohol use", see Boyd & Heritage, 2006) is part and parcel of their participation in and reproduction of a particular institutional interaction; it is not evidence of a temporary fixation of epistemic status.

Heritage then presents the Emma and Lottie fragment (in which Emma inquires about Lottie's recent trip to Palm Springs) as support for his argument:

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(6) [NB IV:10: 14-18]
 1  Emm:      .h ↑How wz yer tri:p.
 2  Lot:      Oh:: Go:d wonderful Emm[a,
 3  Emm:                             [Oh idn'it beautiful do:wn the:re,
 4  Lot:      Oh:: Jeeziz ih wz go:rgeous::.
 5  Emm:      Wh't a ni:ce ↑wut time'djih git i:n.
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Heritage writes:

> across two turns on aspects of ostensibly the 'same topic', there is a shift in relative epis-
> temic stance and status. Given the enormously elaborate indexicality of language and
> action in interaction, it should come as no surprise that previous turns or sequences may
> not be entirely reliable guides to current ones. (forthcoming, p. 28)

But what happens here really only amounts to a person taking two different epistemic stances
with regards to two different, though closely related, topics: a) Lottie's trip; and b) Palm Springs,
in general. Of course what a person says next is not given by what he or she said just prior;
people may engage in slight topic shifts for instance and take different stances with regards to
these different topics. It is difficult to see how Heritage's use of the Emma and Lottie fragment
at all illustrates a problem with our approach, which had to do with epistemic status, and not so
much with stance (which in many ways is less problematic). Heritage does say there is a shift in
relative epistemic stance *and* status but what we see is stance-taking and a topic shift. Would not
the epistemically inclined analyst rather say that Lottie retains epistemic status regarding her trip,
while the attractions of Palm Springs in general are 'up for grabs'?

Ambiguity

Heritage (forthcoming, p. 31) rejects the claim (attributed to us) that he treats particular utter-
ances as inherently ambiguous. We do not really propose that he does so. What we discuss is his
suggestion that the joint recognition of epistemic status *prevents* such utterances from becoming
ambiguous. As we understand Heritage's argument, it is that keeping track of epistemic status is a
necessary resource for action formation, *without which* many actions *would be* ambiguous. Follow-
ing Schegloff (1984), we have therefore chosen to discuss this in terms of theoretical ambiguities
rather than inherently ambiguous utterances.

In his rebuttal, Heritage (p. 32) maintains that joint recognition of relative epistemic status is the
primary vehicle for a recipient's ability to distinguish between actions of giving and requesting
information—without such joint recognition any distinction would in many cases not be possible.
And an inability to distinguish between action types could surely be understood as a problem of
ambiguity (again, it does not arise, because of epistemic status).

Of course, it is admissible to build a case for the import of a certain resource through the presenta-
tion of instances where it can be shown or argued that its absence would have yielded ambiguity. In
a sense one could argue the import of gaze, intonation, sequentiality, et cetera along the same lines.
In our re-analysis of the chicken dinner excerpt for instance (Lindwall et al., p. 511), we account
for the recognizability of the target utterance ("Iz BEEN cooked") through observing its reliance
on the preceding sequence—it is the sequence which in large part accounts for the economy of
expression possible at a given moment. Another way of saying this is that had a hearer not had access
to the preceding turns, the utterance could conceivably have presented a problem of ambiguity for
that person.

What we *do* argue, and the reason for bringing in a quotation from Schegloff (1984, p. 50) on
theoretical ambiguities, is that a convincing demonstration is lacking that epistemic status consti-
tutes such a fundamental resource. In none of the cases presented do we find epistemic status to be

necessary—we find no problems of recognizability for which the invocation of epistemic status is needed. While there are clearly cases where surface features of the interaction are not sufficient for recognizing an action (contrary to the position ascribed to us in the rebuttal, we do not believe that everything relevant is 'out there' or 'on the surface'), we have so far not been presented with any clear cases which show the *necessity of epistemic status*.

It is unclear to us what Heritage (p. 31) refers to when he says he has supported his claims (that epistemic status can trump the surface features of utterances and 'flip' their import as actions) with several cases in which "such a 'flip' in fact occurred." If he intends the cases we have reanalyzed and found no convincing demonstration of the purported role of epistemic status, then the question is why his rebuttal presents no explicit engagement with our arguments in those cases.

As argued above, simply saying that the fragments were in fact chosen *because* the recognizability of the target turns *was* provided by the preceding sequence, but then re-describing that sequential embeddedness in terms of epistemic status does not suffice: If epistemic status in these cases is nothing more than another way of describing what is distilled from prior turns, it is difficult to see the point of characterizing it as the primary vehicle through which acts of requesting information are distinguished from acts of conveying it.

Through a conceptual discussion and by re-analyzing several of the key transcripts presented by Heritage as evidence for the fundamental role of epistemic status, "we 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" (Lindwall et al., 2016, pp. 518-519). Simply put, by hearing someone asking about the time, it is possible to infer that that person does not know what time it is (being "K-" with respect to time), which is something other than to say that the recipient first must determine the relative epistemic status before hearing the question (as information seeking). By this, we are not claiming that participants never orient to who knows what in hearing an utterance as a particular action. On the contrary, we find the *occasioned* orientation to knowledge, expertise, et cetera really interesting topics. We simply argue that presented cases (in Heritage, 2012; 2013) fail to demonstrate the *necessity* or *fundamental relevance* of epistemic status and that this failure of empirical demonstration reflects conceptual issues.

Like Lynch and Wong (2016), we believe that talk about "heuristics", "tickers" and so on might end up in analyses that rely on a "hidden order". Heritage, in his rebuttal, responds to this by writing that "The participants are surely more likely to know and rely on aspects of epistemic status than the overhearing analyst, so the 'order' I describe is surely not 'hidden' from them." What we set out to do in our paper was to scrutinize the *evidence* for the claim that participants *surely know* and *rely on epistemic status*, and what we eventually concluded was that there were little or no evidence for this in the analyses presented by Heritage (2012; 2013).

It might also be worth briefly commenting on the passage that continues the line quoted above.

> The participants are surely more likely to know and rely on aspects of epistemic status than the overhearing analyst, so the 'order' I describe is surely not 'hidden' from them. Moreover, there is a fundamental distinction between the claim that there are "asymmetric claims and endowments operating in the background, shaping our ways of speaking (and hearing)" [Macbeth and Wong, 2016: 575] on the one hand, and on the other that particular aspects of conduct (for example, turn design) communicate certain "asymmetric claims and endowments". The distinction turns on whether the objective is to describe a causal process ("shaping" etc.) or a communicative one. My focus in all the papers addressed by the EoE [epistemics of Epistemics] group is throughout on communicative actions, and facets of turn design that bear on them. (Heritage, forthcoming, p. 27, emphasis in original)

This and the associated claim that the papers of the special issue continually fail "to distinguish between resources for communication and causal processes" appears somewhat problematic to us. To say that epistemic status or some other asymmetry is "*shaping* our ways of speaking and hearing" (Macbeth & Wong, 2016, p. 575, emphasis added) is not necessarily to talk about 'causal processes' or 'causes of behavior'. And even if it were, it seems odd to locate the failure to uphold the distinction to the papers of the special issue. We wonder how the formulation by Macbeth and Wong differs from central formulations in Heritage's own writing, such as "relative epistemic status dominates morphosyntax and intonation in *shaping* whether utterances are to be understood as requesting or conveying information" (2012, p. 24, emphasis added). While we share the interest in communicative actions and facets of turn design that bear on them, it seems to us that the introduction of epistemic status and the associated terminology ("shaping" etc.) move beyond this (see also, Lynch 2016).

Conclusion

The notion that relative knowledge is a relevant aspect of context for human action and interaction has, in a general sense, a lot of 'face validity'. It is reasonable to assume that people occasionally orient to aspects of knowledge, and perhaps even do so 'often.' It is also evident that language provides means by which people can communicate that they know, or do not know, to what degree, and also place their knowledge claims relative to interlocutors or to generalized standards. However, for all the apparent relevance of epistemic matters—in a general sense—it is *not* similarly apparent that relative knowledge plays the *particular role for action formation* suggested for it by Heritage (2012; 2013). In his Rebuttal, Heritage says that his "sole interest in 'Epistemics in Action' was to *build support* for the claim that epistemic status would 'trump' other facets of turn design in participants' determinations of whether an utterance was designed to give or seek information" (Heritage, forthcoming, p. 28, emphasis added). Our article in the special issue engaged precisely with the solidity of this support, and found it to be lacking, both on empirical and conceptual grounds.

We also questioned the usefulness of epistemic status as an *analytic* construct. In particular, the analytic burden of determining the play of status attributions seems impossibly heavy to us. The question is how one might gather evidence to support any particular assignment of epistemic status. As Heritage acknowledges in the rebuttal, "I was less interested in how the investigator could know what the recipients would surely know about epistemic status, topic by topic, turn by turn." (forthcoming, p. 28) But from the perspective of the overhearing analyst, this is clearly a central issue. If the aim is to develop and strengthen the "systematic analysis of 'action formation'" (Heritage, 2012), and if the suggested approach depends on the determination of relative knowledge, the researcher should be able to explicate how such determinations are made. If only stipulated, the analyses seriously risk ending up *less* rigorous than previous analyses of action formation within conversation analysis.[2]

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[2] This is an argument that we pursued in relation to the case of Debbie and Shelley (Heritage, 2012, p. 23; Lindwall et al., 2016, pp. 511ff.).

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