

## **GIVING A SOURCE OR BASIS: THE PRACTICE IN CONVERSATION OF TELLING 'HOW I KNOW'**

Anita M. POMERANTZ \*

People routinely attend to their bases of knowledge or sources when there is doubt about what is true. The grounds that they attend include their direct experience and what others have said. When people describe their bases or sources during a dispute, they may be defending viewpoints, backing away from positions, or deciding which versions are credible.

A feature of describing one's basis is that smaller claims are made than in asserting an objective state of affairs. In describing what is directly experienced, speakers are strictly accountable for representing only their experiences while they imply that these experiences are more or less typical. In reporting what others have said, speakers are strictly accountable for citing accurately, not for the views cited. Interactionally, they may be affiliating, disaffiliating or leaving ambiguous their positions on the cited views.

The descriptions which are given in situations of doubt are also used in a different set of circumstances. People describe their bases or sources when they perform sensitive actions. Actions may possibly be offensive, degrading, or compromising and yet conversants may still want to, or feel they should, perform those actions. The ambivalence or caution involved may be exhibited by the speakers' making limited or no claims on their own behalf.

### **1. Introduction**

The practice of giving evidence is usually thought of as strictly belonging to the institutionalized resolutions of disputes, e.g. in trials, hearings, inquiries, etc. Yet the practice is a constitutive part of activities in other settings too. Evidence is used in the course of informal interactions as well as in business transactions, by friends, acquaintances, and strangers. In short, requesting, giving, considering and evaluating evidence are practices which are within the repertoire of social actions that are performed by competent people within a culture.

What are the features of using evidence? A familiar event might serve to illustrate some of the features. When I drive past a friend's house and see her car in her driveway, I infer that she is, or may be, home, depending on what I

\* Author's address: Anita M. Pomerantz, Dept. of Speech, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA.

know of her circumstances. The presence of her car in the driveway is my evidence: it is the basis I have for making that inference.

The concept of evidence provides for a scene, an event, an artifact, etc. that *qua evidence* is thought of as relevant in determining the nature of some other scene, event, artifact, etc. My friend's car in her driveway is evidence inasmuch as it speaks to a concern. In this case, it is to my friend's whereabouts. In other circumstances, it might have spoken to other concerns: whether her car had been repaired yet, whether she went to a friend's party, etc.

How does such a concern come into being? People may happen upon the evidence which then sparks a concern, or they may feel a concern before encountering the evidence. It may be that *upon* seeing a colleague's car in the parking lot at work, I infer that she is at work. On the other hand, I may have a more active curiosity as to whether she is at work and might search through the parking lot for her car. Either way, the evidence speaks to something outside of itself; it suggests that some particular state of affairs exists in relation to some particular concern(s). The expression, 'the state of affairs being evidenced', will be used below to refer to the state of affairs that is inferrable from the evidence, given the concern.

If I am *certain* that my friend is home, would I see 'her car in the driveway' as *evidence* for her being home? or would I see 'her car in the driveway' as part of the scene as it should be given that my friend is home? A feature of the use of evidence is that the state of affairs being evidenced is *not* certainly, definitely, and unproblematically established.

In the illustration, my evidence consists of the presence of my friend's car in her driveway. The car's presence is established by 'seeing it there'. It is directly experienced – I know through one of my senses that the car is there. In this instance, it is an unproblematic scene.

Direct experience is an important way, a principal way, in which states of affairs are known unproblematically and with certainty. It is not the only way: I might be certain that my friend is home because she told me she would be and she is utterly reliable, or because I know she is always home at that time. Certainty based on direct experience may or may not be more fragile than certainty based on a reliable authoritative source, or on knowledge of the particular circumstances. Also, while direct experience is an important warrant for being sure, it does not necessarily yield an unproblematic state of affairs. On seeing my friend's car in her driveway, I might 'see her car'. On seeing her car in a different neighborhood, however, I might wonder whether it is her car or one like it.

If people ask for evidence, they are asking for grounds for believing that given assertions are true. One sort of evidence that people give is to tell the *sources* or *bases* of their believing given assertions. The source or basis of an assertion may not be relevant when an assertion's validity is assumed. When, however, its validity is called into question, the source or basis comes into play.

To illustrate this point, let us imagine you are catching a train. After buying the ticket, you look at your watch to determine how much time you have to get to the platform. You go immediately there, find the train waiting as expected, and board it. During this episode, your watch may get no further attention than its use in providing the time. If however, you arrive at the platform and the train has just left, you would probably attempt to find out what went wrong. Even if you had previously assumed that your watch was accurate, you may now wonder and check it against a station clock. In this episode, your watch is attended to for its accuracy.

People routinely consider the sources or bases of believing in a state of affairs when that state of affairs is called into question. There are, however, other sorts of occasions when people consider their sources or bases. When people are concerned with being accountable for what they say, they may mitigate their accountability by presenting sources or bases for believing particular states of affairs, without accountably asserting the states of affairs that are suggested.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1. *Declarative assertions of 'objective' states of affairs*

In the course of their daily routines, people often communicate about states of affairs. They witness events, communicate news, share observations concerning their environment, correct misinformation, etc. They often do this by making declarative assertions. So, for example, if a concern is to give the time, they will simply assert the time; if a concern is to tell what happened yesterday, they describe the event. 'Established facts', 'true accounts' and 'correct information' are asserted in this way, e.g. *it's three o'clock* or *there was an accident on the corner*. When speakers make such declarative assertions, they are proposing to represent actual states of affairs and are accountable for being right.

There are a variety of ways in which speakers indicate that they are not sure of the time. They may say *It's about three*, *it's probably around three*, *it's three-ish* and the like. On these occasions, they are approximating, guessing, or roughly giving the time, and propose to be less accountable for having given the right time.

On many occasions, however, people do something other than directly assert particular states of affairs which are of concern. They give evidence that suggests that particular states of affairs are (or are probably, or may be, or are doubtfully, or are not) the case. Two forms of evidence that people give to suggest objective states of affairs are (1) telling *my* experience, i.e. only what I know first hand regarding the state of affairs, and (2) reporting someone else's version of the state of affairs. With both kinds of evidence, speakers suggest

the existence of a particular state of affairs without directly asserting it. Prior to the analysis of conversants' use of evidence, there is a brief discussion of some features of assertions.

A speaker may describe an 'objective' state of affairs with a declarative assertion, e.g. *John's at the door*, *Dinner's ready*, or *It's raining*. Such assertions are uttered to *do* any number of specific things, for example to mobilize the addressed person to go meet John at the door, or to summon one's guests to the dining room to eat, or to cancel the pre-arranged tennis game (Austin (1962)). Whatever else the utterances might be doing, in describing a purportedly *objective* state of affairs, the speaker is accountable for representing a state of affairs as it actually is.

In 'giving the time', a speaker is accountable for the time being right. This presumes that speakers would know (or think they know) the right time if they 'give the time'. The presumption that a speaker properly has knowledge of the state of affairs being asserted, may be used when persons decline to give information. The following excerpt illustrates this. *J* is asking *V* to tell her what time *J*'s son phoned *V*.

*J*: Well what time was it, I left you at about twenty to five.  
(0.4)

→ *V*: I don't know what time it was Jenny, I can't remember really,

One of *J*'s immediate concerns, expressed in the question, *What time was it*, is to have *V* give the time that her son phoned. While *V* understands *J*'s concern she does not cooperate with it. If she were cooperating and were unsure of the exact time, she might have indicated an approximate time. Or she might have taken what *J* said, *I left you about twenty to five* as a starting point and worked on arriving at an estimated time. In fact, she gives nothing helpful toward that concern. She first says that she does not know and then adds that she does not remember. 'Not knowing' and 'not remembering' serve as accounts because of the norm that speakers should base their reports on knowledge.

The *basis* of the speakers' knowledge is not necessarily described in declarative assertions of 'objective' states of affairs. If speakers make assertions with certainty they are accountable for the correctness of their assertions, howsoever they know. For 'objective' states of affairs, the process of finding out does not bear on what the states of affairs are. For example, if three o'clock is the actual time, it is so regardless of whether I found out by looking at my watch, by hearing the bells chime, or by having a perfect internal time-clock.

Recipients may infer the access or bases speakers have for making assertions. If you ask the time and I look at my watch and then say *It's three o'clock*, you may infer that the source of my knowledge is my watch. And routinely if the source is what one would normally infer, it is not explicitly described. If, however, you ask the time and I say with no apparent checking

*It's 10:23*, you may ask how I know. The source or basis of a speaker's knowledge may be proffered or asked for if it is not inferable. If I know something about your circumstances that you did not tell me, I might, in mentioning it, also tell how I know, or I might be asked to tell.

If speakers want to claim a different source or basis of knowledge from what would be normally inferred, they may describe how they came to know what they are asserting. In the following excerpt, the speaker is claiming to know less than would be normally inferred for someone calling for an ambulance.

- Desk:           What is the problem.  
 → Caller:       I don't know. The desk called me and asked me, would you like to talk to the desk. They called and asked me to call an ambulance. We have one guest here that is ill.

If, in response to the question, *What is the problem*, the caller had simply said, *We have one guest here that is ill*, the desk may have reasonably presumed that the caller knew further details, possibly based on his witnessing the event. The caller may well have anticipated being asked for details which would be relevant for dispatching the ambulance and emergency medical help. His preface (*I don't know. The desk called me and asked me ...*) is aimed at undoing a presumption that he knows first hand about the situation. In describing his source of information as second hand, he accountably knows *only* what he was told on the phone and not more, i.e. not the details that an observer of the scene would know.

## 2.2. *Using evidence when there is doubt*

When people are uncertain about what a particular state of affairs is, they may use evidence to help determine it. Doubt is involved when people feel their sources or bases or knowledge are inadequate. Doubt is also involved in disputes, disagreements, disagreements, and challenges. In these circumstances, the use of evidence comes into play.

The kind of evidence focussed on in this paper is when interactants describe their sources or bases of knowledge. That includes telling *just* what is directly known (*'my experience is ...'*) and reporting what other sources have said. When conversants describe their sources or bases during disputes, they may be defending their point of view and presenting materials to convince others that they are right, or they may be backing off from positions and safely asserting just what they know for certain. Some features of describing one's source or basis operate across these differences. Four illustrations of speakers' dealing with doubt by giving evidence are presented below.

### 2.2.1. *Doubt illustration 1*

Field notes. *A* and *B* are talking together in the standing area on a train; *C* overhears.

*A* to *B*: Leamington is the next stop.

*C*: I think it's the second stop.

(*A* looks at *C*)

*C*: I was told it's the second stop.

*A* and *B* are concerned with knowing where Leamington is. This concern is expressed through *A*'s giving *B* that information. Analytically, *A* is describing an 'objective' state of affairs without explicating a source of information. In giving the information, he is accountable for it being right.

*C* interjects with a disagreement or correction of *A*'s assertion. In saying *I think it's the second stop*, *C* is challenging the correctness of *A*'s assertion and is offering alternative information, proposedly correct [1]. Both *A* and *C* can not be right. In this circumstance, participants routinely find ways of evaluating the validity of the assertions. *C*, having just challenged the correctness of *A*'s information, supports her own assertion by describing her source or basis of information. She indicates that her information is based on someone else's knowledge and authority. Whether or not it is convincing evidence involves, in part, whom she is seen as citing. It may be that not identifying the source is a way of referring to a purportedly authoritative source. If it is so recognized and accepted, her initial assertion would be regarded as more credible [2].

In telling how she knows, she is giving a report of what she knows first hand, i.e. that she was told personally that Leamington is the second stop. She gives her source as evidence for Leamington being the second stop. In describing how she knows she no longer directly asserts that Leamington is the second stop, but that she was told that Leamington is the second stop.

[1] In some cultures, people orient to exposing disagreements; in other cultures, to minimizing them. While mitigated challenges are at times a consequence of the speakers' uncertainty, at other times they are a consequence of the speakers' perceptions of their rights to disagree. When interacting with high status people, low status and marginal status people may find themselves mitigating their challenges and disagreements.

[2] Whether people regard a source as good and credible would be influenced by how the culture regards the source as well as by their previous experiences with the source. In saying *I was told it's the second stop* *C*, may have been seen to be referring to a British Rail employee as her source. Whether or not the conversants see a British Rail employee as a good authority on that matter is related to their conception of what British Railway employees normatively know. It is influenced as well by whether they have received correct or incorrect information on such matters from British Rail employees in the past. A complete discussion of the processes through which credibility is determined is beyond the scope of this paper.

In giving sources, participants may attempt to convince skeptical recipients that there are good grounds for accepting their versions as right. Yet there is a sense in which they are more careful: in giving their sources they report only what they directly and with certainty know.

### 2.2.2. *Doubt illustration 2*

The following fragment comes from a telephone conversation. Karen and Allan apparently have different information concerning whether Evie will be going to a party. The arrows mark where references to the source of information are made.

- Karen: Evie can't come,  
 Alan: = Well she'll come late.  
 (0.7)  
 Karen: Well  
 → Alan: Why. She said not at *all*?  
 (0.4)  
 Karen: Well, she's going out with her folks afterwards hh  
 :  
 → Alan: Oh because I j- I talked to her Sunday and she said she c-come  
*after*.

One may infer that both Karen and Alan are aware that Evie is otherwise engaged on the evening of the party. Their dispute involves whether, as a consequence, she cannot attend or will attend but late.

Karen begins by telling Alan, *Evie can't come*. With that assertion, she is delivering 'news'. She is reporting an 'objective' state of affairs and is accountable for being right. Alan challenges the correctness of her information by offering alternative information: *Well she'll come late*. He, too, is describing an 'objective' state of affairs and is accountable for being right. At this point, a dispute is in progress: Karen and Alan have made incompatible assertions about whether Evie intends to go to the party. Karen does not explicate her source of knowledge in her announcement *Evie can't come*. Nor does Alan in his contrary assertion *Well she'll come late*. Neither party describes the source; as such it is presumed to be the inferrable source. With respect to plans and intentions, the actors themselves are routinely authoritative sources. In making the announcement without describing the source, Karen and Alan imply that the source is the proper and expected source for that information, i.e. Evie. The inference that Karen's source is Evie herself is made use of when Alan asks Karen about the basis for her report (*she said not at all?*).

Given the conflicting reports as to whether Evie intends to go to the party, procedures are used for determining which version is the right one, or the more plausible one. Alan's query: *She said not at all?*, is aimed at determining

whether Karen's information is equally credible or less credible than his. His question wants confirmation or disconfirmation. If Karen confirms, she would be affirming that Evie herself said that she could not go. On the other hand, if Karen disconfirms, the implication is that whatever her basis, it was Karen who concluded or assumed that Evie could not go. Knowing which source or basis Karen had for her report (what Evie said versus what Karen concluded) is relevant for evaluating its validity relative to Alan's report. A principle is being invoked for judging the version's credibility. The principle is roughly this: a person's report of his or her own plans is more likely to be right than someone else's inferences regarding those plans. That is, the Best Source's Version is more credible. If Karen would indicate that her assertion *Evie can't come* is her own conclusion, it loses credibility relative to Alan's assertion which purportedly came from Evie herself. With this question, then, Alan is getting information to determine the credibility of Karen's report – whether it is more credible and need to be considered further, or whether it is less credible and perhaps dismissible.

Karen's response *Well, she's going out with her folks afterwards*, is somewhat ambiguous as an answer to Alan's question. Although she does not directly confirm that Evie specifically said she cannot attend the party, she implies that her information is based on what Evie said. If Karen and Alan both received their information from Evie, that situation offers no recommendation for choosing the right version using the principle of best source.

Alan then gives a report *I talked to her Sunday and she said she c-come after*, which invokes a new principle for determining which version is more credible. Alan not only reports what Evie said, but relevantly when she said it, *I j- I talked to her Sunday and . . .*. The principle he is invoking is: the most recent version is probably the right one. Consistent with this principle are possibilities such as, she may have changed her mind or reconsidered, rather than, for example, she lied to one of them.

The particular principle (*most recent report* is more credible) is informative for what is relevant to know (*when* Evie told Alan and Karen her plans) and then, given that information, is used to judge the report's credibility. If Alan identifies his information as more recent than Karen's, their believing that the most recent report is probably more credible would lead them to conclude that Alan's information is probably right and Karen's probably wrong.

To reiterate, when disputants assert conflicting 'information', the parties may seek and offer details of the circumstances of their finding out that information. The details would be such that, according to some principle, a version would be recognized as more, or less, credible than the conflicting version. If Karen says that *she concluded* that Evie can't go to the party, the credibility of her assertion is weakened relative to Alan's, given the acceptance of the principle: the more credible version is that of the authoritative source. If Alan says that on Sunday Evie told him that she can come late to the party,

and that is more recent than Karen's information, then the credibility of Alan's information is strengthened, given the acceptance of the principle: most recent report is probably the right one. There are, of course, any number of principles that might be invoked to assess credibility.

### 2.2.3. *Doubt illustration 3*

Giving evidence in the form of telling the source or basis of believing an assertion is engendered by disputes, disagreements, and challenges – activities in which the validity of assertions is called into question. Novelists with a sense of conversational detail may make use of that organization, as did Gore Vidal in his novel, *Messiah*.

Clarissa unfolded her mushroom omelet with a secret smile.

'You'll meet our number-one committee member after lunch. He's coming isn't he?' She looked at Hastings as though suspecting him of a treacherous ineptitude.

→'Certainly, certainly, at least he said he was'. (1955: 71)

Clarissa is portrayed as challenging Hastings' competency in making a luncheon arrangement with a committee member. In response Hastings assures her that he will attend, first with claims of certainty, and then followed by a report of his basis: *at least he said he was*. Had he stood firm, he might have said *Yes he is coming*. Instead, in response to the challenge, he backs off from that affirmation and affirms his basis, just what he directly knows. What he directly and with certainty knows is that the man *said* he would be there. Whether saying so means that he will, in fact, be there is left for Clarissa to judge.

Challenges tend to occasion the challenged persons' considering what they *directly* know. In response to a challenge, people may change what they have asserted as fact to something like an inference, where the inference is based on what they directly know. Upon being challenged, people seem to recall as a reportable event the circumstance of establishing that information, i.e. the basis or source. Faced with Clarissa's challenge, Hastings recalls-for-reporting the circumstance of his establishing that the committee member will attend. That circumstance is what he reports as certain in *At least he said he was*. With this report he both defends his competency and gives Clarissa a basis for judging for herself whether the committee member will attend.

### 2.2.4. *Doubt illustration 4*

While challenging, disagreeing, and disputing are conversational activities in which the validity of assertions is necessarily questioned, the validity of assertions is questioned on other occasions as well. For example, when a description is seen to serve the speaker's interest and/or an interest other than 'telling', 'reporting', 'sharing', etc., its validity may be treated with suspicion.

Excuses are known to be formulated, on occasion, with reference to their excuse-ability (Drew (1984)). Among other things, this may entail formulating a situation in which the actor has 'no choice' but to cancel, back out, refuse, quit, or whatever. Interactants often listen to excuses with a skeptical attitude, entertaining the possibility that they are shaped to excuse.

If interactants are involved in repeating an excuse to other people they must take some position with respect to the excuse's validity. If they repeat what was reported in the excuse, they take the position that represents the actual state of affairs. If, on the other hand, they report only what they directly know, i.e. the circumstance of hearing the excuse, they take no *official* position and are skeptical or cautious about assuming the validity of the excuse (Sacks (1971)).

In the following excerpt, Ken, a group-therapy patient, tells the other patients why Lu quit the group.

R: Did Lu quit the group?

K: Yeah. Y-yeah, she hadda good reason, she- I dunno she-she had to work.  
 → She said she had to anyhow. I think I think sh-it'll do her some good she wanted to. Seem(ed) like she was really excited about the job.

When Ken says, *she hadda good reason, she- I dunno she-she had to work* (emphasis added), he is giving the other group-therapy patients information and is accountable for being right. *She had to work* serves as a reason for quitting the group inasmuch as Lu is portrayed as having no choice but to work.

While Ken has no doubt that Lu just got a job, he is skeptical about her report that she had to work, and that she had no choice but to quit the group. He shows his skepticism by recalling-for-reporting the circumstance in which he was informed that she had to work, *She said she had to anyhow*.

Upon asserting *She had to work*, Ken becomes skeptical. He backs off from that version, reporting only what he directly, and with certainty, knows, *She said she had to anyhow*. He then continues by describing a different state of affairs from the non-volitional one initially portrayed: *It'll do her some good she wanted to. Seemed like she was really excited about the job* (emphasis added).

### 2.3. Using evidence with sensitive actions

During an interview on BBC radio, a snuff advocate was asked to comment on some negative social effects of taking snuff. In response, he first denied those negative effects and then promoted the benefits of its use. One benefit that he suggested was the possibility that snuff cures hayfever. While he suggested that possibility, he was quite careful about not asserting it in so many words, to the extent of being explicit that he was not making that claim. Rather, he reported

his 'personal experience', just what he directly knew, with something like, 'It's cured my hayfever. I'm not saying it would cure everyone's, but it's cured mine'. His telling his personal experience worked to suggest the possibility that 'curing hayfever' is a general effect of snuff.

People who are interviewed by the media generally know that they may be taken to task for what they say. Publicly making claims that cannot be substantiated may be consequential and/or costly. In telling his personal experience, the advocate subtly suggested that snuff cures hayfever; however, he never made that claim and hence was not strictly accountable. The caution with which he spoke seemed responsive to the circumstance of possibly being held responsible for making any claims that he could not substantiate.

Interactants commonly find themselves in circumstances in which they feel cautious, ambivalent, or hesitant to assert something in particular. Their caution may be based on any number of things; for example, sometimes people are concerned to avoid offending co-interactants, other times they are in a position of saying or doing something that they are not entirely convinced of. Whatever the basis, caution may be manifested by speakers making limited or no claims on their own behalf. In the above illustration, the snuff advocate was cautious in that he made a limited claim relative to claiming some general effects of snuff. Four illustrations follow in which speakers make limited or no claims on their own behalf relative to a sensitive issue at hand.

### 2.3.1. *Sensitive action illustration 1*

People sometimes are reluctant to criticize their co-participants or be critical of their family and friends (Pomerantz (1984)). Being critical includes telling about matters that are seen as shameful or reflect weaknesses and faults. In the excerpt below, the speaker treats *M.R.*'s having had a nervous breakdown as a sensitive matter.

My dear uh you know M.R. (0.5) with- whom I've been associated since I've been out here in Brentwood, has had a series of um- bad experiences uhh hh I guess he calls it a nervous breakdown.

The speaker is giving her co-participant news about *M.R.* She seems to be working at arriving at a satisfactory description of what has happened to him. In saying *M.R. ... has had a series of um- bad experiences*, she refers to what has happened without characterizing anything of the nature of the event. Such glosses that do not reveal the character of the event being referred to are often used when speakers talk about matters that they feel are confidential and/or shameful. This first gloss, then, suggests that the speaker is talking about a touchy or sensitive matter.

In using the non-revealing gloss, the speaker has not yet put across to her recipient the character of what happened. She continues with the more

revealing description, *nervous breakdown*. While she does not say, *M.R. has had a nervous breakdown*, she nonetheless succeeds in suggesting that that is what happened with *I guess he calls it a nervous breakdown*. In choosing to report the characterisation as *M.R.'s*, she leaves unspecified her own position. She has made no claim on her own behalf for the character of the event. On record, she has not committed herself.

### 2.3.2. *Sensitive action illustration 2*

If interactants talk about fellow-interactants' blameworthy actions they may be seen to be accusing, reprimanding, chastising, etc. their fellow-interactants. Talking about a fellow-interactant's wrongdoing is often seen as a sensitive action to perform, and as such may be done with caution.

In this illustration, the caution displayed by Ida involves a concern to avoid accusing Jenny of losing her key to Ida's house. Ida has telephoned Jenny to make arrangements for Jenny's getting into her house that afternoon while she is away. The following exchange occurs close to the beginning of the telephone call.

*I*: So if you come over I'll put the key underneath the mat. Ha- you've got a  
→ key though haven't you

*J*: No I haven't I don't think I have Well I *HAVE* somewhere but I don't know where it is it's (.) I-I I was just on my way out I would be *grateful* if you put it under the door 'n then I'll look for it when I get back.

Ida first makes an offer which presumes that Jenny does not have a key to her house, *I'll put the key underneath the mat*. (It is likely that they have made this arrangement before.) She abandons this presumption by 'recalling' that Jenny does have a key, *you've got a key though haven't you*. By including the tag question, *haven't you*, Ida recalls Jenny's having a key as a matter which is not certain. Rather than confronting her with a declarative assertion, which would be tantamount to accusing or reprimanding Jenny, Ida mitigates the action by 'just now remembering the possibility and checking on it'. By posing Jenny's having a key as a matter not definitely established, she puts Jenny in a position of confirming possession and then of accounting for the paradox of not currently possessing it. Jenny is in the position, then, of producing the first formulation of the missing key, e.g. lost, misplaced, disappeared, stolen, etc., which would simultaneously propose how serious the situation is as well as how responsible she is for it.

In response to Ida's 'recollection', *You've got a key though haven't you*, Jenny acknowledges that she had been given a key but that it is misplaced (*Well I HAVE somewhere but I don't know where it is*). She talks about the missing key as findable, but given her immediate circumstances, not findable before going to Ida's house that afternoon (*then I'll look for it when I get back*).

In short, Jenny proposes the missing key is unserious and temporary, to be remedied shortly.

In closing the call, Ida treats Jenny's missing key as a sensitive matter and is cautious in her talk about it. The earlier key arrangements of Ida leaving a key under the mat had as its context the 'fact' that Jenny's key was missing. As part of the arrangement, Jenny declares her intention to look for it: *I would be grateful if you put it under the door and then I'll look for it when I get back.* In reiterating the arrangements, however, Ida mentions the plan to leave her key under the mat without making any reference to Jenny's missing key.

*I:* Uh:: uh we'll put a key under the mat.

*J:* Alright then.

Jenny, in response, brings up the missing key, and repeats her intention to *have a good look t'night*. Ida's caution is most visible in her next contribution.

*I:* Uh:: uh we'll put a key under the mat.

*J:* Alright then.

(0.4)

*I:* [Right

*J:* [Okay an' I- I'll have a good look t'night. for  
the for the other key I'm *sure* it's on<sub>e</sub> I've

→ *I:* [Uh-oh- cuz Edgar  
says you've got it you've got o<sub>ne</sub> (yes)

*J:* [In *one* of the handbags

I'm sure I've got one but [I can't look for it now

*I:* [Yes.

When Jenny says, *I'm sure it's one-*, Ida interrupts to confirm that Jenny was given the key. (It may be that ida has wrongly anticipated what Jenny was in the course of saying, hearing Jenny talking about whether she was given the key rather than where the look for it, i.e. in one of her handbags.) In support of the assertion that Jenny has been given the key, Ida reports what her husband said: *Edgar says ... you've got one.*

Given the fact that Jenny has already acknowledged having a key to their house, it is peculiar that Ida is ready to jump in on that issue, so ready, perhaps, as to mishear that Jenny was casting doubt on having been given the key. And rather than simply confirming it on her own behalf, she gives supporting evidence in the form of reporting her husband's statement. Ida's being ready to jump in with support may be part of her anticipating the possibility that Jenny may try to squirm out of being cast as an offender. With offences, negotiations very frequently occur concerning the responsibility of the alleged offender (Pomerantz (1978)). Ida is ready to hear Jenny cast doubt

on having been given a key, and hence on whether she actually is responsible for losing or misplacing it.

Ida treats Jenny's having been given the key as a matter which needs to be quickly confirmed and substantiated such that no doubt remains. But she substantiates it by citing her husband on that point. She thereby takes the official position of having no knowledge of it on her own behalf. While Ida might well be convinced that Jenny was given a key (her husband apparently asserted it before she phoned Jenny, and Jenny has already acknowledged having misplaced it), she refrains from simply asserting it on her own behalf but rather presents the evidence that her husband says it is true.

### 2.3.3. *Sensitive action illustration 3*

People are often hesitant to directly and openly disagree with one another (Goffman (1971)). Some of the ways of minimizing or de-emphasizing the stated difference between oneself and co-interactants are: including claims of uncertainty when disagreeing (see Doubt illustration 1, above), forming a disagreement as a partial agreement, stating a disagreement as an impersonal position (e.g. *couldn't it be the case that ... or some people think ...*), and even withholding a disagreement entirely (Pomerantz (1984)).

Presenting evidence is another way of mitigating overtly stated disagreements. People clearly disagree when they assert contrary states of affairs. When, however, conversants recount their personal experiences that are contrary to the states of affairs asserted by co-conversants, or when they cite other people's assertions that are contrary to their co-conversants', they are in disagreements-of-sorts.

In the following exchange, *P* and *L* are on a tennis court and *P* has just noticed a swarm of flies.

*P*: Are there flies here?  
 → *L*: I haven't noticed any.

Having noticed a swarm of flies, *P* comments on them in the form of asking *L* about their presence. Having noticed the flies, it is curious that *P* did not articulate an observation, for examples, *Jeez, there's flies here* rather than ask for *L*'s validation of their presence. One obvious difference between producing a declarative assertion and an interrogative is that with a declarative, *P* would have been accountable for the assertion's rightness, whereas with an interrogative, she merely implies that a particular state of affairs exists (Lakoff (1975)). And in implying rather than declaring, she has structured the determination of whether flies are there as a joint, rather than a unilateral, enterprise.

Whether or not *L* notices *P* noticing the flies, her question is sufficient to key *L* into *P*'s suspicion or suggestion that flies are present. In hearing the question, *L* would ask himself why *P* is raising the question of flies. With no

previous history of trouble with flies, a reasonable inference is their presence then and there.

Rather than declaring that there are no flies, he takes the stance of knowing only his experience regarding that state of affairs (*I haven't noticed any*). *L's* experience-as-reported does not corroborate *P's* suggestion. *I haven't noticed any* is a report which argues for the conclusion that no flies are present. Stating it in that way, however, allows the possibility that *P* may still be right – there may be flies but he has not encountered them. In saying *I haven't noticed any*, *P* is not proposing that *L* is wrong but rather indicating that his experience does not confirm *P's* suggestion that flies are present.

People sometimes feel degraded when they are told that they are wrong (Jefferson (1974); Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977)). Proposing that fellow interactants are wrong may carry the implication that they are incompetent and/or ignorant. Often, more is at stake than whether a particular version is right or wrong – a participant's knowledgeability may be threatened. The various ways that speakers have of mitigating their statements that fellow-interactants are wrong may be designed to lessen the threat of degradation.

In reporting just his experience, *L* is accountable for less than he would have been had he asserted that no flies were present. Making a limited claim is a way of his not quite saying that *P* is wrong. It is also the case, however, that *L's* evidence argues for the *absence* of flies. People orient to a difference between the grounds for knowing a positive case and a negative one. Noticing flies may be sufficient to assert that flies are present (though in this case *P* did not assert it); not noticing flies may not be sufficient to assert that flies are not present. When asked whether a colleague is at work, a common response is *I haven't seen her* rather than *She's not here*.

Whether or not *I haven't noticed any* is weak or strong evidence for the conclusion that no flies are present depends in part on whether *L's* experience constitutes a representative sample. If *L* had looked around for flies, sampled the various areas of the court, searched, etc. and found no flies, then clearly his findings strongly argue for the conclusion that no flies are present. In this case, *L* himself downplays the representativeness of his experience. He implies that his observations were unsystematic and undirected by his use of the term 'noticed' (*I haven't noticed any*). By presenting weak evidence, he makes more allowance for the possibility that flies may be there and that *P* may be right despite his own disconfirming experience.

#### 2.3.4. *Sensitive action illustration 4*

This is another instance in which a speaker displays a cautiousness with respect to being critical. A mother and father are visiting their son and his wife. The son's long hair seems to be a source of discomfort for the mother. This sensitivity surfaces when the son begins to talk about a friend of his, John, who

just had his long hair cut. The conversants orient to John's hair as analogous to the son's hair, so that comments about John's hair are heard as relevant to the son's hair.

In the excerpt that follows, the mother's cautiousness on two occasions is noted with arrows. In the first, she is possibly withholding any comment that could be seen as critical of long hair; in the second, she cites her sources.

- Mo*: Is this the uh piece of sculpture one of your friends made for you?  
*So*: Yeah.  
 (2.5)  
*So*: That's *John*. He cut his *hair* by the way.  
*Mo*: Oh he did?  
*So*: Yeh  
 → *Mo*: Do you *like* it?  
*So*: Uh, *Yeah*, [ (He looks) -  
 → *Mo*: [ I heard- uh, I read two or three columns and I hear it  
 over TV that it's become old- it's becoming *passé*.  
 (2.9)  
*Fa*: They *what*?  
 (1.5)  
*Mo*: The longer hair,  
*Fa*: Which is *John*.  
 (1.0)  
*So*: (possibly suppressing a laugh) They guy with the real long hair,  
*Mo*: How sh- How short did he *cut* it.  
*So*: Very *short*. I mean, *yih* know,  
*Mo*: Just a regular hair [ cut  
*So*: [ -combable.

For the son, John's having his hair cut is an event that warrants being told to his mother. Assessing news is partially constitutive of understanding news, i.e. understanding in part involves analyzing a news-event as happy, sad, good, bad, fortunate, wonderful, mixed, etc. Conventionally, persons display their understanding of news by proffering assessments of the news (Heritage (1984)). A commonly performed series of responses upon hearing news is to first mark receipt of it as 'news' and then to assess it. Following this pattern, the mother would have assessed the news in the turn indicated below:

- So*: That's *John*. He cut his *hair* by the way.  
*Mo*: Oh he did?  
*So*: Yeh.  
 → *Mo*: ASSESSMENT

Rather than proffering her assessment of the news, the mother asks the son for his assessment (*Do you like it?*).

The family members see 'long hair' as an issue, particularly the son's long hair. A way they have of talking about the son's long hair is to talk about long hair on other men, or long hair on men on general. Since the son's long hair is an issue, their talking about John's long hair (or now cut-off long hair) would be heard as applying to the son's hair.

Because the mother's reaction to John's haircut may be heard as reflecting her attitude toward her son's long hair, the mother may be hesitant to give a reaction to John's haircut. In fact, just where her reaction is due, she asks for her son's reaction. In asking for his assessment in that place, she manages to avoid giving her assessment without making it particularly noticeable. If the mother had greeted the announcement of John's cutting his hair as good news, she would be heard to be negatively commenting on her son's long hair. The mother needs to watch what she says about other people's long hair (as well as her son's long hair) if she is to avoid being critical of her son's hair.

Because John's hair is analogous to the son's, and because the son's hair style is an issue in the family, the son's reaction to John's haircut may be read as an index of his receptivity to cutting his own hair. In asking the son if he likes John's haircut, the mother may be getting a reading of the son's inclination to follow suit. Immediately after his positive response to John's haircut (*Do you like it? Uh, yeah*), the mother gives a negative description of long hair (*it's becoming passé*). 'Becoming passé' is an unfavorable description; it is a reason to stop wearing the 'passé' hair style.

The mother does not simply assert that long hair is becoming passé but gives her sources: *I read two or three columns and I heard it over TV that it's become old- it's becoming passé*. In citing sources, she is 'merely telling' what others are saying. She does not indicate what her position is on whether long hair on men is becoming passé, i.e. she is not openly affiliating with that position. Although officially she offers no view of her own, she presents it as a credible view. By citing the multiple mentions in newspaper columns as well as on television, she implies that everyone is saying that long hair is passé.

In this segment, then, the mother has been cautious by not giving an assessment of John's haircut and by not authoring the view that long hair is passé while nonetheless reporting it. The mother, in all likelihood, is quietly unhappy with the son's long hair and hopes that he will cut it. She seems reluctant to voice views that would be heard as critical of the son's long hair. This includes making comments about other men with long hair.

She transmits a view (read in the newspaper and heard on television) that long hair is passé. That view, if true, could be a reason for the son to cut his hair. The mother is reluctant to openly assert the view. Her ambivalence is reflected in her 'merely reporting' the view that she read in the newspaper columns and heard on television. It involves giving a view which is portrayed as credible but not authored as her own.

### 3. Conclusion

People routinely consider their bases of knowledge or sources when doubt is cast upon what they took to be true. What was taken to be true may come to be doubted by virtue of a challenge or dispute. During a dispute, disputants often give grounds to convince others of the validity of their own versions of events. Other times they back down, and they assert with certainty just what they know first hand. Giving grounds may consist of disputants' describing the circumstances in which they found out about the now disputed states of affairs. They would describe 'how they know', or what they know first hand about the states of affairs.

Attending to the sources or bases involves evaluating the sources as good or bad. That then bears on whether the version in question is believed or not. If a source is accepted as authoritative and reliable, a version may well be accepted as true. If an assertion from a credible source is presented as certainly true, it is more likely to be believed than if presented as a guess or an inference. The rules or principles invoked depend upon the particulars of the case. For instance: A friend told me that her illness would last about two more weeks. I asked if the doctor had said that. She said he had not, but a friend of hers had a similar illness that lasted that long. In asking for the source of the prognosis, I was somewhat skeptical about the prognosis. Had the doctor given it, I may have regarded it with less skepticism on the basis that it came from an authoritative source. Needless to say, someone skeptical of her doctor's competency, or of doctors in general, might regard a person's experience with a similar illness as a better guide than a doctor. In both cases, an evaluation of the source influences the belief in or skepticism of the prognosis.

When assertions are challenged, people regularly consider the circumstances on which they based their assertions. In recalling the circumstances, they may review what they know first hand and with certainty, i.e. their evidence. They may report the sources or bases of the assertions to support the position that the assertions are valid (*this is how I know*). Or they may report the sources or bases as part of backing away from the initial assertions (*at least this much is certain*). The sources or bases may be offered to provide recipients a way to determine for themselves the validity of assertions.

Reporting sources or bases is also done with respect to a different order of phenomenon. When people perform sensitive actions, they may report the sources or bases without authoring the assertions that are suggested. When people report their 'limited' experiences, e.g. *I haven't noticed any [flies]* or *Snuff cured my hayfever*, they suggest more general conditions while they are being *strictly* accountable for representing only their experiences. When people 'merely report' other sources' credible positions (e.g. the mother reporting the view which was presented in newspaper columns and on television that long hair on men is becoming passé), they may avoid taking positions on their own behalf.

People who are ambivalent about performing particular actions (e.g. feel obliged to say or do something that compromises themselves or others, or feel that they ought not to express something that they believe), may express their ambivalence through these cautious forms. Reporting *my limited experience is ...* and *an authoritative source said ...* are both ways of mitigating sensitive actions. If one's experience is seen as representative of a larger population, a general state of affairs is suggested through telling one's own experience. If the cited source is regarded as authoritative and reliable on the matter in question, the assertions probably will be accepted as valid. Unlike in court, the fact that a source is other-than-self, i.e. hearsay, does not disqualify the statement; rather the issue is whether it is a good source. If conversants perceive a source as good and credible, they may well accept the validity of an assertion on faith or on 'good authority'.

## References

- Atkinson, H., W. Heritage, eds., 1984. *Structures of social action: studies in conversation analysis*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Austin, J.L., 1962. *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davidson, J., 1978. 'An instance of negotiation in call closing'. *Sociology* 12: 123–33.
- Drew, P., 1984. 'Speaker's reportings in information sequences'. In: H. Atkinson and W. Heritage, eds., pp. 129–151.
- Goffman, E., 1971. *Relations in public: Microstudies of the public order*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Goodwin, M.H., 1978. Exposed disagreement. Paper presented at the 77th annual meeting of the American anthropological association, Los Angeles, California, USA.
- Heritage, J., 1984. 'A change-of-state token and aspects of its sequential placement'. In: H. Atkinson and W. Heritage, eds., pp. 299–345.
- Jefferson, G., 1974. Error correction as an interactional resource. *Language and Society* 2: 181–199.
- Lakoff, R., 1975. *Language and woman's place*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Pomerantz, A., 1978. Attributions of responsibility: Blamings. *Sociology* 12: 115–121.
- Pomerantz, A.M., 1984. 'Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes'. In: H. Atkinson and W. Heritage, eds., pp. 57–101.
- Sacks, H., 1971. Lecture – March 4, 1971 (unpublished) pp. 9–10.
- Schegloff, E.A., G. Jefferson, H. Sacks, 1977. The preference for self-correction in the organization of repair in conversation. *Language* 53: 361–82.
- Schegloff, E., H. Sacks, 1973. Opening up closings. *Semiotica* 8: 289–327.
- Vidal, G., 1955. *Messiah*. London: Heinemann.

*Anita Pomerantz* (Ph.D., University of California, Irvine, 1975) is currently in the Department of Speech at Temple University. She has published articles on conversational interaction. Topics that she has written on include methods of agreeing and disagreeing, of attributing responsibility, and of fishing for information.