ATTRIBUTIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY:
BLAMINGS

ANITA POMERantz

The corpus of data upon which this report is based includes sequences in which participants attribute responsibility for 'wrongdoings'. An initial observation concerning that data is that a large number of such attributions are done in subsequent turns within sequences. The blame attribution utterances are produced as 'subsequent' or 'on topic', i.e. referring to some same referents referred to in prior turns. In that respect, the sequence in which blaming is a part is initiated prior to the actual blame attribution.

The sequences are structured with two discrete segments. The first segment consists of an announcement or report of an 'unhappy incident'. That segment occasions a subsequent segment: an attribution of responsibility for the 'unhappy incident'. The following excerpt is offered as an instance of that sequential organization.

[D.Z.-1]
Z: Jesus it's freezing out.

D: I know I went up to the Computer Center before.
Z: (cough)
D: Do my ho me?
Z: What?
D: I hadda do my homework assignment.
Z: O-h yeah.
D: An hfl went up there'n it was freezing cold, an the stupid thing was closed.
D: I was
Z: Touched?
D: -piss off
Z:

I thought it was open on Friday night.

D: Oh well.
Z: Yeah that's what yih told me.
D: Thanks a lot ha ha shhh
Z:
N:o last semester they kept it open on Friday night,

D: Yeah well apparently uh hh (1,0) time requirements 've changed butuh
(1,0)
D: My professor didn' even let me know what de hours wuh.
(0,3)
Z: (Y)eah
D: Very negligent on his part I must say
Z: He prob'ly doesn' know himself
(0,4)
D: Yeah he looks like an idiot.
When the topic is initially raised by D, the event which he reports is described as an action initiated (‘...I went up to the Computer Center beforeth’ but frustrated prior to its completion (‘... an the stupid thing was closed.’). It is an event which is reported as an ‘unhappy incident’. In that report, he tells of the event without implicating either his co-participant, Z, or his professor. It is upon the completion of that report that the participants turn to and focus upon Z’s prior informing/misinforming of D and D’s professor’s failure to inform D of the Computer Center’s open hours. It is in this subsequent segment that attributions, excuses, denials, etc., i.e. responsibility attributions, are performed. When the blaming, etc. are performed, the materials used for understanding what it is that is the blameworthy event are to be found in D’s prior talk, in his initial report.

A description of the organization of sequences which contain (1) announcements of ‘unhappy incidents’, followed by (2) attributions of responsibility, is the interest of this paper. In the next section, some features of announcements of ‘unhappy incidents’ are discussed; in the following section, some features of blame attributions are examined.

**Reports of ‘unhappy incidents’**

A standard form for attributing responsibility, in both blaming and praising activities, is with a construction in which the candidate blamed/praised party is referenced in subject position with an active predicate. That is, the candidate blamed/praised party is formulated as an *actor-agent performing a blameworthy/praiseworthy action.*

While inclusion of actor-agent performing an action is a standard form in announcements, stories, reports, etc., a feature of reports of ‘unhappy incidents’ is that the reported event/action/state is not co-joined with an actor-agent. One prevalent construction used in reporting ‘unhappy incidents’ is that an object (non-person) is referred to by the subject reference.

**#2 [GTS4:44]
R: Now he likes to drive fast Austin Heleys now.
A: Not any more.
R: What happened?
→A: It blew up.**

The incident which is described does not include an actor-agent reference, e.g. ‘it + ‘blew it up’, but references an affected object, i.e. ‘it’.

Likewise in the following datum there is no actor-agent specified in the initial announcement:

**#3 [HG:2]
N: My f: face hurts,**

Although N subsequently produces descriptions with actor-agent + action construction (e.g. ‘he really hurt me’, ‘heuz really hurting me’, ‘GOD’s pracly killed my dumb face’), in the cited announcement, the subject (‘My f: face’), is not the hurting agent but the hurt object.

A delivery of an ‘unhappy incident’ (with an object referenced with the blameworthy action/event/state) may be oriented to a report with an absent actor-agent. Such deliveries may occasion subsequent searches for ‘responsible’ parties.

**#4 [JG:C3]
R: 1-stiddle (kaak) has been eating pudding.
→C: You’ve been feeding it to it.**

**#5 [C:MI:1]
B: Uh:hm Last night, about ten past ten. (.) luh U found a cigarette smokin’ away in the**
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which is to be placed chronologically prior to the 'unhappy incident' reported in the prior turn (L. Liddle (kask) has been cading pudding.')

A device for allocating blame involves treating an event, e.g. an 'unhappy incident', as a consequent event in a series. An antecedent action, one which is intendedly linked with the 'unhappy incident', is referenced. The actor of the antecedent action has the status of a candidate blamed party.

One aspect of the linking between the action referenced in the blaming (the antecedent action) and the 'unhappy incident' is the relative temporal ordering of one to the other. The connectedness, however, is achieved in other ways as well.

Recall that a prevalent construction used in reporting 'unhappy incidents' is with objects (non-persons) referred to by the subject references. In attributing responsibility, a speaker may describe an action which preserves the prior 'unhappy incident' as a referent but transform it to a position of 'acted upon', 'product', or 'consequence'. In the following instances, that transformation is observable in the shift from an object referred to in subject position in the 'unhappy incident' announcements to the same object referred to as acted upon in the attributions of responsibility.

Identifying examples of attribution containings with consequent event are

A: It blew up.

R: Whadju do to it?

A: It blew up.

R: Whadju do to it?

N: My face hurts,

R: Whadju do to it

In the blaming, the misinforming is referred to in past tense with no additional temporal specifications (Yeh that's what yih told me'). As a blaming, it describes an action, i.e. Z's misinforming D, which is to be located chronologically prior to the 'unhappy incident' reported in prior turns.

In C's attributing responsibility to R, she describes an action ('You've been feeding it to im.'
provides for a subsequent attribution of responsibility, permits the possibility for recipicents to initiate attributing responsibility.

Initial work suggests that sequences may be organized to permit and prefer attributing blame to self (e.g. apologies, admissions, confessions) over attributing blame to co-participant (e.g. blameings, complaints, accusations). 6

Notes

1. The co-joining of actor-agent with praiseworthy/blameworthy action is a construction routinely used for apologies, accusations, praises, complaints, compliments, brags, remands, etc. The following represent a few illustrations of that form.

Kamunsky:1:4
K: I'm sure Kevin doesn't know anything cuz I + mench(h)indit
he (ya know) ( ) registered at all. I didn'
I + was thinking I'm sorry

JG:3:2
R: I'll help (kaak) has been eating pudding.
C: You've been feeding it to him.

MC:
W: She, I was brainwashing me Lila.

TW:
M: I wish you wouldn't open up the letters d'ya hear me?
they are not for you. They're for Mummy. Here's it.
Now, don't you + open up my letters again.

JG:7
B: Well yeah but I certainly feel terribly let down to think that
you + didn't recognize me.

MC:1:37
L: Yeh you're not frustrated in six different ways.
W: No.
L: And this all shows. -in everything yuh + say 'n do ez yuh go along.
W: Yet I + ve got quite a distance huh go yet.

2. In the following fragment, A rejects the blame attributed to him with repeated 'no actor-agent' forms:

[GT4:44]
A: It blew up.
R: Did you really?

( )
R: What did you do to it?
A: The uh engine blew- I don't know, the valves an' everything
went --- PHOOH!

( )
R: Are you kidding?
A: There's three hundred an' fifty dollars worth of work to be done
on the engine now.

( ) (low whistle)
R: What did you do to it?
J: (clears throat)
( ) : hhhhhhh
A: Nothing.
K: Oh nothing heh

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→A: No I just accelerated normally an' it went boom.
J: It just blew up. Just sitting in the garage, sitting in the
garage, you're layin in bed, and it blew up.

No actor-agent forms also occur and recur in praise sequences. They may be used to reassign praise post compliments, where credit is shifted from one of the participants to a non-person referent:

[V:V:MC]
R: You're a good rower, Honey.

→J: These are very easy to row. Very light.

[S:B:L:11:12-35]
B: ... an Bea, you know, well, I think it's awfully nice of you to
t - rent to a family with children.
A: Well, that was uh built for that it's in a too good a school area.

[IS:1:11]
B: ... You're very intelligent person by the way. You're bout the most
intelligent - that I've talked to and I've talked to many over here.
A: Well,
B: That seem to know uh, y'know, a little-, its nice to hear somebody
ehh heh heh y'know heh-
→A: Well it's important stuff you gotta really do your own research, . . .

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