ATTRIBUTIONS OF RESPONSIBILTY: 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.

#1   [D.Z.:1]
```
      Z:  Jesus it's freezin outhh.
                (.)
      D:  I know I went up to ⌜the Computer Center beforehh,
      Z:                      ⌞—((cough))
      D:  Do my ho ⌜me-
      Z:           ⌞What?
      D:  I hadda do my homework assignment.
      Z:  O:h yeah.
      D:  An hhI went up there'n it was freezing co:ld, an the stupid thing was closed.
      D:  ⌜I was
      Z:  ⌞Tuhnight?
      D:  -pisstih h
      Z:       ⌞I thought it was open on Friday night.
                (.)
      Z:  Oh well.
      D:  Yeh that's what yih told me,
      D:  Thanks a lot ha ha ⌜hhh
      Z:                     ⌞N:o no last semester they kept it open on Friday night,
                (1.0)
      D:  Yeah well apparently u:h hh (1.0) time requirements 've changed butuh
                (1.0)
      D:  My professor didn' even l-let me know what de hours wuh.
                (0.8)
      Z:  (Y)e ⌜ah
      D:       ⌞Very negligent on his part I must ⌜say
      Z:                                          ⌞He prob'ly doesn' know himself
                (0.5)
      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 beforehh') but frustrated prior to its comple-. tion ('... an the stupid thing was closed.'). It is an event which is reported as an 'unhappy inci-dent'. 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 blamings, excuses, denials, etc. i.e. responsibility attributions, are performed. When the blamings, 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*.[1]

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 'un-happy incidents' is that an object (non-person) is referred to by the subject reference.

#2 [GTS:4.-44]
     R: Now he likes to drive fast Austin Healeys 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. 'I' + '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', 'he wz really *hurting* me', 'GOD'e prac'ly *killed* my dumb *fa:cc*'), 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 as a report with an absent actor-agent. Such deliveries may occasion subsequent searches for 'responsible' parties.

#4 [JG:3C:3]
     R: L:liddle (kaak) has been eading pudding.
     →C: You've been *feed*ing it to im.

#5 [C.M.II.-1]
     B: Uh:::m Last night, about ten past ten. (.) .hhh U found a *cigarette* smo:kin' away in the

---

        bin there-a, ontop'av'a ne:wspaper, tha' coulda caught fire,
     →   (1.3)
     →B: Now I'm not g- I'm not gunna go rou::nd 'n sor'a find out who::
          did- who the *offe:nder* is.

While this paper concentrates on the 'no agent-actor' forms occurring in initial turns within blame sequences, that form is used more pervasively throughout sequences in which responsi-bility (both blame and praise) is negotiated.[2]

To reiterate, reports of 'unhappy incidents' which precede blame allocations contain descrip-tions of 'blameworthy' actions/events/states with no incorporated actor-agents. Such descrip-tions are shaped as reports of 'events that happened' rather than of actions performed by actor-agents.

In an initial report of an 'unhappy incident', the description may be *unelaborated*. The turn in which the 'unhappy incident' is reported may contain no reference to background, setting, circumstances, etc.

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

#3 [HG:2]
     →N: *My f:face hurts,*

In the above data, the 'unhappy incidents' are not delivered in stories but in rather stark or bare announcements. In their very sparseness, they constitute 'parts of stories', or unfinished tellings. By reporting an 'unhappy incident' as an announcement, a speaker reserves accounts of the background, setting, circumstances, etc. for subsequent turns. It is in these subsequent turns that the allocating of responsibility is routinely oriented to.

Blamings

Subsequent to reports of 'unhappy incidents', operations may be performed on the initial reports such that responsibility is attributed. To describe some of the procedures used in attributing responsibility, we return to earlier cited data.

Subsequent to unelaborated announcements of 'unhappy incidents', recipients may orient to the telling as unfinished by requesting heretofore undelivered elaborations:

#2 [GTS4:44]
     A: It blew up.
     →R: *Didju really?*
             (/)
     →R: Whadju *do* to it?

#3 [HG:2]
     N: *My f:face hurts,=*
     →H: =°W't-
             (.)
     →H: Oh what'd'e *do* tih you.

The structuring of the recipients' requests for elaboration is of interest here. Recall that the initial unelaborated announcements contain references to objects co-joined with descriptions of

'unhappy incidents'; no actor-agents are designated. While recipients may preserve prior speakers' characterizations while requesting elaborations, in the above data the recipients re-characterize the referent-events, transforming them from 'incident that happened/is happening' to 'action performed by actor-agent'. Each speaker specifies an actor-agent while requesting a description of some action(s):

#2   [GTS4:44]
→R: Whadju *do* to it?

#3   [HG:2]
→H: Oh what'd'e *do* tih you.

One aspect, then, of an operation to attribute responsibility involves formulating an actor-agent.

The requests are formed to elicit descriptions of actions. What is asked for, in each instance, is a description of an as-yet-untold action, distinct from, but related to, the 'unhappy incident' initially described. In each request, the action is referred to in past tense. While 'when' in the past is not indicated with specific temporal formulations, e.g. 'before', 'earlier', 'yesterday', etc., a relevant 'when' is operative via the structure of attributing responsibility. For instance, in

#2   [GTS4:44]
A: It blew up.

.

.

→R: Whadju *do* to it?

R's question to A is a question referring to A's actions *prior* to the reported 'unhappy incident'. It asks for a description of an action chronologically prior to the one reported in a prior turn.

When a particular actor-agent and action is specified in a blaming subsequent to the telling of an 'unhappy incident', a similar temporal structuring operates on those segments, e.g.

#1   [D.Z.:1]
D: An hhI went up there'n it was freezing co:ld, an the stupid thing was closed.
D: ⌈I was
Z: ⌊Tuh*night*?
D: -pisstih h
Z: ⌈
         ⌊I thought it was open on Friday night.
         (.)
Z: Oh well.
→D: Yeh that's what yih told me,
→D: Thanks a lot ha ha hhh

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.

#4   [JG:3C:3]
R: L:liddle (kaak) has been eading pudding.
C: You've been *feed*ing it to im.

In C's attributing responsibility to R, she describes an action ('You've been *feed*ing it to im.')

which is to be placed chronologically prior to the 'unhappy incident' reported in the prior turn ('L:liddle (kaak) has been eading 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.

#4   [JG:3C:3]
R: L:liddle (kaak) has been eading pudding.
→C: You've been *feed*ing it to im.

#2   [GTS4:44,
A: It blew up.

.

→R: Whadju *do* to it?

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

.

→H: Oh what'd'e *do* tih you.

If an event can be turned into a *consequent event*, an attribution of responsibility is performable. In Datum 1, inasmuch as D provides that his going to the Computer Center when he did was a consequence of Z's prior informing that it was open at just such times, then his finding it closed when he went is an event for which he may attribute blame to Z for. In Datum 2, inasmuch as A provides that the car blowing up was *not* a consequence of what he did to it prior to its blowing up, he denies the responsibility which may be attributed to him:

#2   [GTS4:44,
R: Wha' didju *do* to it?
J: ((clears throat))
( ): hhhhh hh
→A: Nothing.
K: Oh nothing hehh
→A: No I just accelerated normally an' it went boom.

The 'Nothing' and 'No I just accelerated normally . . .' may be seen as A's claims of their being no antecedent actions performed by him to which 'the car blowing up' would be a consequence.

Concluding remarks

An observation was made that blamings frequently occur in subsequent positioning within sequences. Initiating a sequence with a segment other than a blaming, though one which

provides for a subsequent attribution of responsibility, permits the possibility for recipients 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. blamings, complaints, accusations).[3]

Notes

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

Kamunsky:I:4

K: I'm *sure* Kevin doesn' know anything cuz when *I* + mench(h)indit
    he (ya know) (   ) registered at all. *I* didn'
    I + wasn' thi:nki:ng I'm so:rry

JG:3C:3

R: L:liddle (kaak) has been eading pudding.
C: You+ve been *feeding* it to im.

MC:

W: She, + was brainwashing me Lila,

TW:A

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

JG:7

B: Well yea:h but I certainly feel *terribly* let down to think that
    you + didn't recognize me.

MC:I.-37

L: Yeh you+re not frustrated in six different ways.
W: No, No,
L: · And this all sho:ws. -in everything yuh+say 'n do ez yih go along.
W: Yet I+ve got quite a distance tuh go yet.

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

[GTS4:44]

A: It blew up. ·
R: *Didju really?*
      (/)
R: Whatju *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: Wha' didju *do* to it?
J: ((clears throat))
( ): hhhhh hh
A: *No*thing.
K: Oh nothing hehh

→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:

[VIYMC]

R: You're a good rower, Honey.
→J: These are very easy to row. Very light.

[SBL:I.1.12.-35]

B: . . .an Bea, you know, well, I think it's awfully nice of you to
    r-rent to a family with children.
→A: Well, that was uh *built* for that it's in a- too good a *school* area.

[ISI:11]

B: . . .You're very intell'gent *person* by the way. You're bout the most
    intell'gent 'n- thet I've talked to and I've talked to *many* over here.
A: Well,
B: Thet seem to *know* uh, y'know, a little-, its nice to hear somebody
    ehhh hehh y'know hehh-
→A: Well it's important stuff you gotta really do your own research, . . .

3. I wish to thank Gail Jefferson and Emanuel Schegloff for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this report.