

## Oh-Prefaced Responses to Assessments

### *A Method of Modifying Agreement/Disagreement*

JOHN HERITAGE

I want to begin with a text from the "Parade" section of the *LA Times* of Sunday, January 25, 1998. On the cover is a picture of a woman in full firefighting attire, backlit by flames and hosing water at a target that is out of the shot. Superimposed on the picture is a text that reads: "A firefighter, a jockey, a welder, a tobacco farmer, a boxer—these women's stories are as different as their professions, but they all have one sentiment in common: 'Oh, yes I can!'" A significant element of the "sentiment" referred to here is one of rebuttal. This woman, the reader is led to infer, decided to be a firefighter and was told that it is not a job for a woman. The picture with its caption conveys that she has driven back this attack and overcome the opposition of naysayers. A substantial contribution to that understanding, I want to suggest, is made by the *oh*-preface to this quotation. "Oh, yes I can!" conveys something different, in this case more oppositional, than just "Yes I can!": it is this kind of difference that I am trying to reach in this essay.

It has long been recognized that turn beginnings are a significant and strategic aspect of turn design (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Schegloff 1987b, 1996; Lerner 1996). As Schegloff (1987b) observes, turn beginnings often project the planned shape and trajectory of the remainder of the TCU to follow, thus providing hearers with resources for anticipating both what kind of action is under construction and what it will take to be complete. Turn beginnings are thus important resources both for the anticipation and organization of sequences of ac-

tions and for the management of the turn-taking through which those sequences are implemented.

Turn beginnings are also strategic sites because they are a prime location for the placement of sequential markers that convey some relation between what the current speaker is about to say and what the previous speaker has just said. Turn components like *well*, *uh*, *but*, *so*, *oh*, and others are all used in this way. For example, turn beginning is the standard position for *well*, *uh*, and other markers used to index a relationship of dispreference or disaffiliation between the position taken by a previous speaker and the position the current speaker is about to adopt (Pomerantz 1984a; Davidson 1984; Schiffrin 1987). Similarly prefacing a question with *and* is a resource for conveying that the question to follow is part of a continuing activity initiated previously (Heritage and Sorjonen 1994).

The particle *oh* is also used at turn beginnings to convey a stance toward what the previous speaker has said. When persons preface a second or responsive action with *oh*, they are commonly understood to have acted in a fashion that problematizes the action to which they are responding. *Oh*-prefaced responses to questions, for instance, often embody a challenge to their relevance or appropriateness (Heritage 1998). In example (1), taken from a radio talk show, Sir Harold Acton, a celebrated English aesthete, was interviewed by British broadcaster Russell Harty. The interview has turned to a discussion about the manners of the Chinese and some work that Acton was doing in Beijing—teaching modern poetry at Beijing University. Sir Harold Acton's reply to the question "Did you learn to speak Chinese" is *oh*-prefaced:

(1)

[Chat Show: Russell Harty–Sir Harold Acton]

- 1 Act: . . . hhhh and some of thuh- (0.3) some of my students  
2 translated Eliot into Ching::se. I think thuh very  
3 first.  
4 (0.2)  
5 Har: Did you learn to speak (.) Ching[:se.  
6 Act: → [hh Oh yes.  
7 (0.7)  
8 Act: .hhhh You ca::n't live in thuh country without speaking  
9 thuh lang[uage it's impossible .hhhhh=  
10 Har: → [Not no: cour:se

Here, given that Acton taught modern poetry and that his students were the first to translate T. S. Eliot's work, the interviewer's question is clearly vulnerable to the charge that it is questioning the obvious. Acton's responsive *oh yes* manages to convey just that, treating it as evident that he would have learned the language. Subsequently both parties topicalize the self-evident nature of the point. Acton goes on to explain briefly why it was essential to learn the language to live in China (lines 8–9). And this explanation, in turn, is acknowledged by the interviewer (with *Not no: course* [line 10]) in a way that treats the answer to his question as, after all, having been quite self-evident (Heritage 1998).

As I have argued elsewhere, this process of challenging the relevance or appropriateness of a question by *oh*-prefacing the response exploits the "change-of-state" meaning of *oh* (Heritage 1984) to indicate that the question has occasioned a *marked shift of attention*. In the case of questions, conveying a marked shift of this kind can imply that a question was inapposite and, hence, that the respondent is experiencing difficulties with the question's relevance, appropriateness, or presuppositions. In this way, a respondent can challenge or resist the relevance of a question and the course of action that the question may be implementing.

An important feature of this practice is that, through it, respondents can convey that *their own point of view* is the basic framework from which the issue is to be considered and do so inexplicitly yet insistently (Heritage 1998:291–296). In treating their own point of view as the perspective from which some matter should be considered, *oh*-prefacing respondents index (and reaffirm) a claim of epistemic authority over their questioners. This is a theme that will resurface in this analysis of *oh*-prefaced agreement and disagreement.

### *Oh-Prefaced Agreements: Epistemic Independence*

In analyzing *oh*-prefaced agreements, we can begin by distinguishing two kinds of agreements. First, there are agreements in contexts where persons have had a joint experience of some kind. Here each person knows that the other has rights, grounded in experience, to assess the object in question (Pomerantz 1984a):

(2)

[JS II:41]

- 1 J: T's- tsuh beautiful day out isn't it?  
2 L: → Yeh it's jus' gorgeous . . .

(3)

[VIYMC 1:2] ((J and R are in a rowboat on a lake))

- 1 J: It's really a clear lake, isn't it?  
2 R: → It's wonderful.

(4)

[SBL 2:2:3:46]

- 1 B: Well, it was fun Cla[ire,  
2 A: → [Yeah, I enjoyed every minute of it.

In these contexts, agreeing second assessments of the experience are ordinarily produced as simple upgraded agreements or as upgraded agreements prefaced with *yes* (Pomerantz 1984a). These second assessments convey that the second speaker's agreement is grounded in a newly articulated common experience, which is reconfirmed in a common judgment in the "here and now."

Something rather different appears to be going on in the case of *oh*-prefaced second assessments. In example (5), for instance, Gay is giving Jeremy a German

telephone number. After she has given eleven digits of the number, thus exceeding the norm (during the 1980s) for a (British) intracountry call, Jeremy comments (line 13) on the length of the number, prefacing his comment with *Gosh*, an expression that indicates that, for him, this is something new, notable, or surprising. Here Gay could have responded with a simple agreement, which, as in examples (2) through (4), would have conveyed that her agreement was grounded in the "here and now" common experience of an interminable telephone number. Instead, her *oh*-prefaced response—*Oh it doe:s*—treats his remark as reviving an earlier observation of the same type that she had made independently of this occasion, and she thereby conveys that, in contrast to Jeremy, she finds it unsurprising.<sup>1</sup> By this means she also manages to indicate that she is an "old hand" at phoning abroad:

(5)

[Heritage 01:7:3]

- 1 Gay: So the ↑number is (0.2) oh; one oh;:  
2 Jer: *Oh* one oh;  
3 (1.0)  
4 Jer: Yeup,  
5 Gay: ↑Four ni;ne,  
6 (0.5)  
7 Jer: Right?  
8 Gay: Sev'n three, u-six o;ne?hh  
9 (0.6)  
10 Jer: Sev'n three: six o;ne?  
11 (0.3)  
12 Gay: Ei:ght ni;ne,  
13 Jer: → "Gosh" it goe:s (..) goes on'n on  
14 Gay: → *Oh* it doe:s Germany doe:s.

It may also be noticed that Gay adds a turn component that appears designed to further suggest her expertise about foreign telephone calls. Her postpositioned "adjusting" component (*Germany doe:s*) recalibrates the referent of her response from this particular telephone number to German telephone numbers in general and also works to convey a degree of prior knowledge on the topic. Moreover, with its hint of a further contrast with telephone numbers in other foreign countries, it implies a still broader expertise in the matter of placing telephone calls abroad. Shortly afterward, Gay underscores her expertise, informing Jeremy that the "ringing" sound on a German phone sounds like a "busy" signal on a British phone (data not shown).

In example (5) the *oh*-prefaced second assessment conveys that the observation being agreed to had already been independently arrived at by the agreeing party on an earlier occasion, and this in turn was used to suggest the agreeing speaker's greater expertise on the topic at hand. In example (6) *oh*-prefacing is again used to convey that the opinion being agreed with was formed earlier and on the basis of independent experience of the referent event. However, in contrast to example (5), there is no indication of particular expertise on the matter under discussion. Here

two Orange County women are talking approximately one week after the assassination of Robert Kennedy in Los Angeles in 1968. The matter on which they agree is not something of which the speakers have a directly shared experience but rather something that, by virtue of the public media, they have experienced separately but in common:

(6)

[NB II:2:R:2]

1 Emm: ↑THEY gosh uh this is really been a we:k hɑ:n't?=  
 2 Nan: → =Oh:: it rilly hɑ:s. ((sadly))  
 3 Emm: I[ t's r i h ]  
 4 Nan: [Gee it ri:lly, it rilly hɑ:s.  
 5 Emm: [Ah won't ev'n turn the tee vee o:n,h

In this example, Emma's assessment of "the week" evidently invokes the assassination event and its aftermath in Southern California.<sup>2</sup> Nancy's *oh*-prefaced response, like Gay's in example (5), indicates that she has separate and independent access to the assassination and its aftermath, which Emma alluded to, and moreover that she has separately and independently arrived at the same conclusion as Emma.

Given that Nancy could have responded with the kind of simple or *yes*-prefaced agreement that is otherwise commonplace, what is at stake in this marked indexing of epistemic independence? In assessing objects or states of affairs, there are differences between going first and going second. Specifically:

1. A first assessment can index or embody a first speaker's claim to what might be termed "epistemic authority" about an issue relative to a second or to "know better" about it or to have some priority in rights to evaluate it. While this may mean little and be readily acquiesced to in the matter of the weather or the quality of lake water (e.g., examples [2] and [3] respectively), it may be resisted in the matter of a grandchild (e.g., examples [18] and [19]), or the attractions of one's birthplace (e.g., example [7]).<sup>3</sup>
2. Moreover, a first assessment establishes a context in which a second can be found to agree or disagree. In such a context, respondents may be vulnerable to the inference that their response is fabricated on the instant to achieve agreement or disagreement and is thus a dependent or even a coerced action within a field of constraint that is established by the first.
3. These issues can be compounded by the context of the assessment. The priority relationship between a first and second assessment may be less significant in contexts where the parties are joint experiencers of a state of affairs (e.g., the weather and lake water cited earlier). However, where a state of affairs is separately experienced or known by the parties, going first can have a greater impact in implicitly establishing superior access, expertise, authority, and rights to assess the matter in question, if only because the relative access and expertise of the parties to the state of affairs may remain to be negotiated.

Where, out of these and related considerations, a second speaker wishes to convey that he/she has *previously and independently* formed the same view or opinion as the first speaker, *oh*-prefacing is a resource with which to achieve this objective. *Oh*-prefaced second assessments, in short, embody a declaration of epistemic independence. Returning to example (6), the *oh*-prefacing of Nancy's agreement markedly indexes her independent access (via media coverage) to the week's sad events. And it also carries the implied claim that her agreement is based on a judgment that, rather than being constructed in immediate response to Emma's assessment, was formed earlier and in independence from it.

In summary: this chapter argues that *oh*-prefacing both agreements and disagreements to assessments, thus conveying a "change of state of orientation" in response to them, is a systematic way of indicating that a speaker has independent access to and already holds a position on the matter at issue. The baseline claim conveyed in an *oh*-prefaced (dis)agreement is one of *epistemic independence*: in this way, the second speaker conveys that the opinion that follows the *oh*-preface is independent of the "here and now" of current experience and the prior speaker's evaluation. *Oh*-prefacing may achieve this outcome through a "change of state semantics" that conveys that the first assessment has occasioned a review, recollection, and renewal of the speaker's previous experience and judgment and that it is this that forms the basis for the second assessment. As in responses to questions, *oh*-prefacing conveys that the speaker's *own experience* is the basis for the evaluation that follows. This baseline claim of epistemic independence is often associated with and a resource for conveying superior knowledge of and/or rights to assess the matter under discussion.

To demonstrate this phenomenon of epistemic independence, we begin with cases where the agreeing respondent has separate but equivalent access to the phenomenon being assessed and equivalent rights to know or evaluate it. Subsequently, we will move to cases where the second speaker has a priori epistemic authority in relation to the assessed state of affairs, that is, primary or privileged access to it and/or primary or privileged rights to evaluate it.

The data for this essay are drawn from a large number of American and British telephone calls. There are no discernible differences in the deployment of this practice between British and American English.

### *Equivalent but Independent Access*

In this first set of cases, *oh*-prefacing is used to invoke the independent basis of an agreement when "going second" on a matter of common knowledge. For instance, in example (7) Robbie and Lesley, two British teachers connected through a class that Lesley once taught and that Robbie now has charge of, have found, unexpectedly, that they have common origins and family connections in the county of Kent. At this point, the conversation turns to the attractions of their home county, which, it transpires, both visit fairly regularly:

(7)

[Holt 5/88:1:5:21]

- 1 Rob: Well *that's* ri:ght I mean: uh .hhh you know this is the  
 2 thing *we*: miss the trees eh- yu- *exactly* the same as  
 3 you[:  
 4 Les: [eYgs:=  
 5 Rob: =An' [you *don't* realize until you go u:p just how many=  
 6 Les: [Yes  
 7 Rob: =trees there are [(↑sti [ ll if if ] the:)y {  
 8 Les: [.hhh [n N o :.] [S*pecially* in the  
 9 *Weald*:ld it's lovely. .hh[hhhhh=  
 10 Rob: → {↑Oh- yes [Yes  
 11 Les: =The *Weald* I *lo*:ve:: stj:ll.=  
 12 Rob: → =Oh:: lovely. You ↑(*never*) use' to go to a *pub* called  
 13 the *Whgatsheaf*, up at *Ide Hill* did you?

At line 1, Robbie agrees with an earlier observation of Lesley's by remarking on the number of trees there "still" are in Kent, to which Lesley appends, *Specially in the Weald* (a notably beautiful part of Kent). This remark attracts an *oh*-prefaced agreement from Robbie (line 10). Here Lesley's remark, with its increase in specificity over Robbie's earlier comment about the trees, "ups the ante" on a point that Robbie had already made. Robbie's *oh*-prefaced response, while evidently agreeing, limits this process, formulating her agreement about the Weald as grounded in independent experience and judgment. Robbie responds in a similar way to Lesley's (line 11) subsequent, more general, assessment of the Weald. Here Lesley's left-dislocated turn is designed to be heard as a new "first action," partially disengaged from the prior sequence and reestablishing her previous assessment of the Weald as an action to be addressed. Robbie's *oh*-prefaced response embodies the independence of her own judgment in the matter but again limits Lesley's effort to extend the topic with a brief and dismissive response.<sup>4</sup> In this example, which involves two persons with independent experience of their native county and equal rights to assess it, the agreeing second speaker *oh*-prefaces her agreements to convey their grounding in independent experience. In this way, she invokes an equality of experience with the one who took the lead in the matter.

A similar process seems to be at work in example (8). Here two women are discussing a neighborhood dog:

(8)

[MC:1]

- 1 A: They keep 'im awful nice somehow  
 2 B: → Oh yeah I think she must wash 'im every [week  
 3 A: [God-she  
 4 must (h) wash 'im every day the way he looks [to me  
 5 B: [I know it

Here neither woman owns the dog, but each of them has equal rights as an "independent observer" in the neighborhood to assess it. Here B's *oh*-prefaced agreement is offered as based in independent experience and judgment: an independence of perspective that she goes on to support with her epistemically upgraded agreement about how frequently the dog must be washed (line 5).

Finally, in a conversation that almost exactly parallels example (6), Emma discusses the Kennedy tragedy and its aftermath with another co-participant.<sup>5</sup> Although she claims (in both calls) not to have followed the television coverage of the events, it transpires a little later that she did watch the ceremony in which Kennedy's body was loaded onto a plane for transportation to the East Coast and that she has a connection with that particular location—she took a chartered flight to Honolulu from the same airfield. In example (9), she makes an effort to introduce this information:

(9)

[NB II:1:R:2]

- 1 Emm: ↑That's where ↑we took off. The *exa:ct* sp<sup>o</sup>:t. on that  
 2 chartered *fl*i:ght.  
 3 (0.4)  
 4 Lot: ↓Oh::=  
 5 Emm: =°where the° *pl*a:ne came in. I jst watched *tha:t* but  
 6 (0.3)  
 7 Emm: [hhh  
 8 Lot: → [Uh I wouldn't ev'n turn it *o:n* I [mean I]: js .t.hhh  
 9 Emm: [Uh-uh ]  
 10 Lot: → Iss *too* *depre*s[sing.]  
 11 Emm: → [Oh:::] ↓it is *terr:uhble*↓=What's *ne:w*.  
 12 Lot: Gee *nothing* *Emma* . . . (continues)

However, as it turns out, Lottie did not watch the event and justifies this with the observation that it is *too depressing* (line 10). Faced with the failure of her effort to move the conversation toward her own small connection with the assassination events, Emma is reduced to an *oh*-prefaced agreement that renews her earlier stated position on the assassination. Here the *oh*-preface-carried claim of her independence in that viewpoint may help to mask the sense that she is "merely agreeing" with her co-participant in the aftermath of a failed topic launch.<sup>6</sup> In any case, the *oh*-prefaced agreement is here used preparatory to an abrupt topic shift, implemented at line 11 with *What's ne:w*. (See also example [7], line 12, and note 4).

Of course, not every second assessment that is based on separate and independent experience is *oh*-prefaced. In example (10), two neighbors—Emma and Margy—are discussing an associate of Margy's husband who is also known, albeit peripherally, to Emma and her husband. After some talk about the associate's business dealings, the following sequence occurs:

(10)

[NB VII:7]

- 1 Mar: B'd isn't it funny *Emma* how that's all c'nected  
 2 t'get*her*? [hh

- 3 Emm: ['S that terr:ifi=
- 4 Emm: → =YEAH BECUZ yihknow he's a goodlooking fel'n eez got a
- 5 → beautiful wi:fe.=
- 6 Mar: → =Ye:s:: Go:geous girl-.hh-.hhh e-We'll see he'n Larry'v
- 7 been friends fer a long ti:me.=

Here, even though Margy evidently has independent experience of the associate and his wife, her agreement is not *oh*-prefaced. Indeed, example (10) and similar cases are particularly significant because although her assessment is in second position, Margy has a *closer* relationship with the individual referred to and his wife and thus arguably *stronger* rights to assess them. As is shown later, *oh*-prefaced responses to assessments cluster in contexts where the second speaker has epistemic authority in relation to the matter being assessed relative to the first speaker. Thus, cases like example (10), where a second speaker has the "prior and independent access" necessary to assess the referent but does not index it, underscore that *oh*-prefacing in the case of agreements is a practice that markedly and optionally conveys an epistemic position.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, *oh*-prefacing in the context of agreements is a method persons use to index the independence of their access and/or judgment in relation to the state of affairs under evaluation. Sometimes, as in example (8), the *oh* prefacing turn components that add further independent contributions to the matter at hand; in others (examples [7] and [9]), they do not. Thus, the basic claim here is that *oh*-prefacing, in and of itself, indexes epistemic independence: an independence that may or may not be elaborated by other elements of the turn that follows. This indexing is implicit, marked, and optional.

### "Epistemic Authority" in Access to and/or Rights to Assess the Referent

*Oh*-prefaced agreements are common in environments where the second, *oh*-prefacing speaker has primary access to the state of affairs being assessed and/or primary rights to assess it. In this context, *oh*-prefacing continues to index "independent access" to the referent, but it may often be additionally understood to index the epistemic authority of the second speaker.

In example (11), for instance, two dog breeders—Norman and Ilene—have been talking about the readiness of one of Norman's younger dogs to have a first litter. At line 9, Ilene ventures a comment about one of Norman's other dogs (Trixie), who apparently began breeding at a young age:

(11)

[Heritage 1:11:4]

- 1 Ilene: No well she's still a bit young though isn't [she<ah me]an:=
- 2 Nor: [S h e :: ]
- 3 Ilene: =uh[:
- 4 Nor: [She wz a year: la:st we:k.

- 5 Ilene: Ah yes. Oh well any time no:w {then.}
- 6 Nor: [U h :: ]: [m
- 7 Ilene: {Y e : s . =
- 8 Nor: =But she[:'s ( )]
- 9 Ilene: → [Cuz Trixie started] so early [didn't sh[e,
- 10 Nor: → [°O h :: ]: [y e : s . °=
- 11 Ilene: =°Ye:h°=

Here Norman's *oh*-prefaced agreement (line 10), in conveying the independence of his assessment from Ilene's, also alludes to his epistemic priority with respect to the information in question. At the same moment, Ilene's tag question (line 9) downgrades the epistemic strength of what would otherwise be a flat assertion.

In example (11), the epistemic priority of the second, *oh*-prefacing speaker is available from the topic and context of the interaction and inexplicitly indexed in the talk. In the following cases, the priority between first and second assessor is directly established in the sequence prior to the *oh*-prefaced second assessment. In example (12) Jon and Lyn are talking to Eve, Jon's mother. After Jon's announcement about going to the movie *Midnight Cowboy*, Lyn asks Eve if she has seen it. She replies that she has not and goes on to account for this by reference to a friend, Rae, who reportedly said that the film "depressed her terribly" (lines 5/7):

(12)

[JS 11:61]

- 1 Jon: We saw Midnight Cowboy yesterday -or [suh- Friday.
- 2 Eve: [Oh?
- 3 Lyn: Didju s- you saw that, [it's really good.
- 4 Eve: [No I haven't seen it
- 5 → Rae [sed it 'n' she said she f- depressed her
- 6 ( ): [( )
- 7 Eve: → ter [ribly
- 8 Jon: → [Oh it's [terribly depressing.
- 9 Lyn: → [Oh it's depressing.

Here both Jon and Lyn agree with Eve's friend's opinion, but both their agreeing assessments are *oh*-prefaced, thus indexing the independence of their access to the movie and in this context that, relative to Eve, they have epistemic priority: direct, rather than indirect, access to the movie.

A similar gradation of access to a referent is apparent in example (13), which comes from a dinner party at which Shane and Vivian are hosts to Michael and Nancy. The conversation turns to a neighbor who is quite well known to the hosts but not to the guests. Shane makes a number of disparaging remarks about the man, characterizing him as an "asshole" and attracting a protest from Vivian, who is rather less critical, that the guests have not yet met him. When it transpires that the guests have in fact met him briefly in the past, Shane revises his assessment (at line 1): "Nuh 'eez a nice guy 'eez j's sorta dumb." Whereupon the following sequence ensues:

(13)

[Chicken Dinner:10]

- 1 Sha: Nuh 'eez a nice guy 'eez [j's s[orta dʌmb.]  
 2 Mic: [( [ ) ]  
 3 Nan: [I've tɔk'to]m on the  
 4 phə[ne.  
 5 Mi?: [(Yeah)  
 6 (0.4)  
 7 Sha: ( [ ) ).  
 8 Viv: [Oh when you were over he wɜ ho:me?  
 9 Mic: Hm-hm?  
 10 (1.0)  
 11 Viv: So wuddiyou thi:nk.  
 12 (2.2)  
 13 Sh?: pwehh °hh  
 14 Mic: I'on'know I couldn' (1.4) I dɪn'rilly git tɪh  
 15 tɔk to'm that much uh- I can't say.  
 16 (1.2)  
 17 Viv: hHuh. (Yuh lucky.)  
 18 (0.9)  
 19 Mic: °I can't say.  
 20 (3.2)  
 21 Mic: → Hɛ seem'like a nice guy-  
 22 Sha: (Naw) hɛ is.  
 23 (0.6)  
 24 Sha: Hɛ's [a nice [guy  
 25 Vi?: [(t) [  
 26 Viv: → [Oh he's a nice guy.

Invited by Vivian's *So wuddiyou thi:nk* (line 11), Michael's eventual assessment at line 21 is epistemically downgraded with *Hɛ seem'* and this is itself preceded by statements (lines 14–15, 19) in which Michael accounts for his unwillingness to assess the neighbor by reference to his lack of knowledge of him. Though hedged, this assessment hearably disagrees with Shane's position and agrees with Vivian's.<sup>8</sup> The assessment attracts responses from both of them. Shane agrees with Michael (lines 22/24), further backing away from his earlier critical position. Vivian's agreement is *oh*-prefaced. Here although both parties clearly have epistemic priority, Vivian, who has taken a consistently more pro-neighbor position, *oh*-prefaces her agreement, while Shane (the previously antineighbor participant) may be inhibited from an *oh*-prefacing ("knowing better") stance by the inconsistency of the position he is taking relative to his earlier pronouncements.

And in example (14) there is also a gradation of access, this time in relation to the qualities of Burmese cats:

(14)

[TCIIA:1]

- 1 Abe: Well I had this- (1.2) beautiful Siamese fer years yihknow.  
 2 (en) [I'm (j's a li'l)- unha:ppy when 'e wuh- when 'e::

- 3 Ben: [M-  
 4 Abe: had t'be put awa:y tɪhday, hh acquired a Bu:rmese.=  
 5 =D'yihknow what that breed [is?  
 6 Ben: [Oh yes indee:d uh we had a  
 7 neighbor thet had a couple a' Burmese.  
 8 (. )  
 9 Ben: They're ni:ce.  
 10 Abe: → Oh:: it's a great cat. It's the- only cat I ever saw thet  
 11 chased do:gs.  
 12 (0.2)  
 13 Ben: [ehh hhu [hh huhh ]  
 14 Abe: [(Hadda)[go out'n r]escue a dog thet wɜ eight times bigger'n  
 15 he wɜ th's [morning.  
 16 Ben: [e- .hhhhhh Hurra:y fer the Burme:se.  
 17 Abe: e-huh-huh-[heh-[heh-he:h,]  
 18 Ben: [F:: [ɪght'n' fo]o:ls.  
 19 (0.2)  
 20 Abe: Pard'n,  
 21 (0.3)  
 22 Ben: .hhh They're fight'n' fools those Burmese,  
 23 Abe: → Oh I know 'e is.

This sequence begins with Abe's report of his acquisition of a Burmese cat and his query as to whether his co-interactant (Ben) knows "what that breed is." As it turns out, Ben does know about Burmese cats, but indirectly through a neighbor, and ventures an assessment, *They're nice* (line 9). Abe responds with a strongly upgraded assessment, which also includes an *oh*-preface that indexed independent judgment and, in this context, invokes his epistemic authority as a Burmese cat owner. Subsequently Abe elaborates his assessment with an account of the fighting abilities of Burmese and offers an event that occurred that very morning and involved his own cat as evidence for this (lines 14–15).<sup>9</sup>

A second sequence that culminates in a second *oh*-prefaced second assessment is launched with Ben's *Hurra:y fer the Burme:se* and his assessment of them as "fight'n' fools." This latter, postpositioned, assessment is produced in overlap with Abe's laughter, and Abe solicits its repetition at line 20. Thus, Ben finds himself producing a sequentially detached assessment of Burmese cats as a new "first action" at line 22.<sup>10</sup> In response, Abe launches a second *oh*-prefaced agreement, involving a shift in reference from Burmese cats in general to his own cat. Here both the *oh*-preface and the emphasis on the word *know* upgrade the strength of his assertion and convey his claim of epistemic authority in the matter.

In examples (11) through (14), the speaker who had rights to know better than the other asserted those rights with *oh*-prefaced second assessments against the implied priority claims of first assessments. However, more problematic issues may be at stake than sheer epistemic priority. In example (15), extensively discussed in Schegloff (1997), Marsha and Tony are the separated parents of the teenage Joey, who was scheduled to drive home to his father in Northern California on the day of this call. Tony, the father, has called to find out when Joey left, only to be informed that Joey is flying home on standby because the soft top of his sports car

was stolen and driving north without the top on his car would be too cold. At this point, Tony renews an earlier inquiry about the fate of the car:

(15)

[MTRAC 60:1-2 Stolen]

- 1 Tony: W't's 'e g'nna do go down en pick it up later? er  
 2 somethin like ( ) [well that's aw:ful  
 3 Marsha: [H i s friend ]  
 4 Marsha: Yeh h[is friend Stee- ]  
 5 Tony: [That really makes] me ma:d,  
 6 (0.2)  
 7 Marsha: → .hhh Oh it's disgusting ez a matter a'f[a:ct.  
 8 Tony: [P o o r J o e y ,]  
 9 Marsha: I- I, I told my ki:ds. who do this: down et the Drug  
 10 Coalition ah want th'to:p back.h .hhhhhhhhh ((1.0 breath))  
 11 SEND OUT the WQ:RD.hhh hnh  
 12 (0.2)  
 13 Tony: Yeah.  
 14 Marsha: °hhh But u-hu:ghh his friend Steve en Brian er driving  
 15 up. Right after:: (0.2) school is out.En then hi'll  
 16 drive do:wn here with the:m.  
 17 Tony: Oh I see.

Tony's inquiry (lines 1-2), as Schegloff notes, takes the form of a question + candidate response, and Marsha makes two attempts to respond with a description of a plan for Joey to return later with his friends to pick the car up (lines 3 and 4), finally succeeding in its articulation much later at lines 14-16. Marsha's attempt to describe the plan is derailed by Tony's assessments of his son's misfortune at lines 2 and 5. Tony positions the first of these assessments as an immediate follow-on from the completion of his inquiry at line 2 and in overlap with Marsha's first attempt to respond to it. Marsha abandons her response and restarts it with a minimal agreement (*Yeh*) at line 4, before proceeding with a recognizable reinitiation of her previous response to his question. Immediately after her agreement, Tony pursues the issue with an upgrade: *That really makes me ma:d* (line 5). It is to this pursuit that Marsha responds with an *oh*-prefaced agreeing second assessment, embodying an upgrade (from Tony's *mad* to her *disgusting*).

A number of observations can be made about this assessment and its context. First, although she is the one with firsthand access to the event, this is the first explicit evaluation of Joey's misfortune that Marsha has offered.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, second, she produces this assessment having responded with the most "pallid" (Schegloff 1997) of agreements (*Yeh*) to her husband's first assessment at line 2. Thus, third, as Schegloff notes, her assessment at line 7 is vulnerable to the "suspicion that it has been coerced by Tony's interruptive upgrade of his prior assessment in reaction to Marsha's tepid agreement; that Marsha is just going along, saying what is necessary" (ibid.). In this context, Marsha does three things to defeat this suspicion. She completes her first unit of talk with *as a matter of fact*, which, as Schegloff again notes, is a resource for claiming that what is said "is so, and is said,

independent of local interactional grounds for saying it" (ibid.). Second, she follows this with an account that describes her expression of that reaction on an earlier occasion to the kids at the "Drug Coalition." The third practice she deploys is the prefacing of her responsive assessment with *oh*, through which she conveys that, "of course," she had "previously and independently" arrived at this upgraded evaluation of this unfortunate state of affairs.

Here, then, Marsha, the one with the firsthand experience of the robbery and its impact on her son, was not the first to evaluate the event. But caught in a persistent and upgraded flurry of assessments by her ex-husband, she was obliged to work hard to provide for the fact that her eventual responsive assessment was not simply a coerced response, from someone who might otherwise be characterized as insufficiently concerned about her son's predicament. *Oh*-prefacing her agreement to convey its epistemic independence from her ex-husband's position was the first of the resources she deployed to that end.

### Epistemic Authority and the "Agree + Disagree" Format

In a significant number of cases where *oh*-prefaced agreeing turns involve the second speaker's epistemic priority in the matter being assessed, these turns also involve some qualification or disagreement. In example (16), for instance, Robbie has recently taken over an elementary school class that Lesley was previously teaching. Here, in a conversation in which Robbie seeks and gets reassurance about various aspects of teaching the class from Lesley, her generalized assessment of the children also encounters an *oh*-prefaced agreement. Once again, the *oh*-prefacing conveys that Lesley's opinion was arrived at prior to and independently from Robbie's and, in this context, reinforces the epistemic priority on the matter that Robbie recurrently attributes to Lesley across the course of a lengthy conversation:

(16)

[Holt 5/88:1:5:4]

- 1 Rob: Oh I'm such a ↑so: gla:d t'have a chat with you cz I ↑↑do want  
 2 t'↓know'n I'm en↑jo:ying it 'n' the children'r ↓love[ly.  
 3 Les: [tch  
 4 Les: → ↑Oh ↓yes.=They ↑are lovely:: i[h if a little ex↓citable.  
 5 Rob: {( )  
 6 Rob: Th[a:t's w't I thought. I've ↑thir↓ty in that roo- I=  
 7 Les: {Hm↓.  
 8 Rob: =do:. Sympa↓thize with you.↓

However, in addition, Lesley modifies her agreement that the children are "lovely" with the qualification "if a little ex↓citable." Robbie then takes up this shift in the subsequent talk (lines 6/8). In this sequence, we can see an additional motivation for *oh*-prefacing a second assessment. The *oh*-preface indexes an "independent" and "decided" perspective that, in turn, invokes Lesley's epistemic authority in the

matter of the children. That epistemic authority is then mobilized as part of a turn that ends in Lesley's qualification of Robbie's enthusiasm for the class and Robbie's acquiescence in that qualification.

In example (12), this mobilization of *oh*-prefacing as part of an [agree + disagree] response format (Pomerantz 1984a) is still more overt: both *oh*-preface producers go on to modify their positions in relation to Eve's friend's reported position:

(12)

- [JS:II:61]
- 1 Jon: We saw Midnight Cowboy yesterday -or (suh- Friday.  
 2 Eve: [Oh?  
 3 Lyn: Didju s- you saw that, [it's really good.  
 4 Eve: [No I haven't seen it  
 5 Rae [sed it 'n' she said she f- depressed her  
 6 (: [ ( )  
 7 Eve: ter[ribly  
 8 Jon: → [Oh it's [terribly depressing.  
 9 Lyn: → [Oh it's depressing.  
 10 Eve: Ve[ry  
 11 Lyn: → [But it's a fantastic [film.  
 12 Jon: → [It's a beautiful movie.

In example (13), Vivian's positive assessment of the neighbour is subsequently qualified, albeit at a slight distance, with an addition (lines 30–31) in which Vivian repositions herself closer to Shane's earlier stated position that the neighbor is "sorta dumb" (line 1):

(13)

- [Chicken Dinner: 10 (extension)]
- 1 Sha: Nuh 'gez a nice guy 'eez [j's s[orta dumb. ]  
 2 Mic: [( [ ) ]  
 3 Nan: [I've talk'to] 'm on the  
 4 pho[ne.  
 5 Mi?: [(Yeah)  
 6 (0.4)  
 7 Sha: ( [ ) .  
 8 Viv: [Oh when you were over he wz ho:me?  
 9 Mic: Hm-hm?  
 10 (1.0)  
 11 Viv: So wuddiyou thi:nk.  
 12 (2.2)  
 13 Sh?: pwghh °hh  
 14 Mic: I'on'knw I couldn' (1.4) I dɪn'rilly git tih talk to'm  
 15 that much uh- I can't say.  
 16 (1.2)  
 17 Viv: hHuh. (Yuh lucky.)

## Oh-Prefaced Responses to Assessments

- 18 (0.9)  
 19 Mic: °I can't say.°  
 20 (3.2)  
 21 Mic: → He seem'like a nice guy-  
 22 Sha: (Naw) he is.  
 23 (0.6)  
 24 Sha: He's[a nice [guy  
 25 Vi?: [(t) [  
 26 Viv: → [Qh he's a nice gu:y.  
 27 (0.3)  
 28 Sha: I rib um a lot.  
 29 (2.7)  
 30 Viv: → But- when- That's the: prob'm when yih try tih carry  
 31 → on a conversation with im

And in example (14), having agreed that his cat is a "fight'n' fool," Abe shifts to a strong claim about the affectionate nature of his cat:

(14)

- [TCHIA1:detail]
- 1 Ben: .hhh They're fight'n' fools those Burmese,  
 2 Abe: → Oh I know 'e is. But yet 'eez the most affectionate thing I  
 3 ever saw.

In these cases of *oh*-prefaced [agreement + disagreement], it is noticeable that the *oh*-prefaced agreement incorporates the same descriptive terminology that was employed in the first assessment, albeit qualified by the *oh*-prefaced indication of epistemic independence or authority. These *oh*-prefaced repetitions are then re-repetitions are the clear harbinger of subsequent disagreement components and are designed to index an epistemically authoritative position ancillary to the project of (re)positioning the speaker as in modified agreement or actual disagreement with the first speaker.<sup>12</sup>

## Disagreement within Agreement: Further Refinements

Since *oh* can convey the epistemic independence of a second speaker's assessment from a first, *oh*-prefacing can be part of a process of competitive agreement in which each party, while agreeing with the other, invokes the priority of his/her own experience as the standpoint from which his/her evaluation is made. In such cases, the affiliation that is normally associated with agreement is marred by a form of ego-centered epistemic struggling between the participants. Example (17) is a simple case of this phenomenon. This sequence occurs close to the opening of the phone call, and Lottie is just back from a trip to the Palm Springs area:



(17)

[NB IV:10:R:1]

- 1 Emm: .h ↑How wz yer tri:p.  
 2 Lot: Oh: Go:d wonderful Emm{a,  
 3 Emm: [Oh idn't beautiful dō:wn there,  
 4 Lot: → Oh: Jeeziz ih wz go:rgeous:..  
 5 Emm: Wh't a ni:ce ↑wut tīme'djih git j:n. Jst a li'l whal ago?

Here Emma's (line 3) response, itself indexing "independent access" to the "Palm Springs experience" and a degree of separation from the experiential basis of Lottie's report, is met with a response whose *oh*-preface is part of turn that insists (with the past tense) on Lottie's own immediate experience as the basis for the assessment.<sup>13</sup> Here, as Goodwin and Goodwin (1987) have noted in their work on assessments, the contrast between the tenses used by the two speakers marks two distinct stances toward the item being assessed: Lottie, the speaker with the news, uses the past tense to index a specific experience on which her assessment is based, Emma uses the present tense to index a more generalized stance toward the location.<sup>14</sup>

Examples (18) and (19) are more complex and embattled cases. The context of this conversation is as follows: Vera's married son and grandchildren have been visiting for a day or so. When they arrived at Vera's house, after a long-distance car drive, a note on her door directed them to her neighbor Jenny's, where they had a cup of tea and waited for Vera to return. Now the family has gone home, and Vera and Jenny are discussing the visit. In example (18), Vera responds to Jenny's assessment of the children as "go:rgiss" with a specifically behavioral assessment: the children were "ez good ez go:ld"—a shift in tack that she warrants by adding that she had heard "such bad repō:rts.about them." Jenny's response to this assessment is *oh*-prefaced and (1) agrees with Vera's assessment, (2) disagrees with the "bad reports," and (3) indexes her independent access to the referent—the children's good behavior in her home—as the basis for her position:

(18)

[Rahman 14:2]

- 1 Jen: An' they look so well.the chilreh theh go:rg[iss aren't they]  
 2 Ver: [D'you know theh-]  
 3 Ver: → He wz- they w'rr ez good ez go:ld,  
 4 (. )  
 5 Jen: Yes[:  
 6 Ver: → [Yihknow ah'v hehrd such bad repō:rts.about them.  
 7 Jen: → Oh: they w'sm[ashj:ng. ]  
 7 Ver: → [Ah: : : n]d eh- they w'good here they  
 9 play:ed yihknō:w,

Now Jenny evidently designs this turn both to agree with Vera and to maximize her disagreement with the "bad reports" that Vera had mentioned (see the section on disagreements and the discussion of example [26]). But the *oh*-preface nonetheless conveys Jenny's independent access to the behavior of the children

(who visited her house), and this is confirmed by the *w* in *they w'smashj:ng*, which unambiguously bases the assessment on her personal experience of the children's visit.<sup>15</sup> Here, then, the *oh*-preface contributes to Jenny's claimed right to independently assess children whose conduct Vera, as the grandmother, would ordinarily have exclusive rights to evaluate. Significantly, at line 8 Vera abandons an *and*-projected continuation of her talk at line 6, in favor of mobilizing what we can term a counteragreement that explicitly asserts (with *here*) her own home as the epistemic basis for her claims. This strongly suggests that in the face of Jenny's *oh*-prefaced assessment, the task of asserting her epistemic rights in the matter of assessing the grandchildren's conduct has assumed a real priority for Vera. Here the *oh*-preface-carried claim of epistemic independence has become a source of friction in a sequence otherwise designed to achieve maximal agreement and affiliation.

A similar order of activity seems to be going on in example (19), which is taken from the same conversation and occurred just after example (18). Vera's assessment of the older grandchild, James, culminates in her assertion that he "was mischeevous but he was good" (line 7). This is met with an upgraded agreement from Jenny (line 8), which is *oh*-prefaced<sup>16</sup>:

(19)

[Rahman 14:2]

- 1 Jen: [Yeh James's a little divil ihhh ↑heh heh  
 2 Ver: [That-  
 3 Jen: [.huh .hh[h He:-  
 4 Ver: [James is a little bugger [jsn'e.  
 5 Jen: [Yeh- Yeah=  
 6 Jen: =[ ( ) evrythi]ng.  
 7 Ver: → =[Mindju 'eez good] Jenny, 'e wz mischeevous but w-'e wz good.  
 8 Jen: → Oo 'e wz beautiful here [wuuz↑n't'ee.=  
 9 Ver: {↓Yes.  
 10 Jen: ='E[wz very well be[he:ved.  
 11 Ver: → [↓Yes. ['E wz well behaved hē:uh [to:.  
 12 Jen: [Ye:s they're  
 13 luvly little boy:s.  
 14 Ver: Ye:s,

This is a very complicated sequence. At its beginning both speakers have picked out James as the naughtier of the two grandchildren, using quite extreme terms (lines 1 and 4) that encompass the character of the child as well as his behavior.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently Vera, the grandmother, revises her position, describing James as "good" and then explicitly referencing his behavior with the qualified claim that "'e wz mischeevous but w-'e wz good." It is now Jenny's turn to revise her earlier observation that James is "a little divil" and position herself as in agreement with Vera's new position. Jenny also does so by reference to his behavior, specifically the behavior that she has witnessed at her home. Here, although her turn is done as an upgraded agreement (designed to back away from her earlier position and to

agree with Vera), the *oh*-preface is part of a turn that, especially with the additional agree of the word *here*, markedly invokes Jenny's independent knowledge of the behavior of the children as the basis for her revised position. However, this narrows the scope of her agreement to the behavior that she has actually witnessed.<sup>18</sup> The scope of this agreement is not sufficient for Vera, who reasserts her earlier assessment with a further agreement (*'E wz well behaved hg:uh toq:*) that reasserts her own experience of the children as a further and final basis for the conclusion they are converging upon. Jenny then seizes this opportunity to exit the sequence with a generalization about both children (lines 12–13). Thus, in both examples (18) and (19), while the parties are working to achieve full agreement about the behavior of the children, they are also discomforted over how that agreement is to be managed and which account will have epistemic priority as the basis for the conclusions they are jointly reaching.

### Summary: Oh-Prefaced Agreements

In sum, *oh*-prefacing in the context of agreements is a practice that embodies the second speaker's claim to have a perspective and opinion that is epistemically independent of the first.<sup>19</sup> As suggested earlier, *oh*-prefacing may achieve this outcome through a "change of state semantics" that conveys that the first assessment has occasioned a review, recollection, and renewal of the speaker's previous experience and judgment and that it is this preexisting experience that is the basis for the second assessment. Through this independence of perspective that is central to the work of *oh*-prefacing in agreement environments, the practice can serve as a resource with which a respondent can talk in a fashion that novelists describe as "decided." It projects the second speaker's mind as "made up" on the topic. And it permits an expression of opinion to be understood as voiced in response to the other's point of view but not altered by it.

*Oh*-prefaced agreements are more frequent in cases where (1) the second speaker has epistemic authority in the matter of access to and/or rights to assess the state of affairs in question, and (2) the second speaker is in some disagreement with the first and deploys an [agree + disagree] response to register this. These two circumstances may be primary motivations for the claim to epistemic independence that *oh*-prefaced responses to assertions embody, and they may add associative coloring to the understanding of what an *oh*-preface has indexed. Thus, *oh*-prefacing is associated with, indexes and reflexively embodies claims to epistemic independence that may be understood and glossed by a recipient in terms of authority and disagreement. Further, while the claim of epistemic independence embodied by *oh*-prefaced agreements may be treated as giving enhanced support to the claims of the first speaker, it may also be understood as embodying an element of epistemic competition between the parties. Under certain conditions, speakers may find themselves dealing with both possibilities simultaneously and struggling uncomfortably through a process of "counter-agreement." Thus, across these cases, even the most harmonious, there is an element of epistemic tension between the parties.

### Oh-Prefaced Disagreements

Given that *oh*-prefacing is clearly associated with various kinds of tensions and trends toward divergence and misalignment in sequences that are primarily occupied with agreement, it will come as no surprise that it is also found in disagreement sequences. We begin with two basic claims about *oh*-prefaced disagreements.

First, persons do not ordinarily *oh*-preface a first disagreeing turn. Rather, *oh*-prefacing is used by disagreed-with parties in responding to a disagreement that is already launched. Although it is obviously possible that *oh*-prefaced “initial disagreement” turns can occur empirically, there are none in the substantial data set I have examined for this essay. It is reasonable to conclude, then, that *oh*-prefacing is rarely a “weapon of first resort.”<sup>20</sup>

Second, since *oh*-prefaced disagreements are ordinarily *responses* to disagreement, *oh*-prefacing can be understood as a means of escalating disputes. In this context, its role in indexing a position as “established” and as founded in epistemic independence/priority (whether rhetorically or not) is a significant one.

### Oh-Prefaced Disagreements: "Holding a Position" in Flat Out Opposition

Although oh-prefacing is relatively uncommon in disagreement contexts, its significance there is unambiguously one of escalation and intensification of disagreement. Example (20) is perhaps prototypical of this. Here two undergraduates, Shirley and Geri, get into a dispute about how many weeks of the Geri's school term are left. Geri's assessment of "six er seven more weeks" initially meets with agreement from Shirley (line 4), but the latter then revises her opinion so as to disagree (lines 6–8), calculating that the quarter has only five more weeks to run:

(20)

[Frankel TC1:7]

- 1 Ger: A:nd uh:m (0.2) school is, alri:ght 't's coming alo:ng it's  
2 Shi: [Yeah=  
3 Ger: =it's only seh- seven more six er seven more weeks.  
4 Shi: Yea:h, rilly,  
5 Ger: A:::n[d  
6 Shi: [There's less then tha:t, this's the beginning of  
7 the seventh week a'the quarter. .hhhh Yer off- You have five  
8 weeks left.  
9 Ger: Uh-uh,  
10 Shi: [Mm-hm,  
11 Ger: [We av more then [fi : : [ve,  
12 Shi: → [ .hhh[Oh no Geri five weeks.  
13 (0.7)  
14 (S): .t.hhh  
15 Ger: Wul maybe we 'av six. But we don't have[fi : [ve.  
16 Shi: [ .hh[Whendju get out.=  
17 Shi: =Christmas week er the week before Christmas.

Geri resists at line 9 with *Uh-uh* and subsequently with a contradictory claim of *more than five*. It is this disagreement in which Geri holds her original position, which Shirley then attacks with an *oh*-prefaced rejection and a reassertion of "five weeks." At this point Shirley has already underpinned her claim at lines 6–8 with a display of calculation that builds an explicit justification for her position. Faced with continued, but unargued for, disagreement (at lines 9/11), Shirley reasserts the product of her earlier "calculation" with an *oh*-prefaced repetition. Here the *oh*-prefacing of the turn indexes (1) its epistemic independence and (2) the "established" nature of the position she is expressing and thus points to the inappropriateness of Geri's questioning something that has already been explicitly stated, thereby indirectly asserting a (claimed) epistemic authority on the matter.<sup>21</sup> By this means the response is made more overtly *reassertive*. Here the practice of *oh*-prefacing is a significant feature of a turn, designed to "hold a position" that has already been taken up and which is now reasserted in intensified fashion.<sup>22</sup> Notably, it induces Geri into a partial backdown from her earlier position (line 15).

*Oh*-prefacing achieves this intensification of a stated position by entering a claim of position-holding epistemic independence while simultaneously providing for the unexpectedness or inappropriateness of the (oppositional) assertion to which it responds. Turn-initial position is a strategic site for this provision in that it represents a first possible opportunity at which it can be made. As an initial response component, *oh* amplifies the impact of the subsequently stated disagreement.

In example (21), as in example (20), *oh*-prefacing is used to further escalate an already thoroughly developed disagreement between a grandmother and her granddaughter whom she suspects of being bulimic.<sup>23</sup>

(21)

[SDCL:G/S:25–40]

- 1 G: I don't know (.) I think you're just (0.2) °(well you're)°  
 2 just *wearin'* yourself out with all your activity >I think if you  
 3 *slow* down a li(tt)le bit and rest a little bit more<  
 4 (0.4)  
 5 S: GRA:[M M A] YOU'RE *SO WEIRD*!  
 6 G: [Maybe]  
 7 S: >I don't even know why you *say* that I- <.hh I am *f : i : : ve thr : ee : :*  
 8 and I *still weigh* a hundred an' te[n- fif teen po : unds?  
 9 (((noise))  
 10 (0.6)  
 11 G: → *Oh* ↓you don't weigh a °hundred an' °fifteen ↑pounds .hh all your  
 12 *clothes* are fallin' off of ya everybody tells you ya look thi : : n?

Here the grandmother's rebuttal of her granddaughter's disagreement is *oh*-prefaced. The epistemic claim embodied in the *oh*-preface is a fascinating maneuver: surely the granddaughter—especially if she is bulimic—will have an exact knowledge of her own weight. Yet the *oh*-preface can imply that the grandmother knows that the granddaughter is overestimating her weight for argumentative purposes, and indeed at line 12 the grandmother offers two kinds of evidence to support her side of the case.

Even in less intensely contested disagreements, *oh*-prefacing is ordinarily restricted to "second rounds" of disagreement. In example (22), Rich has disclosed that he's working from three to eleven during the weekends—something that Hyla regards as "terrible hours" (line 5):

(22)

[Hyla-Rich: 2]

- 1 RIC: Well I go in en outta work from about three to eleven  
 2 thirt[y].  
 3 HYL: [tch Oh: yer ki::dding.  
 4 (0.3)  
 5 HYL: That's terr[ible hours.]  
 6 RIC: [Jes- jes fe]r (.) jest today en yesterday.  
 7 HYL: O:h.  
 8 (.)  
 9 HYL: Those're aw:ful hour:s.  
 10 RIC: → Oh but the pay is grea::t.

In this sequence, Rich deflects Hyla's first assessment (at line 5) with the incremental claim that he's only working these hours for two days (line 6). However, on Hyla's subsequent renewal of the negative assessment (at line 9), he again disagrees, citing the pay—something to which he has epistemically privileged access. That disagreement is *oh*-prefaced and, once again, *oh*-prefacing is used to "hold a position" as a weapon of second resort.

In these cases *oh*-prefacing is used when the speaker is rebutting a disagreement and, in my data at least, this is the prototypical context for *oh*-prefaced disagreements. It is thus no accident that it is just this sense that is conveyed in the text with which I began this essay. The women (firefighters and others) described in the text are, we imagine, retorting to naysayers, people who deny their occupational aspirations. It is the *oh*-preface that specifically conveys this, and it does so because *oh*-prefaced disagreements overwhelmingly manifest themselves as disagreements to disagreements.

#### Oh-Prefaced Disagreements: "Holding a Position" in Scaled Disagreement

We have seen that *oh*-prefaced disagreements are predominantly deployed to respond to actions that are themselves disagreeing: in all such cases they "hold a position" that the speaker has already taken up in a prior turn. However, they also occur in environments of downgraded or "weak" agreement (Pomerantz 1984a). Pomerantz (ibid.:68) notes that downgraded agreements frequently engender disagreement sequences in which the participants reassert previous positions. Not surprisingly, some of these reassertions are *oh*-prefaced, as in example (23). Here a strongly positive assessment is met with an agreement token (*yes*) and a downgraded assessment. The producer of the original strongly positive assessment then reasserts her position with a second strongly positive one that is also *oh*-prefaced:

(23)

[G]:1 (From Pomerantz 1984a:68)]

1 A: She's a fox.

2 B: Yeah, she's a pretty girl.

3 A: → Oh, she's gorgeous!

Here the *oh*-preface upgrades the disagreement that is expressed in the mismatch between descriptors by underscoring the reassertive "position holding" quality of A's response. A similar process is apparent in example (24):

(24)

[NB VII:1-2]

1 Emm: =Oh honey that was a lovely luncheon I shoulda called you2 s:soo[: ner but I: ]I: [lo:ved it.Ih wz just deli:ghtfu[: l.]=3 Mar: [((f)) Oh :::] [°( )] [Well]=

4 Mar: =I wz gla[d y o u ] (came).]

5 Emm: ['nd yer f: friends 'r so dar:ling,=6 Mar: =Oh :: [it wz:]7 Emm: [e-that It isn't she a do: [I?]]

8 Mar: [iY e]h isn't she pretty,

9 (.)

10 Emm: → Oh: she's a beautiful girl.=

11 Mar: =Yeh I think she's a pretty girl.

12 Emm: [En that Reinam'n : :

Here, too, Emma's (line 10) reasserted position is *oh*-prefaced, indexing that she is holding a position vis-à-vis an unlooked-for, or less than apposite or agreeable, response. This case is notable for the fact that Margy sustains her disagreement into a fourth turn (line 11) with a yes-prefaced turn that preserves the exact assessment value that she offered in her first downgrade at line 8. However, with the yes-preface in place, Margy's utterance, which also "holds a position," manages this in a less argumentative way and is done as a less reassertive disagreement. This example permits us to see that there is a clear distinction between *oh*-prefaced and yes-prefaced position adjustments. While Emma's *oh*-prefaced upgrade comes off as an explicit disagreement, Margy's subsequent yes-prefaced downgrade is managed, like her first (line 8), as a muted disagreement or "pseudo-agreement."

In sum, in the context of direct disagreement, *oh*-prefacing is rarely deployed in a first disagreeing action. Rather, it is normally reserved for disagreements with assertions that are themselves disagreements. In such contexts, the epistemic independence embodied in *oh*-prefacing is hearable first as explicitly holding an earlier stated position and second as implying the inappositeness or untowardness of the counterposition. For this reason, *oh*-prefaced reassertions of upgraded or downgraded assessments relative to another's position underscore the element of disagreement that those actions embody without *oh*-prefacing.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that *oh*-prefacing is used to convey the epistemic independence of a second judgment or evaluation from a first and primarily in cases where the parties have not had joint access to the referent being assessed. It is used by an agreeing party to markedly indicate access to and/or evaluation of a state of affairs that is independently grounded from that of the first speaker. More commonly than not, it is used in contexts where the second speaker has epistemic priority with regard to the matter under discussion. Thus, it may be motivated as a means of disputing any epistemic priority that is asserted by the sheer "firstness" of a first assessment and to disengage a second speaker's expression of opinion from the taint of being produced merely "in agreement with" or "in conformity with" the first speaker's opinion. A substantial subset of *oh*-prefaced agreements embodies some element of epistemic competition between the parties, often compromising the element of affiliation that is normally embodied in the process of agreement. A further subset involves movement toward position adjustment or disagreement by the second speaker.

*Oh*-prefaced disagreements embody upgraded disagreement relative to the same turn in the same context without the *oh*-preface and tend to be restricted to subsequent disagreements or disagreements with disagreements.

It might be concluded that *oh*-prefaced responses to assessments are somewhat undesirable actions to encounter. While generally true, this is not always the case. In example (25) Emma is telling her sister about an accusation that Emma's husband has made, as reported to Emma by her married daughter:

(25)

[NB IV:10:R:4]

1 Emm: ... shg s'z well;< (0.3) DA:D se:z you won't LIVE2 IN THE A↓PA:RTMENT jn thetcher unHA:PPY UP THERE'n

3 you want hjm tuh c'mmute BA:CK 'n forth evry day

4 ↑which is a Gō:d dā:mn LIE:,

5 (.)

6 Emm: .hh[hhh&lt;

7 Lot: → [Oh↓: ::::: y:cah[c u z]you'd never sa:d tha\*:[:t.

8 Emm: [e-H\_e] [A:nd uh, ...

Here Emma's sister's *oh*-prefaced response at line 7 simultaneously manages escalated disagreement with Emma's husband's assertion as reported by Emma and epistemically independent agreement with—and thus independent corroboration of—Emma's assessment of that assertion as a "Gō:d dā:mn LIE:." Her action is the more remarkable as a gesture of raw affiliation with her sister by the fact that her "epistemic independence," though strongly asserted and powerfully voiced, is at best dubious in the context of a "he said, she said" dispute between husband and wife. While *oh*-prefaced responses are often "bad news," they are not invariably so.

## NOTES

1. There is a nice paradox here. *Oh*, which is commonly thought of as the "surprise particle," is here used to convey the reverse.
2. Because Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles, its aftermath and many of the funeral arrangements received heavy coverage on local television stations.
3. It is possible that the use of turn components such as tag questions in first position assessments embodies a mitigation of any implied claim to epistemic authority that the turn's position embodies, even in the co-present cases, such as examples (2) and (3).
4. This response is hearably brief and dismissive of an assessment that could have engendered an extended sequence on this topic. Robbie then immediately initiates a new topic, a pub. There is a convergence here with the use of *oh*-prefaced responses to questions to curtail the development of topics projected by the questions (Heritage 1998:313–320).
5. For a more extensive account of these two sequences, see Heritage (1990/1).
6. There is a convergence here with Schegloff's (1996:63) comment that deploying such terms as "actually" or "as a matter of fact" is a practice that can be used to indicate that what follows has a contemporary relevance to the speaker that is distinct from that created by the prior speaker's talk. See also the discussion of example (15).
7. Of course speakers have other ways of indicating the independence and priority of their perspectives. For example, as she elaborates her agreement in lines 6–7 of example (10), Margy underscores the closeness of her relationship to the referenced person, relative to Emma.
8. Michael's reluctance may receive additional motivation from the apparent difference in the stance taken to the neighbor by his host and hostess.
9. It is possible that Abe is referring to his own cat at lines 10–11, thus shifting the reference from Ben's "Burmese cats in general" to his own animal as part of his *oh*-prefaced, epistemically authoritative response. However, his initial *oh*-prefaced response employs a reference form, *it's a*, which is likely designed as a generic reference, by comparison with Abe's later use of *he* at lines 15 and 23 to refer specifically to his own cat.
10. I thank Geoff Raymond, who drew this feature of the sequence to my attention.
11. It probably speaks to the state of the relationship between these two interactants that Marsha did not call Tony to inform him of the altered travel plans and that the call, having been—up to this point at least—focused on the "mechanics" of Joey's return to his father, now turns to the "mechanics" of the return of the car itself. In a variety of other ways Marsha, who is ordinarily an emotionally colorful interactant, attempts to maintain a factual, controlled, and "cool" tone.
12. This observation lends some further support to Anita Pomerantz's argument that nonupgraded agreements convey incipient disagreement.
13. The format of Emma's inquiry—"isn't it . . ."—makes it as close to an assertion in its own right as can be made within interrogative syntax. Questioning in the news media that embodies this format is recurrently so treated. For example:  
 IR: W'l Mister President in your zeal (.) for funds during  
     → the last campaign .hh didn't you put the vice president (.)  
     an' Maggie and all the others in your (0.4) administration  
     topside .hh in a very vulnerable position, hh  
     (0.5)  
 IE: → I disagree with that.hh u- How are we vulnerable because . . .

Here Helen Thomas's (UPI) interrogative syntax is not sufficient for her utterance to be treated by President Clinton as simply a neutral question. Rather, she is treated as having

taken a position with which the president, as he puts it, "disagrees." Questions framed in the negative with such beginnings as *Isn't it*, *Don't you*, and so forth, are characteristically responded to as assertions (Heritage forthcoming).

14. There is a strong parallel here with Goodwin and Goodwin's (1987) treatment of the "asparagus pie" example, to which this discussion is indebted.

15. If Jenny had used *are* instead of *were*, the outcome would have likely been less problematic. It might be added that Jenny's choice of adjective—*smashing*—is a shade overapt as a description of the good behavior of a naughty child!

16. Here the particle preface at line 8, transcribed as *Oo*, is treated as a token of *oh*. Though the shift in its pronunciation may involve some (currently unknown) departure in use and meaning from *oh*, it is part of the "*oh* family" in a way that *ah* (Aston 1987), *eh*, and *uh* manifestly are not.

17. Although Jenny appears to "go first" in offering this assessment, in fact it is interactionally engendered (data not shown). Moreover, Vera's responsive upgraded and agreeing turn at line 4 is ended with a tag question, muting its second position status and offering itself as a claimedly first position object.

18. In this example, it is noticeable that the *oh*-prefaced second assessment is converted into a first action by the addition of the tag question. The tag question here is a further resource that Jenny uses to try to work her way out from a reactive "second position" revision of opinion and to reduce the extent to which her revised assessment of the child will be seen as interactionally motivated.

19. Significantly, an *oh*-prefaced agreement may be abandoned when its producer recognizes that the object to which it responds was not a first hand assessment. Thus in the following case, Lesley is describing a visit to her mother in Kent, which among other things involved helping with the garden (lines 1–2) and taking a trip to Maidstone (line 3). As is clear from the subsequent talk, Lesley is quite distressed by recent changes in the town. The issue is raised by Kevin with a remark—"Yes I hear it's changed a lot"—which could seem, to Lesley at least, to imply exactly the concerns she is about to express. Kevin's turn also embodies (with the evidential phrase *I hear* [Chafe 1986; Pomerantz 1984b]) just the kind of reduced epistemic access that is, as we have seen, recurrently associated with *oh*-prefaced second position agreements by epistemic authorities. And indeed this is what Lesley vigorously launches into with *Oh: it (.) was (.) abs-*, where, in light of her later remarks, the cut-off *abs-* was presumably going to be *absolutely*.

[Holt U/88–2–2:1–2]

- 1 Les: eYes: u-and uhm, hmhh.t.hhh we helped her with'er garden  
 2 an' hhh.hhh weeded 'n::d hh generally messed about,h  
 3 But w'↑went tuh ↑Maidsto:ne(.hhhhhhhhh) {  
 4 Kev: [—(1.0)—] [Yes I hear it's  
 5 chan[ged a {lot.  
 6 Les: → [↑u- [Oh: it (.) was (.) abs- e-We came back ↑so  
 7 depressed. .hhhh It- (0.2) eh that-that Stoneborough,hhh  
 8 uh:m: (0.4) .k.hhhh e-shopp↓ing arcade↓ (.) is: a ↑pit:  
 9 hh It: (.) is ↑gha:st↓ly. 'N' everything looked taw:↓dry  
 10 in it.↓ .hhhhh And the ↑↑people looked ↑so ↑shabby.hh

However, the turn with which Lesley was about to agree was, on its face at least, relatively "neutral." It describes a report of "change." It does not embody the kind of strongly felt evaluation with which Lesley was evidently preparing to agree. It is likely that Lesley abandons this turn start in recognition of the lack of fit between Kevin's remark and what she

had intended as an "agreement." It is noticeable that her revised turn, now of course shorn of the *oh*-preface, reports a notably "subjective" experience—*We came back 1sq depressed*—now positioned as a "first" action reporting "news," rather than a "second" and agreeing action.

20. An exception to this generalization might arise in the context of highly polarized "hot button" public issues, for example the widely circulated Starr Report and the possible impeachment of President Clinton. For such subjects, one might expect to hear: "Oh I completely disagree . . ." as a first position disagreement, though to date (September 1998) I have not heard such a maneuver. Pseudoexceptions might include disagreements over topics that, for example, family members recurrently disagree on. In these latter cases, the *oh*-preface might, through its very use as a weapon of first resort, reinvoke earlier disagreements on the same issue.

21. Shirley also deploys another offensive procedure in this turn: naming her addressee (Clayman 1998).

22. There is a parallel here with phenomena described in Heritage (1998), in which *oh*-prefacing is used to "hold a position" in a context of questioning that embodies components of disagreement. The following, well-known sequence concerns Mike's claim (line 1) that "a guy at work" has two Cords. A Cord is a rare automobile that was briefly manufactured in the United States in the 1930s and is now copied as a "classic car." For these reasons the claim is distinctly newsworthy, especially for the car enthusiasts among the conversation's participants. Mike's claim at line 1 gives rise to a sequence of queries from Curt, of which we are interested in the first two. Curt's initial query is, *Not original*. While this may be deployed merely as a means to register the out-of-the-ordinary nature of Mike's claim, it may alternatively be taken to indicate doubt as to whether the "two Cords" are of original manufacture and therefore "the real thing" or alternatively just modern replicas. At any event, the design of Curt's question strongly favors a, "No," response which, in the unlikely event that it were done, would represent a reversal of Mike's stated position:

[Auto Discussion: 13:04–13:15]

Mik: Lemme ask a guy at work. He's gotta bunch a' old clu[n]kers.

Gar: [Y'know Marlon Liddle?  
(0.2)

Mik: Well I can't say they're ol' clunkers eez gotta Co:rd?  
(0.1)

Mik: Two Co:rdz,  
(1.0)

Mik: [And

Cur: 1→ [Not original,  
(0.7)

Mik: 2→ Oh yes. *Very origi(h)nal*. [lateral "disagreeing" head shake]

Cur: 3→ Oh:: reall[y]?

Mik: 4→ [Yah. Ve(h)ry origi(h)nal. [vertical "agreeing" head shake]

Cur: °Awwhh are you shittin' m[e]?

Mik: [No I'm not.

Mike's response to Curt's question is composed of two TCUs that (re)assert his claim as to the originality of the cars. The first unit, *Oh yes*, is accompanied by a strong lateral and, in this context, "disagreeing" head shake. It clearly reasserts his earlier claims of lines 5

and 7. The second unit, *Very origi(h)nal*, which is accompanied by a continuation of the lateral head shake, strongly upgrades that assertion. Curt's second query—*oh:: really*—is, by contrast with *Not original*, not in any way oppositional. It is a "newsmark" of a type that, far from inviting a revision of Mike's position, routinely invites reconfirmation of a position and, further, projects its producer's acceptance of that reconfirmation (Heritage 1984; Jefferson 1981). Mike's response to this second query is identical to the first except for two features. The first is that his head movement is revised from a lateral head shake, indicative of disagreement, to a vertical head shake, produced across the entire turn and indicative of agreement. The second feature is that the reassertive *oh*-preface is removed. This sequence embodies fine-grained evidence that *oh*-prefacing in response to questions can be specifically designed to disagree with, or rebut the position taken by a questioner and to do so by indexing the "established" nature of the position being defended and pointing to the inappropriateness of questioning something that has already been explicitly stated (Heritage 1998) as an ancillary part of holding and upgrading the position that has already been taken. It remains to be added that both of Curt's questions are designed to underscore the "newsworthiness" of Mike's announcement and that the sequence is generally benign. Nonetheless, within that understanding, Curt's two questions are treated in quite distinct ways that are fitted to the preferences they embody. See Goodwin (1980) and Schegloff (1987a) for further discussions of this well-known sequence. I thank Charles and Candy Goodwin for very helpful discussion of this example.

23. See Beach (1996) for an extended analysis of this conversation.

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## 9

## Turn-Sharing

*The Choral Co-Production  
of Talk-in-Interaction*

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Simultaneous speech in conversation, when it occurs, can be treated as a turn-taking problem in need of repair (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). Speakers may cut short what they are saying or employ devices to compete for exclusive speakership when faced with an overlapping utterance by another participant (Jefferson 1983; Jefferson and Schegloff 1975; Lerner 1989; Schegloff 1987, 2000). However, some forms of participation in conversation are not serially organized—that is, they are not designed for one participant speaking at a time. On occasion, participants may treat more-than-one-at-a-time speaking as properly simultaneous. That is, some simultaneously voiced actions are not treated by participants as a violation or as being in need of repair (Coates 1996; Erickson 1992; Goodwin and Goodwin 1987; see James and Clarke 1993 for a review of research on "supportive and cooperative interruptions").<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there seem to be systematically describable sequential environments for such simultaneously voiced actions. For example, the beginnings and endings of social gatherings may be marked by collective greeting and leave-taking utterances. Also, consider the appreciative responses that can follow the opening of a gift. These can form a cacophony of verbal and vocal assessments.

Thus far I have only proposed that there are times when simultaneous speech and not just a one-at-a-time contribution seems in order. I have not yet said anything about the form of these simultaneous utterances. In the examples of properly simultaneous speech cited earlier, each speaker's contribution may consist of a some-