

Post-decline requesting and the reversal of refusals: A research proposal

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Introduction

This report presents a research proposal grounded in an empirical observation from a transcript of naturally occurring social interaction among university students. The proposal concerns the phenomenon of post-decline requesting, whereby a participant who has initially declined an offer subsequently seeks to access the same resource they refused. This phenomenon reveals how prior sequential actions create constraints on subsequent ones, requiring participants to employ distinctive interactional procedures to manage the reversal of their earlier position.

The data

The following transcript captures a casual interaction among five university students. The transcript uses conventions from conversation analysis, including timed pauses, overlapping speech marked with square brackets, emphasis marked with colons and underlining, and prosodic features such as pitch changes.

Extract 1 [RCE06 14.27]

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1  Jes:  ((humming))
2  Ash:  (          ) my concentration is aw:ful.
3        (3.2)
4  Jes:  hhnn huh huh .hhhh
5        (0.5)
6  Jes:  Yeap, (0.8) [yesterday in the library (.) g-=
7  Ash:  [(It's not happening.)
8  Jes:  =I was rea[ding my notes.
9  Sar:  [↑What are you eating.=Where did you ↑get that from.
10 Mat:  .hh Ye(h)ah I was thi(h)nk[ing the sa(h)me °thi(h)ng.°
11 Jes:  [I had a chocolate bi:scuit in my bag.
12        (1.4)
13 Mat:  A single one.
14        (1.2)
15 Jes:  I have some.
16        (0.6)
17 Jes:  Do you want one(h).
18 Sar:  It's fi[ne.
19 Dan:  [Can I have one.
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20 Jes: Yeah?
 21 (.)
 22 Dan: [Sweet.
 23 Ash: [Please can I have one.
 24 Sar: You have those in your room don't you[:(h) hehh
 25 Ash: [Yeh ((nods))
 26 (.)
 27 Sar: I love those.= [T h e y'r e l i k e m y f a : v o [rites.
 28 Mat: [Alright if you have that many [can I have one.
 29 Ash: [()
 30 Mat: [heh heh heh heh .hhh
 31 Dan: [heh heh heh heh
 32 Ash: Thank you.
 33 Jes: They're a bit melted.
 34 (0.7)
 35 Sar: °hmm uhh° (I want one now.)
 36 Ash: heh heh
 37 Jes: Well- mhhh (such a [)
 38 Sar: [I'll pay you back.
 39 Sar: I- I give you chocolate all the time.
 40 (0.3)
 41 Sar: [in fairness.
 42 Jes: [Mhm
 43 (1.2)
 44 Ash: Yeah because you have [like a mountain of [it (though don't you).
 45 Dan: [Cheers.
 46 Jes: [hm hm hm hm hm
 47 Mat: Thank you Jess.
 48 Sar: Sshh

Core empirical observation

The phenomenon of interest centers on Sarah's trajectory from declining an offer to ultimately requesting the same resource she initially refused. At line 17, Jess produces a targeted offer to Sarah: "Do you want one(h)." Sarah responds at line 18 with "It's fine," which functions as a declination of the offer. However, following the successful requests and acceptances by other participants (Dan at line 19, Ash at line 23, and Mat at line 28), Sarah reverses her position between lines 35 and 41.

What makes this reversal analytically significant is that Sarah does not produce a straightforward request comparable to those produced by the other participants. Dan's request at line 19 takes the simple form "Can I have one," and Ash's request at line 23 is similarly straightforward: "Please can I have one." In contrast, Sarah's pursuit of a biscuit involves a multi-unit trajectory that includes an oblique expression of desire ("°hmm uhh° (I want one now.)" at line 35), an offer of compensation ("I'll pay you back" at line 38), an entitlement

account ("I- I give you chocolate all the time" at line 39), and a fairness claim ("in fairness" at line 41).

This contrast reveals that Sarah's initial decline has created a sequential environment in which straightforward requesting has become problematic. The declination does not simply refuse the resource; it establishes a position from which reversing course requires distinctive interactional procedures. Sarah must manage not only the act of requesting itself but also the fact that she has already positioned herself as someone who does not need or want a biscuit.

Analytical significance

This observation illuminates several theoretically important features of interaction. First, it demonstrates how prior sequential actions create constraints on subsequent actions. Sarah's decline at line 18 shapes what becomes possible or necessary at line 35 onward. The sequential organization of interaction is not simply a matter of local adjacency pairs but extends across longer trajectories, with earlier actions establishing positions that participants must navigate in producing later actions.

Second, the data raise important questions about preference organization. Sarah's decline might initially appear to be a dispreferred response to Jess's offer, yet the subsequent sequence reveals that Sarah does want a biscuit. This suggests that preference organization cannot be reduced to simple formulations about desire or willingness. Rather, preference appears to be bound up with the management of social positions and sequential trajectories in ways that extend beyond the local turn.

Third, the phenomenon reveals how entitlement to request is not a stable property but is accomplished and can be undermined through conduct within the interaction itself. By declining the offer, Sarah demonstrates that she has no pressing need for a biscuit, which then becomes relevant when she seeks to obtain one. The accounts and justifications she produces at lines 38-41 can be understood as procedures for recalibrating her entitlement in light of her prior declination.

Additionally, there is an important transformation in the activity that occurs after Sarah's initial decline. When Dan produces his request at line 19, overlapping with Sarah's declination, the interaction shifts from a targeted offer to Sarah into a more general offering sequence. This transformation paradoxically makes Sarah's position more difficult, as she can no longer simply accept a standing offer but must actively request access to a resource that others are obtaining through simpler procedures.

Anticipated significance and implications

This research would make several theoretical contributions to conversation analysis. It would extend our understanding of sequential organization by demonstrating that prior actions create

structural constraints on subsequent actions not just locally but across extended sequences. The position a participant establishes at one point in an interaction shapes the possibilities available at later points in ways that require specific interactional procedures to navigate.

The research would also contribute to discussions of preference organization by showing that preference cannot be understood simply in terms of desire or willingness. Sarah's case demonstrates that a participant may decline an offer not because they lack desire for the resource but because of other considerations related to the management of social position. This suggests that preference is fundamentally a matter of interactional positioning rather than psychological states.

Furthermore, the research would develop our understanding of how entitlement to request is situationally accomplished and can be both established and undermined through conduct in interaction. The analysis of post-decline requesting would reveal the range of procedures through which participants manage questions of entitlement and the circumstances under which entitlement becomes a matter requiring explicit attention.

In terms of practical implications, understanding this phenomenon illuminates how groups manage resource distribution and the implicit rules governing who can claim what. It reveals that decisions to decline or accept are not simply individual choices but become consequential for the subsequent trajectory of the interaction. This has relevance for understanding coordination in social contexts more generally.

The phenomenon also reveals something important about the procedures required when a participant's prior actions create obstacles to subsequent courses of action. While the terms "politeness" and "face-work" are not central to conversation analytic research, the observation that Sarah must employ additional interactional procedures compared to other requesters speaks to how participants orient to the potential delicacy of reversing an earlier position. The accounts and justifications Sarah produces can be understood as managing the potential for her reversal to be seen as inconsistent or opportunistic, though these concerns emerge from the sequential structure rather than from abstract notions of face or politeness.

More broadly, the research could inform understanding of negotiation and decision-making in institutional settings, medical interactions where patients initially decline treatments or recommendations and later reconsider, consumer interactions where initial refusals are followed by purchases, and group decision-making processes where participants reverse positions. In all these contexts, the procedures through which reversals are managed have implications for how decisions unfold and how participants maintain their standing within the interaction.

Methodological contribution

This project demonstrates conversation analysis's capacity to identify consequential social phenomena in seemingly mundane interaction. The systematic analysis of how participants

navigate sequential obstacles they have themselves created reveals the sophisticated interactional competencies underlying everyday conduct. Such competencies remain invisible until analyzed in detail through the careful examination of recorded interaction using conversation analytic methods.

The phenomenon of post-decline requesting shows participants as simultaneously constrained by and creative within the sequential structures of interaction. This represents a core insight of conversation analysis: that social action is both structured and structuring, that participants orient to normative patterns while also producing local variations that respond to the specific contingencies of particular interactional moments. The proposed research would develop this insight empirically through the detailed analysis of a phenomenon that reveals how sequential position both enables and constrains the possibilities for subsequent action.