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Equivocal invitations (in English)

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Abstract

Examining a corpus of invitations made in telephone calls, in English (US and UK), there is evidently some variation in the design of turns in which the invitations are made, in their lexico-grammatical format. The variations in the forms through which these invitations are delivered are associated, broadly speaking, with two intersecting contingencies; the sequential and interactional circumstances (environment) in which the invitation is being made, and the kind of occasion that is represented in the invitation. The ways in which the design form(at) of an invitation is shaped by its interactional environment and represents a particular 'kind of occasion' is explored here. However, there is something further which, across the variations in their specific lexico-grammatical design, these designs tend to have in common – that is, that they are variations of equivocal forms of invitation (in contrast to grammatically 'assertive' forms); that is there is an uncertainty, a tentativeness in asking, amounting to a kind of cautiousness. This paper reports these equivocal forms through which invitations are most commonly made.

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1. Introduction

There has in recent years been a growing interest in the design and linguistic form, especially the grammatical form, of a range of actions conducted through talk, that are commonly regarded as initial actions (Couper-Kuhlen, 2014). The caveat conveyed in 'commonly regarded as' requires some explanation; although we can usually identify a turn in which one speaker makes an offer to another, or requests another to do or give her something, apologises to or invites the other, it is rarely the case that these are 'firsts' in any clear sense; such actions can frequently emerge out of preceding talk, in which the movement or management towards the 'initial' action can be traced, so that the request or invitation is produced some way down a sequential line. Pre-sequences are perhaps the most familiar kind of sequential preludes to some 'initial' actions, but it is very frequently the case that such actions do not occur simply 'out of the blue' without any sequential preparation or prelude. Nevertheless, it is generally possible to identify the particular turn(s) in which one person makes an offer, makes a request, or apologises; as it is in this excerpt, which has been preceded by some extensive preliminaries (not shown) by Leslie before she makes her offer.

Ex.1 [Holt:2:3] (Mary's husband has been made redundant; Leslie is offering to put him in touch with something like an agency her husband knows of, who may be able to help)

1 Les: They find positions for people: in the printing'n
2 paper(0.4)industry:,

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3 Mar: [Oh I see:[:.]

4 Les: [hh An:d if: i-your husband

5 would li:ke their adre[ss.]

6 Mar: [Y e :[:i s,

7 Les: [As they're

8 specialists,

9 Mar: Ye:[:s?

10 (.)

11 Les: Uhm: my husband w'd gladly give it [t o h i m .

12 Mar: [Oh ^that's ~very

13 ^kind

This offer is made through a particular (conditional) syntactic form, particular insofar as this form is used systematically when one participant has contacted the other in order to make an offer; when an offer is made in different sequential circumstances or environments, such as in response to the other having reported some trouble or difficulty, then a different form is used (Curl, 2006). Much of the recent research into actions conducted in talk has adopted this approach of investigating the linguistic/syntactic form or design of the turn in which an action is conducted. Close analysis of that design may also reveal or enable us to discover who is being expected to carry out the intended action (agent), and who will benefit from the action (benefactive). That line of enquiry is making a valuable contribution to showing how participants distinguish between such actions as proposals, offers, requests or suggestions – that is, to distinguish between directives and commissives (Couper-Kuhlen, 2014). Another approach is illustrated in research that demonstrates that the number of linguistic components, whether lexical or grammatical, with which a speaker constructs an apology manifests the speaker's treatment of the offence for which the apology is made as being less or more serious; a brief apology, often *Sorry*, treats the (virtual) offence as minor, as minimal, whereas expanded forms of apology treat the offence as more significant, partly through the inclusion of an overt expression of agency (*I'm sorry*), and through expansions to cover [agentive apology] + [naming offence] + [account] (Heritage and Raymond, 2015). However, currently the principal analytic approach has been to explore the associations between linguistic form in turn design (Drew, 2013a) and the specific sequential and interactional environments in which different forms are used (e.g. Curl and Drew, 2008).

Invitations are, like offers, actions that can inhabit a specific turn at talk and are done through distinctive and varying linguistic forms and turn design, illustrated in the following.

Ex.2 [TC1(a):14:2-5]

Alb: Uhhhhhh. So you guys coming over toni:ght?

Ex.3 [NB:VII]

Edn: .hhhhh Wul why don't we: uh-m:=Why don't I take you'n Mo:m
up there tuh: Coco's.someday fer lu:nch.

Ex.4 [NB:II:2]

Emm: Wanna c'm do:wn 'av a bi:te'a lu:nch with me?

Ex.5 [Kamunsky:3:2]

Alan: Uh nex'Saturday night's a s'prize party here fer p-Kevin. (0.2)p! Egnd
if you c'n make it.

Ex.6

Gor: .t.hhhhhh S:o:- (.) if you:'re (.) not doing anything .hhhhh u (0.2)
d-uh::m: some time one weeke:nd?

Ex.7 [Holt:X(C):2:1:2]

Les: O h:: Well come over- 'n have a dri:nk'n a mince: pie:.

Ex.8 [JGII(b):8:14]

John: So in other words you'd go out if I:: askedche out one a' these times.

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