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978-1-107-03102-9 - Grammar in Everyday Talk: Building Responsive Actions

Sandra A. Thompson, Barbara A. Fox and Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

1. Background for this study

In research on talk-in-interaction, it has long been acknowledged that interactional data reveal “a deep connection between what has been traditionally viewed as the ‘internal’ structure of a language – the distinct grammatical forms of individual sentences or turns, for example – and its use in sequences of action” (Raymond 2003: 941). In other words, there is an increasing body of evidence showing that the way a first utterance is grammatically built makes a crucial contribution to what kind of action it is understood to be implementing and consequently to what kind of response is expected next (Curl 2006; Curl and Drew 2008; Drew and Holt 1988; Couper-Kuhlen 2007; Couper-Kuhlen *et al.* 2014; Freed 1994; Freese and Maynard 1998; Heinemann 2006; Heritage 2012a; Kärkkäinen and Keisanen 2012; Lindström 2005; Selting 1992, 1996; Vinkhuyzen and Syzmanski 2005; Weber 1993; for a summary, see Lee 2013). While much work has been done on the grammar of **initiating** actions, in this book, we focus on **responsive** actions in English.

Our study was originally inspired by an inquiry into the interactional differences between ‘short’ (e.g., *Germany*) and ‘long’ (e.g., *he was from Germany*) utterances as responses to ‘WH-questions’ (Fox and Thompson 2010).¹ Coming from discourse-functional linguistics, we were concerned about the inclination within much of linguistics to approach differences such as these mechanically, in terms of the notion of ‘ellipsis,’ with the shorter form being thought of as a ‘truncated version of,’ or as ‘derived from,’ the longer form (as discussed further below). Fox and Thompson’s study of responses to WH-questions in actual interactions proposed an alternative account in terms of Schegloff’s (1996a) notion of a ‘positionally sensitive grammar.’

From there, the three of us became interested in how a positionally sensitive grammar might explain the grammatical differences among formats responding to other initiating actions. Here we were also inspired by the groundbreaking work of Heritage (1984, 1998, 2002), Pomerantz (1984), and Raymond (2003)

¹ A more comprehensive treatment of that issue appears as Chapter 2 of this book.

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into the grammatical forms of responsive actions in English. Heritage analyzed the work of the ubiquitous English *oh* and *oh*-prefaced response forms, Pomerantz revealed the pervasive role of preference in sequence organization, and Raymond, introducing the notion of type conformity in responses to polar interrogatives, demonstrated the relationship between polar interrogatives and the grammatical formats they mobilize in their responses.

Building on this and other recent research into the relationships between initiating actions and the forms and sequential implications of responses in languages of the world (see especially Sorjonen 2001a),² this book specifically explores the morphosyntactic and prosodic design of responsive actions in four sequential environments:

- (a) Information-seeking sequences (initiated by question-word (QW-) interrogatives)
- (b) Informing sequences
- (c) Sequences involving assessments
- (d) Request sequences

Why precisely these four sequence types? Bühler (2011 [1934]) suggests three basic linguistic functions: (i) representation, (ii) steering or appeal, and (iii) expression; we can understand these as roughly relating to epistemicity, deonticity, and evaluation. Jakobsen (1960) and Searle (1976) appeal to similar sets of three linguistic functions, and Tomasello (2008: 84–88) postulates three elementary motivations for human communication: (i) Informing, (ii) Sharing, and (iii) Requesting. The four sequence types considered in this book, then, can be argued to be initiated by actions that are among the most central for human sociality. Our ‘Information-seeking’ and ‘Informing’ sequences correspond to Tomasello’s (i) ‘Informing’; our ‘Assessing’ sequences are related to his (ii) ‘Sharing’; and our ‘Requesting’ sequences to his (iii) ‘Requesting.’³ With our examination of these four sequence types, we thus hope to have covered some of the most basic response types in human languages.

2. What is a ‘response’?

Responses, as we are conceptualizing them, are ‘positionally sensitive’ (Schegloff 1979, 1996a, 1996b, 2007), and sequence-specific. That is, they

² Other important research on the design of responsive actions includes Ford (2001a), Ford *et al.* (2004), Goodwin and Goodwin (1987, 1992), Heritage and Raymond (2005), Local (1996), Ogden (2006), Raymond (2000), Heritage (1998), Levinson (1983), and Schegloff (2007).

³ We suggest that it is no accident that Sorjonen (2001a), the groundbreaking study of responsive actions in conversation, in discussing the Finnish responsive particles *joo* and *niin*, considers their use in precisely these four sequence types.

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are responsive to a specific initiating action.⁴ But responsive actions, in the understanding adopted here, are not simply actions occurring in next position. Responsive actions have in common that they first and most importantly take up the action of an initiating action, and second that they are ‘typed,’ i.e., they are specific to a particular type of initiating action that they are understood to address (Schegloff 2007).^{5,6}

There are at least two types of action occurring in next position that do not qualify as responsive in the sense used in this book. For one, the action of passing the floor, e.g., remaining silent or producing a continuer, subsequent to an initiating action is **not** a sequence-specific responsive action, but rather one that could be done at many sequential junctures. Similarly, the action of initiating repair in next position is not a response in our understanding. Like a floor pass, repair initiation is not specific to a particular type of initiating action, but is instead omnirelevant and can be implemented at any point in time (Schegloff 1982, 2007).⁷

Responses, as we understand them, are also distinct from reactions. While the latter can be wholly non-verbal and need not come at transition relevance points, responsive actions come in slots especially designed for them. Although responses may be produced in partial overlap with the turn they are directed to, the overlap is typically of the ‘recognitional’ or ‘terminal’ sort (Jefferson 1984). In other words, in order to respond, a participant must have ascribed some action to a prior turn, even if that ascription is only a best guess. ‘Responses’ that are in full overlap with initiating turns are accordingly not possible.⁸ We have framed our study, then, in terms of the real-time choices faced by any recipient to an initiating action, “What are my options for responding to this action?” With sequences as the vehicle for getting an activity accomplished, for each initiating action, a recipient can either do (a) a next action that “embodies or favors furthering or the accomplishment of the activity” (a ‘plus’-action) or (b) a next action which does not (a ‘minus’-action). (Schegloff 2007: 59ff.) Table 1.1

⁴ With one exception, responses can come in either 2nd or 3rd position, as we will discuss in the chapters to follow.

⁵ We therefore exclude here discussion of ‘response tokens’ that are treated without attention to sequence-specificity (as in, e.g., treatments of German *jaja* by Golato and Fagyal (2008) and (2011), of English *no no no* by Stivers (2004), or of Danish *nåja* by Emmertsen and Heinemann (2010)).

⁶ An exception is assessment responses in extended tellings; we take these up in Chapter 4 (Section 3), where they are compared to sequence-typed assessment responses, i.e., second-assessment responses to first assessments.

⁷ Enfield (2011: 286) thus has a broader understanding of ‘Response’ than ours: ‘Response’ for him “has a more general sense, i.e., that which follows and is occasioned by, and relevant to, something prior.”

⁸ As we will see in Chapter 4, the situation is again somewhat different for assessing first actions. Here agreeing second assessments are expectable **before** the TRP and may even come before a recognition point has been reached (Goodwin and Goodwin 1992).

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Table 1.1. *Types of initiating and responsive action discussed in this book*

<i>Initiating action</i>	<i>Responsive action</i>	
	'plus' response	'minus' response
Information-seeking (WH)	Answering	Non-answering
Informing	Treats informing as (partially) unknown	Treats informing as already known
Assessing	Agreeing	Disagreeing
Requesting	Complying	Non-complying

summarizes the initiating and responsive actions for the sequences examined in this book.

Responses can of course take the form of bodily–visual movements, including, e.g., nods, facial gestures, and pointing to or retrieving an object, but because of the nature of our investigation into the grammatical formats⁹ of responsive actions, in this book we will not be considering responses that are done solely with bodily–visual means.¹⁰ However, our analyses do include such bodily–visual movements that **complement** vocal responses (see Ruusuvoori and Peräkylä (2009) on story assessments, M.H. Goodwin (2006) on directive responses, and Ford *et al.* (2013)).

On the whole, in establishing our collection of responses we have focused on the first turn-constructural unit of a next turn.¹¹ On occasion this turn unit is through-produced with a preface, e.g., *oh, well*, or the like, in which case we have acknowledged the import of this preface in our discussion. Cases in which a turn-initial *oh, well*, or the like, is not through-produced but forms a prosodic unit of its own we have tracked and dealt with separately.

We can think of the relationship between the form of an initiating action and the form of a response to it in terms of a variety of metaphors, including 'format tying' (Sacks 1995, vol. 1; Goodwin and Goodwin 1987; M.H. Goodwin 1990; and C. Goodwin 2010),¹² 'fittedness' (e.g., Stivers 2010; Stivers and Hayashi

⁹ Throughout this book, we will use the terms 'grammar' and 'grammatical' to refer to (morpho)syntax plus prosody, reserving the terms '(morpho)syntax' and '(morpho)syntactic' for non-prosodic linguistic patterning. We will furthermore use the shorter terms 'syntax' and 'syntactic' to mean 'morphosyntax' and 'morphosyntactic' respectively.

¹⁰ Research on bodily–visual responses includes Rauniomaa and Keisanen (2012), M.H. Goodwin and Cekaite (2013), Ford *et al.* (2012), M.H. Goodwin (1980), Haddington (2006), Kent (2012), Levinson (2010), Mondada (2009), and Rossi (2012).

¹¹ The multi-unit responses to Telling QW-interrogatives discussed in Chapter 2 are an exception.

¹² M.H. Goodwin (1990) primarily uses 'format tying' to refer to oppositional contexts, but in this book we are using it in the sense of C. Goodwin (2010), to refer to any reusing of materials from the initiating action.

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2010; Fox and Thompson 2010), ‘ellipsis,’ ‘latencies’ (Auer 2014), and ‘parasitism.’ In this book, we will refer to all of these metaphors in outlining the ways in which various types of dependencies allow recipients to re-use materials provided by the initiating action to shape a response to it.

In addition to strictly syntactic considerations, however, we will demonstrate that prosody also plays a significant role in doing tying. By ‘prosody,’ we understand at least these non-segmental aspects of the phonetic realization of each utterance: its overall intonation contour and the direction of its final pitch movement, the position of its main accent, its timing, volume, and register, and its possible infusion with laugh particles or ‘smile voice.’

The goals of this book are thus twofold: the first goal is to reveal, using naturally occurring American English conversational data, the subtle actions accomplished by each grammatical format. In so doing, we seek to elucidate just how responsive actions are ‘fitted’ to their initiating action by considering these four types of sequences of initiating actions and the response types that recipients provide to them. Through this pursuit we aim towards a deeper understanding of how grammatical fittedness (or lack thereof) operates, what actions speakers use it to implement, and how sequence type works with fittedness to shape the ‘paradigm’ of responsive formats. With this book we thus hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationships between grammar and (inter)action.

The second goal relates to the issue of what linguists have referred to as ‘nonsententials’ or ‘fragments,’ that is, ‘utterances smaller than sentences’ (Progovac *et al.* 2006: 1). ‘Nonsententials’ have been taken to include a range of forms like these constructed examples:

- (1.1) a. Casablanca. (as a response to ‘What movie did you see?’)
 b. Car problem.
 c. And Betty is too. (after ‘Harry is going to be a stockbroker.’)
 d. Scalpel!
 e. No, Charlie. (as a response to ‘Is Sally having dinner with us?’)

There has been a robust interest in ‘nonsententials’ within linguistics. While the generative linguistics literature debates the syntactic derivations of such imagined utterances (see especially Aelbrecht 2010; Baltin 2003; Chao 1988; Johnson 2008; Lappin and Benmamoun 1999; Lobeck 1995; Merchant 2001; Winkler 2005; and Progovac *et al.* 2006), there are also discussions in the literature that acknowledge the role of semantic, pragmatic, or ‘discourse inference’ in the interpretation of some of these utterances, such as ‘Sam’s mom,’ as ‘full-fledged speech acts’ (e.g., see Asher *et al.* 2001; Barton 1990;

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papers in Elugardo and Stainton 2005 (especially Dalrymple's); and Stainton 2006). Micro-analysis of the real-time implications of data from actual interactions might well have eventually led these latter thinkers to an understanding close to the position we adopt here.

Within functional linguistics, Evans (1993: 244–245) takes an 'interpenetrationist' position; with data from Kayardild, a language of Australia, he argues that to account for the interpretation of unexpressed elements, "the neatest analysis is to assume that a certain amount of information is exhaustively encoded in the syntax, but that a significant remainder is decreed by the grammar to be left to inference. . . I argue against the feasibility of a neat division into a coded grammar and an inference-based pragmatics."

Heine (2011) takes a similar 'usage-based' perspective in considering the relationship among such constructed utterances as these:

- (1.2) a. Would you like some coffee?
 b. You like some coffee?
 c. Like some coffee?
 d. Some coffee?
 e. Coffee?

She proposes a Construction Grammar approach, namely that each of these five utterances can usefully be considered as an instance of a distinct but related construction, with its own syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic features. So, for instance, she considers (1.2)a. to be "an instance of the general 'yes–no interrogative construction,'" and (1.2)e. an instance of the '*coffee* construction': [NP_{obj}?] (Heine 2011: 74).

We build on the work of Evans and Heine in taking 'elliptical' or 'nonsentential' utterances as independent and self-sufficient forms; however, we align with research on conversational organization over the last 40 years in focusing on the analysis of responses specifically as next turns in naturally occurring conversational sequences (Schegloff 2007), and on the social–interactional motivations for, and consequences of, the choices recipients make in building responsive actions in everyday encounters.

In fact, work in the study of talk-in-interaction suggests an approach to minimal forms that is much more in line with what we will be arguing (Auer 1996, 2005, 2014; Goffman 1976; Selting 1997; and Hakulinen and Sorjonen 2009). For example, Hakulinen and Sorjonen (2009: 127) suggest that in 'verb repeat' second assessments in Finnish, "the speakers leave both the subject and the assessment term of the prior turn intact" by not expressing them.

Selting (1997), perhaps the first to approach 'ellipsis' from an interactional perspective, proposes that much 'ellipsis,' including that found in second pair parts in adjacency pairs, is dependent on 'co-text,' i.e., is sequentially conditioned and constrained. Similarly, Auer (2014: 17) speaks of both turns in an

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adjacency–pair relationship, as well as of two parts of the same turn, in terms of a ‘host/symbiont’ relationship which creates ‘structural latencies,’ that is, moments in which “a grammatical structure already established remains available and can therefore be made use of with one or more of its slots being filled by new material.”¹³

Hopper (2011: 36) notes that “in many cases the usually assumed relationship between an elliptical and a full version should be reversed – it is the elliptical utterance that is basic, and the supposed fuller version has a special pragmatic function.” We will likewise show that in some responsive environments (though importantly not all), the syntactically minimal form is actually the most frequent and no-problem response type, and is thus not at all usefully described as being ‘elliptical.’

Wittgenstein (1958) understood this point well. Though he was again drawing on constructed utterances, his intuition is nicely borne out by the findings we present here. In discussing ‘ellipsis’ and ‘sentencehood’ (1958: 3–9), he speaks of a pair of bricklayers, one of whom calls to the other *Slab!*, expecting the other to bring a slab.¹⁴ Wittgenstein suggests that this “could be appropriately called a ‘degenerate’ sentence,” or a ‘shortened’ sentence, which is precisely what many linguists have done by invoking an ‘ellipsis’ analysis. Crucially, however, Wittgenstein goes on to ask, “but why should I not on the contrary have called the sentence *Bring me a slab* a lengthening of the sentence *Slab!?*” In line with Wittgenstein, we will **not** be assuming that one of these two forms should be analyzed as more ‘basic’ than the other. In line with Heine (2011), we will go one step further and assume that there is no reason to think that these two forms are ‘versions’ of one another at all.¹⁵ We will return to the issue of ‘ellipsis’ in our concluding chapter, Chapter 6.

In the chapters that follow, we focus on more-minimal and more-expanded responsive actions. Our choice of the terms ‘minimal’ and ‘expanded,’ as used by Schegloff (1996a: 107), is our best solution for the considerable difficulty we have had in finding appropriate terminology with which to discuss the grammatical options available to English-speaking respondents. Almost any pair of terms, e.g., ‘full’/‘reduced,’ ‘expanded’/‘condensed,’ ‘elaborate’/‘simple,’ brings with it the association that one could be derived from the other or that ‘bigger is better.’ These are precisely the connotations we have been concerned to avoid.

To build on Selting’s, Auer’s, Hopper’s, and Wittgenstein’s insights, we have found the notion of ‘positionally sensitive grammar’ (Schegloff 1979, 1996a, 1996b, 2007) particularly fruitful. Taking ‘position’ in terms of ‘position in a sequence,’ this phrase draws on the notion of ‘sequence organization,’

¹³ Here it seems clear that by ‘grammatical,’ Auer has in mind ‘morphosyntactic.’

¹⁴ This is what Quirk *et al.* (1985: 895ff.) refer to as ‘situational ellipsis.’

¹⁵ In fact, in considering how they might be related, rather than considering one to be a ‘version’ of the other, we incline towards a network model such as that put forth in Bybee (2010).

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summarized in Schegloff (2007: 2) as the organization of “coherent, orderly, meaningful successions or ‘sequences’ of actions or ‘moves.’” “Sequences”, he says, “are the vehicle for getting some activity accomplished.”

‘Positionally sensitive grammar’ embodies the claim that what we call the ‘grammar’ of a language is actually a massive set of linguistic practices which have evolved in, and are organized in terms of, the sequential positions and actions of utterances in their everyday conversational habitat (Ford *et al.* 2003; Fox 2007; Schegloff 1996a). For the linguist interested in language use, a ‘positionally sensitive-grammar’ approach recognizes the fact that a wide range of utterances in everyday conversation are grammatically organized by virtue of their position in particular sequences. We argue that the notion of a positionally sensitive grammar provides a framework much better suited than notions like ‘ellipsis’ to furthering our understanding of grammar as it emerges in real-time social interaction.

Schegloff (1996a: 107–109) makes this point clearly for responsive actions by invoking a QW-interrogative sequence, as shown in (1.3):¹⁶

- (1.3) “Al won” [= Schegloff’s ‘Auto Discussion 5:16–26’]
- 1 CUR: (W-)/(Oh-) how wz the races las’ night .
- 2 (0.8)
- 3 ??? : (Ha- [u h]) =
- 4 CUR: [Who w’n] [th’ feature.]
- 5 MIK: [= **Al won**,]
- 6 (0.3)
- 7 CUR: [(Who)] =
- 8 MIK: [**Al**.] =

“Al” is, then, *the form* such an utterance takes, in an answer-to-question position like this, and is not an elliptical reduction of some other form.

Not that the other forms *cannot* be used; they simply *are* not used, here. Perhaps one can then be in a position to ask when they *are* used. We might then be able to speak not of ‘Al’ as an elliptical form of ‘Al won’ or ‘Al won the feature’ but of the latter as having some special use when they occur, given that the basic grammatical form in that sequential position is ‘Al’ (if, that is, there *is* a ‘basic grammatical form’). (1996b: 109, emphasis original)

In the discussion that follows this fragment, Schegloff makes the point that there are two turns with roughly the same content here, *Al won* (in line 5) and *Al* (in line 8). Yet each has its own sequential environment, i.e., each stands in a relationship to a different prior turn. Mike’s turn *Al won* is arguably a late response to Curt’s topic proffer *how was the races last night*, whereas Mike’s *Al* is a delayed response to Curt’s follow-up question *who won the feature*. In each

¹⁶ We have maintained Schegloff’s transcription for the extract.

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case the form of the turn-constructural unit is sensitive to the turn it is responding to.

Removing the overlaps and gaps, we can say that the turns group as follows:

(a) CURT: How was the races last night .

MIKE: Al won .

Single-clause response to topic proffer¹⁷

(b) CURT: Who won the feature .

MIKE: Al .

Minimal (Phrasal) response to Specifying QW-interrogative

As Schegloff argues with respect to turn group (a), *how was the races last night* in this sequential position is proffering a new topic for talk. “In response to topic proffers, minimal responses can be ways of declining the proffer, or at least of not embracing the topic which has been proffered,” whereas “expanded responses . . . can be ways of ‘buying into’ . . . [the proffer] (1996a: 107).” In turn group (b), Curt produces a follow-up question, having not gotten an immediate response to his first one (cf. the pause of 0.8 sec. in line 2). This second question is somewhat more specific than the first, in that it details what he is interested in: the feature and who won it. Mike’s answer, *Al*, provides precisely the information that Curt’s second question has requested (as discussed in Chapter 2).

Each of these more, or less, minimal forms thus has its own sequential position and is appropriate for precisely that slot. We take this observation and others like it (see Selting 1997) as indicating that minimal and expanded forms of turn-constructural units are not only sensitive to the context in a general sense, but also in a specific sense, with respect to sequence type and activity type. That is, different types of actions in different types of sequences make different utterance types relevant. They are also responsible for the fact that different types of inferences accrue to the use of an expanded form where a minimal form would be the ‘norm.’

This book aims to directly address the issue of the sequential position in which certain responses, such as *Al* in this example, are ‘the form’ to be used, and what the ‘special use’ of a different form might be in its sequential position.

Drawing on the work of a number of scholars of conversation, this book will be the first to present a comprehensive study of a range of types of minimal and expanded utterances recurrently found as responses in English talk-in-interaction. Based on analysis of many hours of video and telephone conversations, we aim to uncover the sequential contexts in which minimal and expanded responses are routinely found, and to understand in what sequential

¹⁷ See Chapter 2 on QW-interrogatives for a discussion of single-clause responses to ‘Telling Questions’ as problematic.

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and interactional circumstances speakers might be motivated to choose one rather than the other.

Our study will focus on English, but much literature, as well as our combined experience working with other languages, strongly suggests that the perspective of understanding grammar as positionally sensitive is equally rewarding for explaining minimal and expanded responses in other languages, although those forms may be grammatically quite different from what English provides for.¹⁸

3. Data

Our data consist of transcribed recordings of naturally occurring conversations in American English.¹⁹ All are either audio recordings of telephone calls or video recordings of face-to-face interactions, thus ensuring that we have roughly comparable access to the bodily visual behavior of the participants as the participants themselves did. The data come from a variety of sources, which are indicated with each extract, and which total approximately 30 hours of conversation. For the extracts selected as examples in the book, we have aimed to preserve (or convert to) a modified Jeffersonian transcription²⁰ with orthography ‘normalized’ for readability. Our transcription system is given in the Appendix.

4. Response types

Each of the four sequence types examined in this book clearly reveals that the format of the response reflects different kinds of epistemic, affiliative, affective, agentive, and deontic stances towards the initiating action, as we will discuss in detail in the chapters to follow.²¹

¹⁸ For noteworthy examples, see, Selting (1997), Sorjonen (2002), and Sidnell and Enfield (2012) on responding in general; Hayano (2013b), Sorjonen and Hakulinen (2009), Hakulinen and Sorjonen (2009, 2011), Heinemann *et al.* (2011), and Uhmman (1996) on responses to assessments; Sorjonen (2001a, 2001b), Hakulinen (2001b), and Keevallik (2010) on responses to yes–no interrogatives; Hayashi and Kushida (2013) on responses to question-word interrogatives; and Golato (2010, 2012), Koivisto (2015), and Mori (2006) on responding to informing.

¹⁹ A substantial body of data exists for other varieties of English as well, especially varieties from Britain and Australia (see, e.g., Gardner (2001) with Australian English data and Reber (2012) with British English data), but the subtleties of the social actions we are considering in this book call for a homogeneous database.

²⁰ See Atkinson and Heritage (1984) and the tutorials at: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/TranscriptionProject/index.html> and www-staff.lboro.ac.uk/~ssjap/transcription/transcription.htm

²¹ We acknowledge the difficulty in appealing to the term ‘format’; we use it cautiously throughout this book, and attempt to motivate it in the discussion of individual sequence types. As argued in Ford *et al.* (2013), as long as their social, temporal, and cognitive implications are fully recognized, such apparently static ‘unit’ terms may be valuable as a shorthand for us as researchers communicating with other scholars in our field.