The Sequential Organization of "Explicit" Apologies in Naturally Occurring English

Jeffrey D. Robinson

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In this article, I use the method of conversation analysis and data from American- and British-English conversation to analyze the sequential organization of “explicit” apologies (e.g., I’m sorry, and I must apologize). I demonstrate that (a) apologies can occupy a number of different sequential positions, with different ramifications for the organization of apologizing as an action; (b) apologies can be first parts of adjacency-pair sequences; (c) apologies index particular offenses and embody a claim to have offended someone; (d) As first-pair parts, apologies have a preference organization such that preferred responses mitigate or undermine, and dispreferred responses endorse, apologies’ claims to have caused offense; and (e) apology terms can be used to accomplish nonapology actions. In this article, I contribute to our understanding of the social and sequential organization of talk in interaction as well as communication practices dealing with the maintenance of social/relational harmony.

“Whether one runs over another’s sentence, time, dog, or body, one is more or less reduced to saying some variant of ‘I’m sorry’” (Goffman, 1971, p. 117).

In interpersonal relationships—from the merest civil relationship between strangers (Goffman, 1963) to the closest romantic relationship—the negotiation of personal (moral) responsibility (Goffman, 1971) for offensive behavior and its threat to face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) is integral to successful relational management. Apologizing is an essential component.
of the maintenance of social harmony because it communicates awareness and acceptance of moral responsibility for offensive behavior and initiates the process of negotiating absolution (Blumstein, 1974; Edmondson, 1981; Goffman, 1971; Holmes, 1990; Leech, 1983; McCullough et al., 1998; Obeng, 1999). In this article, I examine the sequential organization of “explicit” apologies in naturally occurring English and demonstrate that

1. Apologies can occupy a number of different sequential positions other than first parts of adjacency-pair sequences, with different implications for the organization of apologizing as an action.
2. When apology units initiate a sequence of action and when apologizing is the primary action being accomplished, apologies are first parts of adjacency-pair sequences (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973).
3. Apologies index particular offenses and embody a claim to have offended someone, which implicitly includes an admission of personal responsibility for the offense.
4. As first-pair parts, apologies have a preference organization (regarding preference, see Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987; for review, see Heritage, 1984b; Schegloff, in press) such that preferred responses mitigate or undermine, and dispreferred responses endorse, apologies’ claims to have caused offense.
5. Apology terms can be used to accomplish nonapology actions.

In this article, I begin by discussing the place of apologies in prior research and providing a rationale for studying “explicit” apologies.

Prior research has focused less on apologies themselves and more on (a) how they are affected by variables that are exogenous to interaction, such as degree of relational closeness, degree of offense, type of offense, social status (including age), power, and gender (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holmes, 1990; Meyerhoff, 1999; Obeng, 1999); and (b) how they inform theory, such as that of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), impression regulation (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992), and image restoration (Benoit, 1995). When examining apologies themselves, prior research has tended to conflate them with accounts (i.e., excuses and justifications; Scott & Lyman, 1968) and other offense-remedial-related actions, such as accepting blame (e.g., It’s my fault), promising forbearance (e.g., I promise it won’t happen again), requesting forgiveness (e.g., Forgive me, and I beg your pardon), and requesting to be excused (e.g., Excuse me) and pardoned (e.g., Pardon me). For example, some researchers have considered apolo-
gies to be types accounts, as with Schonbach’s (1980) much-used account typology (for review, see Cody & McLaughlin, 1990). Others have considered accounts to be types of apologies (e.g., Fraser, 1981; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983), and yet others have considered apologies to be subtypes of larger order phenomena, such as face-threatening/supporting actions (e.g., Trosborg, 1987) and image-restoration strategies (Benoit, 1995).

There is no question that apologies and other types of offense-remedial-related actions frequently co-occur, at least in the sense that they can be said to precede or follow the other within relatively close spates of interaction (Cody & McLaughlin, 1985; Holmes, 1990; Obeng, 1999; Owen, 1983; Sugimoto, 1997). It is important to note, though, they are not always adjacent nor always part of the same turn or sequence of talk, and much of their conflation is due to researchers’ lack of sensitivity to processes of turn taking (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) and sequence organization (Schegloff, in press). There is evidence that, as a social action, apologizing is different and separate from other offense-remedial-related actions. For example, Holtgraves (1989) experimentally demonstrated that persons are able to differentiate between apologies and accounts, as well as between different types of accounts (i.e., excuses and justifications). For this reason and others, both Goffman (1971) and Owen (1983) have distinguished between apologies and other offense-remedial-related actions and restricted the term apology to “explicit” apologies.4

“Explicit” apologies include Sorry-based units of talk (e.g., I’m sorry) and offers of apology, or what Olshtain and Cohen (1983) termed illocutionary force indicating devices (e.g., I must apologize).5 There is data-internal evidence that members orient to at least these explicit forms as methods for apologizing. For example, see Extract 1. Four friends, all of whom attend the same U.S. college, are preparing to play a board game. While Tim, Max, and Kim are setting up the board, Don (who is standing across the room) purposefully throws a mini soccer ball at Max and hits him in the forehead.

Extract 1: BOARD GAME [JL Game:SB Corpus]

01 TIM: hOH::::::::: ((A response to Don’s assault))
02 (0.4)
03 TIM: DO::N,
04 (0.3)
05 DON: My bad. ((slang for ‘My fault’))
06 KIM: ↑Is she taping al(ready)?↓
In response to being chastised by Tim with “DO::N,” (line 3), Don produces “My bad” (line 5), which is slang for My fault and admits guilt for his offense. After some unintelligible, overlapping talk by Don and Kim (lines 8–9), Tim commands Don to “apologize” (line 10), which he does with “I’m sorr[y]” (line 11), thereby displaying his understanding that the Sorry-based unit is a method for apologizing. Relative to the Sorry-based unit, offers of apology (e.g., I must apologize) are rare, perhaps due to their formality (Meier, 1998; Owen, 1983; see Extracts 4 and 12 following).

A SOCIAL-ACTION APPROACH TO STUDYING APOLOGIES

For two reasons, this article takes a social-action approach to studying apologies (for review, see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Heritage, 1984b), eschewing questions of whether or not apologies are valid representations of actual psychological states, such as self-blame (Blackman & Stubbs, 2001) and self-guilt (Cody & McLaughlin, 1985; McLaughlin, Cody, & O’Hair, 1983), as well as questions of whether or not events being apologized for are objectively offensive. First, although researchers have tried (Holmes, 1990; Wolfson, Marmor, & Jones, 1989), it is probably not possible to specifically operationalize or exhaustively codify participants’ notions of an offense, which usually ends up being defined extremely generally in terms of a violation of social norms, particularly when it threatens another’s face or identity (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1981; Goffman, 1971; Meier, 1995; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Wolfson et al., Jones, 1989; see also Cody & McLaughlin, 1985; Schlenker, 1980; Schonbach, 1980). Second, according to Goffman (1971), persons constantly monitor acts, retrospectively and prospectively, for their possible offensiveness. As Goffman (1971) put it, actors “imagine … one or more ‘worst possible readings,’ that is, interpretations of the act that
maximize either its offensiveness to others or its defaming implications for the actor” (p. 108). This is at least partially why the work of remedying an offense, including apologizing, strategically tends to occur before participants overtly orient to an act as being offensive, for example, by sanctioning the offender (Goffman, 1971, p. 95; note that this is why cases such as Extract 1 are relatively rare). Because of this, apologies tend to address merely possible, or what Goffman (1971) called virtual, offenses. Following Goffman (1971), a social-action approach treats apologies as social claims to have offended someone. As such, in this article, I focus on moments when participants orient to events as being offensive and produce apologies for such events.

DATA AND METHOD

Data were drawn from a range of naturally occurring, recorded interactions including ordinary American and British telephone calls; videotapes of persons talking during meals, games, and other social engagements; videotapes of American physician–patient visits; and telephone calls between British physicians and clients. All data I transcribed (or retranscribed) using Jefferson’s notation system (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984), and transcripts were checked by at least one other trained conversation analyst to ensure their reliability (Roberts & Robinson, 2004). The method used is conversation analysis (for review, see Heritage, 1984). A collection of apology-related extracts was made, and their similarities and differences were analyzed qualitatively, including the formation of boundary cases (regarding method, see Schegloff, 1997) and deviant cases (Silverman, 2001). These extracts represent especially clear instances of the phenomenon of explicit apologies but are not qualitatively different from other cases in the core collection.

ANALYSIS

Apologies Can Take Sequential Positions Other Than First Parts of Adjacency-Pair Sequences

In this article, I primarily focus on the adjacency-pair organization of apologies (as seen in Extract 1, lines 11–12) including their prefer-
ence organization. However, that and how apologies can initiate first parts of adjacency-pair sequences is better understood by recognizing that not all do. Although space prevents an exhaustive account, in this section, I describe three different sequential positions that apologies can take and their relevance for the organization of apologizing as an action.

Prior research has shown that single turns of talk can be mobilized to accomplish multiple, distinct actions, which can themselves be hierarchically organized in terms of their centrality (and conditional relevance; Schegloff, in press). One sequential position that apologies can take is the initial turn-constructional unit (Sacks et al., 1974) of a turn that is part of an adjacency-pair sequence of action (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) that is being mobilized to accomplish a different (i.e., nonapology) action. In this position, the action of apologizing is typically subordinate to the adjacency-pair action being pursued in the remainder of the turn; in this position, apologies prospectively index a possible offense embodied in the subsequent turn and its action or actions (see also Maynard, 2003; Maynard & Schaeffer, 1997). For an example concerning a first-pair part of an adjacency-pair sequence, see Extract 2, which is drawn from a British, out-of-hours, emergency telephone call between a mother and an on-call physician:

Extract 2: DIARRHEA [DEC: 1-1-03]

01 MOM: Wha’ I’m concerned about is do I give f:luïds, or
02 DOC: .hhh [h Yeah. ]
03 MOM: [Or what.] I just don’t kno: [w. ]
04 a-> DOC: [>.h< ]>Sorry< how old is your daughter, >did you s [ay?><
05 a-> old is your daughter, >did you s [ay?><
06 MOM: Sh j:e:’s eightee:n.
07 DOC: Eightee:n.

At line 3, the mother’s “I just don’t kno:w” pursues an answer to her question at line 1: “Wha’ I’m concerned about is do I give f:luïds, or” (regarding I don’t know, see Robinson, 2003; Sacks, 1992a; tenHave, 1991). In preparation for answering (regarding pre-sequences, see Schegloff, 1988c), the physician asks “>Sorry< how old is your daughter,” (lines 4–5). The physician’s “>Sorry<” (line 4) claims that his subsequent question embodies a possible offense. Evidence that “>Sorry<” is a term of apology per se is found in the physician’s “>did you say?<” (line 5),
which displays his orientation to his initial question as being possibly in-
appropriate (i.e., possibly offensive) due to the fact that the patient might
have already provided such information (see Terasaki, 1976 [forth]). In
this case, the action of apologizing is produced and understood as being
subordinate to the primary action of this turn, which is requesting infor-
mation (for a related observation, see Bean & Johnstone, 1994); the phy-
sician’s turn is an apology-prefaced question, not an apology to be re-
responded to in its own right. This is supported in the following ways: (a)
the physician produces “>Sorry<” with level (i.e., nonfinal) intonation
(Ford & Thompson, 1996); (b) the physician produces “>Sorry<” with a
quick pace (symbolized by > < ) and rushes through to the word “how,”
which can be a practice for securing multiple units of talk (Schegloff,
1982); (c) the mother does not respond to “>Sorry<” despite its status as
a grammatically complete turn-constructional unit; and (d) by (only) re-
spending with her child’s age, “She:’s eighteen.” (line 6), the mother
treats the physician’s turn as accomplishing the action of requesting
information.

For an example of this type of sequential positioning concerning a sec-
ond-pair part of an adjacency-pair sequence, see Extract 3, which is drawn
from a British telephone call wherein Jane invites Edward and his wife
(Ilene) over for drinks (lines 1–7):

Extract 3: DRINK INVITATION [Heritage 01:13]

01 [ JAN: .h Uh:.m- () I was wondering if you an’
02 | Ilene would like to come over for a ()
03 | drink this evening. u-=uh:: () Margo
04 a>| has come from Coventry.
05 | (0.2)
06 | JAN: And uh:(m) () you know I thought that
07 [ d-=ih- ’d be nice if we could get toge<duh.

((Edward leaves phone to consult with his wife))

08 EDW: Janeiro,
09 JAN: Ye<es?
10 (0.4)
11 b-> EDW: I must apologi:ze, () thee answer is negative.
12 JAN: Okay.
13 EDW: Because uh: she’s (0.2) she’s feeling a
14 little under thuh weathah:
15 ( )
Jane’s invitation (lines 1–7) makes an acceptance or declination conditionally relevant (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Edward’s “I must apologize;” (line 11) claims that the subsequent portion of his turn (i.e., his declination) embodies a possible offense; in this sequential context, it projects a dispreferred response to Jane’s invitation (regarding Sorry as similarly forecasting bad news, see Maynard, 2003). As some (albeit ex post facto) evidence that “I must apologize;” (line 11) is a term of apology per se, note that immediately after Edward finishes accounting for (i.e., completes) his declination, he initiates a stand-alone apology using a similar term, “Our apologies” (line 23), and this is treated as an apology by Jane (the sequence at lines 23–24 is discussed on p. 307). However, Edward’s apology at line 11 is treated by Jane as being prefatory and subordinate to the primary action of this turn, which is declining the invitation; that is, Edward’s turn at line 11 is an apology-prefaced declination, not an apology to be responded to in its own right. This is supported by the fact that (a) Jane does not respond to “I must apologize;” even though it is a possibly (grammatically, intonationally, and pragmatically) complete turn-constructional unit, and (b) Jane does respond to “thee answer is negative” with “Okay” (line 12), which acknowledges and accepts the declination.

The sequential positioning characterized by Extract 3 is not limited to offers of apology (e.g., I apologize). For an example using the Sorry-based unit, see Extract 4, which is drawn from a British telephone call between two acquaintances, Leslie and Myrtle; Myrtle had previously indicated that
she would attend a meeting, and Leslie is calling to confirm her attendance (lines 1–2):

Extract 4: ATTENDANCE #1 [Field:X-Mas:1985:3]

01 a-> LES: A:re you thinking (. ) of coming (. ) to thuh
02 a-> meeting tonigh t.
03 b-> MYR: >Do you know< 'I'm te:rribly sorry. >I was
goin g da ring you in a short while,< .hh I
04 had=a phone call from Ben. (he's/whose) down
05 in Devon. 'n he's not going to get back
06 toni:ght. .h [h
07 LES: [Ye s=
08 MYR: =And mommy's going to this k - k-=uh: (. ) that
09 [ca:rol =]<concert.>
10 LES: [(y)- Yes [of cou:urse. ] I think my husband's
going to that too.:=
11 MYR: =I'm dreadfully sorry,
12 b'> LES: ↑That's a 'ri:ght,↓

Leslie’s query (lines 1–2) makes a Yes or No conditionally relevant. Myrtle’s “I’m te:rribly sorry” (line 3) claims that the subsequent portion of her turn embodies an offense (i.e., a No answer that embodies a backing out of a prior commitment) and thus projects a dispreferred response (see also, Raymond, 2003). As in Extract 4, there is evidence that “I’m te:rribly sorry” (line 3) is a term of apology per se; that is, immediately after Myrtle completes her account, she initiates a stand-alone apology using a similar syntax and lexicon, “I’m dreadfully sorry” (line 23), which is treated as an apology by Leslie (the sequence at lines 13–14 is discussed on p. 302 and is the first of a number of apology sequences in this extract, the second of which is Extract 12). However, Myrtle’s apology at line 3 is treated by Leslie as being prefatory and subordinate to the primary action of this turn, which is saying No; that is, Myrtle’s turn at lines 3 through 7 is an apology-prefaced account that stands as a No answer, not an apology to be responded to in its own right. This is supported by the fact that (a) Leslie does not respond to “I’m te:rribly sorry,” even though it is a possibly (grammatically, intonationally, and pragmatically) complete turn-constructional unit, and (b) Leslie does respond to Myrtle’s account with “Yes of cou:urse. I think my husband’s going to that too:” (lines 11–12), which acknowledges and ratifies Myrtle’s account (and, indirectly, the No it embodies).
Third, apologies can be conditionally relevant second parts of certain adjacency-pair-organized actions (e.g., complaints). In these cases, the action of apologizing is primary (vs. subordinate) but does not necessarily make a response conditionally relevant. For example, see Extract 5, which is drawn from a British telephone call in which Gordon calls Norman to request a ride:

**Extract 5: BATH [Field:SO88:1:2]**

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>GOR:</td>
<td>Are you goin’ toni:ght.=h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>NOR:</td>
<td>Mm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>GOR:</td>
<td>.hhh (.) Would you mind givin’ me a lift.= [h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>NOR:</td>
<td>[No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td></td>
<td>that’s a’righ’,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>GOR:</td>
<td>. hhh (0.2) Very kind of you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>a-&gt;</td>
<td>NOR:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 08 | GOR: | [ .ph]hhh Pardon?=
| 09 | a-> | NOR: | =(heh) Caugh [t me in thuh ba[th |
| 10 | b-> | GOR: | [.thh [O(h)hh(h) I’m s(h)orr(h)y |
| 11 |   | hee=.hu- (.).hhhh (uh/oh) well I sh’(ll) let you get |
| 12 |   | back to it.=h |
| 13 |   | (0.2) |
| 14 | GOR: | .hhh Uh::m (.) (.th) (0.2) sh’l I expect |
| 15 |   | you about quarter past ei:ght? |
| 16 |   | (0.7) |
| 18 | NOR: | Ah:: (lb-uh) (0.8) Yeah. |

After Gordon closes the request sequence (lines 1–5) with “Very kind of you” (line 6), Norman initiates a sequence of talk by asserting/announcing that Gordon called at an inopportune time, “Caught me in thuh bath again” (line 7; a-→), which raises the relevance of Gordon having committed a possible offense. After claiming registration of this with “O(h)h(h)” (line 10; Heritage, 1984), Gordon apologizes: “I’m s(h)orr(h)y” (line 10). Note that, after laughing, “hee=hu- (.).hhhh” (line 11), Gordon moves to close the interaction, “well I sh’(ll) let you get back to it,” (lines 11–12), which displays his orientation to the closure of the prior sequence of talk and thus the sufficiency of his apology as a response. Stated negatively, Gordon does not pursue a response to his apology and thus does not orient to it as an initiatory action (see also Note 6). Norman’s announcement (line 7) operates something like a complaint (Schegloff, 1988a) to which an apology may be a specifically relevant response (Sacks et al., 1974).
Adjacency-Pair and Preference Organization of Apologies

When apology units initiate a sequence of action and when apologizing is the primary action being accomplished, apologies are first parts of adjacency-pair sequences of action (the final analytic section, “Sorry-Based Units Can Be Used to Accomplish Nonapology Actions,” elaborates on these caveats). A first, and perhaps most basic, form of evidence is that such apologies solicit responses. This was the case in Extract 1 (lines 11–12), Extract 3 (lines 23–24), Extract 4 (lines 13–14), and is the case in Extracts 6 and 7. Extract 6 is drawn from the beginning of an American telephone call between a husband and wife:

Extract 6: WAKE UP [Schegloff:Openings #328]

((Ring))

01 WIF: Hello-o? ((sleepy voice))
02 HUS: Yeah did I wake yih up?
03 WIF: Yea:h.
04 a-> HUS: Sorry gal.
05 b-> WIF: That’s (okay doll),

Extract 7 is drawn from the beginning of an American medical visit:

Extract 7: VIRAL INFECTION [P3:118.19]

01 PAT: Hello:]
02 DOC: [He-=l ]o the:re,
03 (.)
04 a-> DOC: Sorry da keep you [waitin(g).]
05 b-> PAT: [ Oh that’s oka:y,
06 (.)
07 PAT: I have schoolwork to do an’ I said to Fran it’s quieter
08 here than at my house.=hhhh[heh heh heh ]
09 DOC: [Well you’re welcome] to stay …

Preferred Responses

In this article, I argue that the responses in Extracts 1, 3, 4, 6, and 7 are preferred (vs. dispreferred). There are at least two types of evidence for this claim. First, each of these responses is formatted in a structurally preferred manner (Pomerantz, 1984; Schegloff, 1988b). That is, they begin either at
or slightly before the first transition relevance place within the apology (i.e., one that is grammatically, intonationally, and pragmatically complete; Sacks et al., 1974). Second, preferred responses tend to accomplish actions that maintain or promote social solidarity (Heritage, 1984b) such as accepting (vs. declining) an invitation (Davidson, 1984), complying with (vs. refusing) a request (Davidson, 1984), and (notably for this analysis) disagreeing with (vs. endorsing) a self-deprecation (Pomerantz, 1984). Along these lines, the responses in Extracts 1, 3, 4, 6, and 7 promote social solidarity by somehow mitigating or undermining an apology’s claim to have caused offense and thus to have damaged the interpersonal relationship between apologizer and apologizee. The following three subsections examine (a) the preferred response of absolution (e.g., Extract 4, line 14: “That’s a’ri:ght”), (b) the preferred response of disagreeing with the need to have apologized (e.g., Extract 3, line 24: “No.”), and (c) the Oh-prefacing of preferred responses (e.g., Extract 7, line 5: “Oh that’s okay.”).

Absolution: “That’s alright” and “that’s okay.” In this data, as well as others (Owen, 1983), the two most common responses to apologies are That’s alright and That’s okay (see Extracts 3, 4, 6, and 7). These responses contain an indexical term (i.e., that’s) and an evaluative term (e.g., alright). The indexical term does not refer to the apology per se; in other words, respondents are not asserting that the act of apologizing is alright/okay. Rather, the that’s refers to the possible offense that is indexed by the apology. This argument is clearly supported by cases such as Extracts 6 and 7. In Extract 6, the husband’s “did I wake yih up?” (line 3) initiates a preapology sequence (see Schegloff, 1988c) in which the husband seeks to determine whether or not he committed a possible offense (i.e., waking his wife up) to establish the status of the relevance of apologizing. The wife’s “that’s” (line 6) indexes this possible offense. In Extract 7, the physician’s apology, “Sorry da keep you waitin(g)” (line 3), explicitly includes a reason for apologizing that constitutes a possible offense (i.e., “keep you waitin(g)”). The patient’s “that’s” indexes this possible offense.

In a variety of contexts of evaluation/assessment, the words alright and okay are relatively unaccountable terms of positive evaluation (e.g., relative to great and terrible; Jefferson, 1980; Sacks, 1975); Pillet-Shore (2003) described okay as a bottom-line positive or “no problem” (vs. “problem”) assessment. It is possible that, as responses to apologies, That’s alright and That’s okay are virtually semantically equivalent and thus interchangeable. For evidence, see Extract 8. Here, three American college students (Mat, Ann, and Ron), who are part of a decision-making group for a
college class, are waiting for the arrival of their fourth member, Joy, who is late; Joy arrives at the beginning of this extract:

Extract 8: GROUP MEETING [Morse:502]

01 MAT: (Hey) ( [ ]= ] ((addressed to Joy))
02 JOY: [Hey:]y.=h
03 a-> JOY: >Sorry I’m late.<
04 b1> MAT: That [‘s oka:y] y,
05 b2> ANN: [‘t’s=alright,]
06 (0.3)
07 ANN: (‘t)=least you came.
08 (.)
09 JOY: Yeah.

Ann begins and finishes her response, “‘t’s=alright” (line 5) in overlap with Don’s response, “That’s oka:y” (line 4); their evaluative terms are produced simultaneously.

In this article, I argue that the responses That’s alright and That’s okay simultaneously (a) acknowledge the commission of a possible offense (which is claimed by the apology) yet (b) claim that no offence was actually taken. These arguments are clearly supported by cases in which responses are elaborated. For example, it is not uncommon for That’s alright and That’s okay to be immediately followed by statements that mitigate, and sometimes overtly deny, an apology’s claim to have caused offense. For the first of four examples, see Extract 7. After the patient says “Oh that’s oka:y” (line 5), she goes on to assert, “I have schoolwork to do” (line 7), which simultaneously (a) displays an orientation to the physician having committed a possible offense by orienting to having waited (i.e., to having occupied her time with “schoolwork”) yet (b) claims to not have been offended insofar as she used the wait to complete necessary work.

For a second example, see Extract 9, which is drawn from the beginning of an American medical visit:

Extract 9: HAIR LOSS [P3:18.04]

01 DOC: ((Knock Knock Knock))
02 (0.2)
03 PAT: H e llo: 
04 DOC: [Hello:];
05 PAT: Hello:,
06 a-> DOC: [Hi_ (‘e:re,) I apologize ] [for thuh wa:i]t.
07 PAT: [tuh huh huh] [hhh ]
08 b-> PAT: Oh that’s alright. I’m=in=n o rush tonight.
After responding with “Oh that’s alright” (line 8), the patient asserts, “I’m no rush tonight” (line 8), which simultaneously (a) displays an orientation to the physician having committed a possible offense (i.e., having her “wa:it”) by implying its offensiveness under different circumstances (i.e., not “tonight”) yet (b) claims to not have been offended on this particular occasion (i.e., “tonight”).

For a third example, see Extract 10, which is drawn from a British telephone call between two friends who are cocomplaining about being primary-school teachers. Despite Leslie’s “Uh=m:” (line 4), which projects that she is about to take a turn of talk (Schegloff, 1996), Robbie interrupts by removing the phone from her mouth and yelling at an unidentified third party (line 5):

Extract 10: SHOUTING [Field:88:1:5]

01 LES: And it’s thuh rea:di:ng. thew thih thuh thuh
02 ROB: Tha’s ri:ght.
03 LES: Uh=m:.
04 ROB: [(Thuh DOOR it’s just stuck).]
05 (0.4)
06 ROB: ((Hearably returns mouth to phone))
07 LES: Uh=m:.
08 ROB: [(Thuh DOOR it’s just stuck).]
09 a-> ROB: So[rly. I’m shouting at [my ( )]]
10 b-> LES: [That’s alri:ght.] [That’s alri:ght.]
11 b-> LES: [(heh heh) heh]
12 b-> LES: [That’s alri ]ght. I don’t mind at all.

After (re)responding with “That’s alright” (line 12), Leslie denies that she was offended, “I don’t mind at all” (line 12), which simultaneously (a) displays an orientation to Robbie having committed a possible offense by orienting to the existence of something to be minded yet (b) claims to not have been offended.

For a fourth example, see Extract 11, which is drawn from the beginning of an American medical visit:

Extract 11: STREP THROAT [P3.39.06]

01 DOC: How ya doin’
02 PAT: [Oh] fine thank[s. ]
03 DOC: [ M] [iss- ]
04 PAT: [And y]o:u?
05 DOC: (I:)’m doin’ pretty goo:d except for bein’
After responding with “That’s alright” (line 9), the patient asserts “no problem,” which simultaneously (a) displays an orientation to the physician’s apology as embodying a claim to have caused offense (i.e., a “problem”) yet (b) denies that offense was taken.9 

I have shown that an apology indexes a particular offense and embodies a claim to have offended someone. This was most evident when apology turns themselves contained explicit orientations to the commission of an offense, such as “Sorry da keep you waitin’” (Extract 7, line 4) and “Sorry I’m late” (Extract 8, line 3), but also when preapology sequences contained such orientations, such as “did I wake you up?” (Extract 6, line 2), and also when apologies immediately followed events that were subsequently oriented to by apologizers as being possibly offensive, such as in Extract 10, in which Robbie interrupts Leslie, apologizes, and then accounts for her behavior: “I’m shouting at…” (line 9). These claims are further supported by the analysis of That’s alright and That’s okay, wherein apologizees acknowledge apologizers’ commission of a possible offence. Insofar as That’s alright and That’s okay simultaneously acknowledge the commission of a possible offense, yet claim that no offence was actually taken, they can be characterized as performing the action of absolution; that is, they work to reassure apologizers that their possible offense was not taken as an actual offense.10

**Disagreeing with the need to have apologized.** Another type of preferred response to an apology is to disagree with the need to have apologized, which is frequently accomplished with the negation No. For example, see Extract 12, which occurred shortly after Extract 4:

**Extract 12: ATTENDANCE #1 [Field:X-Mas:85:3]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>MYR:</th>
<th>LES:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Oh I’m dreadfully sorry about it,</td>
<td>No,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>[I w’s&lt; ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>&gt;(i[ts] in fact&lt; ]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>LES:</td>
<td>[It’s _en]ded].↓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Here, Myrtle, who has already apologized once for backing out of a commitment to Leslie (see Extract 4, lines 13–14), apologizes for a second time: “Oh I’m dreadfully sorry about it” (line 28). Leslie’s initial “↑No, no, ↓” (line 29) disagrees with the need for Myrtle to have apologized (note that it is not disagreeing with the apology per se but rather with the apology’s production as an action). This is supported by Leslie’s subsequent “↑(It’s ended). ↓,” which proposes the sufficiency of the first apology in terms of closing or ending the course of action of apologizing and thus asserts the lack of relevance for continued apologizing.

For another example, see Extract 13, which is drawn from a British telephone call between two friends, Jenny and Vera. Vera’s son and family recently came to visit her. However, when the family arrived, Vera was not at home. As a result, Vera’s family went to Jenny’s house where they stayed until Vera returned:

Extract 13: IN LAWS [Rahman:B:2:JV14]

01 JEN: >They were looking< all looking very well,
02 (.)
03 VER: ee=Ye(s)- >wasn’t [it lu]cky? I told (thuh
04 JEN: [(Mm)-]}
05 VER: w) I told missis richards ta [tell ()]
06 JEN: [Ye:s ]
07 >that was smash(ing)< mind he might have
08 thought you were up here any [way(s) ]
09 VER: [Yes. he ]
10 VER: could=of done.
11 VER: [Ye:es . ]
12 JEN: [ee=Ye:s]: [Mm h]m,
13 VER: [Yes. ]
14 a-> VER: I↑[‘m sorry] you had them all [on you
15 JEN: [(——)]
16 hh ]
17 a-> VER: [Jenny.]
18 b-> JEN: [↑Oh don’t ↓[be si ]lly, ↑No;↓ that was
19 love>ly it< was a nice surpri[↑se,↓]
20 VER: [ Y:]ließ ( )
21 JEN: [An’
22 JEN: they look so well.

Similar to Extract 12, Jenny’s “↑No;↓” (line 17) is not disagreeing with Vera’s apology per se but rather with her production of it as an action. Jenny displays her orientation to the function of “↑No;↓” by continuing with
“that was lovely it was a nice surprise” (lines 17–18). Jenny’s assessment term “lovely” is markedly positive, unmitigated, and upgraded relative to alright and okay (i.e., That’s okay) and communicates more than simply “no problem” (Pillet-Shore, 2003). With “lovely,” Jenny claims access to the possible offense and disagrees with Vera’s need to have apologized via characterizing the apologized-for event as specifically non-offensive and thus documenting a lack of relevance for Vera’s apology (see also Pomerantz, 1984, pp. 86–87).

The analysis of Extracts 12 and 13 illuminate that of others, such as Extract 3, in which Jane responds to Edward’s “Our apologies” with “No, that’s alright” (lines 23–24). Here, Jane initially rejects the need for Edward to have apologized and then absolves him of the offense.

“Oh”-prefaced preferred responses. As noted by Heritage (1984a, 1998), an oh preface to a response can propose that the action being responded to effected a change in the respondent’s orientation or awareness. When the response is to a question, an oh preface can propose that the question was unexpected or unlooked for and thus that it was in some way problematic regarding its relevance, appropriateness, or presuppositions. In such cases, oh has a self-attentive quality in that it draws attention to the respondent’s world and its presuppositions as the basis for the response. Along these lines, an oh preface to a response to an apology can display the respondent’s understanding that the action of apologizing was in some way irrelevant or inappropriate.

For the first of two examples, see Extract 7, in which the patient responds with “Oh that’s okay” (line 5). Not only was the patient not offended on this particular occasion because she had “schoolwork to do” (line 7), but the patient further claims that the physician’s office is, in fact, a preferable location to work: “I said to Fran it’s quieter here than at my house” (lines 7–8). In this case, the physician’s apology is oriented to as specifically inappropriate because its claimed offense (i.e., the wait) is actually oriented to as a boon. For a second example, see Extract 13. Jenny’s “don’t be silly” (line 17) explicitly reveals her orientation to the function of the “Oh” preface, which is to display her understanding of the silliness, or lack of appropriateness or relevance, of Vera’s apology. Insofar as apologies embody a claim to have offended someone, oh prefacing a response can be a way of challenging such a claim by challenging the relevance of the action of apologizing. Oh prefacing an absolution-type response is a way of upgrading the level of absolution.
To summarize, preferred responses to apologies somehow mitigate or undermine an apology’s claim to have caused offense, such as providing absolution (e.g., That’s okay) and disagreeing with the need to have apologized (e.g., No; and perhaps others as well, such as disagreeing with an apology’s claimed offense; see Extract 14 later). Note that “acceptance” was not included as a form of preferred response. Although the notion of “accepting” an apology is deeply ingrained in at least American vernacular culture (e.g., Apology accepted), there are no cases in this data in which an apology is technically “accepted.” This is not to argue that apologies do not get accepted nor that acceptance cannot be a preferred response. However, as I argue later in this article, mere acknowledgment of an apology (e.g., shrugging or saying Right) and agreement with an apology (e.g., Yeah) are oriented to as dispreferred responses. Future research needs to better understand the relation between an apology’s claim to have caused offense, its technical acceptance, and its vernacular acceptance.

Finally, the preferred responses discussed, as well as their prefacing with Oh, are not mutually exclusive, and their inclusion and ordering within a turn can display respondents’ in situ, nuanced treatment of apologies. For just two examples, in Extract 3, Jane’s “No, that’s alright” initially disagrees with Edward’s need to have apologized and then absolves him of the possible offense; in Extract 13, Jenny’s “Oh don’t be silly” prefaces her disagreement with Vera’s need to have apologized: “No; that was love>ly.” Each of these multiunit, preferred-response turns embody subtly different stances toward the apology, apologizer, and possible offense. As multiunit, preferred-response turns, they raise the possibility (which is not addressed in this article) that different types of preferred responses (e.g., absolution and disagreement with the need to have apologized) have their own normative organization relative to each other (for a similar observation, see Raymond, 2003).

Dispreferred Responses

Response delay and pursuit of apology response. To prove that apologies are first parts of adjacency-pair sequences, it is not sufficient to show that responses merely follow apologies. Rather, it needs to be demonstrated that apologies make responses conditionally relevant (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). This means demonstrating that apologies establish a normative constraint that responses be provided and be positioned at the first transition-rel-
evance place within the apology. If so, then respondents’ forms of participation that are understandably not the beginning of an apology response and that occur after the first transition-relevance place should be accountable as forms of response delay. Evidence for this is found in the fact that, when confronted with response delay (see “ø->” in Extract 14), apology speakers not only pursue a response, but pursue an apology-relevant response, thereby orienting to the normative constraint established by the conditional relevance of the apology. One way that apology speakers pursue responses is by producing accounts (see “*->” in Extract 14), or more precisely, offense-related excuses (Scott & Lyman, 1968). For example, see Extract 14, which is drawn from an American medical visit:

**Extract 14: CHRONIC-ROUTINE VISIT [P3.15.03]**

01 a-> DOC: Hello: s[orry I’m running] late.
02 PAT: [Hi: ]
03 ø-> (.)
04 *-> DOC: ’T’s a typical mo
05 b-> PAT: Oh you’re not running (late)=
06 DOC: =(N)ot doin’ too ba:d.
07 PAT: No:::

The first transition-relevance place is after “late” (line 1). The patient’s response is delayed by a micropause (line 3) after which the physician pursues a response by producing an offense excuse: “’T’s a typical monday” (line 4). The patient treats this not only as a pursuit of a response, but of one to an apology; that is, rather than responding to the offense excuse per se, she responds to the apology by producing an oh-prefaced disagreement with the apology’s claimed offense: “Oh you’re not running (late)” (line 5). The patient shows herself to be responding specifically to the apology by reusing the physician’s words (cf., line 1, “running late”).

The previous analysis hinges on the claim that the physician’s offense excuse, “’T’s a typical monday” (line 4), is a pursuit of a response to an apology. There is evidence that offense excuses can be produced and understood for their apology-related offense relevance. For the first of two examples, see Extract 15. Victor and James are both superintendents of U.S. apartment buildings. While James was away from his building, one of the tenants broke a window, which Victor discovered. At the time of discovery, Victor only had a pail (not a broom), and he did his best to manually pick up
the glass. Extract 15 occurs later when Victor and James finally talk about the incident:

Extract 15: CLEAN UP [Upholstery Shop]

01 VIC: (Thuh) pəːil is in yuh haːllwaːy,
02  (.)
03 JAM: (I know it hu(hh) [h)
04 a-> VIC: [Thuh- thuh- (.) I
data did’nt have a broom with me if I’d a swept up.
05 -> had a [broom I’d a swept up.
06 b-> JAM: [e(hh)] [That’s alright.
07 VIC: (So [dat’s, right on.)
08 b-> JAM: [That’s ar- SOMEbody- (.)
09 -> got it up, I don’know who;
10 a-> VIC: [(Look). But do me a favor-

At lines 5 through 6, Victor provides an offense excuse for why he did not thoroughly clean up the glass: “if I’ad a had a broom I’d a swept up.” James responds by absolving Victor of the potential offense, “That’s alright” (line 7), which treats the offense excuse for its apology relevance. Note that James’s subsequent, “SOMEbody- (.). got it up” (lines 9–10) orients to the event (i.e., Victor not sweeping up) as being possibly offensive by acknowledging the incompleteness of Victor’s initial job.

For a second example, see Extract 16, which is drawn from the beginning of an American medical visit. Although the visit occurs on a Monday, the patient first experienced her problem over the weekend and had unsuccessfully attempted to contact the physician by having him paged. At lines 4 through 5, the physician provides an offense excuse for not having returned the patient’s call: “I was out of state- out of town”:

Extract 16: SICKNESS [Nurses.14.07]

01 PAT: And you? ((a reciprocal “How are you”))
02 DOC: I’m fiːne;
03  (0.2)
04 a-> DOC: You knoːw? (0.8) I got your pːage (0.8) but I was
05 a-> out of state- out of [town.  ]
06 b-> PAT: [That’s al]r[ight.([  )]
07 DOC: [Y- [You diʃ]n’t knoːw?
08  (0.2)
09 PAT: No I didn’ know.
The patient responds by absolving the physician, “That’s alright” (line 6), which treats the physician’s offense excuse for its apology relevance.12

I now return to the argument that apologies make responses conditionally relevant. Extract 14 provided some evidence for this, in that the patient’s silence at line 3 constituted an accountable response delay and the physician’s offense excuse “‘T’s a typical monday” (line 4) pursued and secured an apology response. In general, accounts associated with dispreferred response trajectories tend to be designed to mitigate speakers’ responsibility for performing dispreferred actions (Heritage, 1984b) and in this way address possible relational damage between themselves and their addressees (e.g., in terms of face violations; Brown & Levinson, 1987). As a type of account, excuses function to reduce personal responsibility and forestall negative attributions of moral character by shifting causal attributions from central elements of one’s identity to peripheral or external elements (Goffman, 1971; Riordan, Marlin, & Kellogg, 1983; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). Apologizers use offense excuses to pursue not simply responses, but preferred responses (as was the case in Extract 14). In doing so, they display their understanding of apologizers’ response delay as embodying the possible existence of relational damage for which they are responsible, and thus as projecting a dispreferred response type.

Pursuit does not always secure a preferred response. For example, see Extract 17, which is drawn from a British telephone call between two acquaintances, Leslie and Janice; Janice is yet another person declining to attend a meeting (cf. Extract 4):

Extract 17: ATTENDANCE #2 [Field:X-Mas:85:04]

01 LES: Oh: hello Janice, are ↑you going↓ to=(th’)
02 meeting toni:ght,
03 (0.4)
04 JAN: No. I’m not. °Leslie°
05 LES: No:. [Ok↑ay↓ then:,
06 JAN: [(No)
07 (0.3)
08 a-> JAN: No. sorry about that,
09 ø-> (;)
10 *-> JAN: [I think I’m un↑able↓ to make that one,
11 b-> LES: [°↑Right then↓°]
12 (0.3)
13 LES: N:o.
Leslie’s response is delayed by a micropause (line 9), after which Janice pursues a response by producing a nonspecific offense excuse: “I think I’m unable to make that one” (line 10; this is an excuse because it alludes to a reason, “I’m unable,” for not being able to attend the meeting). Simultaneous with the beginning of Janice’s offense excuse, Leslie produces “↑Right then↓” (line 11), which is not a preferred response. Rather, it simultaneously acknowledges the apology (and its claimed offense) and initiates the closing of the call (cf. her earlier “Ok↑ay↓ the:n,” line 5; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973).

Even though an offense excuse may not secure a preferred response, the fact that apologizers persist in their pursuit of a response is additional evidence that apologies are first-pair parts. For example, see Extract 18, which is drawn from an American telephone call. Bob and Mark are part of a circle of friends. Lately, Mark has been out of touch and, consequently, did not get invited to a party, which is being organized by Bob. Mark initiates this call to inquire about the party, which leads to Bob’s sarcastically formal invitation at lines 1 through 2. After some teasing (lines 4–10), Bob apologizes for not having originally invited Mark to his party: “I’m so:rry” (line 15):

Extract 18: SNUB [SF2]

| 01 | BOB:  | Ma:rk,=h (0.2) will you come to (our/a) party |
| 02 |      | >Frida<y< |
| 03 | MAR: | [hh heh heh heh heh .hh#uh# .h |
| 04 | BOB: | N(h)o(h)? |
| 05 | MAR: | [h |
| 06 | BOB: | [.hhh ] No: you |
| 07 | BOB: | #do:n’t.# |
| 08 | BOB: | {hhhhhh/(0.5)} |
| 09 | MAR: | Y:eah. I know. |
| 10 |      | (0.2) |
| 11 | MA?: | .tch |
| 12 |       | (. ) |
| 13 | MAR: | .hh [ He:y= [“uh^”] |
| 14 | a-> BOB: | [( ) I’m [ so ]:ry, |
| 15 | φ-> | (0.4) |
| 16 | *-> BOB: | But- (0.2) you know how these things are. |
The first transition-relevance place is after “so:rry” (line 15). After 0.4 seconds of response delay by Mark (line 16), Bob produces a nonspecific offense account (i.e., it is not clearly an excuse or justification): “But- (0.2) you know how these things are” (line 17). This is followed by a full second of silence (line 18), after which Bob continues with “So: uh” (line 19). However, Mark interjects with “Oh:” (line 20), which claims a change of state (Heritage, 1884a), and continues with “we:ll,” which is a form of response delay that routinely projects a dispreferred response (Sacks, 1987). This is oriented to by Bob, who immediately, after Mark’s “we:ll” (line 20), interruptively pursues a preferred response by producing an offense excuse: “It(’s) just a matter of: (1.2) taking for gran’ed th’t you know you know: w it’s our fault that you don’t know.” (lines 21–22). Additional evidence that Bob is pursuing a response is found in his tag question “you know” (line 22), which is a request for confirmation that simultaneously functions to absorb some of Mark’s response delay and secure turn transfer (Sacks et al., 1974). When Mark still does not respond (after the tag question), Bob shifts from offering an offense excuse (lines 21–22) to admitting blame: “It’s our fault that you don’t know” (lines 22–23; this may be another practice for pursuing a response to an apology). After a micropause (line 24), Mark produces an extended inbreath, “.mtch=.hhhh,” which is another form of response delay that routinely projects a dispreferred response (Sacks, 1987). Again, before Mark begins speaking, Bob interjects with an assertion that Marks understands the nature of his prior accounting: “>You know what I mean<” (line 26). Rather than producing a response to the apology, Mark initiates a new sequence by demanding to be informed about the purpose of the party: “Well what’s thuh deal though. … why are we having this party” (lines 27 and 30, respectively). Bob’s only solace (for not securing a response to his apology)
can be found in Mark’s use of “we” (line 30), which displays that he now considers himself to not merely have been invited to the party, but as being integral to its organization (and perhaps to the organization of friends from which he has recently been out of touch).

Actual dispreferred responses. In the preceding subsection, I only examined apologizers’ pursuit of response in the wake of different forms of response delay, which included silence, well, and drawing breath. The argument that apologizers do not simply pursue responses, but preferred responses, is proven by the fact that, in the wake of dispreferred responses, apologizers frequently continue to pursue another type of response. In doing so, apologizers display their orientations to the initial response as being dispreferred. For example, see Extract 19, which is drawn from an American medical visit:

Extract 19: CRAZY [P3.122.18]

01 a-> DOC: I’m sorry (.) ta=make ya=wait.
02 ø-> (.)
03 b-> PAT: ((1 Shrug))
04 (.)
05 *-> DOC: It’s thee usual.
06 ø-> (0.2)
07 *-> DOC: Things are crazy.
08 PAT: I feel thuh same.
09 (.)
10 DOC: .hh [h] ((DOC ends by mouthing a “w”))
11 PAT: [I] realize it.
12 (0.4)
13 DOC: What brings ya in.

The first transition-relevance place is after “wait” (line 1). The patient delays for a micropause (line 2) before nonvocally responding with a single shrug. Although the shrug minimally acknowledges the apology, the stance it takes toward the apology is ambiguous. Proof that the shrug constitutes a dispreferred response is that, after a micropause (line 4), the physician treats the shrug as insufficient by pursuing a preferred response with a nonspecific offense excuse: “It’s thee usual” (line 5; “It’s” refers to the “usual” office situation that produces waits). After 0.2 seconds of response delay by the patient (line 6), the physician continues to pursue a preferred response by elaborating on (and thus renewing the relevance
of) her prior offense excuse: “Things are crazy” (line 7). The patient’s response, “I feel thuh same” (line 8), may shed light on the import of her earlier shrug—that is, it challenges the validity of the physician’s offense excuse by asserting that she is experiencing the “same” exigencies, and thus challenging the excuse’s unique, circumstantial nature. The patient’s earlier shrug may have been specifically designed as a mere acknowledgment of the apology, that is, an acknowledgment that an offense had been committed. After a brief micropause (line 9), the physician prepares to begin the business of the visit by breathing in “.hhh” (line 10) and beginning to solicit the patient’s medical problem (the physician ends her inbreath by mouthing a w, which is the beginning sound of her “What” at line 13). However, the patient interdicts this with “I realize it” (line 11; “it” refers to the office’s state of craziness). Here, the patient alters her position (from line 8) by acknowledging the physician’s prior excuse (i.e., the craziness; lines 5–7). Relative to her shrug, this response is more preferred in that it acknowledges the physician’s lack of personal responsibility for having committed the offense; however, it specifically does not absolve the physician of the offense.

Examples of unambiguously dispreferred responses are extremely rare in this data, and perhaps generally given their threat to a relationship specifically, and to social harmony generally. One clear (albeit nonserious) case is Extract 20, which is drawn from an American telephone call between two good friends, Nancy and Hyla. Prior to this extract, Hyla tells Nancy that she has a future romantic date. This raises the potentially sore topic of the last man who Hyla dated, who subsequently moved out of town and remained out of touch. Knowing that Hyla has been expecting a letter from this man, Nancy asks, “Did ya already get the maiːl” (line 1):

Extract 20: DATING [HG2]

01 NAN: Did ya already get the maiːl,
02 HYL: .hhh Yes
03 (.)
04 HYL: hhhh=
05 NAN: =Oh.
06 ???: hhh ((outbreath))
07 (0.2)
08 a-> NAN: S(h)orry I brou(h)ght (h)it u(h)p
09 b-> HYL: Yeah. [So am I:.hhh [h hh
10 NAN: [(hhh) [(Oh::/Uh::),
11 (.)
Nancy’s question at line 1 nominates the topic of whether or not Hyla has received a letter from her former admirer (regarding topic proffers, see Schegloff, in press). Hyla answers with “Yes,” which displays that she has the ability to address the proffered topic. However, the subsequent pause (line 3) and Hyla’s extended outbreath (line 4) project that Hyla will not continue speaking. Thus, Hyla displays, almost literally, that she “does not want to talk about it” and thus that the topic is sensitive. This is registered by Nancy with “Oh” (line 5), and after a brief silence (line 7), Nancy apologizes for proffering a topic that exposed a face-threatening issue in Hyla’s life. Note that Nancy’s apology is produced with laugh tokens, which functions to reduce its seriousness; in fact, Nancy’s apology is produced as a token apology and in this way manages to tease Hyla. Hyla initially responds with “Yeah,” which acknowledges the apology and its claim that offense was given, and thus implies that offense was actually taken. This is supported by Hyla’s subsequent, “So am I:” (line 9) in which she claims to be hurt or offended by claiming personal regret (see following) for having been spurned by her former admirer.

**Sorry-Based Units Can Be Used to Accomplish Nonapology Actions**

*Expressions of Personal Regret*

Having demonstrated that *sorry* can be a term of apology per se, and that the *sorry*-based unit can be used to accomplish the action of apologizing, in this section, I provide a final cautionary note that the *sorry*-based unit can also be used to accomplish other, nonapology actions (it is not clear, in this data, if this is so for the *apologize* illocution). At least in English, the *sorry*-based unit is an abstract or decontextualized *expression of personal regret* (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978; Fraser, 1981). On each occasion of its production, the *sorry*-based unit indexes a particular *object of regret* (Coulmas, 1981; Fraser, 1981; Rehbein & Ehlich, 1976). The action that the *sorry*-based unit accomplishes is essentially tied to the nature of this object of regret. *Sorry*-based units constitute *apologies* at least when the object of regret is not only an offense (e.g., hitting someone in the head, as
in Extract 1) but one for which the speaker of regret (e.g., Don) is personally responsible for having committed and one that directly affects the recipient of regret (e.g., Tim). So far, all of the apologies in this article have been of this type. However, the sorry-based unit can constitute a different action when the nature of the object of regret changes. For example, when the object of regret is not only a misfortune, but one that is being experienced by the recipient of regret and one for which the speaker of regret is in no way responsible, the sorry-based unit can accomplish a condolence (Coulmas, 1981; Fraser, 1981; Kumatoridani, 1999; Maynard, 2003; Sacks, 1992b). For example, see Extract 21, which is drawn from an American telephone call between two friends, Emma and Nancy. Emma has just informed Nancy that she had an operation on her toe:

Extract 21: OPERATION [NB:2:4:R]

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>NAN:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>EMA:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>EMA:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>a-&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>EMA:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>b-&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>NAN:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At line 7, after Emma concludes her troubles telling (lines 4–6; regarding troubles telling, see Jefferson, 1988), Nancy produces “Oh:: I:’m so:rry E:mma:?” (line 7). There is evidence that Emma orients to this as a condolence, not an apology. First, with “I: am too” (line 9), Emma not only claims to be experiencing a particular state of being, but (with the word “too”) claims that she is experiencing a same state of being as Nancy. Thus, Emma’s “I: am too” displays her understanding of Nancy’s prior turn, “Oh:: I:’m so:rry,” as embodying a particular state of being. Second, the nature of this state of being is illuminated by Emma’s subsequent “>why=(d)on’<=cha come an’ see me.” The formulation “see me” (vs. come over for coffee or come say hi) refers to something that someone does when another has suffered in some way, such as when people visit or go see someone in the hospital. Thus, Emma appears to orient to Nancy’s “Oh:: I:’m so:rry” as an expression of hurt or suffering on someone else’s (i.e., Emma’s) behalf, which fits the description of a condolence.
**Other-Initiated Repair**

There is at least one other conversational practice in which the *sorry*-based unit comprises the entirety of the first part of an adjacency-pair sequence, yet the action it accomplishes (at least the *primary* action) is not an apology. In some cases, *sorry* or *I’m sorry*, almost always produced with upward intonation, can be used to accomplish *other-initiated repair* (for related observations, see Bean & Johnstone, 1994; Drew, 1997; Edmonson, 1981; regarding other-initiated repair, see Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). For example, see Extract 22, which is drawn from the very beginning of a British telephone call between Leslie and her Mother:

**Extract 22: OTHER-INITIATED REPAIR**

((Telephone Rings))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>LES</th>
<th>MOM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Hello::</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>°↑Hello::↓°</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>(.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>°(Leslie?)°</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>(0.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>a-&gt; LES: Sor↑ry↓?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>(0.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>b-&gt; MOM: Leslie?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>(.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>LES: Oh yehah. Sorry.=I couldn’t hear you very [well. Je:m]’s m-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>MOM: [°(Oh:)°]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>LES: (m)= [Je:m’s-]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>MOM: [Are (your) &lt;fam]ily&gt; o:ff?</td>
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After Leslie answers the phone (line 1), her mother greets her in a manner that communicates that she recognizes Leslie: “°↑Hello::↓°” (Schegloff, 1979). When Leslie fails to respond (line 3), raising the possibility that she is not Leslie, her Mom shifts from a greeting to a request for confirmation of her identity: “°(Leslie?)°” (line 4). After a brief pause (line 5), Leslie initiates repair with “Sor↑ry↓?” (line 6). Evidence that Leslie’s “Sor↑ry↓?” (line 6) is a term of apology per se is found in her subsequent excuse, “I couldn’t hear you very well” (line 10), which is prefaced with the same apology term, “Sorry.” Nonetheless, Leslie’s “Sor↑ry↓?” (line 6) is produced and understood as (at least *primarily*) accomplishing the action of initiating repair, not apologizing. This is supported by the fact that her mother treats it this way by repeating “Leslie?” (line 8). Using a sorry-
based unit, which is a term of apology, to initiate repair may be a practice for claiming personal responsibility for repair-related trouble, in this case Leslie’s trouble hearing.

DISCUSSION

In this article, I examined the sequential organization of “explicit” apologies, including the sorry-based unit (e.g., I’m sorry) and the apologize illocution (e.g., I must apologize). I demonstrated that apologies can take a number of different sequential positions, with different implications for the organization of apologizing as an action, but I focused on turns in which apology units initiate a sequence of action, and apologizing is the primary action being accomplished. In these cases, apologies are first parts of adjacency-pair sequences making conditionally relevant a paired-type response in which one type is preferred and the other is dispreferred. Preferred responses somehow mitigate or undermine an apology’s claim to have caused offense and included (a) absolution (e.g., That’s alright and That’s okay), which simultaneously acknowledges the commission of a possible offense yet claims that no offence was actually taken and (b) responses that disagree with the need to have apologized (e.g., No), which undermine an apology’s premise that offense was given. Dispreferred responses somehow endorse an apology’s claim to have caused offense and included (a) mere acknowledgments (e.g., shrugging and saying Right) and (b) responses that agree with the need to have apologized (e.g., Yeah). Finally, I demonstrated that, even when sorry-based units initiate a sequence of action, they can accomplish non-apology actions, such as condolences and other-initiated repair.

It is perhaps curious that, in this article on apologies, I did not deal directly with the important concept of forgiveness, which research has found to be associated with relational satisfaction and commitment (McCullough et al., 1998). However, these data contain no cases of the forgive illocution (e.g., I forgive you). Future research needs to investigate the reasons for the apparent rarity of overt orientations to forgiveness, as well as its social-organizational features. The preferred response of absolution may embody a social claim of forgiveness, and thus may constitute part of members’ vernacular notion of forgiveness. If so, the finding that absolution is a preferred response to an apology aligns with previous findings that apologizing promotes forgiveness (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Insofar as apologizing is frequently orga-
nized in terms of adjacency-pair sequences, as absolution is a form of forgiveness, and as preferred responses are pursued in the face of response delay and/or dispreferred responses, these findings suggest that forgiveness is negotiated, and done so in and through structures of interaction.

The bulk of prior research on preference organization has focused on actions in which a positively valenced response (e.g., agreement) is preferred and a negatively valenced response (e.g., disagreement) is dispreferred, such as with invitations, offers, requests, and Yes/No questions. In contrast, Pomerantz (1984) demonstrated that the preferred response to a self-deprecation is *disagreement*. Along similar lines, Schegloff (1988b) offered a data-based conjecture that the preferred response to a guess at bad news, when the guess is overly pessimistic, is *rejection* (note that the bad news that Schegloff, 1988b, examined implicated copresent members including a dinner guest guessing at bad news dealing with dessert prepared by one of the hosts). Schegloff (1988b) went on to speculate that, even actions that are typically thought of as preferring positively valenced responses, such as offers preferring acceptances (see Heritage, 1984), may have forms that prefer negatively valenced responses, such as “initial offers of a second helping of dessert” (Schegloff, 1988b, p. 454) preferring *declination*.

Along the lines of Pomerantz (1984) and Schegloff (1988b), in this article, I found that apologies prefer the mitigation, versus endorsement, of an apology’s claim to have caused offense, which can include outright disagreements with the need to have apologized (e.g., *No*). Along with the organization of self-deprications, that of apologies supports the idea that the nature of preferred and dispreferred responses has less to do with their valence and more to do with how their actions affect social relationships, including *face* (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, declining an invitation, not complying with a request, agreeing with a self-deprecation, and endorsing an apology’s claim to have caused offense are all accountable actions (Garfinkel, 1967) that tend to have negative sociorelational implications. Insofar as such accountability is culturally bound, apologies are another example of how culture shapes sequence organization (Schegloff, 1988b). Apologies are also another example of how the structure of interaction has built-in mechanisms for promoting social solidarity (Schegloff, in press).

Future research needs to address whether or not apologizing itself (i.e., as a first-pair part) has a preference organization (see Schegloff, in press). The existence of preapology sequences, as in Extract 6, suggests that there
may be some environments in which apologizing is oriented to as a dispreferred action (e.g., a dispreference for apologizing when there is “nothing” to apologize for). Alternatively, the preponderance of apologies closely following the relevance of a possible offense suggests that there may be some environments in which apologizing is not only preferred, but specifically relevant. This is apparently the case in Extract 1, in which Tim’s command to Don to apologize (line 10) is some evidence that Don relevantly failed to apologize after hitting Max in the head. Future research needs to examine ways in which virtual offenses become relevant to members in and through interaction and how the occurrence of such relevance, including its sequential positioning, shapes the action of apologizing.

The inclusion of the qualifier “explicit” in the title of this article—“The Sequential Organization of ‘Explicit’ Apologies in Naturally Occurring English”—orients to the possibility that members may have other methods for apologizing that do not include the virtually exclusive focus of this article, which was the sorry-based unit and offers of apology. For example, pardon and excuse me might, in some contexts, be produced and understood as primarily accomplishing the action of apologizing. However, at least three qualifications must be noted. First, as discussed in the literature review and as reinforced in the analysis, prior research has tended to conflate the action of apologizing with other offense-remedial-related actions, such as accounting (i.e., offering an excuse or justification), admitting guilt, promising forbearance, requesting forgiveness, and requesting to be excused or pardoned. Second, participants themselves appear to orient to differences between offense-remedial-related actions. For example, in Extract 1, Don’s admission of guilt, “My bad” (line 5), is not oriented to by Tim as an apology. Or again, in Extracts 4 and 5, respectively, Edward and Myrtle apologize despite having just provided an offense excuse and having it acknowledged (and, in Extract 5, having the excuse ratified: “Yes of course. I think my husband’s going to do that too:”; lines 11–12). Third, as demonstrated by Extracts 15 and 16, and as elaborated in Footnote 11, a variety of nonapology actions (e.g., excuses and thanking) can be nonetheless treated for their offense relevance and be responded to in ways that are very similar, if not identical, to apologies.

In this article, I provide data-internal evidence that members orient to at least the sorry-based unit and offers of apology as accomplishing the action of apologizing per se. Indeed, two of the largest apology studies analyzing naturally occurring, English interaction (Holmes, 1990; Owen, 1983) as well as Meier’s (1998) systematic review of apology studies, found that the
unelaborated, sorry-based unit is by far the most prevalent apology strategy. This may be because other offense-remedial-related actions are not the primary vehicles for performing the action of apologizing. Although many actions have indirect forms (e.g., directives; for review, see M. H. Goodwin, 1990), Edmonson (1981) argued that, concerning apologies, there is no cause for them to not be explicit, and that indirectness may in fact undermine their function as apologies. Future research needs to seriously consider the question of whether or not the sorry-based unit and offers of apology are merely “explicit” methods of apologizing, or whether the action of apologizing is essentially constituted by such “explicit” methods.

NOTES

1 Samp and Solomon (1998) found that the most prevalent and intense goal during problematic events in close relationships is the offender’s acceptance of fault for the event.

2 Decreases in intimacy by one close relational partner, which can communicate a perceived relational offense by the other partner, significantly promote compensatory verbal responses by the other partner such as an apology (Guerrero, Jones, & Burgoon, 2000).

3 With several exceptions (e.g., Holmes, 1990; Owen, 1983), prior research on apologies has used nonnaturally occurring data such as intuition, retrospective self-reports of behavior, discourse completion (and other judgment) tests, role play, news media, nontape-recorded forms of naturalistic observation, or recorded forms of laboratory based, induced conversation (for review, see Meier, 1998). Although I focus on apologies in English data, they have been studied in a number of non-English languages including Akan (Obeng, 1999), Bislama (Meyerhoff, 1999), French (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1994, as cited in Obeng, 1999), German (Vollmer & Olshtain, 1989), Japanese (Kumatoridani, 1999; Sugimoto, 1997), Polish (Jaworski, 1994), and Spanish and Hebrew (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983).

4 Goffman (1971) and Fraser (1981) have claimed that apologies address the offensiveness of an act but not necessarily the act itself, including issues of explanation and atonement (see also Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Semin & Manstead, 1983; Sugimoto, 1997). Hale (1987) found that persons perceive unelaborated apologies (i.e., without excuses or justifications) to be insufficient accounts for some personal offenses. Compared to excuses, justifications, and other types of offense-remedial behavior, apologies are more effective in resolving interpersonal conflict (for review, see Takaku, 2001).


6 Note that Myrtle never actually says No. Along these lines, Schegloff (in press) noted that a feature of dispreferred, second-pair-part turns is that the actual, dispreferred,
conditionally relevant response, such as *No*, does not always get produced; rather, it is strongly projected by other features such as silence, *Uhm*, accounts, and so forth. Along these lines, Edmondson (1981) observed that *sorry* alone can constitute a rejection of a request. This aligns with a field-noted sequence between a beggar and a pedestrian:

**Extract A: ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE**

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<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>a- &gt;</td>
<td>BEG: Spare some change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>b- &gt;</td>
<td>PED: Sorry. ((Pedestrian walks away))</td>
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Although such second-positioned apologies do not make conditionally relevant a response, they can nonetheless be responded to as apologies. For example, Duneier (1999, p. 66) recorded the following conversation (which is not transcribed according to Jefferson’s conventions):

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>a- &gt;</td>
<td>A: Do you have a bag?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>b- &gt;</td>
<td>B: Sorry, I ran out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>c- &gt;</td>
<td>A: That’s okay.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B’s “Sorry, I ran out” (line 2) is produced as a second-part, *no* answer to A’s question, “Do you have a bag?” (line 1). Nonetheless, A treats B as having apologized by responding with absolution, “That’s okay” (line 3).

Prior research has generally recognized that apologies are parts of ordered stages of communicative action, such as the corrective interchange (Goffman, 1967), the remedial cycle (Goffman, 1971), the account episode (Schonbach, 1980), the three-place apology pattern (Coulmas, 1981), the account sequence (McLaughlin, Cody, & Rosenstein, 1983), and the remedial episode (Morris, 1985). Prior research has also speculated that apologies are sequenced actions that solicit responses (e.g., Coulmas, 1981; Fraser, 1981; Goffman, 1971; Jaworski, 1994; Obeng, 1999). However, research has not yet examined the sequential organization of apologies in detail (for a partial exception, see Owen, 1983).

In this article, I focus on apologies between persons who are working to maintain a participation framework (C. Goodwin, 1981) throughout the course of action of apologizing. Showing that one is currently engaged in interaction with another has consequences for how and whether initiating actions are responded to (C. Goodwin, 1981). Along these lines, Okamoto and Robinson (1997) found that the likelihood of responding to the action of thanking, which has sequential and other similarities with that of apologizing (Coulmas, 1981; Kumatoridani, 1999), significantly increased when interlocutors had eye contact, which is the primary method of communicating current engagement (C. Goodwin, 1981; Kendon, 1990a, 1990b; Sacks et al., 1974); Goffman (1971) made a similar assertion about apologies. Thus, for example, in this article, I do not examine apologies in which one or both participants’ use gaze and/or body orientation to communicate their lack of engagement or participation with the other.
A denial that offense was taken can stand alone as a response to an apology, as seen in Extract B, in which the patient simply responds with “No problem” (line 5):

Extract B: [Nurses.17.06]

01 DOC: Hello:
02 (.)
03 PAT: [How ya doin, ]
04 a-> DOC: [Sorry to make] you wait.
05 b-> PAT: No problem.
06 DOC: I’m Doctor Moiso nice to meet you

The label absolution is, for now, approximate. Insofar as That’s alright and That’s okay claim that no offense was taken, it seems too strong to label their action as forgiveness. That is, in the Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary (Webster’s, 1996), the first definition of forgive is “to grant pardon for or remission of (an offense, debt, etc.),” the sense of which is elaborated by the fourth definition, “to cease to feel resentment against” (p. 751; italics added). Although the dictionary gives absolve as a synonym of forgive (Webster’s, 1996, p. 751), the first definition of absolution is “a freeing from blame or guilt; release from consequences, obligations, or penalties” (Webster’s, 1996, p. 7). In this article, I use absolution more along the lines of the latter definition, which focuses less on the speaker’s internal state and more on issues of accountability between the interactants.

According to Scott and Lyman (1968), an account is not merely an explanation for behavior, but a “statement … made to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior—whether that behavior is his [sic] own or that of others” (p. 46). According to Scott and Lyman, “excuses are accounts in which one admits that the act in question in bad, wrong, or inappropriate but denies full responsibility” (p. 47). Scott and Lyman differentiated excuses from justifications, which “are accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it” (p. 47). As a subtype of accounts, in this article, I define an offense excuse as an excuse for offensive behavior (Goffman, 1971).

In addition to offense excuses, many other nonapology actions, such as thanking (Coulmas, 1981; Kumatoridani, 1999; Okamoto & Robinson, 1997) and requesting (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Craig, Tracy, & Spisak, 1986; Roloff & Janiszewski, 1989), directly or indirectly index particular events. When these events are apology-relevant objects of regret, these nonapology actions can establish the relevance of a possible offense. As such, respondents sometimes opt, in their response, to address the possible offense. For example, in Extracts C and D, the same physician thanks two different patients for agreeing to be videotaped as part of a research project, which constitutes a possibly offensive (i.e., intrusive) event:

Extract C: PARTICIPATION 1 [P3.39.06]

01 a-> DOC: Well thank you for agreeing to thi:[ s ]
02 b-> PAT: [Y]ou’re welcome.
Extract D: PARTICIPATION 2 [P3.36.06]

01 a-> DOC: Thank you for agreeing to thuh tapi[ng t[oo: ]
02 b-> PAT: [Oh. [No sweat.]

Unlike the patient’s response in Extract A, “You’re welcome” (line 2), which simply treats the physician’s prior turn as doing the action of thanking, that in Extract B, “No sweat” (line 2), addresses the possible offense by denying having been offended.

13 Regarding the observation that the same lexical item can accomplish different actions, see Schegloff (2001b).

14 In this article, I focus on apologies performed by persons who are personally responsible for the commission of a possible offense and addressed to persons who are directly affected by the offense. This raises the possibility of at least a 2 × 2 matrix of apology types dealing with the apologizer (i.e., directly responsible vs. not directly responsible) and the apologizee (i.e., directly affected vs. not directly affected): for related observations, see Holmes, 1990; Obeng, 1999). It is likely that as apology types differ, so do the apologizer’s degree of personal (moral) responsibility and thus accountability for the offense as well as the possibly damaged status of the apologizer’s and apologizee’s relationship relative to the offense, both of which might affect the nature of apologies as actions and thus the nature of apologizees’ responses.

15 Although the term condolence, which is commonly associated with death, may not be a perfect label for this action, it is slightly better than other more psychological terms, such as sympathy (which more strongly implies “actual” feelings). A condolence is technically defined as an “expression of sympathy with a person who is suffering sorrow, misfortune, or grief” (Webster’s, 1996).

16 Compared to persons who do not apologize for offenses, those who do are evaluated more favorably and blamed and punished less (Darby & Schlenker, 1982, 1989; Mehrabian, 1967; Ohbuchi et al., 1989).

REFERENCES


