Talking Back: "Small" Interactional Response Tokens in Everyday Conversation

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Because many studies of small talk (and talk in general) focus on the input of main speakers, the verbal behavior of listeners is often underrepresented in descriptions of interaction. The notion of small talk as talk superfluous to transactional exigencies enables us to encompass a variety of phenomena, including phatic exchanges, relational language, and various types of insertion sequence. This article adds to this range of phenomena by examining a set of high-frequency short listener response tokens that fulfill the criteria of being superfluous to transactional needs, of being focused on the interpersonal plane of discourse, and of having social functions that seem to overlap with those of phatic and relational episodes in different types of talk. Probably because the items involved are themselves "small" (in that their position is often difficult to locate on the cline from back-channels to full turns), their relational importance is easily overlooked.

Small talk is, in lay terms at least, seen as talk that is in some sense an "extra" to the business at hand in any spoken interaction and as existing in "the pragmatic space between and among the transactional and the relational functions of talk," to quote Candlin (2000, p. xv), who raised some of the problems associated with this idea of small talk, as it

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were, "squeezing itself in" between other types of talk, some of which problems this article also attempts to shed light on. The collection of articles on small talk edited by Coupland (2000), to which Candlin's comments are a fitting exordium, builds on previous work by linguists who have shown small talk and other relational features of conversation to be anything but superfluous, frivolous, secondary, or irrelevant to the analysis of the main stream of talk and who stress the importance of notions such as interpersonal involvement and the creation of social meanings (e.g., Gumperz, 1982; Schiffrin, 1994; Tannen, 1984). Coupland herself (2000), in her introduction to the collection, headlined the "celebration of the everyday" (p. 4) that sociolinguistics have benefited from and stressed the significance of the commonplace as the cornerstone of analysis. Much of the research in Coupland's volume illustrates how (at first glance unimportant) episodes such as phatic exchanges, personal anecdotes, and evaluative comments by speakers are a central part of the fabric of the talk and assist its efficient progress toward its transactional goals. In my own article in that volume (McCarthy, 2000) I attempted to show how phatic, relational, and evaluative episodes were an indispensable aspect of two types of extended service encounter (the hairdresser's and a driving lesson) where participants were forced into a physically close (and mutually captive) encounter. The similarity in patterns of nontransactional talk in these two quite different types of service encounters led me to conclude that the small talk episodes were something participants worked hard at and were not something just tossed in for good measure, relating instead to the construction and consolidation of ongoing commercial relationships and to the mutual assurance that service was being delivered appropriately. In that article, I focused on exchanges as a whole between server and served. In this article I focus in even closer and look at nontransactional aspects of participants' responses. I hope to do this by continuing the framework of recent reassessments of nontransactional talk, very much in the spirit of work such as Coupland, Coupland, and Robinson (1992) where, building on Laver's work (e.g., Laver, 1975), phatic exchanges are approached in an explorative way and not relegated to a secondary level or seen as in some way communicatively deficient. Laver's work was important in that he saw phatic exchanges not only as constructing and consolidating social relations but as strategic mechanisms for creating transitions into and out of transactional talk. Thus, small talk is not something that just sits in the gaps between transactional episodes but

actually facilitates them and enhances their efficiency and threads them into socially recognizable fabrics that constitute our everyday spoken genres (e.g., service encounter and job interview). McCarthy (2000) argued further for such a link between types of small talk and speech genres. In this article, I consider how nontransactional listener feedback also assists such transitions and how it plays characteristic roles in different types of interaction. The place where the items I examine here are "squeezed into the gaps" is the all-important turn-initial slot where speakers first attend retrospectively to the previous turn before engaging with their own, incremental contribution (see Schiffrin, 1994, pp. 351–352). I illustrate how listeners routinely do more than just give necessary back-channel responses, what roles seem to be played by the set of nontransactional items I exemplify from my corpus, and how this set of "small" items can be assessed in the same way that small talk can in terms of interpersonal mechanisms such as conversational support and convergence, ongoing social relations, and the "textual" support by which items of small talk contribute to boundary phenomena such as openings and closings and topic structures. The purpose of the article is not to undermine the notion of small talk as a separate category but rather to support its general thrust of focusing on nontransactional elements. I take advantage of the ambiguity of the term *small* here to set alongside each other the conventional idea of the role of small talk episodes and the claim that *small* (in terms of numbers of words) contributions by listeners regularly perform similar tasks in creating and consolidating the social and affective strata in talk.

The set of items under examination are turn-initial lexical items that very frequently occur in responses in everyday spoken genres and that either account for the whole of a response to incoming talk, are the first item in the response, or occur immediately after some noncontent turn-preface items (e.g., "oh," "well," and "mm"). The items are based on the 2,000 most frequent tokens in two spoken English corpora, one British-based and one American (see Data for this study). The items have in common that they occur with high frequency in turn-initial position in responses by listeners. Most of their occurrences are in utterances where, in terms of transactional efficiency, "yes" or "no" would have done just as well (in other words, where "yes" or "no" would have functioned as adequate acknowledgments of, e.g., understanding, agreement, and closure), but would have had different (less engaged) interactional implications. The items are, therefore, in a sense, "yes-plus" words in that they do more than just acknowledge or confirm the

receipt and understanding of incoming talk (and project engagement and interactional bonding with interlocutors) in the same way that phatic exchanges and other small talk sequences do. The set of words that routinely perform these interactional and relational responsive functions also contribute to the elaboration of the notion of "good listenership," an important area of spoken discourse analysis and one that linguists have often downplayed in favor of a concentration on speaking turns as primary/initiating, rather than responsive, input. The principle aim of the article is to provide a quantifiably supported typology of relational response items alongside the often (by necessity given the central importance of local analysis) single-occasion observations based on individual transcripts that conversation analysts provide.

RESPONDING AS AN AREA OF INVESTIGATION

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) established a rank-scale for spoken exchanges that included, at the level of speaker moves, the *initiating move* (i.e., an utterance not structurally dependent on a previous turn) and *answering* or *responding* moves by recipients of initiating moves (pp. 26–27; see also Sinclair & Brazil, 1982, p. 49). In exchanges observed in the traditional, teacher-fronted classroom that Sinclair and Coulthard's early research focused on, there was also a third move, the *follow-up*, whereby teachers acknowledged and evaluated the responding moves of their pupils as they answered the teacher's questions or carried out their instructions. A typical three-move speech exchange as characterized by Sinclair and Coulthard is illustrated in the following corpus extract (A, B, etc., indicate different speakers who are labeled sequentially in order of first speaking in any conversation):

> A: Mm. Obviously it's not easy to eat er   *Initiation*
>   little and often when you're a busy man
>   driving around the country.
> B: Yeah that's true.   *Response*
> A: Mm. Right.   *Follow-up*

The follow-up move may be expanded after the initial acknowledgment/ feedback, with some additional comment. The response move may also be extended as follows:

[B: Travel agent; C: customer]

B:	But I mean there is availability there.	*Initiation*
	It's just a matter of deciding where you	
	want to go. And really how much you	
	want to spend. But going out this	
	weekend they start at one four nine.	
C:	**Great. That's brilliant.**	*Response* (acknowledge//comment)

Conversation analysis (CA) also deals with initiation–response sequences (see, e.g., Stenström, 1990, whose study of lexical items characteristic of spoken discourse overlaps partly with this article), and CA researchers have also drawn attention to the significance of "third-turn receipts" (a parallel term for the follow-up move as outlined earlier; see, e.g., Heritage, 1985). Additionally, in the CA literature on adjacency pairs (which are inherently concerned with both initiation and response), *assessments* (personal evaluations of persons and other entities) in both initiating and responding slots have shed some light on how listeners respond to such acts (see especially Pomerantz, 1984). Likewise, Antaki, Houtkoop-Steenstra, and Rapley (2000) and Antaki (2002) examined "high-grade assessments" (emphatic versions of some of the tokens examined in this article) that again throw light on the recipient's responsive move. This article treats as responses items that occur in the second (response) and third (follow-up/third-turn receipt) slots of the three-part exchange, and I refer to *response moves* to cover both types, because both are noninitiating.

Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) three-part exchange structure and the parallels in CA are of importance in the study of spoken corpora, where regularities in the sequential positioning of words over large amounts of data can reveal typical environments of occurrence and potentially associated conversational functions. Recently, working within interactional linguistics, where the aim is to bridge the gap between elements at the linguistic, lexicogrammatical level and higher order concerns of the interaction, Tao (in press) investigated turn-initial items in spoken corpora and concluded that the nature of such items reveals much about the design features of a grammar of speaking turns. Following Schegloff (1996), Tao saw turn beginnings and endings as particularly important. Tao found that turn-initial elements in English are mostly lexical in nature and that they tend to be syntactically independent items. Notable is the rarity of items such as the definite article, which is usually the most frequent word in any general corpus of English and which qualifies as an extremely common *sentence*-initial item in written

texts. Instead, in speech, at the *turn*-initial slot we find items such as "yes," "well," "right," "okay," and pronominals introducing fixed and formulaic expressions such as "I think," "you know," "I mean," and "that's + adjective" (e.g., "that's right" and "that's true"). The importance of Tao's quantitative work is that it illustrates the attention interlocutors pay to the interactional state of affairs and the prior turn before they attend to the transactional elements, with turn-initial items carrying a large burden of interactional meaning, contributing to the interpersonal and social context on an ongoing basis. For the purposes of this article, the turn-initial position is seen as the locus of choice where speakers frequently select items that contribute to the nontransactional stratum of the talk and where our set of "small" items does its work of supporting, converging, bridging, and facilitating transitions that Laver (1975, 1981) saw as immanent in phatic episodes and that Schiffrin (1994) referred to as "the emerging set of understandings that participants gain through the give and take of interaction—through the process of orienting towards the other person" (p. 351).

The set of response tokens to be examined frequently occur as single-word responding or follow-up moves; the initial item in extended responding or follow-up moves; or as a lexical element in those moves alongside functional particles such as "yes," "no," "oh," and "okay." The words under scrutiny, I argue, play a key role in how competent listeners act verbally and attend to the ongoing interactional concerns of participant relationships. However, first it is necessary to locate the set of words within the broader context of response items studied to date.

Much research on listener verbal behavior has dealt with how listeners retain their status as listeners without taking over the role of "main/current speaker," and the notion of the *back-channel* has become central (see following discussion). In an important early study, Fries (1952) looked at listener responses in telephone calls. Fries's list of items included "yes," vocalizations such as "unh" and "hunh," and lexical items such as "I see" and "good" (Fries, 1952, p. 49). Yngve's (1970) well-known article on "getting a word in edgewise" introduced the notion of "back channel," which has informed many subsequent studies. Yngve investigated responses such as "uh-huh," "yes," "okay," and brief comments (e.g., "Oh, I can believe it"). Yngve called this "behavior in the back channel" (p. 574), but what has been included within back-channel behavior (as opposed to turns that assume the speaker role) in subsequent research varies considerably from study to study.

Notions of back-channel behavior derive from a default model of turn taking, most readily associated with Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974),

where speakers are seen as responsible for the local management of turns at talk and where speakers select who speaks next, select themselves as the next speaker, or simply continue speaking if no one else grabs the turn. These norms are predicated on the troublesome notion of transition relevance point (TRP; Sacks et al., 1974), which is frequently a fine judgment made by listeners that the current speaker is prepared to relinquish the turn or that the talk is at least open for an intervention that will not be heard as a rude interruption. A wide variety of phenomena, from body language to pitch changes, pauses, and syntactic completion, may contribute to such judgments (see Duncan, 1972, 1974; Ford & Thompson, 1996; Jucker, 1986). This means that, especially where a listener's contribution is brief (perhaps just one word, as in many examples in this article), it is often difficult or impossible to assess whether the contribution is just seen as signaling the back-channel with no desire to assume the role of speaker or whether such contributions should be classified as turns that change the identity of "current speaker." As a result of such difficulties, much of the literature on back-channeling has been unable to provide precise and replicable tools for labeling recipients' contributions.

Duncan and Niederehe (1974) pointed to uncertainties over the boundary between brief utterances and proper turns, while restating the basic idea that back-channel behavior projects an understanding between speaker and listener that the turn has not been yielded. The complex cline of options that listeners may select from, ranging from nonvocal acknowledgment (e.g., by body language), to minimal response (including nonword vocalizations such as "hnh" and "hmm") to short function words (such as "yes" and "okay"), single lexical tokens (e.g., "good" and "fine"), short clauses (e.g., "that's true" and "I agree"), and more extended responses, has probably been the reason why the more readily identifiable non-word-like vocalizations have led to that end of the cline becoming the focus of more research than the other areas.

Duncan (1974) expanded the scope of back-channel responses from vocalizations and "yeah" to embrace items such as "right" and "I see," sentence completions, requests for clarification, brief restatements, and nodding or shaking the head. Duncan's list of items shows the broad spectrum of behavior that may be considered relevant to the study of listenership and response and, again, the difficulty in delineating the boundary between back-channel behavior and floor grabbing (e.g., whether a brief clarification request is to be interpreted as the listener assuming the floor, even if only very briefly).

Schegloff (1982) argued that the turn-taking system is at its core designed to "minimize turn size" (p. 73); that is to say, there is an economy built into spoken communication: Speakers say no more than the bare necessities (although this may be overridden by any speaker at any time, with appropriate motivation). The brief responsive turns that occur in everyday talk as illustrated in the earlier examples would seem superficially to conform to a principle of communicative economy (in that they are often the only word in their turn). But the additional turn content, over and above necessary acknowledgments and "yes/okay" and "no," that regularly occurs in response moves suggests that listeners attend as much to the interactional and relational aspects of the talk as to the transactional and propositional content and the need to keep the channel open. The idea of "economy," therefore, must embrace both transactional and relational concerns and does not sacrifice either one in the effort to keep the message brief. Speakers do not, it seems, economize when it comes to sociability, unless there are the most urgent circumstances demanding a purely transactional response. Indeed, although there may be a bias toward economical, brief turns in talk, this in no way fails to recognize the fact that everyday talk also contains a large number of lengthy turns. Schegloff acknowledged the role of vocalizations such as "yeah," "mm hmm," and "uh huh" and the importance in general of looking at what listeners do. To neglect the listener and to focus only on the main speaker, Schegloff stated, leads to a tendency to consider the discourse as "a single speaker's, and a single mind's, product" (p. 74).

Schegloff (1982) also observed the multifunctioning of response tokens such as "yeah": They not only mark acknowledgment and confirm understanding but may also express agreement, and in this way, social action is coordinated and fine-tuned on several levels simultaneously, one of the main arguments of this article. He also suggested that repetitive use of a response token by the same listener over an extended stretch of talk could run the risk of being interpreted as a sign of boredom or inattention; to guard against this, listeners typically vary their responses. However, as is shown later, repeated tokens in close sequence may also be plausibly interpreted as signaling an enthusiastic or encouraging response, and it is only in the local context that the affective consequences can be resolved. Other possible affective functions may also be performed by response tokens (e.g., sarcasm, surprise, and disgust), any of which may be interpreted in particular contexts where repetitive use occurs. However, the data drawn on in this article support the view that listeners have a range

of items available for response and that they do generally vary their use of such tokens. The data also suggest, in line with general descriptions of phatic and relational communication, that speakers prefer convergence and agreement (Malinowski, 1923/1972, pp. 150–151).

Öreström (1983), using a 50,000-word sample of the London–Lund spoken corpus, noted paralinguistic features of back-channel behavior such as degree of overlap with the main speaker's turn and loudness. He too extended the scope of items beyond vocalizations such as "aha" and "mmm" to include lexical response tokens such as "quite" and "good," which are discussed in this article.

Tottie (1991), as does this article, looked at back-channel behavior in British and American English corpus data and put items such as "mm," "mhm" and "uh-(h)uh," alongside "bona fide words and phrases" (p. 255). Tottie also raised the problem of establishing the limits of back-channels. She observed cases where an utterance is very short and appears to be back-channel behavior but is responded to by the interlocutor such that there is a case for reclassifying such phenomena as full turns. The problem is illustrated in an example from the corpus being studied here; the first two responses, "No" and "Oh, right," seem to be received by the speaker as back-channel, but the third, "That's great," receives the following response:

> B: (1.0) she's one of the job share but she's, we couldn't all get involved with
>   dealing with them+[1]
> A: **No.**
> B: +so she she does all the dealing and we she feeds back to us.
> A: **Oh, right.**
> B: And then we, we you know we have meetings and feed back to them sort of
>   the, yeah it's dual.
> A: **That's great.**
> B: It's good, yeah.

One way of looking at "No" and "Oh, right" in this extract is that, because speaker B is engaged in an extended report, speaker A's rights to take the turn are constrained anyway (see Houtkoop & Mazeland, 1985; Schegloff, 1982), whereas the final two utterances ("That's great" and "It's good, yeah") could be seen as A's assessment and B's "second assessment" (in Pomerantz's, 1984, terms) of the report, thus rendering the notion of back-channel as less than helpful in this case. Tottie (1991) reinforced the idea of the range of behavior that extends from body language to vocalizations to single words to phrasal utterances to short clauses (e.g., "That's great") to longer utterances

(e.g., clarification requests) to the other extreme where the respondent's utterance grants him or her current speaker status. She also drew a distinction between back-channel items (i.e., the individual tokens or vocalizations) and back-channels, which may include more than one token, as when a respondent says "yeah," "sure," "right" in quick sequence (p. 261). What would seem to be most important, however, is to see responsive behavior, however brief and back-channel-like, as functioning within a sequence of talk or activity; for example, later we see how the items we are interested in have a role in pre-closing and closing sequences.

Gardner (1997, 1998) defined back-channels as "the vocalisation of understandings" and located them as existing "between speaking and listening" (both quotations from the title of the 1998 article). Gardner (1997) investigated "minimal responses" such as "mm-h" (which he called a "continuer," encouraging the main speaker to go on; see also Schegloff, 1982), "mm" (which functions as a "weak acknowledging" token) and the "stronger, more aligning/agreeing" "yeah" (p. 23). Gardner (1998) divided typical listener behavior into back-channel items such as acknowledgments, brief agreements and continuers (e.g., "yeah" and "mm-hm"), newsmarking items (e.g., "oh, really"), evaluative items (e.g., "wow" and "how terrible"), and clarification requests.

Stubbe (1998) referred to "supportive verbal feedback" in her title and compared listener behavior in English conversation of two groups of indigenous New Zealanders. She considered clusters of minimal responses and distinguished between neutral response tokens (e.g., "mm" and "uhuh") and supportive tokens (e.g., "oh, gosh"). Stubbe's goal is cross-cultural understanding, and the rejection of negative evaluations and stereotyping that can arise from differences in types of listener feedback across different cultural communities. Holmes and Stubbe (1997) further introduced a gender dimension to the study of variation in listener behavior, but such concerns remain beyond the scope of this article.

Research into how listeners behave has reinforced the notion of conversation as jointly produced, what Erickson (1986) called the "relationship of intertexuality between speaking and listening" (p. 295). Observations of both verbal and nonverbal behavior while listening (e.g., Goodwin, 1981) show how listeners respond at appropriate moments and in appropriate ways to incoming talk and also how speakers respond to verbal and nonverbal cues and adapt their contributions accordingly. Duranti (1986) noted the importance of examining how speakers' acts are responded to by interlocutors as central to understanding, whereas Erickson (1986) stressed the

two kinds of knowledge and skill that participants bring to any interaction, the institutional (broadly speaking, linguistic and general sociocultural knowledge) and the emergent (locally judged and negotiated), and saw listening as "an activity of communicative production as well as one of reception" (p. 297). In a major study of interview data, Erickson and Shultz (1982) pointed to three key moments of transition relevance during speaker explanations, at which moments "it becomes appropriate for the speaker and hearer to signal reactions to one another" (p. 121). When a speaker makes a point in explaining something, there is then a moment of listening-response relevance (LRRM), after which a speaker may persist with the same point or make a new one. It is at such LRRMs that primary opportunities are realized for the use of the responding tokens examined in this article, and, as in Erickson and Shultz's study, the contribution of the responses in enabling the discourse to proceed smoothly will be crucial. Interview data and oral narrative (see Goodwin, 1986, on how listeners position themselves vis-à-vis tellers) have provided fruitful data for observing what I here generally refer to as "listenership," the active engagement with one's interlocutor that expresses more than just "hearership" (Goodwin, 1981, p. 103). This article shows the verbal responses of listeners in a wide variety of genres, including service and opinion exchange. In general, studies of the joint activity of speakers and listeners all underline significance of listener response and the effects of response on the way speakers construct their turns (see also Bublitz, 1988; McGregor, 1986; McGregor & White, 1990).

One major difficulty in the study of listener behavior is a lack of shared terminology. In this article I adopt the term *nonminimal response* to refer to the response moves under scrutiny to reinforce the view that speakers systematically select tokens that more than satisfy the minimal requirements of acknowledging receipt, showing understanding of the incoming talk, and keeping the back-channel open. In most cases, "yes/yeah," "no," "okay," or a conventional vocalization would be enough to maintain the economy and transactional efficiency of the talk, to show agreement and/or acquiescence, and to function as an appropriate second pair part in an adjacency pair. Listeners regularly choose to say more and choose response tokens that orientate affectively toward their conversational partners and project and consolidate interactional and relational bonds in the same way that extended small talk episodes do.

Another significant tradition of analysis relates several of the items dealt with in this article to the notion of discourse marking. Although, as

in the case of the back-channel, there is no overall agreement among linguists as to what constitutes discourse markers (see Fraser, 1999, for a useful survey), some of the characteristics repeatedly attributed to them overlap with the items considered here as nonminimal responses. In general, discourse markers are seen as syntactically detachable or outside of the sentence or clause structure and as capable of operating locally and globally in the discourse (these qualities are central, for instance, to Schiffrin's [1987] characterization of markers). Schiffrin also added their tendency to appear turn-initially. The items dealt with by Schiffrin as markers include "oh," "well," "but," "so," "y'know," and "I mean" and she defined their general role as bracketing units of talk (p. 31). Many of the items in this article could be seen as fulfilling the same criteria and roles as Schiffrin's items in that they are syntactically freestanding, turn-initial, operating at a global level, and bracketing units. Thus, the occurrences of "right" (the most frequent of the tokens examined in this article) in the following corpus extract can by no means all be plausibly analyzed in the same way:

[Workplace: discussing an order]

B: They'll be finished by midmorning tomorrow.
A: **Right.   (1)**
B: That means a bit of drying time we could pack them up and have them
      delivered tomorrow afternoon if there's going to be somebody there
      Saturday.
A: Oh **right.   (2)** Oh well Jim will be pleased about that,
      Mark I'll I'll let him know all that and I'll get him to ring
      y⌈ou before.
B: ⌊If you if you could.
A: As soon as possible obviously+
B: Yeah.
A: +because er you need to know to arrange things.
B: That's right.
A: **Right.   (3)** Leave it with me, Mark.
B: Okay.
A: Okay?
B: Thanks.
A: Thanks a lot.
B: Bye.
A: Bye.

"Right" (1) and (2) seem to be confirming receipt of the information, whereas "Right" (3), coming as it does after B's "That's right" rather than after a new

input of information, seems to be performing a more global function of signaling (along with "Leave it with me, Mark") a desired (pre-)closure. However, discourse markers do clearly operate on several planes (Schiffrin, 1987) and can do so simultaneously such that there is no necessary conflict between viewing an item as having a more global organizing function as well as simultaneously expressing the type of engagement and involvement of the nonminimal responses in this article. In other words, items such as "fine" and "excellent," frequently associated in the British data with closing of deals, arrangements, service transactions, and so forth, are nonetheless still relevant as a choice of nonminimal response indicating interpersonal satisfaction and as giving out a positive social signal over and above the alternatives "yes" or "okay." Another issue is raised by Fraser's (1999) rejection of certain items such as "wow," "shucks," and other interjections from the class of discourse markers because they do not signal a relationship between discourse segments, but rather constitute "an entire, separate message" (p. 943). In this article these would certainly be classed as syntactically freestanding nonminimal responses and might well operate globally. However, in line with Fraser's emphasis on relationships between discourse segments (see also Redeker, 1990, who stressed the role of markers in relating ideational, rhetorical, and sequential segments), many of the tokens examined here are considered only as having a local responsive role. The present focus is on the relational and affective value added by the choice of the response tokens, whether they are operating primarily as nonminimal responses or simultaneously as discourse markers.

DATA FOR THIS STUDY

This is a corpus-based investigation, as were some of the studies cited earlier, but with considerably more data than earlier studies and looking at a wider range of response tokens across both British and American English. So as not to duplicate extensive work already done, this study does not examine nonword vocalizations and the words "yes/yeah," "no," "oh," and "okay" and focuses on the most frequent lexical words that occur in nonminimal responses. I include "gosh" and "wow," even though they fall on the uncertain borderline between vocalizations and lexical items, because they do have institutionalized spellings and manifest other wordlike characteristics.

This article uses two corpora: a 3.5-million-word sample of the 5-million-word CANCODE spoken corpus[2] and a similarly sized North American spoken sample of the Cambridge International Corpus, giving a total corpus of approximately 7 million words. Both corpora are the copyright of Cambridge University Press, from whom permission to use or reproduce any of the corpus material must be sought. For the sake of convenience, these data are referred to as "British" and "American," respectively. It is not the purpose of this article to highlight differences between the two varieties, and, though there are differences in frequency, the commonality between the two varieties in the way the response tokens are used neutralizes such differences for our purposes.

RESPONSE TOKENS IN THE CORPUS: QUANTITATIVE DATA

Word-frequency lists were generated for both corpora using corpus-analytical software. The 2,000[3] most frequent words in both the British and American corpora were then scrutinized manually and the most likely items (based on the previous studies reviewed earlier and on observation and intuition) for consideration as response tokens were listed. At least 100 occurrences in each corpus was set as the level below which items would be excluded from consideration (thus a minimum 200 occurrences were required to appear in Table 1). One hundred occurrences is approximately the lowest frequency band in the CANCODE 2000 sample and it was felt that having a similar number of examples for comparison in each corpus was desirable, though these figures have no absolute power. Once the initial list was established as in Table 1, a maximum of 1,000 extracts from each corpus were isolated for each item in the list (via the random sampling option in the analytical software). These extracts included the key words in all positions, not just response-initial. The initial search through the frequency lists produced the items in Table 1, in descending order of frequency, for the British and American data combined.

"Perfect" represents a cutoff point. The next word below it, "marvelous," makes the 100+ British list at 104, but fails to make the 100+ American list and is thus out of the running (similarly, "brilliant" makes the British 100+ list but not the American list). All of these items occur in nonminimal responses, but Table 1 shows their total occurrences in all turn positions. As a next step, it is necessary to count how many of the total

TABLE 1
Total Frequency of Potential Response Items Occurring More Than 200 Times
in the Combined Corpora (British and American)

Item	Frequency
Really	27,481
Right	22,767
Good	16,442
Quite	6,688
Great	3,729
True	2,984
Sure	2,328
Exactly	2,290
Fine	1,698
Wow	1,440
Absolutely	1,368
Certainly	1,305
Wonderful	1,231
Lovely	1,145
Definitely	1,112
Gosh	934
Cool	766
Excellent	418
Perfect	286

occurrences for each item occur in the nonminimal response-token function. As stated previously, where frequency exceeds 1,000 in either of the corpora, the maximum of occurrences of any individual token taken as the sample for analysis is 1,000, generated by random sampling of the total number of occurrences. Table 2 shows the actual occurrences in the response function, in descending order of frequency, for both corpora combined.

"Quite" has now disappeared from the list as occurring only in the response function in the British data and with low frequency even there.

CONTEXTS AND USES

In this section we look at the environments in which samples of these response tokens occur and illustrate broadly the kinds of functions they typically fulfill. Each extract is labeled according to its variety, British (Br.) or American (Am.), and items for comment are in bold.

TABLE 2
Occurrences of Relevant Tokens in Nonminimal Responses[a]

Item	As Response
Right	1,150
Wow	1,099
True	880
Exactly	872
Gosh	746
Absolutely	594
Great	493
Definitely	365
Sure	349
Fine	348
Good	313
Cool	229
Really	214
Excellent	200
Lovely	196
Wonderful	195
Certainly	101
Perfect	32

[a]Turn-initial position or postfunction word ("yes," "no," etc.).

Nonminimal Responses Without Expanded Content

The first set of examples shows response tokens occupying the whole response move, or only minimally accompanied by "yes/yeah/no/okay/oh," after which the turn reverts to the previous speaker. Extracts 1 and 2 show the typical use of items such as "lovely," "fine," and "right" marking transactional or topical boundaries, where speakers jointly coordinate stages of conversational business such as making arrangements or agreeing on courses of action. However, as asserted several times already, the response tokens are nonessential transactionally and do more than just signal boundaries; they seem to signal affective and social well-being between interlocutors, and both British and American varieties display the same functions (for transcription conventions, see the end of this article). Note how both social arrangements are concluded by "Lovely" in extract 1 and especially how speaker A returns with "Lovely" even after the arrangement has been adequately confirmed with "Yeah" in transactional terms. "Lovely" thus seems to be displaying both a responsive function and (simultaneously in its second occurrence) a discourse-marking one as follows:

Extract 1 (Br.) [Telephone call between friends, arranging a barbecue]

A: I would love it if you could bring a salad.
B: Yeah.
A: It would be very nice.
B: I will do then. I'll do that this afternoon then yeah.
A: **Lovely.**
B: What time do you want us then?
A: When were you planning?
B: Well you said about fiveish didn't you.
A: Yeah.
B: Yeah.
A: **Lovely.**

Extract 2 (Am.) [Social chat among friends]

A: Well please promise me that you won't carry any heavy things.
C: No I can't. I can't lift anything.
A: It's not worth it.
C: No.
A: There's no reason to.
C: Well anything. Even a heavy pot or a dish.
A: No.
C: You know you don't realize. I said to dad you've got to take the
      cake out.
A: **Right.**
C: Cause when you do (1.0) that's the weakness.
A: **Right.**

Extract 3 illustrates sociable agreement asserted with "right" and rein-forced with "definitely":

Extract 3 (Am.) [Social conversation between acquaintances]

A: You know, I, I wouldn't, couldn't tell you if we sentenced someone tomorrow
      how long he'd actually be in jail.
B: Uh huh.
A: Could you?
B: No. Me either.
A: I couldn't. And I think they kind of depend on that, these criminals.
B: **Right,** yeah, **definitely.**

Note here how "Uh huh" seems to be considered an insufficient contribu-tion at this moment of listening-response relevance (Erickson & Shultz, 1982): Speaker A persists with a follow-up tag question and then with an

expansion of the main argument; it is only then that B responds with an emphatic confirmation of convergence and agreement.

"Wow" and "gosh" potentially express strong affective responses of surprise, incredulity, delight, shock, horror, and so forth, as part of their lexical meaning (though in particular contexts these could also, of course, be ironic, sardonic, etc.). Here "wow" responds repeatedly to a progressive report of exorbitant charges in an educational setting, an example of the restricted options for the listener to respond with an extended turn, as discussed earlier, but also an example of the importance of responding at transition relevant points, and feeding back to the teller:

Extract 4 (Am.) [Social conversation between acquaintances]

B: Um it cost um an incredible amount of money and it amazed me. It was
      something like (1.0) Our lessons were forty five minutes long and they
      had to pay (1.0) They had to buy something like sixty lessons at a time.
A: Oh **wow**.
B: And they had to pay a registration fee and if you added it all up and basically saw
      that and divided it by they were paying something like ten thousand yen for a
      forty five minute lesson.
A: **Wow.**
B: Which was a (1.0) It was all supposed to be one to one or one to two+
A: **Wow.**
B: +and it was almost entirely free conversation with completely untrained people
      like myself

Extract 5 (Br.) [social chat among friends at B's home, prior to a Tupperware sales
promotional party at B's house. A realizes she has arrived too early.]

A: What time are your other people coming, Janet?
B: Well the thing officially starts at two.
A: Oh **right** ooh **gosh**.
B: The Tupperware lady said she'd come about half one but as far as I'm
      concerned if she comes about half one-
A: Yeah.   Oh sorry we're early.
B: No no no I was only kidding.
A: Oh.
B: Oh it doesn't matter. It's nice having you here a bit earlier.

After an initial teasing reaction to A's discomfort at realizing the time was too early, B repairs the situation by indicating that it does not matter and that it is a pleasure to have people arriving early. A's "gosh" both enables the teasing retort (she has shown herself as vulnerable by her reaction) and

prompts the repair that resolves the episode. Extract 5 also contains a typical use of "right," to acknowledge reception progressively, as complex messages unfold.

"Really" as a response token is of special interest in that it invites continuation by the previous speaker, or at least some indication of confirmation before the talk can continue, and before the full affective reaction occurs (in the British extract 6 "No, you're joking," and "wow" in the American extract 7):

Extract 6 (Br.) [social chat among students]

A: Yeah. And there's there's a thing on, there's a erm blackboard in the erm not blackboard sorry chalkboard. Can't call it blackboard any more. It's not PC.
B: **Really?**
A: Yeah.
B: **No you're joking.**
A: No I'm not joking. It's a chalkboard.

Extract 7 (Am.) [social chat among students]

A: But who's willing to pay that much money? That you know?
B: Every game's sold out.
A: **Really?**
C: Are you serious?
B: Yeah. This one against Harvard is worth like (1.0) It's worth like thirty dollars. These these are on the glass. Front row on the glass. Center ice.
A: **Wow**.

Single-token responses are often the result of the listener finding himself or herself in the role of receiver of an extended report or the recipient of new information to which minimal response is adequate or else where a prompt to the speaker to say more or respond himself or herself is appropriate. Although only single words, the choice of nonminimal tokens underlines the interactional concerns listeners attend to.

Nonminimal Tokens Preceding Expanded Responses

The corpus extracts under "Nonminimal Responses Without Expanded Content" mainly had the response tokens occupying the whole of the

response move. Response tokens also frequently preface expanded response moves, where they feed back on initiating moves (or on responding moves as follow-ups) before the listener embarks on a longer move, showing the attention to interactional continuity before embarking on the main business of the response stressed by Tao (in press):

Extract 8 (Am.) [Friends playing cards, discussing the odds of getting a particular suit]

A: No. Say we both want hearts. Okay?
B: Yeah.
A: We come around. You don't get a heart. Then my chances are better then. Of getting a heart.
B: **Right. That that's exactly what I'm saying.**
A: That's if you know you didn't get a heart.
B: Yeah but of course I don't know what you get. [the argument continues for several further turns]

B's "That's exactly what I'm saying" seems to reinforce the effect of "Right" as enough to conclude these deliberations, but in fact it does not prevent A from further pressing the point. It is worth considering B's without "Right": Its status as a cooperative response becomes less clear.

Extract 9 (Br.) [Travel agent's: A: server, B: customer. Server offers to do further checks on good deals for the customer.]

A: I wouldn't like you to miss out just because I haven't+
B: **Fine.**
A: +had time to check.
B: **Fine. Yeah. Fair comment. Okay. Yeah.**
A: Right.

Extract 9 is a service encounter, but it is interesting to note that the customer expands beyond a basic acknowledgment to make the response more sociable, combining "Fine" and "Fair comment" to express a more affectively convergent acceptance of the server's offer, possibly wishing to guard against the risk of being heard as brusque or less than satisfied. Service encounters place heavy responsibilities on both parties to create and maintain sociable relations (see McCarthy, 2000). Both extracts 8 and 9 represent examples of the indeterminate territory where short, back-channel-type responses fade into full speaker turns. In these cases, the extra matter strengthens and elaborates the pragmatic force of the response token at the interpersonal level rather than necessarily instituting a new move

(in Sinclair & Coulthard's [1975] sense). Nonminimal responses with expanded turn-content as in this category clearly require turn-taking conditions where the listener is not restricted to the kinds of minimal roles dictated by extended narratives or reports.

Response Tokens With Premodification

A subset of the response tokens (principally "fine," "true," "good," "definitely," and "perfect") often occurs premodified by degree adverbs, which serve to intensify their interactional and affective meanings as follows:

> Extract 10 (Br.) [social chat among friends]
>
> A: She went into education didn't she?
> B: She went into education yeah then she went to be a speech therapist. And she's going to have a baby.
> A: **Jolly good.**

> Extract 11 (Br.) [social chat among friends]
>
> A: I'm amazed that they remember each other because they don't see each other that often do they?
> B: No they really
> A: And yet they really do remember.
> B: **Most definitely.**
> A: I think it's lovely.

Simple intensification is one way in which listeners can apparently boost the interactional effect of their response without necessarily making a challenge for the floor and, as in extract 11, to converge with affective reinforcement to a speaker's repetition of or persistence with a point.

Negated Response Tokens

"Absolutely," "certainly," and "definitely" may be negated with a postmodifying "not." This is not a very frequent phenomenon, accounting for only 11, 14, and 23 occurrences in the data of the three items, respectively, and is a reflection of the general tendency of the response tokens to occur in affirmative convergent contexts. What is more, the negated

tokens in extracts 12 and 13 respond to negative propositions and are thus convergent, not countering, as follows:

> Extract 12 (Br.) [friends socializing]
>
> B: Well it got, it got well used last night that Hoover.
> D: Yeah. You've already done it.
> A: No. No. Oh no. No. No. We haven't have we.
> B: No indeed.
> A: **Definitely not.**

Again, in extract 13 as in extract 12, the reinforcement accompanies a persistence on the part of the main speaker (cf. if A's final response had been another "No" or "No, we haven't" considerably less sociable convergence would have been projected).

> Extract 13 (Am.) [students chatting]
>
> A: Don't go to a hospital if you want to get well.
> B: Yeah.
> C: **Absolutely not.**

Once again, simple negation, like simple intensification, provides an economical way of reinforcing affective convergence without extended syntactic implications but at the same time clearly contributing a great deal more than a bare *no*.

Doublets and Triplets and Tokens in Short Clauses

Nonminimal response tokens often occur as doublets, as illustrated in extracts 14 and 15. This is particularly noticeable in (pre-)closing stages and at topic boundaries, where the doublet may signal a discourse boundary (whether transactional or topical) and at the same time inject a strong relational element of response to the situation (one of satisfaction, agreement, and positive social bonding). Doublets also occur at points of pronounced conversational convergence between speakers. In extract 14 the customer expresses delight and satisfaction at the outcome of the service transaction, and clearly this is helped along by the choice of "great," "lovely," and "terrific" used in different combinations. These are no mere businesslike acknowledgments but illustrate the way servers and served in such encounters

frequently move into and out of personal bonding and justify the inclusion of such brief, localized episodes as comparable to longer small talk episodes, pursuing what Coupland (2000) referred to as "the local dynamics of small talk in its specific domains" (p. 5), examined on a turn-by-turn basis as follows:

Extract 14 (Br.) [Travel agent and customer]

A: To be honest you haven't paid that much for it so+
B: No. No. Yeah. Yeah.
A: +that much more.
B: Yeah. **Great lovely.**
A: Go out at nine thirty five+
B: Yeah.
A: +come back at four o'clock.
B: **Lovely. Terrific.**
A: Total price. Er hang on. One four five plus fifteen to get it here for
    tomorrow so that's one sixty in total.
B: Yeah. **Great. Lovely.**
A: Okay. I'll just go through the fare rules with you quickly.
B: Yeah.

Extract 15 (Am.) [social chat between acquaintances]

A: So the more we communicate, hey, look, we want a change here, because,
    you know, as it turns out, we've wasted a tremendous amount of money
    on our defense spending in this country.
B: Oh, absolutely.
A: Over a very long period of time.
B: **Right, absolutely.**

Here the initial listening-response relevant moment (filled by B with "absolutely") is followed by topical persistence on the part of Speaker A, producing, as we have noted before, a reinforced listener response.

The doublet may also be a repetition of the same token, again reinforcing convergence or satisfaction with the progress of the conversation as follows:

Extract 16 (Br.) [Travel agent and customer]

A: And I've left you still on the sixteenth Albany to Chicago+
B: Yeah.
A: +and then I've got you coming back Chicago Birmingham on the twenty
    second.
B: **Great. Great.**

A: That gives you what+
B: Yeah.
A: +ten days in one and and five
B: That that's fine.

Occasionally, triplets occur, which clearly serve to intensify the relational or affective response to an even greater extent, simultaneously marking episodic boundaries:

Extract 17 (Br.) [social chat between friends]

A: So you wanna you wanna go back to er your your sort of apartments then?
B: Yeah. I've got to find out when my drinks cabinet was installed and+
A: **Cool. Fine. Right.** Erm okay.
B: +since it may be the same segment of time.
A: Okay. Fair enough.

Triplets most frequently occur as repetitions of the same token, which is an interesting reflection on the question of possible negative interpretations of a speaker's repeated used of the same token raised by Schegloff (1982). Certainly in extracts 18 and 19 there seems no reason to suppose that the repetition is intended to convey anything other than enthusiastic reception of the incoming talk and a desire to send out strong interpersonal signals even during predominantly transactional episodes (extracts 18 and 19 are both professional contexts). Repetition has many functions in discourse (see Kuiper, 1982; Tannen, 1989), and interpretation will always depend on the local context as follows:

Extract 18 (Am.) [Colleagues at work]

A: I hate I hate doing color you know that. But is there something (1.0) I mean what do you think of it I guess is what I'm asking. Does it bother you?
B: Well I think it looks too um (1.0) Well you know it's it's also something just to see a page without the rest of the—
A: **Right. Right. Right.** That's true too.
B: Cause this is just one aspect of it.

Extract 19 (Br.) [publisher's meeting between editor and author]

A: I don't have any adverse comments to make at all.
B: **Good. Good. Good.**
A: She just captured the spirit of it.

The triple good here could be seen as an emphatic acknowledgment of the perhaps unusual situation that the speaker has no "adverse comments to make at all."

Many of the items that occur as syntactically independent tokens also occur frequently in short clauses with "that's" as follows:

Extract 20 (Am.) [informal chat between colleagues]

A: Like she says when you start applying for jobs I'm gonna give you all
     these materials and when you start+
B: **That's wonderful.**
A: +when you turn in your papers. Your (1.0) I mean when you start
     submitting papers I'm gonna read them. I'm gonna help you hone your
     abstract. I'm gonna help you+
B: **That's great.**
A: +and I know she's done that for other people and I know that she she has
     read so much that she's got a lot of really good instincts developed on
     like how to phrase things.

The minimal clause is frequent with "true," which seems to prefer the clausal option to independent occurrence as follows:

Extract 21 (Am.) [students chatting informally]

B: Like you know I can't walk. I have to go to naval, naval science
     courses. Three of the days uh (1.0) Three out of five days I have to go
     to class for Naval Science. ROTC.
A: Mhm.
B: Which if I really feel like "Oh I can't go. I'm sick." It's like "I got to go."
A: Right.
B: So if I'm up for that I might as well go.
A: Yeah that's true.
B: Anyway.

Other words with a frequent occurrence of "that's" clauses are "good," "great," and "fine." The effect of adding "that's" would seem to provide at least a minimal reinforcement of the convergence (the "that's" responses in extracts 20 and 21 could equally have been realized as single tokens).

Clusters and Extended Sequences

Nonminimal response tokens may also occur in series across speakers, where coordinated actions produce clusters of relational signals during, for

example, (pre-)closures, and often project parallel relational convergences. Often they co-occur with other typical markers of (pre-)closure such as thanks, checks and clarifications, confirmations, and salutations. In situations such as preclosures and closures, speaker and listener roles typically alternate more rapidly.

Extract 22 (Br.) [Informal phone chat between friends]

B: I don't know, whatever you reckon cos I'm picking them up about gone eleven or something.
A: **Right.**
B: It's not like halfway through+
A: **Wicked.**
B: +the evening.
A: Uh huh.
B: **So** maybe I could pick you up from work and+
A: **Cool.** Yeah.
B: +go for some tea.
C: **Ace. That would be really cool.**
B: **Ah yeah.**
A: I'm defi—Yeah **that's fine for me.**
B: **Oh that's good then.**
A: **Oh excellent.**
B: I-I'm going to put that in, in pen now.
A: **Wicked.**

It is worth noting that Speaker A's cool is intensified by Speaker C, and "fine," "good," and "excellent" create a sequential lexical chain cocreated by A and B.

Extract 23 (Br.) [Colleagues making arrangements]

A: Ah no. No. Don't worry about it.
B: Yeah.
A: **So** tomorrow morning.
B: Yeah. I'm leaving Morecambe about half past nine.
A: **Right.**
B: **So** I'll make you the first call before I go into the warehouse.
A: **Great. Okay. That's fine.**
B: **Okay. Thanks very much.**
A: **All right. Okay. Cheers then.**
B: **Bye.**
A: **Bye.**

CONCLUSION

The corpus-based investigation of nonminimal response tokens in American and British English shows a shared set of items that occur within the core, first 2,000-word frequency lists for each variety. Although there are lexical differences between the two varieties (see McCarthy 2000), the core set and typical points and manners of occurrence are shared. In all cases, the use of nonminimal responses shows a concern on the part of listeners toward attending to the relational aspects of the conversation as well as performing the necessary feedback functions with which listeners cocreate the discourse with speakers. The items in question are frequently turn-initial, or at least only preceded by function words and discourse markers such as "yes," "oh," "well," "okay," and so forth, and indicate the need speakers feel to attend to the nontransactional stratum of talk before getting into any transactional matter, in line with the view put forward by Tao (in press), for whom turn-initial placement is a key design feature of a grammar of speech. The tokens we have looked at are much more than just back-channel responses or discourse markers, even though on occasion (as indicated by turn-latches in the transcripts) they occur in overlap with the main speaker's turn, as back-channel responses so often do. And yet, where they are freestanding or only minimally accompanied by brief expansions, they do not seem to be turn–grabbing, as most of our examples show. Thus, like discourse markers they design and organize the talk with the recipient in mind; like back-channels, they show hearership, but they do more and are indexes of engaged listenership. The level of engagement is interpersonal and affective, and the signals the engaged listener sends back by using these tokens are typically the same as those conveyed in longer stretches of phatic or relational talk (i.e., small talk in general), that is to say, signals of human bonding, of social relation, and of affective convergence. In short, the concept of good listenership seems to require more than acknowledgment and transactional efficiency in keeping the channel open; listeners may be inferred as working at the creation and maintenance of sociability and affective well-being in their responses (this is a pragmatic inference; there are no objective or structural indexes of this) before attending to their own transactional concerns and grabbing and expanding the turn. As with other aspects of relational talk, the smallness of small actions often hides the contribution they make to the ongoing talk and can easily be overlooked in the

analysis of dense, extended stretches of discourse. "Small" talk may appear to exist at the margins of big talk, and these tokens may indeed be very "small," but their role in the discourse is anything but small or marginal. As with other aspects of relational talk, this kind of responsiveness is not something that just surfaces from time to time in the discourse but seems to be a continuous thread in the fabric of talk, a thread that the power of computer analysis in revealing regularities and patterns across large amounts of naturally occurring data can help to tease out, as well as providing a quantified, core lexicon for such activity. The most important conclusion to be reached from such a corpus-based study is that actions are indeed achieved at the local level, as conversation analysts have regularly argued, and that the "local" may be profitably observed in the word-by-word utterance and the placement of key tokens such as those we have looked at here, with the speaker turn as the locus of such placements. A concept such as "small talk" may be fruitfully interpreted at higher orders of analysis and perceived in longer stretches of talk, as many of the chapters in Coupland (2000) and articles in this special issue of the journal clearly demonstrate, but its phatic, relational, and affective meanings are continuously, not just intermittently, woven into the fabric of sociable talk. This article suggests that the concrete linguistic indexes of such meanings may ultimately reside partly in a lexicon that reveals its true power only when seen in its regular patterning over many instances of occurrence and that much more research needs to focus on "small," everyday, high-frequency words. These are small words, too small usually to be included even in the domain of small talk, but they have big meanings.

NOTES

1 The + sign indicates continuation of turn by speaker after intervening or overlapping talk by another speaker.

2 CANCODE stands for Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English. The corpus was established at the Department of English Studies, University of Nottingham (UK) and is funded by Cambridge University Press. The corpus consists of 5 million words of transcribed conversations. The corpus recordings were made nonsurreptitiously in a variety of settings, including private homes, shops, offices and other public places, and educational institutions in nonformal settings across the islands of Britain and Ireland, with a wide demographic spread. The CANCODE corpus forms part of the much larger Cambridge International Corpus. For further details of the CANCODE corpus and its

construction, see McCarthy (1998). The North American spoken corpus is, similarly, a collection of a wide range of different types of conversation collected nonsurreptitiously in the United States and funded by Cambridge University Press. The corpus includes casual talk among friends, telephone calls, and a variety of other everyday types of talk. The corpus currently stands at 10 million-plus words, and the sample here was chosen with a view to an optimum balance with the CANCODE corpus conversations.

3 The figure of 2,000 words is not an otiose choice. In both corpora, the frequency distribution graph shows a sharp falloff after about 2,000 words; in other words, the first 2,000 represent a core vocabulary, beyond which everything is (relative to that core) of low frequency.

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