The Appendor Question in English Talk-in-interaction: Focusing on Problems due to Sequential Coherency

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Abstract

This article will examine a practice of other-initiated repair in English conversation called the "appendor question"; in particular, I will examine how this linguistic format is used to address problems due to sequential coherency. Such problems are caused by problems in understanding how the trouble source turn fits in sequentially with the immediately prior talk. While the appendor question has been identified as marking a "tying problem" in English talk-in-interaction previously, this article will expand on this and take a more detailed look at how problems due to sequential coherency are dealt with by participants in interaction. Primarily, this article will focus on why the appendor question (in particular, its syntactic format) is used to address such problems. Utilising the methodology of Conversation Analysis, this article will examine naturally occurring English conversation and delve into the instances where the appendor question was used to address problems due to sequential coherency. It was found that the appendor question is used in environments where a topic shift or change has occurred, such as after a first pair part or a topic initial turn. These appendor questions reveal the strong grasp of the trouble that the participant initiating repair has, to the extent where they are able to produce a missing element that is both a syntactic and semantic extension of the trouble source. In addition, they are used in instances where a shift in the topic (i.e., less abrupt change) has occurred. Compared to another practice of other-initiated repair in English, the "open-class repair initiator" marks a much lesser grasp of the trouble source and a more abrupt change between the topics. The repair initiator in this case does not even construe something that is a semantic, syntactic extension. In addition, the appendor question is minimally stopping the progressivity of the other participant's talk with their own action (i.e., repair), but on the other hand, it is also maximally aligned to support the action of the other participant.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, Appendor Question, Sequential Coherency, Other-initiated Repair

1. Introduction

Whenever we talk with others, there at times can be problems in the shared understanding of what we are talking about. This article will examine how participants deal with disruptions to this shared understanding, focusing on problems due to "sequential coherency"; that is, the coherency of a turn in its sequential (conversational) environment. This article will focus on a practice called the "appendor question" that can be used for such problems.

The appendor question is one of many repair initiators found in English (see Sidnell, 2011 for more about the typology of repair initiators in English). It is both a semantic and syntactic extension of a prior, possibly-complete turn.[1] That is to say, the appendor question appends to the end of the turn it is targeting. It is a practice of other-initiated repair that is used as an understanding check, making relevant a confirmation or disconfirmation by the trouble-source speaker. Appendor questions were initially defined as prepositional phrases with questioning intonation (cf., Sacks, 1992), but this has expanded to adjuncts in general (Hayashi & Hayano, 2013). Moreover, it is not necessary that all appendor questions will have questioning (i.e., rising) intonation; for instance, there were cases in the collected data where the appendor question has non-questioning intonation but is still being treated as performing repair by the recipient.

Let us now look at one example of the appendor question. (1) is from a group therapy session where the provided coffee is from a local café. The target appendor question, denoted by '→', is in line 8.

Excerpt (1): Sacks (1992, pp. 660-661); Schegloff (1997, p. 511)

1	Roger:	So we lack feminine attendance.
2	Dan:	Doesn't seem so, unless we can get some more in.
3	Ken:	But the girls - any girl that comes in here has
4		to take all those tests and stuff, don't they.
5		(3.0)
6	Dan:	Won't be for several weeks now.
7	Roger:	They make miserable coffee.
8	→Dan:	Across the street?
9	Roger:	Yeh
10	Ken:	Miserable food hhhh

Dan proffers a candidate understanding of the referent “they” in line 7 with the appendor question “across the street” in line 8. This appendor question is designed to be a semantic and syntactic extension of line 7’s “they make miserable coffee”. Placing these together, we will get “They make miserable coffee across the street”, which is a complete syntactic unit. As discussed by Sacks (1992, p. 661), the trouble here could be due to a “tying problem”. This is because the “they” in line 7 could be heard as either referring to “girls”, which the participants has just discussed, or “the café”, which is where the participants had purchased the coffee. The appendor question speaker here has heard and understood the trouble source turn itself, but the trouble has been caused by the underspecified referent “they”. Moreover, how the trouble source turn fits in with the immediately prior talk (i.e., sequential coherency) is an interactional problem.

While Sacks (1992) has identified the appendor question previously, this study will examine appendor question and how it is being used to address problems due to sequential coherency. This will involve a comparison with another repair initiator, the open-class repair initiator, that can be used for such problems too. Although both of these are repair initiators, they differ in that the appendor question is syntactically dependent on the trouble source turn and the open-class repair initiator is not. In this respect, the article will delve into why the appendor question might be picked by its speaker, as opposed to a repair initiator that is not syntactically dependent like the open-class repair initiator.

This article is structured in the following manner. After the introduction, I will outline the data and methodology used for this article. This is followed by the analysis of the appendor question addressing problems due to sequential coherency and then the open-class repair initiator. Lastly, the discussion and conclusion will be presented.

2. Data and Methodology

The analysis uses naturally occurring, recorded interaction between speakers of English. 185 instances of appendor questions were collected in total from 135 hours of audio- and video-recorded data. 15 of the appendor questions concern problems of sequential coherency, while the other functions of appendor questions (namely, repair not concerning sequential coherency problems; after a topic initial turn; information seeking; disbelief; a harbinger to disaffiliation) will not be examined as they fall outside the scope of this article. The data primarily came from publicly available corpora, but the corpora in question for this article are: “CallHome” (Canavan, Graff, & Zipperlen, 1997) and “CallFriend – Northern US”

(Canavan & Zipperlen, 1996). These consist of recorded, casual conversations between friends and family members on the telephone.

The methodology of this article is grounded in Conversation Analysis (henceforth, CA). It is the study of natural talk-in-interaction. Emerging as a discipline in the 1960s through the work of Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, a fundamental goal of CA is to describe how participants understand and accomplish social actions in conversation to achieve their interactional goals (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990). That is, a central tenet is answering the question of "why that now" (Sacks & Schegloff, 1973). Hence, this study will examine how the participants use and understand the appendor question, and it will account for how they (and we) use the appendor question in conversation.

Moreover, CA is data-driven and utilises natural conversations that have been recorded. These conversations are then transcribed (please refer to the "Transcription Conventions" section at the end of this article for the conventions used) and analysed.

3. Analysis

This section will examine three instances of the appendor question addressing problems due to sequential coherency. This will be followed by an examination of open-class repair initiators being used to address such problems as well, highlighting the similarities and differences between the two repair initiators. This will revolve around how one format — the appendor question — is syntactically dependent on the trouble source turn, while the other — the open-class repair initiator — is not syntactically dependent.

Now, let us turn our attention to the first appendor question example. This first excerpt comes from a case whereby the trouble source turn marks a shift in the topic; moreover, this trouble source turn is the first pair part of an adjacency pair. Adjacency pairs are a sequence of paired actions whereby the first pair part makes the second pair part relevant and expected (cf. Schegloff, 2007). However, the appendor question has been inserted and becomes a roadblock in the sequence's progressivity; i.e., it delays the second pair part. (2) demonstrates this. Alex and Dave knew each other from the army, but only Alex is still serving. Alex was discussing how he has been offered a job as department head for emergency nursing (lines omitted). The military terminology "deep-selected" is used in the excerpt, which refers to someone who has been promoted ahead of their peers to a higher rank. The target "for commander" occurs in line 15.

Excerpt (2): CallHome (chm4415)

1	Dave:	I know you are stil:l <lieutenant commander right?>
2		(0.6)
3	Alex:	yeah.
4		(0.2)
5	Dave:	okay ah- you are looking towards ho- (.) hh how soon
6		would commander be coming around the pike for you
7		Alex.
8	Alex:	a:h wel:l I'll be in <zone> next- next year.
9		(.)
10	Dave:	okay, so that wouldn't [blow the d]epartment head=
11	Alex:	[but-]
12		=thing if you pick up commander would it?
13	Alex:	no no a:h but guess who got deep selected.
14		(0.3)
15	→Dave:	for commander?
16		(.)
17	Alex:	ye:ah.
18		(0.9)
19	Dave:	°let me think.° (0.8) oh. (0.4) it's got to
20		be (.) Barney.
21		(0.3)
22	Alex:	o:h yeah.

Alex's first pair part question is "but guess who got deep selected" in line 13. The 'guess + WH-word' format can be used for pre-announcements (Schegloff, 2007), but Dave treats this as a question. This is evidenced by the lack of a go-ahead or blocking response. Rather than an answer to the question, Alex instead proffers the appendor question "for commander?" in line 15. This treats Alex's question as pragmatically incomplete as it is not response ready for him. He has been, however, able to infer from the immediately prior talk that the unexpressed element of Alex's question is "commander" (as the terminology "deep-selected" refers only to ranks in the army). This question would mark a shift in topic from Alex's future job and possibly becoming commander in the military. After receiving confirmation from Alex in line 17, Dave in lines 19-20 indicates that he is searching for the answer ("let me

think") before finally giving it. In this instance, there was an unexpressed element in the trouble source turn, which the appendor question speaker construed and received confirmation of such by the trouble source speaker.

Now let us turn to cases where the appendor question appears in is after a topic initial turn. In (3), Sue has been telling May about how a former student of hers introduced her to the novel *Heart of a Dog*. The target "about being a dog" occurs in line 17.

Excerpt (3): CallHome (chm4822)

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1     May:    .hh is heart of a dog is it about (.) what it's like
2              to be a dog in a way and [it's
3     Sue:                              [well [it's about this  ]
4     May:                                    [(speaks how you-)]=
5             =walks around how the smells are.
6             (0.2)
7     Sue:    no it's that he's a dog but he's like being
8             transformed by some mad scientist soviet scientist
9             into this- [to this] like ma:n .hh
10    May:               [  oh.  ]
11    May:    oh.
12            (0.7)
13    Sue:    it's really bizarre.
14    May:    I've never been able to find that book (1.0) hh pf
15            that (.) Hester and I read yea::rs ago,
16            (0.2)
17    →Sue:   about being a dog?
18            (.)
19    May:    yeah.=
20    Sue:    =wasn't call of the wild was it?
21            (0.8)
22    May:    the wild?
23            (.)
24    Sue:    call of the wild?
25            (0.5)
26    May:    no
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In lines 14-15, the demonstrative determiner “that” is being used to modify the noun in May’s topic initial turn. This turn is a shift from Sue’s discussion of *Heart of a Dog* to May not being able to find a particular book. The reference “that book” could have been problematic for Sue as use of the demonstrative determiner “that” suggests the referent is uniquely identifiable and familiar to the co-participant (Gundel, Hedberg, & Zacharski, 2001). As such, it is hearable as inviting Sue to identify the referent. Instead, Sue proffers the appendor question “about being a dog” in line 17, which appends to the end of May’s talk in lines 14-15. It is evident that Sue has inferred this from the prior talk, which was left underspecified by May, that the book is also about a dog. After confirmation in line 19, Sue proffers a suggestion for the book title and this is ultimately rejected by May in line 26. Here, the appendor question is used to target an underspecified element of the prior turn.

(4) is another example of the appendor question occurring after a topic initial turn. Adele and Kylie are clinical therapy interns. Adele mentioned that she has received the necessary credits needed for the next two years (lines omitted). She then shifts the topic to how she might not be where she is in two years’ time. The target “from Guam?” occurs in line 10.

Excerpt (4): CallFriend – Northern US (engn6278)

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1   Adele:    I don't know=maybe I won't even be here in two more
2             years=who knows.
3             (.)
4   Kylie:    huh?
5             (0.3)
6   Adele:    maybe I'll be in Guam hhh .h
7   Kylie:    <did I miss something cruci:al?>
8   Adele:    .hh <well> I've been dating somebody.
9             (0.6)
10  →Kylie:   from ↓Gua::m?
11            (0.4)
12  Adele:    $n(h)o:$
13            (.)
14  Adele:    somebody who's in the Navy.
15            (.)
16  Kylie:    >oh.<
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Adele's announcement "well I've been dating somebody" in line 8 has been designed in a way that suggests that Kylie is in a [K-] position regarding the news. Thus, for Kylie, this is pragmatically incomplete. Indeed, Adele's turns prior to this announcement have been designed in an ambiguous manner. In lines 1-2, Adele announces that she would not be where she is in two years, to which Kylie responses with "huh". Then in line 6, Adele states "maybe I'll be in Guam". In response, Kylie in line 7 asks "did I miss something crucial", which suggests she is seeking more information to understand the reason for Adele going to Guam. Although Adele has stated she might not be where she is in two years as she will be in Guam, the reason why she will be in Guam in the first place has not been given. Adele then announces that she has been dating somebody. In the next slot, Kylie in line 10 proffers the appendor question "from Guam?". She infers from the immediately prior talk that the reason is something to do with Guam. Kylie seeks confirmation from Adele — via the appendor question — that this understanding is correct, but Adele disconfirms this and then reveals she has been dating someone from the Navy. Kylie's "oh" in line 16 signals that Kylie has moved from a state of not knowing to knowing (Heritage, 1984). As soon as she is able to infer, she uses an appendor question. Hence, Kylie here has used the immediately prior talk to infer the topical connection between the announcement and the prior talk, which is made explicit via the appendor question.

From what we have seen with these excerpts, the appendor question is making something that was left "missing" explicit. The appendor question itself makes minimal disruption to the progressivity as it requires a simple confirmation or disconfirmation, rather than an elaboration, by the trouble source speakers. Although the appendor question speaker is initiating a new action (i.e., repair) with the appendor question, this action minimally halts in the progressivity. Another consideration is that the appendor question is both a syntactic and semantic extension, which in turn means that the appendor question is a hearable as being a continuation of what the trouble source speaker could have said for themselves. The appendor question speaker reveals through their use of the appendor question that they have a strong understanding of what the missing element is.

Now, while the appendor question can be used for sequential problems, another repair initiator can also be used: the open-class repair initiator (Drew, 1997). This is demonstrated in (5) with the target open-class repair initiator "pardon" occurring in line 10.

Excerpt (5): Drew (1997, p. 75)

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1   Gordon:    .tch Eh:m (0.4) are you goin' tonight,
2               (.)
3   Norm:      Mm.
4   Gordon:    .hhh (0.2) Would you mind givin' me a lift[t.
5   Norm:                                                 [No
6   Norm:      that's a'right,
7   Gordon:    .hhh (0.3) Very kind of you.
8              (.)
9   Norm:      Caught me in the ba:th a[gain.
10  →Gordon:                           [.p.hhhh Pardon?=
11  Norm:      =heh Caugh[t me in the ba:th
12  Gordon:              [.t .h h .h h Oh(hh) I'm sorr(h)y
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There is an abrupt change in topic from Gordon's request for a lift (line 4) to Norm's announcement that he was in the bath (line 9). This has caused a problem in understanding the connection between the trouble source turn and the immediately prior talk. Gordon proffering "pardon" in line 10 is evidence for this. The excerpts from Drew's article all feature an abruptness in the topic shift between unrelated topics, but in the cases from my appendor question collection, the topics are related and mark a shift in the topic's focus. This is perhaps related to ordered typology for the different other-initiated repair formats (Sidnell, 2011), which is organised in terms of their power for locating the repairable:

Open-class → Q-word → Repeat + Q-word → Repeat → Understanding Check

WEAKER *STRONGER*

Figure 1: Typology of other-initiated repair from Sidnell (2011)

On this scale and of particular interest to us, understanding checks (including appendor questions) have the strongest grasp of what the trouble source is, whereas open-class repair initiators have the weakest. The scale could also be related to the grasp that the speaker initiating the repair has of the relationship between the trouble source turn and the prior talk. That is, open-class repair initiators display the least grasp due to a greater degree of sequential incoherency. This relationship is reversed for the appendor questions, where it

shows a higher grasp due to a lower degree of sequential incoherency. Furthermore, in the case of open-class repair initiators, it would be difficult to use the appendor question in its place (like in (5)) because it would be significantly more difficult to infer the connection between the trouble source turn and the immediately prior talk. In saying so, the appendor question can be used for when there has been an abrupt topic change, like in (1), as the participants have knowledge pertaining to the topic initial turn and thus do not have to rely on the talk prior to the trouble source turn to infer the topical connection.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Appendor questions are semantically and syntactically tied to the trouble source turn, but they are also used to make explicit how the trouble source is tied to its sequence context. That is, it is used to confirm the sequential relationship between the trouble source turn and the immediately prior talk. It was shown that speakers rely on the immediately prior talk to infer the relationship, which then requires either a simple confirmation or disconfirmation by the trouble source speaker. This seems to suggest that the speaker of the appendor question is supporting the action of the trouble source speaker by requiring just a minimal response (a confirmation or disconfirmation).

In addition, the appendor question is maximally fitted to the end of the host utterance in a syntactic way, helping to make explicit something left underspecified or unexpressed. In other words, the appendor question speaker is uttering what the trouble source speaker could have feasibly added to the end of the host utterance themselves. In choosing the appendor question over something like the open-class repair initiator, the speaker reveals that they have construed a missing element, building upon the syntax of the trouble source turn. Not only this, but that there is (at least some) claimed, shared understanding with the appendor question speaker. The open-class repair initiator differs because it is not an extension of what the trouble source speaker could have said, highlighting the breakdown in mutual understanding.

Moreover, appendor questions tend to be used when there has been a shift in the topic's focus, whereas for open-class repair initiators, they are used when there has been an abrupt topic change between unrelated topics. This marks a reliance on inferring from prior talk; however, as shown in (1), appendor questions can be used for abrupt topic changes if the appendor question speaker has knowledge pertaining to the trouble source turn outside of prior talk.

While this article has looked at the appendor question in English, the use of an equivalent linguistic format has been examined in another language too. The Japanese equivalent of the appendor question, "Proffering Insertable Elements" (henceforth, PIE), can also occur after a topic initial turn (Hayashi & Hayano, 2013). PIE and appendor questions are similar in that both are increments; however, they differ in the regard that PIEs are "insertables" that are heard as being inserted into a prior turn, whereas appendor questions are a "glue-on" and append to the end of a prior turn (cf., Couper-Kuhlen & Ono, 2007). Although there is a typological difference between the two languages, there does not seem to be an interactional difference in how they function. The appendor question, like PIE, makes the topical connection explicit and is also a minimal disruption to the progressivity of the trouble source speaker.

Future research should dive into the other interactional functions of the appendor question, as well as examining more broadly how sequential coherency problems are dealt with in conversation. Moreover, in this article, only two repair initiators have been examined. Further investigation is needed to delve into the other repair initiators and how (or even whether) they can be used to address problems related to sequential coherency. This will help to explain if there is a general relationship between the format of the repair initiator and how it is used to address problems due to sequential coherency.

In all, this article has shown how the participants themselves use and understand the appendor question in English talk-in-interaction, and how it is used to achieve shared understanding again.

Notes

(1) Appendor questions differ from a turn that has been collaboratively completed by another speaker. That is, although the utterance is a syntactic and semantic extension of a prior turn, the other speaker is continuing the action of the previous speaker rather than initiating a new action (i.e., repair) (Lerner, 2004; Sidnell, 2012).

Transcription Conventions

[	overlapping talk onset
]	overlapping talk termination
=	'latching'; no gap or overlap between the completion of one utterance and the beginning of another

(x.x)	elapsed length of silence; measured in tenths of seconds
(.)	very short pause or micropause (less than 0.2 seconds)
,	continuing intonation; continuing contour with a slight rise
.	final intonation; falling terminal contour
?	final intonation; rising contour
word	stress in talk through pitch or amplitude or both
°word°	quieter in comparison with surrounding talk
WORD	louder than surrounding talk
:	prolongation of immediately prior talk; multiple colons indicate further prolongation
↓ ↑	marked shifts into lower or higher pitches
>word<	faster than surrounding talk
<word>	slower than surrounding talk
-	cut-off
hh	audible aspirations; outbreath
.hh	audible inhalations; inbreath
(h)	within speech plosive; e.g., laughter, crying etc.
$word$	laughing while talking (audibly detectable)
(word)	possible hearing

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