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RUNNING HEAD:

Prosody and phonetics of OKAY in American English

## **The prosody and phonetics of OKAY in American English**

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### *Abstract*

This chapter is devoted to a study of the prosodic and phonetic realization of the particle OKAY as deployed in American English mundane conversation. Its primary aim is to explore the question of whether there are recurrent prosodic-phonetic formats associated with positionally distinct uses of OKAY. The data come from telephone and face-to-face interactions between family and friends spanning a period from the 1960s to the present. Currently there are approximately 200 tokens in the collection. The older and more recent data sets are considered separately in order to capture changes that have ensued over the last fifty to sixty years.

### *Keywords*

American English, prosody-phonetics, tag, response particle, sequence-closing third, transitional position, continuer, pre-closing, marked prosody, change over time

## 1. Introduction

The word OKAY, an orthographic rendering of the abbreviation *O.K.*, is reportedly an American invention, so it is perhaps not unfitting to devote a chapter to its use in American English some 170 years after its first appearance in print.<sup>1</sup> Above and beyond its syntactically integrated use as an adjective (*I'm okay, that's an okay answer*),<sup>2</sup> OKAY continues to function widely as a particle in spoken American English. The present study will document its most frequent particle uses in mundane conversation, where *use* is understood in terms of turn location and sequential position in conversational structure (Schegloff 2007). Most importantly, the study will explore a frequently neglected aspect of the use of OKAY: its prosodic and phonetic design in actual contexts of occurrence, and these contexts of use viewed over time.

## 2. Data and procedure

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<sup>1</sup> See Metcalf 2010 for a popular treatment of what is known about OKAY and its origins.

<sup>2</sup> See also Pillet-Shore 2003, who examines the use of OKAY as an assessment in parent-teacher interactions.

The prosody of OKAY is examined here empirically based on audio and video recordings of everyday American English conversation, using the methods of Conversation Analysis and Interactional Linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018). The first step of the investigation was to establish a collection of OKAY tokens in the sequential environments in which they occurred. Since the available conversational data covered a period of nearly 60 years, two separate OKAY collections were made, the older one covering the 1960s and the newer one the 1990s into the early 2000s.

An attempt was made to have roughly the same number of tokens in the older and newer collections, with as wide a variety of speakers as possible. Video data were prioritized for the newer collection. When the available video sources were exhausted, telephone conversations from the Call Friend and Call Home corpora were randomly selected. The breakdown of the data is as follows (telephone data unless otherwise noted):

<i>Older data (1960s)</i>	<i>Newer data (1990s–2000s)</i>
Debby & Shelly	Before bed (video)
Hyla II	Call Friend 4984
Joyce & Stan	Call Friend 5926
Kamunsky-3	Call Friend 6239
Newport Beach 27	Call Friend 6255
Newport Beach 28	Call Friend 6278
Santa Barbara Ladies 010	Call Friend 6899

Santa Barbara Ladies 011	Call Friend 6938
Santa Barbara Ladies 015	Call Home 4544
SF-2	Camp Reunion-1 (video)
Two girls	Camp Reunion-2 (video)
	Farmhouse (video)
	Game Night (video)
	Hey Cutie Pie

All OKAY tokens in these recordings were collected, making it possible to estimate how frequently OKAY is used as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in contrast to roughly sixty years ago (see Section 7 below). The collecting initially took place based on pre-existing transcripts of the conversations in question, and an initial categorization was made according to the turn and sequential position of OKAY.<sup>3</sup> The categories included OKAY (a) in first position (accompanying an initiating action), (b) in second position of a sequence (responsive action), (c) in third position of a sequence (sequence-closing third), (d) in sequence-internal position (continuer), (e) in turn-initial transitional position, (f) in turn-final transitional position, and (g) in the pre-closing of a conversation.

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<sup>3</sup> Since prosodic and phonetic detail is typically not recorded systematically in these transcripts, the classification could thus be effected without reference to the auditory nature of the delivery.

For each of the tokens thus categorized video and audio clips were prepared, based on which detailed prosodic analyses were carried out. An attempt was then made to identify recurrent prosodic patterns of delivery for OKAY tokens in the turn and sequential positions listed above.

### **3. Prosodic and phonetic variables in the delivery of OKAY**

Before reporting the results of the investigation, let us first survey the many ways in which the prosody and phonetics of OKAY can vary. The following list of variables represents an -etic perspective; all were tracked in the design of OKAY in the two collections. Some, however, proved to be more relevant for the participants than others, as will become evident in the course of the subsequent analyses.

- (a) Pitch: contour, onset height, register, and span<sup>4</sup>
- (b) Loudness: overall and of the first vs. the second syllable
- (c) Duration: overall and of the first vs. the second syllable
- (d) Accentuation: of the first and/or second syllable
- (e) Timing and pauses: with respect to prior and subsequent talk
- (f) Vowel quality: in first and/or second syllable

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<sup>4</sup> For more on these notions, see, e.g., Szczeppek Reed 2011.

(g) Voice quality: overall

The following guidelines were observed in judging each of these parameters:

- (a) The pitch contour was identified auditorily with respect to the conventional inventory of English pitch accents (fall, rise, fall-rise, rise-fall, and level) and final pitch movements (fall to low or mid, rise to high or mid, and level).<sup>5</sup> The variables of onset height (if marked: high or extra high) and pitch register (if marked: high or low) were judged relatively with respect to prior same-speaker or other-speaker talk.<sup>6</sup> Pitch span was judged auditorily; when possible, the pitch interval between the first and second syllable of OKAY was expressed in terms of semitones. Where necessary, an acoustic analysis of fundamental frequency was carried out using Praat, a computer-based program for speech analysis (Boersma and Weenink 2018, version 6.1.08).
- (b) Loudness was judged auditorily by comparison with prior same-speaker or other-speaker talk (if marked: loud, extra loud, soft, or extra soft).

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Selting et al. 2011.

<sup>6</sup> This decision was made on the grounds that it is above all *relational* aspects of prosody that are relevant in social interaction (see also Couper-Kuhlen 2014).

- (c) Duration was judged auditorily for each syllable (if marked: slow, extra slow, fast, or extra fast) and overall as speech rate (if marked: slow or fast).
- (d) Accentuation, understood as the presence *vs.* absence of stress<sup>7</sup> in the two syllables of OKAY, was judged rhythmically: on the first syllable only (DA-da); on the second syllable only (da-DA); or on both syllables (DA-DA).
- (e) Timing was judged auditorily with respect to the pacing of prior talk, typically the immediately preceding TCU (if marked: early or late). Pauses were identified auditorily and measured in tenths of a second using Praat.
- (f) Vowel quality was judged auditorily: in the first syllable as /ou-/ *vs.* /n-/ *vs.* /m-/ and in the second as /-ei/ *vs.* /-e:/.
- (g) Voice quality was judged auditorily (if marked: nasal, breathy, creaky, or whispery).

The prosodic and phonetic parameters of OKAY, especially when marked, were subsequently added to the transcripts in accordance with the transcription conventions for this volume (Appendix A).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For more on this notion, see Cruttenden 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Pitch accents on stressed syllables are indicated only when there is a significant upward or downward glide.



## 4. Sequential positions and patterns of delivery

We turn now to an examination of the different turn and sequential positions in which OKAY particles occur, reporting on recurrent patterns of delivery found in each position. Extracts from both the older and the newer collections will be used for the purpose of illustration.

### 4.1 OKAY accompanying a first-position action

The particle OKAY can accompany an initiating action such as a request or a proposal and serve as a follow-up, in particular when the conditionally relevant response (acceptance or rejection) is not immediately forthcoming:

**Excerpt 1:** *A drink* (HGII 17), 1960s, American English, telephone, informal interaction

[Hyla and her friend Nancy are planning to go to the theater together in the evening.]

01 HYL: =.hh ↑MAYbe we can go out for a drink tonight.

02 (.)

03 NAN: ye::ah. that soun- yeah I owe you a dri:nk.

04 (.)

05-> NAN: I wanna buy you a dri:n[k.

06 HYL: [AOW. alri[:ght,

07=> NAN: [o↑KA:Y,

08 so we will for sure;=

09 HYL: =alri[ght.]  
10 NAN: [ af]ter; (.) the pl[ay.]

Nancy's proposal in line 5 makes acceptance or rejection from Hyla relevant next, but Hyla at first only registers the proposal with a variant of *oh* (Heritage 1984a). Nancy now follows up with OKAY (line 7), which ends up in partial overlap with Hyla's subsequent acceptance token *alright* (line 6). After Nancy's renewed commitment to buy Hyla a drink (line 8), Hyla reiterates her acceptance of the proposal in line 9.

The prosodic design of the OKAY token in line 7 of Excerpt 1 is typical when the particle accompanies requests and proposals: the first syllable of OKAY is lower, shorter, and softer than the second. There is a step up of approximately three semitones to the next syllable, which remains high, ending here with a very slight final rise. Figure 1 presents a pitch trace of OKAY in Excerpt 1 for illustrative purposes, with the caveat that other, often just as crucial prosodic and phonetic features (e.g., loudness, accentuation, timing, vowel quality) are not captured in this diagram.<sup>9</sup> It is thus only an imperfect representation.

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<sup>9</sup> Because the division between the two syllables of OKAY is invariably marked through the voicelessness of /k/, phonemic segmentation has been omitted from the pitch trace figures.

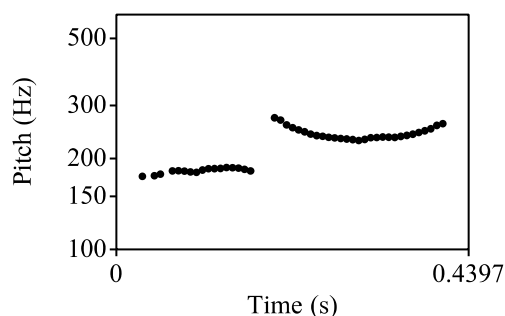


Figure 1: Pitch trace of OKAY in line 7 in Excerpt 1 *A drink*

When OKAY is produced with the prosodic design documented in Excerpt 1 as a follow-up to a request or a proposal, it solicits commitment to comply or acceptance. The interlocutor typically provides this in next turn, often with a responsive OKAY (see Excerpt 18 below) or *alright*, as in line 9 above.

While this freestanding variant of OKAY is found in the newer collection as well, it also occurs there as a *tag* latched immediately on to the end of a TCU. Moreover, it attaches to TCUs that implement not only directive, or deontic, actions (dealing with obligation: see Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2012) as in Excerpt 1, but also informing, or epistemic, ones (dealing with knowledge; see Heritage 2012a, 2012b). Here is a case in point:

**Excerpt 2:** *Tax and tipping* (Farmhouse, 34.25), 1998, American English, face-to-face, informal interaction  
 [Michelle, who works part-time as a waitress, is explaining to her friends Donna and Laura how to reckon a tip based on a bill that includes sales tax.]

01 DON: it comes to twenty percent with tip and tax?

02 MIC: [no no no no no ]

03 LAU: [so you do twenty percent and] then

04       ↑say your twenty percent was five bucks and your

05       tax was another dollar,=then it'd be six bucks?

06       (0.4)

07 LAU: is that what you're saying?

08 MIC: \*I'm saying okay let- let's just say the bill is  
\*gazing at Laura----->

09       twenty dollars total,\*  
----->\*

10 LAU: oka:y,

11       (0.2)

12 MIC: and then ta:xes >would be like what< eighty ce-

13       no. how's that work. ( ) a dollar sixty

14 LAU: whatever. yeah [a dollar sixty]

15 MIC:                   [°I don't know° ]

16       (0.5)

17 LAU: sounds good.

18-> MIC: \*£well (percentages) (.)  
\*gazing at Donna----->

19=>       no(h)t my spe(h)cia(h)lty, = o↑KA:Y £\*  
----->\*

20 DON: mine either.

21 MIC: ↑so anyway let's just say you have this amount

22       for your tax.

23 LAU: right.

When Donna proffers a candidate understanding of what Michelle is saying (line 1), Michelle rejects it (line 2), while Laura proposes another interpretation (lines 3–5) and asks for confirmation (line 7). But Michelle now advances her own case example, using the sum of twenty dollars as an

imaginary bill for food and drink (lines 8–9). She then begins to reckon what the sales tax (8% at the time) would be on twenty dollars, trying eighty cents first (line 12) and then, after correcting herself, repairing to one dollar sixty (line 13). Laura indulgently acknowledges this repair with *whatever* (line 14) and *sounds good* (line 17), whereupon Michelle – with an overlay of laughter particles – produces a self-deprecatory account for her uncertainty in arithmetic (lines 18–19), gazing now at Donna. To this explanation she appends an OKAY, and Donna responds with a congruent self-deprecation (line 20). Michelle now proceeds with her case example.

The OKAY token in line 19 has roughly the same prosodic-phonetic design as that in Excerpt 1: the first syllable is shorter, lower, and softer than the second. The second syllable is produced with a pitch step up, here encompassing approximately seven semitones, and remains on a high pitch level until the end (the ‘flutter’ in the pitch trace of Figure 2 is due to the presence of ‘speech-laugh’ or ‘wobble’: see Ford and Fox 2010 for more on this phenomenon):

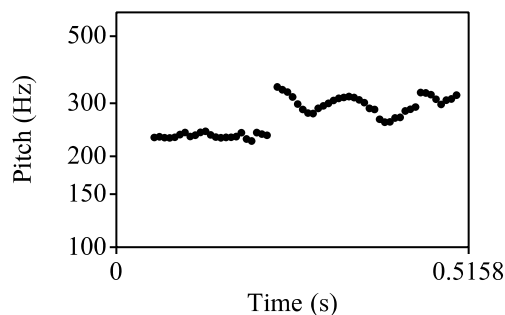


Figure 2: Pitch trace of OKAY in line 19 of Excerpt 2 *Tax and tipping*

What is interesting about the OKAY tag in Excerpt 2 is that it attaches, not to a request or proposal for which it is soliciting compliance or acceptance, but to an account, in this case for a lack of skill in arithmetic: *not my speciality* (line 19). Note that in the next turn Donna responds, not by saying *okay* or *alright*, but by orienting to Michelle's self-deprecation and making a similar self-deprecatory statement about herself (line 20).<sup>10</sup>

With this newer use of OKAY as a tag, the speaker does not solicit acceptance, nor even acknowledgment, of the action it accompanies. In contrast to freestanding OKAYs accompanying requests and proposals, there is no pursuit of such a response, should one not be forthcoming. That is, the OKAY tag has become part of the prior TCU and serves now as a turn-final particle, retaining its characteristic up-stepped pitch contour.

To summarize, OKAY accompanies first-position actions in both the older and the newer collections, where it is produced with a lower, shorter, and softer first syllable and up-stepped or rising pitch on the second. While it attaches to directive actions such as requests and proposals in both data sets, soliciting commitment to comply or acceptance, in the newer data set it also occurs latched onto informing actions such as accounts, promises, and informings. In these cases, however, it lacks strong conditional relevance.

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<sup>10</sup> In another case in the newer data we find a similar OKAY tag being added on to a predictive-like promise: *it's just not gonna happen.=OKAY?*

#### *4.2 OKAY in the second position of a sequence*

Let us turn now to the use of OKAY as a responsive particle. Here distinguishing different responsive actions based on the nature of the initiating action has proven to be useful (Sorjonen 2001; Thompson, Fox, and Couper-Kuhlen 2015). In the present case this means distinguishing OKAY as a response to a directive action, e.g., a request, proposal, offer, or invitation, from OKAY as a response to an informative action, e.g., an informing or a telling. Whereas the former type of sequence could be said to be deontically driven, the latter is epistemically driven (Drew 2012). In deontically driven sequences, an OKAY response indexes acceptance of and/or commitment to the obligation conveyed by the prior turn (Thompson et al. 2015). In the case of epistemically driven sequences, an OKAY response conveys acknowledgment or registering of the information just imparted (see also Beach 1993). In the following we consider these two types of OKAY responses separately.

##### *Responsive OKAY in deontically driven sequences*

When the particle OKAY is used to respond to a directive action, it signals acceptance and willingness to comply. This is what we find happening in the following excerpt:

**Excerpt 3:** *University address* (CF 4984\_17), 1996-1997, American English, telephone, informal interaction

[Roberta has just announced that she will be sending Liz a CD by the folk singer Susan Werner.]

01 ROB: will that fit in the mailbo:x?  
02 LIZ: hell if ↑I: kno:w,  
03 .hhh [you wanna make su:re]  
04 ROB: [hhh hhh hhh hhh ]  
05 LIZ: if you wanna make su:re;  
06 the best thing to do is just send it to the  
07 university;=otherwise I gotta go li:ke  
08 hhh [all the way to ]  
09 ROB: [°okay (.) why don't] I do tha:t°  
10 °just [say° ]  
11 LIZ: [fourtee:nth] street to [pick] it u:p.  
12 ROB: [o:h ]  
13 okay.  
14 ↑so  
15 (0.4)  
16-> [give ] me the address at the univers(ity) .  
17 LIZ: [( )]  
18 (0.6)  
19=> LIZ: **O `ka:y;**  
20 (.)  
21 it's um-  
22 (0.5)  
23 long island university?  
24 (0.3)  
25 ROB: m hm:  
26 LIZ: o:n:e university pla:za:

In lines 1–13, Liz informs Roberta that the best way to send the tape is through her university, as she would have to go the post office to pick it up



if it does not fit into her mailbox at home. Roberta agrees to do so (lines 9–10, 13). She now asks Liz for her university address (line 16), whereupon Liz responds first with the particle OKAY (line 19) and then proceeds to call out the address (lines 21, 23, 26). This OKAY is produced with stress on both syllables: The first is louder, the second begins only a bit higher and is lengthened with a falling glide to mid:

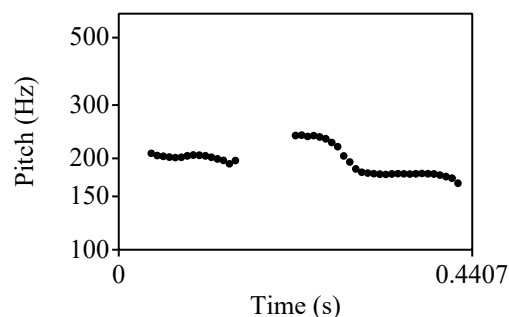


Figure 3: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 19 of Excerpt 3 *University address*

The same pattern can be heard on Roberta’s (overlapped) OKAY in line 9, with which she agrees to Liz’s suggestion that she (Roberta) should send the tape to her university address. This prosodic-phonetic design for a second-position deontic OKAY is *unmarked*, by which we mean that the response is straightforward: There is no affective overlay on the agreement or commitment to comply. We return to prosodically-phonetically *marked* variants of responsive OKAY in Section 5 below.

However, the data reveal a second recurrent pattern for unmarked responsive OKAY in deontic sequences. Here is a case in point:

**Excerpt 4:** *Some suggestions* (Joyce & Stan\_2), 1960s, American English, telephone, informal interaction

01 STA: .hhhh well the ↑main reason I called you up joyce was  
02 to as:k your uh:: advice on two little matters: uh.  
03 (0.4)  
04 STA: I ↑might be going shopping either tomorrow or saturday  
05 and I'm- ↑what I'm looking for is a couple of things.=  
06-> >I thought maybe you might have some< suggestions  
07-> where I could find it.  
08=> JOY: O ↓'ka:y?  
09 STA: ↑first of all: I'm looking for: a: pair a sa:ndles:?  
10 (0.7)  
11 STA: and a hat.

In lines 1–2 Stan announces the reason for his call to Joyce as wanting *to ask [...] advice on two little matters*. After a brief pause he then elaborates that he will be going shopping the next day and is hoping for some suggestions from Joyce as to where to go (lines 4–7). Joyce signals her willingness with an OKAY token in next turn (line 8), whereupon Stan launches an enumeration of what exactly he is looking for (lines 9–11).

Joyce's OKAY in line 8 sounds quite different from that documented in Excerpt 3 above: although it also has stress on both syllables, the first syllable is lower, shorter, and softer than the second. The second syllable has a step down of approximately four semitones with some lengthening and a rising glide to high:

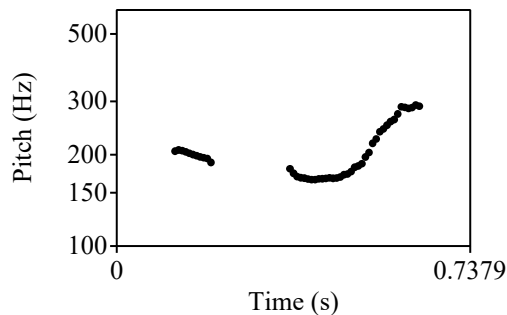


Figure 4: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 8 of Excerpt 4 *Some suggestions*

With this prosodic-phonetic design on OKAY, Joyce gives Stan a go-ahead, signaling that she is willing to comply with his request and make some shopping suggestions. But at the same time, her go-ahead is somewhat cautious: It implies ‘yes but tell me more’. In fact, this is what transpires next: Stan now proceeds to detail at great length (not shown here) what exactly he is looking for.

In sum, there are two recurrent patterns for unmarked OKAY responses to directive actions. In both cases, the OKAY signals willingness to comply with the directive. In one, the second syllable of OKAY is somewhat lengthened and has a falling glide (to mid); in the other, the second syllable has a rising glide. A final rising OKAY marks provisional acceptance of the directive, intimating that more details are needed to ‘seal the deal’.

*Responsive OKAY in epistemically driven sequences*

As an example of OKAY in second position of an informative sequence, consider the continuation of Excerpt 1:

**Excerpt 5:** *A drink*, cont'd (HGII 17), 1960s, American English, telephone, informal interaction

[Hyla and her friend Nancy are planning to go to the theater together in the evening.]

01 HYL: =.hh ↑MAYbe we can go out for a drink tonight.  
02 (.)  
03 NAN: ye::ah. that soun- yeah I owe you a dri:nk.  
04 (.)  
05 NAN: I wanna buy you a dri:n[k.  
06 HYL: [AOW. alri[:ght,  
07 NAN: [o↑KA:Y,  
08 so we will for sure;=  
09 HYL: =alri[ght.]  
10 NAN: [ after; (.) the pl[ay.]  
11 HYL: [.hh]  
12 (.)  
13-> HYL: I can't drink too much cuz I'm dri-i-vhh[i(h)i(h)ng,]=  
14=> NAN: [↑O↓k a: y; ]=  
15 NAN: =(↑well) (0.4) I said one dri[nk.  
16 HYL: [hhheeh .heh .eh [.hh  
17 NAN: [you  
18 think I'm made of money or something-hhn=  
19 HYL: =.e.e=  
20 NAN: =.hhi::[:hh]  
21 HYL: [.t.k]°h-h°

Once the two friends have agreed that Nancy will buy Hyla a drink after the play (lines 5–11), Hyla now announces that she will not be able to drink much because she will be driving (line 13). Nancy acknowledges this

information with OKAY (line 14) and adds that she only promised a single drink anyway (line 15).

Nancy's OKAY in line 14 is delivered in terminal overlap with stress on both syllables, the first, however, being higher and louder than the second. On the second syllable there is a pitch step down of five semitones, with some lengthening. The final rise at the end is barely audible.

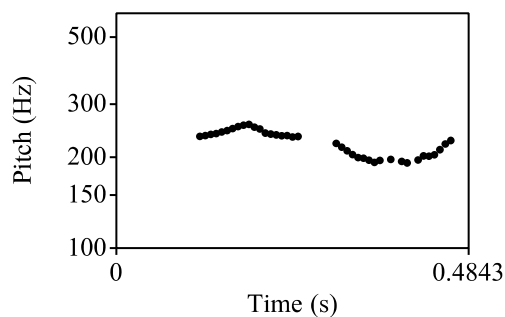


Figure 5: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 14 of Excerpt 5 *A drink, cont'd*

The prosodic-phonetic design of OKAY in line 14 of Excerpt 5 is characteristic of *unmarked* OKAY responses to informings: There is no affective overlay on the acknowledgment or registering of the information. We return to prosodically-phonetically *marked* variants of responsive OKAY in Section 5 below.

There is, however, a second recurrent pattern of delivery for responsive OKAY in epistemically driven sequences. This is the one exemplified in the following excerpt:

**Excerpt 6:** *Native speaker* (CF 4984\_2), 1996-1997, American English, telephone, informal interaction

[Liz is explaining the Call Friend set-up to her interlocutor Roberta.]

01 LIZ: they said ↑you kno:w  
02 (0.2)  
03 if you wanna: make a free: thirty minute phone call;  
04-> to anyone=it has to be a native speaker of Engli:sh,  
05 (0.7)  
06=> ROB: °o↓ka:y,°  
07 [well th]at I am:,  
08 LIZ: [you\_know]  
09 LIZ: .hhh so we're being recorded.  
10 ↓so you know you can like- tell all your secre:ts↓  
11 [n hhh hhh hhh hhh]  
12 ROB: [okay. hhh hhh °( )]  
13 (just) don't use any four letter wor:ds  
14 [o:r ]  
15 LIZ: [.hhh]  
16 £↑A:H I think you can say anything you want.£  
17 ROB: °°#okay good#°°

In line 4 Liz reports that the instructions for the Call Friend telephone call include the requirement that the person being called must be a native speaker of English. Roberta acknowledges this information in next turn with OKAY (line 6) and then applies it to herself in declaring that she satisfies the requirement (line 7). In lines 9–10 Liz goes on to detail the implications of her informing.

Prosodically speaking, Roberta's OKAY in line 6 does not set in immediately after Liz's informing, but is instead delayed by 0.7 sec. Its

volume is softer than that of prior talk. The pitch begins mid high and then drops by approximately four semitones to a lower level, from where it rises to mid high.

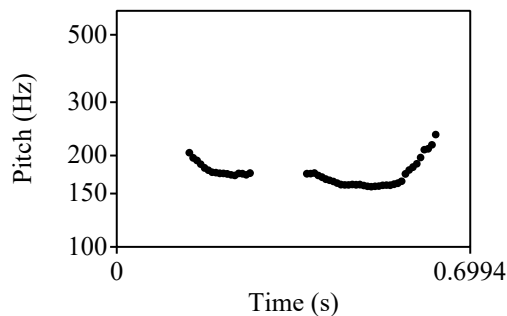


Figure 6: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 6 of Excerpt 6 *Native speaker*

This prosodic design treats the prior informing as preliminary, implying the expectation that more will be said (see also Heritage and Clayman 2010, 113).<sup>11</sup> In Excerpt 4 Roberta may be anticipating that Liz will go on to explain why she is imparting this information at this point in time. In fact, Liz does go on to explain as of line 9.

In epistemically driven sequences then, prosodically unmarked OKAY responses to informings have a first syllable that is somewhat higher and often louder than the second, with the second displaying a pitch step-down and some lengthening. These responses acknowledge or register the information just imparted without affective overlay. If the second syllable is

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<sup>11</sup> Heritage and Clayman find that in doctor-patient interaction, specifically during problem presentation, doctors employ OKAY with rising intonation to counteract the implication that the patient has reached a unit boundary in their talk: “‘Okay,’ (with comma intonation) permits doctors to hedge their bets as to whether a patient is complete” (2010, 113).

produced with a rising pitch glide, there is an implication that more talk is expected from the other.

#### *4.3 OKAY in the third position of a sequence*

According to Schegloff (2007, 120), OKAY can be used in minimal sequence expansion as a ‘sequence-closing third’, in which case it “mark(s) or claim(s) acceptance of a second pair part and the stance which it has adopted”. Interestingly, Schegloff describes OKAY as the “appropriate” sequence-closing third in *directive* sequences such as those involving requests, offers, and invitations, while he treats the particle OH as appropriate for claiming receipt of information in *informative* sequences (ibid., 120). Yet our data collections show OKAY occurring in third position of both directive and informative sequences; its epistemic use has increased dramatically in frequency in the newer data (see Table 1).

In deontically driven sequences, the OKAY speaker has issued a directive and the interlocutor has indicated either acceptance or rejection in next turn. An OKAY particle produced in third position either finalizes the deal in the case of acceptance, or finalizes the rejection (Davidson 1984). In epistemically driven sequences, on the other hand, the OKAY speaker has typically asked a question, to which the interlocutor provides an answer in next turn. A freestanding particle OKAY in third position accepts the information provided in prior turn and proposes to close the sequence. In the



following we will examine these two types of third-position OKAY separately.

*Third-position OKAY in deontically driven sequences*

In a deontic sequence, third-position OKAY marks acknowledgment of the interlocutor's acceptance of the suggestion, invitation, proposal, etc., that the speaker has just advanced. Here is a case in point; this excerpt is from the same conversation as Excerpt 2:

**Excerpt 7: *Water and coffee*** (Farmhouse\_50, 31.53), 1998, American English, face-to-face, informal interaction  
[Mom is offering her guest Donna something to drink.]

01-> MOM: +would you like some m:ore water, or some hot tea,  
+standing, gazing at Donna----->

02 [or coffee,  
03 DON: [hhhh

04-> MOM: o[r+  
-->+

05-> DON: [↑I'll have some water and coffee.=

06=> MOM: =%>↑O°kay;°<%=  
don %hands coffee mug to Mom%

07 DON: =hnnnnhnn

08 MIC: mm hmm?=  
09 DON: =is ↑tha[t  
10 MIC: [mh mh mh=  
11 DON: =being greedy,=  
12 MOM: =+↑NO:[:!  
+leaves for kitchen+  
13 MIC: [ha[haha  
14 DON: [khe[haha  
15 LAU: [haha

Mom's offer of something to drink, expressed as a series of three alternatives (lines 1–2), is accepted by Donna in a transformed version that conjoins two of the alternatives: *I'll have some water and coffee* (line 5). Mom now acknowledges this response with OKAY (line 6). Shortly thereafter she moves towards the kitchen to fulfil Donna's request, indicating that for her the sequence is now closed.

Mom's OKAY is delivered immediately after Donna's response and with fast speech rate: The first syllable is louder and higher than the second, which is low, soft, and breathy. The interval created by the drop in pitch is approximately five semitones:

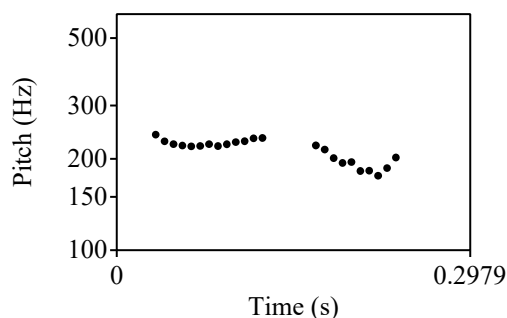


Figure 7: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 6 of Excerpt 7 *Water and coffee*

What looks like a very slight pitch rise at the end of this third-position deontic OKAY is barely audible in this excerpt, but is more noticeable in other cases.

Third-position OKAYs in deontically driven sequences acknowledge prior responsive turns which, as shown here, accept or commit to comply

with the directive.<sup>12</sup> In doing so, they propose sequence closure.

Prosodically, the first syllable is higher and louder than the second; the second syllable may have a slight pitch rise at the end. As with second-position deontic OKAYs (cf. Excerpt 4 *Some suggestions*), a final rise can be used in anticipation of more to come, e.g., arrangement-making.

### *Third-position OKAY in epistemically driven sequences*

This category is by far the largest in our two collections taken together.

However, its frequency is due primarily to a threefold increase in the newer data (see Table 1). Here is an instance from the newer collection:

**Excerpt 8:** *Scheduling* (CF Engn 6239\_27), 1996-1997, American English, telephone, informal interaction

[Debby is a screenwriter who has a part-time job as a secretary. Here she is explaining to her friend Sarah what it involves.]

01 DEB: #bu::t (0.2) I do:n't#,  
02 #cause I have my other jo:b#;  
03 #°and° ↑it would (0.4) burn me out#,  
04 #°to work at this full\_time. you know°#.  
05 cause it has #nothing to do with what I want to do:##.  
06 (.) °#you know#°  
07 SAR: ri:ght.  
08 DEB: #bu:t# [u:m  
09-> SAR: [what ↑are you doing.  
10 (0.9)

---

<sup>12</sup> Although Schegloff reports several cases of OKAY being used as a sequence-closing third after rejection of a request or offer (2007, 121f.), there were no instances of third-position OKAY following rejection in our collection.

11 DEB: !t (0.6) well I- I'm working in (0.8)  
 12 >↑I mean it has nothing to do with< film;  
 13 °#at a:ll#.°  
 14 [°you kno:w°]  
 15 SAR: [↑I know ] is it like secretarial stuff? or [what.]  
 16 DEB: [yea:h]  
 17 it's (0.3) it's secretarial;  
 18-> =↑we:ll .hhh I- ↑what I do ↓m:ost of the ti::me;  
 19 i:s u:m (0.5) I: (1.1)  
 ((26 sec. of talk omitted in which Sarah details her work))  
 36-> =so ↑that's what I do most of the time;  
 37-> =is sche:duli:ng,  
 38=> SAR: [↑O:↓kay;  
 39 DEB: [.hh ] but (0.3) but I also do::-  
 40 like whatever e:ls:e #°they need me to do:#°.

In lines 1–8 Debby is explaining to Sarah why she only works part-time: It would be too much for her to work full-time at something unrelated to her screenwriting. When Sarah now asks *what are you doing* (line 9), Debby launches an extended telling detailing her part-time work, introduced after some background talk with the preface *what I do most of the time* (line 18). When she now returns to this phrase *so that's what I do most of the time* (line 36), she has hearably completed her telling, at least provisionally, and Sarah acknowledges the information imparted with a third-position OKAY (line 38).

Sarah's OKAY has a louder and somewhat lengthened first syllable (both syllables are stressed), which is higher in pitch than the second. The

second syllable has a step down of approximately five semitones to a pitch which remains low until the end:

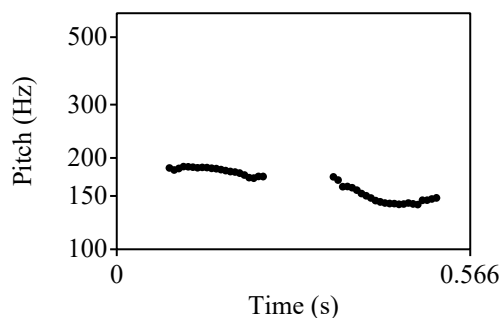


Figure 8: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 38 of Excerpt 8 *Scheduling*

Other third-position epistemic OKAYs sound roughly the same, with some variation encountered on the height of the first syllable and the extent of the step-down on the second syllable.

Yet the new data contain several instances of an alternative prosodic design for third-position epistemic OKAY: This variant occurs exclusively in sequences where the prior informing runs *counter* to what the OKAY-speaker ostensibly thought was the case. Consider, for instance, the following excerpt:

**Excerpt 9:** *College tuition* (Call Home En 4544\_1246), 1994-1997, American English, telephone, informal interaction  
[Beth and Ann, two middle-aged friends, are talking about what tuition was like when they went to college.]

01 BET: .hh I wanted to go to the university of rochester.  
02 (0.5)  
03 ANN: at that time,

04           and it [was ( )-  
05    BET:           [and ( )

06-> ANN: AND AT THAT TIME WHAT WAS IT.

07->           FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS?

08-> BET: no it was much more=  
09->           =it was like (0.5) twelve thousand dollars.

10=> ANN: <<stylized> ↓O↑KAY >

11    BET: it was like unbelievable.  
12           and I told my parents (.)  
13           you know (.)  
14           forget it (.)  
15           I'm not going=  
16           =I'm not gonna ask (.)  
17           you know I'm >NOT gonna get in debt for the rest of  
18           my life<, >and I don't want YOU to get in debt for the  
19           re(h)st [of m(h)y li(h)fe.<  
20    ANN:           [right  
21    BET: ↑I went to the university of buf(falo).↑

In line 1 Beth reports that she had wanted to attend the University of Rochester, implying that this did not happen. Ann now surmises the reason, guessing that it was due to the high tuition. Her question *and at that time what was it* together with her candidate answer *five thousand dollars?* (lines 6–7) makes clear what she estimates the tuition to have been at the University of Rochester when she and her friend were of college age. But Beth contradicts this (line 8) and informs her that it was more than twice as much: *it was like twelve thousand dollars* (line 9). It is this counter-informing that Ann acknowledges in line 10 with OKAY. Beth goes on to

assess this sum as *unbelievable* (line 11) and to report that because she did not want to get her parents into debt, she consequently ended up going to the University of Buffalo (lines 12–20).

The design of Ann’s OKAY token in line 10 is stylized: That is, the pitches on the two syllables are held roughly constant creating a sing-song impression. In this case, the first syllable is low, while the second is higher; they create a pitch interval of approximately six semitones:

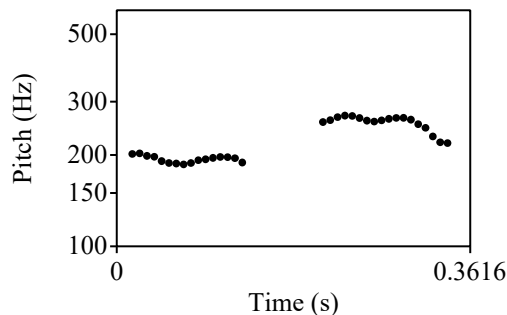


Figure 9: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 10 of Excerpt 9 *College tuition*

The stylization of OKAY here has a distancing effect: With this formatting Ann accepts Beth as an authority on the matter but distances herself from having under-estimated the cost of tuition (see also Couper-Kuhlen 2004a). This is a pattern that recurs elsewhere in the newer data after a counter-informing (see also the discussion of ‘discrepancy of expectation’ OKAYs in Chapter 3 of this volume).

To summarize: An OKAY token that appears in the third position of an epistemically driven sequence acknowledges the information imparted in

a prior turn, often information that has been provided in response to an earlier inquiry by that same speaker. In documenting that one's query has been satisfactorily answered, OKAY proposes sequence closure.

Prosodically, this kind of OKAY sounds much like a responsive OKAY in second position (cf. Excerpt 5 *A drink cont'd*): Its first syllable is higher than the second and there is a step-down to lower pitch on the second syllable. Alternatively, when third-position OKAY follows a counter-informing, it can be prosodically stylized, suggesting a distancing from the speaker's earlier professed or implied belief.

#### *4.4 OKAY in sequence-medial position*

This category became necessary in order to handle the newer data adequately. It is undocumented in the older collection. An OKAY in sequence-medial position is one produced by a co-interlocutor in the course of a longer telling by a primary speaker. It functions as a *continuer*, passing up an opportunity to take a full turn at talk and inviting the primary speaker to go on (Schegloff 1982). Here is a case in point:

**Excerpt 10:** *Waking up early* (Call Friend 6899\_12), 1996-1997, American English, telephone, informal interaction  
[Sally has just moved to Atlanta from Arizona and is explaining to her mother why she is still jetlagged.]

01 SAL: .hhh hm:



02 .hhh although I haven't been able to get up in  
03 the morning, hh hhh hhh hhh [hhh]  
04 MOM: [o ]:h  
05 (0.7)  
06 SAL: .hhh.hhh [.hhh ]  
07 MOM: [°okay,°]  
08 (0.9)  
09 SAL: I think probably because I fdon'tf  
10 .hhh (1.3) you kno:w-  
11 MOM: you're not getting to bed on time.  
12 (.)  
13 SAL: !t ↑no:, but it there's↑  
14 (0.4)  
15 SAL: the:re isn't a reason to:..  
16 (0.9)  
17 SAL: you kno:w?  
18 MOM: uh huh,  
19-> SAL: like I was waking up so early out in arizona;  
20 (0.9)  
21=> MOM: °Oka:y,°  
22 (0.6)  
23 SAL: becau::s:e\_  
24 (3.0)  
25 SAL: ↑I don't know↑=  
26 =cause I wanted to sit outsi::de\_ =↑you kno:w;  
27 MOM: m hm,

Sally confesses to Mom that she has not been able to get up in the morning at her new home in Atlanta, information that Mom accepts with stoicism (lines 1–9). Sally's account for this is that she does not have any reason to

do so (line 15). After a continuer by Mom (line 18), Sally now moves to contrast her present situation with that in Arizona, where she woke up early (line 19). This line, however, is both prosodically and pragmatically incomplete: It only sets the stage for the explanation that Sally has projected. But Sally proceeds to make a significant pause, whereupon Mom produces OKAY (line 21). Mom's OKAY is not responding to the prior informing as sufficient and complete, but is instead signaling that Sally should go on. Sally now provides an account for why she woke up early in Arizona (lines 23, 25–26).

When used in this position as a continuer, OKAY has a characteristic design: It is typically low and soft in volume; both syllables are stressed, with the second being at roughly the same height as the first. There may be a slight upwards glide at the end:

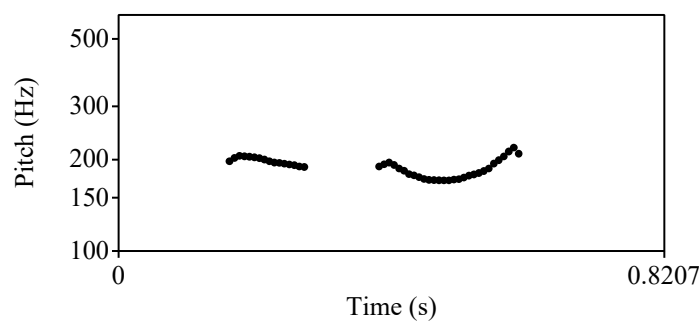


Figure 10: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 21 of Excerpt 10 *Waking up early*

The OKAY in line 7 is another instantiation of this pattern but is only barely audible.

Although the standard continuers for English are considered to be *uh-huh* and *mm-hm* (Schegloff 1982), the newer data set examined here suggests that OKAY is joining the group. When used as a continuer, OKAY is delivered prosodically with low pitch and soft volume. It may have an optional low rise at the end, but overall it displays little pitch excursion.

#### *4.5 OKAY in transitional positions*

Early work by Beach (1993, 1995b) has pointed to so-called “continuative” uses of OKAY, in addition to the “non-continuative” ones which we have described as second-position and third-position OKAYs. “Continuative” OKAYs in Beach’s understanding are forward-looking; they prefigure a fuller turn by that speaker, often one that will entail a shift of topic or activity. As transitions, OKAY particles both close off what has preceded and foreshadow the initiation of a new topic or sequence. Despite this dual task, however, it has proven useful for the present investigation to distinguish OKAYs that primarily *preface* a new topic or sequence by the same speaker (often occurring after a break or significant pause), from OKAYs that primarily *close* a prior topic or sequence and are followed by other-speaker talk (often occurring before a significant break or pause). As we will see, one retrospective justification for making this distinction is that these two types of transition with OKAY have different prosodic-phonetic designs.

*Preface to a new topic/sequence*

The following excerpt illustrates an OKAY that transitions to a new sequence, in this case to an announcement of the reason for the call:

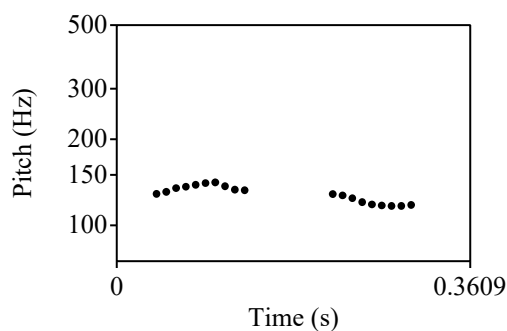
**Excerpt 11:** *Reason I'm calling* (Kamunsky-3\_2), 1960s, American English, telephone, informal interaction

[Alan is the caller, but Maryanne preempts the first topic to tell him about recently talking to a mutual friend who is caught in a triangular love relationship. Alan now announces that Bruce, the other man, has decided to back out.]

01 MRY: well that's good.[at least it's (o:[ff?)]  
02 ALA: [so he [eeyeah.  
03 ALA: finally.=  
04 ALA: =that[s what I- ]  
05 MRY: [(close) the]su:bject,  
06 ALA: that's what hhIhh told him I go it's ab(h)out t(h)i:me.  
07 you kno[w.  
08 MRY: [Go:::::[::::~d]  
09 ALA: [.hhh ]  
10=> ALA: ↑O↓kay;<  
11-> well the reason I'm calling=  
12 ALA: =there[is a reason behind my madness.  
13 MRY: [°( ).°  
14 MRY: uh-huh,  
15 ALA: uh next saturday night's a surprise party here for p-  
16 kevin.  
17 (0.2)  
18 ALA: !p and if you can make it.  
19 MRY: OH REALLY:::, =  
20 ALA: =yeah.

Alan brings his telling to a close by reporting what he said to Bruce after the break-up (lines 6–7), whereupon Maryanne produces an appreciative response cry (line 8). The way is now clear for a change of topic, which Alan introduces with a transitional OKAY (line 10). He then proceeds to an announcement of the reason for his call, which is to invite Maryanne to a surprise party for their mutual friend Kevin (lines 11, 15–18).

The transitional preface OKAY in Excerpt 11 is delivered with stress on both syllables, the first syllable being higher in pitch than the second. The second syllable has a step down of three semitones and is somewhat curtailed in length.



*Figure 11:* Pitch trace for OKAY in line 10 of Excerpt 11

Transitional OKAYs that function as prefaces display a certain amount of variation in the size of the pitch interval between the first and the second syllable but they typically begin higher than same-speaker prior talk. They can be curtailed and/or have fast speech rate.

*Closure of prior topic/sequence*

OKAYs which bring a prior topic or sequence to a potential close in the service of transitioning are often characterized by a form of prosodic stylization. In the following extract from the same conversation as Excerpts 1 and 5, OKAY is not only stylized but also delivered in a high pitch register:

**Excerpt 12:** *What are you gonna wear* (HGII\_20), 1960s, American English, telephone, informal interaction  
[Hyla and her friend Nancy are planning to go to the theater together in the evening.]

01 NAN: ↑what're you gonna wea::r;  
02 (0.9)  
03 NAN: just nice pa:nts,=or some[thing,]  
04 HYL: [yeah. ]  
05 <<all> I'm [ not go]nna get dressed,=  
06 NAN: [°°okay;°°]  
07 HYL: =cause it's supposed to> rai:n tonight;=t[oo:; ]  
08 NAN: [OH ]  
09 that's r[i:ght].]  
10 HYL: [ least] there's a cha:nce of it;  
11 NAN: ↑Okay::\_  
12 =<<dim> then I'll just wear pa:nts.>=  
13 HYL: =<<dim> cause I don't wanna mess up my clothes.>  
14=> NAN: <<stylized> ↑°°`KAY::↑>  
15 (.)  
16 HYL: you know who do I have to look nice for.  
17 (.)  
18 HYL: h h [h-h h- h h h]

In reponse to Nancy's query about evening wear (line 1), Hyla announces that she intends to dress down (line 5) due to the weather forecast (lines 7, 10). Both of these informings Nancy acknowledges with third-position OKAYs (lines 6 and 11) and declares that she too will wear pants (line 12). Hyla now continues with an account for not wanting to dress up (line 13), whereupon Nancy produces an OKAY that treats the sequence as complete for all practical purposes (line 14).

This effect is achieved in part through the sing-song delivery of OKAY: It is produced with high pitch register, with the first syllable whispered. The second syllable falls to mid, from where it undergoes stretching with level pitch.

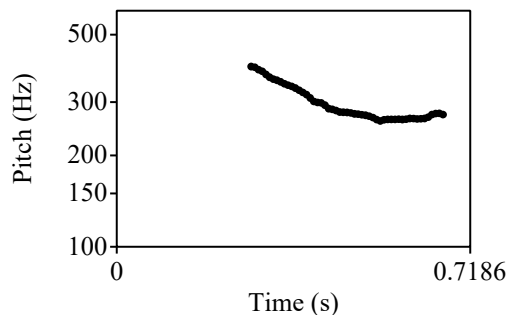


Figure 12: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 14 of Excerpt 12

The high pitch register and stylization of OKAY represent a noticeable departure from local prosodic norms and might thus contribute to a 'break away' effect, which could be said to facilitate sequence closure. What Hyla goes on to say, *you know who do I have to look nice for* (line 16), is offered

as a self-deprecatory ‘post-mortem’ (Schegloff 2007, 143), which after some joking (not shown here), is followed by sequence closure.

The two patterns we have seen for transitional OKAYs (preface and closure) have in common that they both have a second syllable that is lower than the first. However, when OKAY is used as a transition to preface a new topic or sequence, its first syllable is higher than same-speaker talk and the second syllable may be curtailed, while when the same particle is used to close a prior topic or sequence, its first syllable may be ‘swallowed’ with the second undergoing lengthening. In this sense, the two formats are mirror images of one another.

#### *4.6 OKAY in conversational preclosing*

In Schegloff and Sacks’ classic (1973) study, freestanding OKAYs located at the analyzable end of topics are identified as a device for initiating movement towards possible conversational closure: This is because “...they occupy the floor for a speaker’s turn without using it to produce either a topically coherent utterance or the initiation of a new topic” (ibid., 80).

Like transitional OKAYs that preface a new topic or sequence, conversational preclosing OKAYs begin with high onsets. And like transitional OKAYs that close a prior topic or sequence, they may be stylized. Here is a case where the OKAY is combined with a term of address:



**Excerpt 13: *Okay Stan* (Joyce & Stan\_6), 1960s, American English, telephone, informal interaction**  
[At Stan's request Joyce is telling him about her upcoming trip to San Diego.]

01 JOY: an I'll be there (i)all sunday: an all monday.  
02 STA: .hhh °(y'coming in)° .h [you gonna stay in her dorm?  
03 JOY: [°(m)  
04 JOY: uh huh,  
05 (.)  
06 STA: grea:t.<.hhow'r you gonna get picked up at the airport.  
07 JOY: she's gonna pick me ↑up. <she has a car.  
08 STA: ↑oh grea:t,  
09 (.)  
10 JOY: yeah.  
11 STA: grea:t,  
12 (0.2)  
13=> JOY: <<stylized> ↑ o↑kay ↓stan: ↑>  
14 STA: °( )°  
15 JOY: well:- I- I'll s: talk- maybe I'll see you tomorrow  
16 or i[f not=  
17 STA: [may:be,  
18 JOY: =I'll see you on saturday.

Prior to this excerpt Joyce has asked Stan if he could drive her to the airport on the following Saturday for a flight she has booked to visit a friend in San Diego. Stan hedges about whether or not he will be free (not shown here) but goes on to inquire into her plans for the trip (lines 2 and 6). Once this topic comes to a possible close (lines 10–11), Joyce initiates conversational

pre-closing with OKAY (line 13) and the interlocutors move into arrangements for when they will see each other next (lines 15–18).

Joyce's turn *Okay Stan* (line 13) is delivered with high pitch register (300–400 Hz): All three syllables are stressed, the second stepping up by four semitones from the first, the third stepping down by six semitones from the second. The third syllable *Stan* is stretched and held at a level pitch.

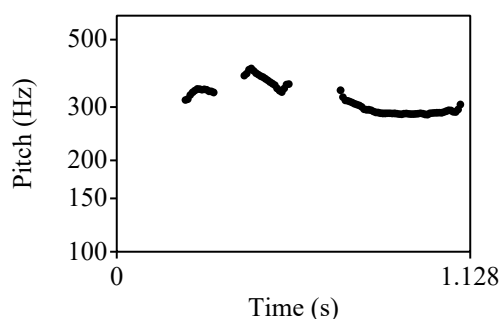


Figure 13: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 13 of Excerpt 13 *Okay Stan*

Here too the sing-song delivery of OKAY (+ Name) suggests a metaphorical 'breaking away', in this case from prior and possibly further topical talk (Schegloff and Sacks 1973).

Often an OKAY token produced as a first move toward conversational pre-closing will be responded to with another OKAY in next turn. When this happens, the onset of the second OKAY may be less high than the first. But as characteristic for telephone pre-closings and closings in general (Auer 1990), its speech rate will be fast. The following excerpt illustrates this:

**Excerpt 14:** *Gimme a call* (Two girls\_9-20), 1960s, American English, telephone, informal interaction

[Ava and Bee are two college-age students who used to attend the same school and are now getting back in touch; this excerpt comes at the end of a 16-minute long call: see also Schegloff (2007, 270–286).]

01 BEE: right. so I'll s-alright.  
02           so gimme a call,  
03 AVA: 'bout ten thirty.  
04 BEE: ri:ght.  
05 AVA: okay th[en.  
06 BEE:           [alright.  
07 AVA: [alri[ght.  
08 BEE: [tch![ I'll (s-)/(t-) I'll talk to you then  
09           tomor[row.  
10-> AVA:           [↑O: -°kay°.=  
11=> BEE: =>O-KAY<=[buh bye,  
12 AVA:           [bye bye.

Once the interlocutors have agreed that Ava will call Bee the next day about ten-thirty (lines 1–5), they move toward conversational closing with a sequence of *alright* tokens (lines 6–7) initiated by Bee. Bee now re-confirms their arrangement (lines 8–9), whereupon Ava launches a second pre-closing sequence with a high-onset OKAY (line 10). Bee reciprocates with a second pre-closing OKAY (line 11) and the two now deliver the closing sequence of *bye-bye* tokens in unison.

Figure 14 shows a pitch trace for the second of these preclosing OKAYs (line 11). Of interest here is the lack of pitch excursion: The second syllable is only one semitone lower than the first. At 0.3 seconds the overall duration of this token is comparatively short; the second syllable is

noticeably curtailed through anticipatory articulation of the /b/ closure in *buh bye*.

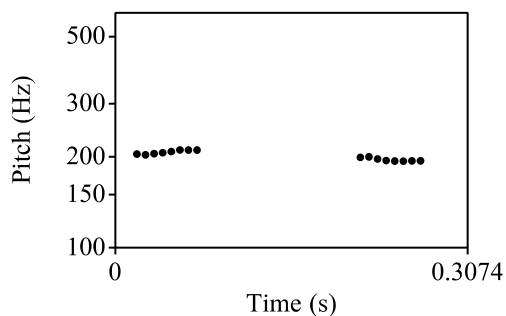


Figure 14: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 11 of Excerpt 14 *Gimme a call*

In sum, OKAYs that initiate conversational pre-closing sequences (with or without an attached term of address) are typically done with a high pitch onset and fast speech rate. An OKAY that reciprocates in pre-closing is also likely to be fast but may lack the high onset of an initiating OKAY.

## 5. Prosodic-phonetic marking in second- and third-position OKAY

As explained in Section 4.2 above, both second- and third-position OKAYs occur with prosodically-phonetically unmarked designs, conveying little or no affective meaning, which contrast with more *marked* variants. In this section we examine some of the marked variation on responsive OKAY in the two collections. As the type of sequence in which marked OKAYs are

embedded affects the work they do, we examine epistemic and deontic sequences separately in the following.

### *Epistemically driven sequences*

In epistemic sequences in which an informing has been delivered in first position, an OKAY response will be hearable as acknowledging and accepting the informing – in unmarked cases in a matter-of-fact fashion. Consider now what happens when OKAY is prosodically-phonetically marked. In the following extract Debbie is remonstrating with her friend Shelley for backing out of a trip they had planned to take together to an out-of-state football game when she (Shelley) learned that her boyfriend would be unable to come along:

#### **Excerpt 15:** *Blow off your girlfriends* (Debbie & Shelley\_2), 1960s, American English, telephone, informal interaction

01 DEB: =I don't know, just don't blow off your girlfriends for  
02 guy:s shel.  
03 SHE: de:b I'm not. h[ow man- ]e- when have I? beside ya-  
04 DEB: [↑ o ka:y ↑]  
05 SHE: I mean you're right a- it was easier w- with him going  
06 because he was going to pay f- for a lot of it.  
07 b[ut]  
08 DEB: [ye]ah;=  
09-> SHE: =that's no:t >I mean< that's not thee reason I'm not  
10-> going.  
11=> DEB: ↑'mm↓kay ↑  
12 (1.0)

13 DEB: .hh °okay° .hhh alright well I'll call jay tee:,  
14 and I'll just tell him tha:t youknow we gotta'n extra  
15 ticket or whatever.

When Debbie accuses Shelley of prioritizing guys over girls (line 1), Shelley initially denies that this is case (line 3). But she then goes on to concede that it would indeed be easier for her if her boyfriend came along (lines 5–6). This admission is immediately followed by a contrastive move insisting that the boyfriend's not coming is not the main reason for Shelley cancelling the trip (lines 9–10).<sup>13</sup> The latter, however, is precisely what Debbie's original injunction *just don't blow off your girlfriends for guys* (lines 1–2) implied. Debbie thus now 'stands corrected'. It is in this context that her subsequent prosodically and phonetically marked OKAY (line 11) must be interpreted.

Debbie's OKAY is produced as *mm-kay*, delivered with high pitch register (245–325 HZ) and an upwards glide on the first syllable. With the high pitch register Debbie comes off as innocently distancing herself from any derogatory imputation concerning Shelley's intentions.<sup>14</sup> The OKAY token itself signals acceptance of what Shelley has claimed, but at the same time, because the first syllable here is articulated with closed lips, its delivery might be heard, on purely iconic grounds, as embodying some

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<sup>13</sup> For more on concession as a rhetorical device in conversation see Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson (2000).

<sup>14</sup> Debbie's OKAY in line 4, produced in response to Shelley's initial denial, has the same marked prosody (including high pitch register) and is arguably doing something similar.

resistance. The subsequent 1.0 second pause may be providing space for Shelley to counter. However, when no further talk is forthcoming, Debbie ‘gives in’ (lines 13–15) – at least provisionally, as the next excerpt will show.

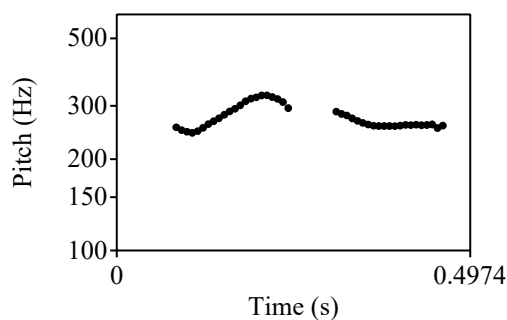


Figure 15: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 11 of Excerpt 15

Several seconds later, Shelley continues to proclaim that her boyfriend is not the reason for her decision to back out and Debbie produces a similarly designed OKAY:

**Excerpt 16:** *Funding* (Debbie and Shelley\_3), 1960s, American English, telephone, informal interaction<sup>15</sup>

01 SHE: now that he's not going I have to pay for the whole  
 02 thing and: that's fi:ne, except for: .hh you know I  
 03 have my sister coming in and stuff and I'm like well  
 04 do I really want to do this? well yeah I wanna do it,  
 05 but do I have the money to do: [all the]se things.=  
 06 DEB: [ri:ght.]  
 07 DEB: =↑okay↑

<sup>15</sup> See also Heritage (2012b, 23), who examines this extract without, however, discussing the prosody of Debbie's OKAY.

08-> SHE: so: I mean it's not becuz he's- he's- I mean it's not  
 09-> becuz he:'s not going it's becuz (0.5) his money's not  
 10-> (0.5) funding me.  
 11=> DEB: ↑ 'o↓kay ↑  
 12 SHE: so and ↑when other time have I ever [done that?]  
 13 DEB: [.hhh well ]  
 14 I'm jus say:in it jus seems you-  
 15 you base a lot of things on-on guy:s.(.) I do'know:,  
 16 it just- a couple times I don- I don- .hh it's not a  
 17 big deal.

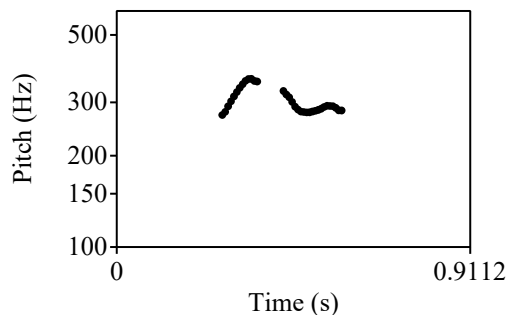


Figure 16: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 11 of Excerpt 16 *Funding*

This OKAY is also delivered with a strong upwards glide on the first syllable and high pitch register (270–360 Hz); it is again hearable as proclaiming innocence and, despite the lexical content of OKAY, mild disbelief at Shelley’s disclaimer. As can be seen from what transpires next, Debbie indeed believes there is evidence that speaks against what Shelley is asserting (lines 13–17).

In epistemically driven sequences, prosodic marking on a responsive OKAY will be interpretable in relation to the main action of the turn,



namely accepting and/or acknowledging the information that has been imparted. The examples we have seen here have involved high pitch register, although other types of prosodic marking such as widened pitch span and increased volume are also documented in the collection.

### *Deontically driven sequences*

In deontic sequences, especially ones in which a request has been made, a prosodically-phonetically unmarked OKAY produced in next position will be hearable as the recipient straightforwardly agreeing to or committing to comply. The use of prosodic-phonetic marking on responsive deontic OKAYs is interpretable with respect to the action of compliance. Here is a case where, again, high pitch register is involved. This exchange takes place later in the conversation in which Hyla and Nancy are making arrangements for the theater (see Extracts 1 and 5 above).

### **Excerpt 17:** *Book back* (HGII\_17), 1960s, American English, telephone, informal interaction

01-> HYL: .hhh oh and you know what I want my book ba:::ck.=  
02 NAN: =your book.  
03=>       ↑ 'O↓`kay:; ↑  
04       I'll have to look for it,=  
05 HYL: =dUhhhhh=  
06 ???: =(k-k-k)=  
07 HYL: =.eh-.uh .hhh  
08       (0.2)

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09  NAN: I don't know where it [is but I'll fin[d it. ]
10  HYL:                                [°.hhhhhhhhhh° [#u.-oh#]::
11      alright,=

```

Hyla's request that Nancy return the book she has lent her (line 1) comes completely out of the blue: Note the *oh* preface, suggesting it is something she has just thought of (Heritage 1984a; Bolden 2006). In next turn, after partially repeating its key element (*your book*), Nancy signals her agreement to comply with OKAY (line 3), but she goes on to claim that she will have to search for it (line 4).

Nancy's OKAY is prosodically-phonetically marked not only through the strong upwards glide on its first syllable and wide falling pitch on the second (with an interval range of nine semitones) but also through its high pitch register (228–383 Hz). The effect achieved is that of utmost willingness, if not eagerness, to fulfil Hyla's request – an affective display possibly designed to offset the upcoming announcement that she does not know where the book is (with its undesirable implication that she may have lost it).

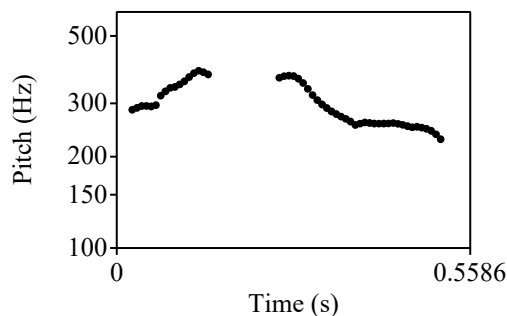


Figure 17: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 3 of Excerpt 17 *Book back*

Yet prosodic-phonetic marking can achieve something quite different in responsive deontic OKAYs. Here is a case where a request, accompanied by an OKAY tag, is responded to with a marked OKAY. This exchange takes place in the Farmhouse conversation, before Excerpts 2 and 7 shown above:

**Excerpt 18:** *Chunky chocolate ice cream* (Farmhouse\_30), 1998, American English, telephone, informal interaction

[Michelle, who is a weight watcher, is complaining to her friend Laura that she (Laura) left some chunky chocolate ice cream in Michelle's freezer.]

01 MIC: [and I'm >sittin' there< staring ] at it  
02 saying ↑I'm not gonna eat this, I'monna-  
03 °(h)I(h) was gonna° bring it over this afternoon  
04 but (0.2) forgot.  
05-> \*so you have to get that.=o↑kay?  
\*gazes at LAU->  
06 (0.5)  
07=> LAU: +°nOkay °  
->+gazes down at her hands on table|  
08 I'll try [to [remember.  
09 MIC: \*[cz otherwise,  
\*gazes at others  
10 DON: [hee hah hah hah  
11 MIC: I'm throwin it out:(h)! £hhh£=

In lines 1–2 Michelle complains that having the ice cream in her freezer requires her to exercise vigilance in order *not* to eat it and in lines 3–4 she claims that she intended to return it to Laura herself but forgot. She now pleads with Laura to come pick it up (line 5), whereupon Laura, with some delay, produces a token of compliance with OKAY (line 7).

Yet although Laura's OKAY is positioned to signal compliance, there are a number of indications, including prosodic-phonetic marking, to suggest that her willingness to commit is only half-hearted.<sup>16</sup> First, on a visual level we can note that Laura breaks away from Michelle's gaze at the end of line 5 to gaze down at her hands. Second, she delays her response by 0.5 seconds and only then produces an OKAY which is low-pitched and has soft volume (line 7). The first vowel of OKAY begins with a nasal sound, resulting in a curious hybrid of 'no' and 'okay'. This OKAY is also marked because it departs from local prosodic norms. As Figure 18 shows, the pitch is roughly the same on both syllables:

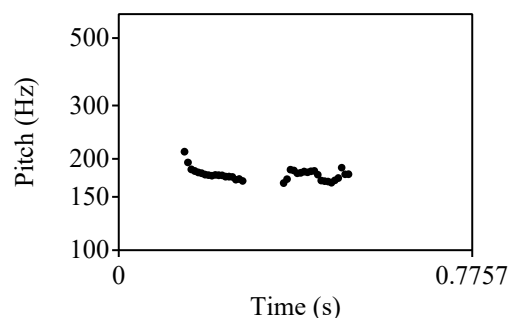


Figure 18: Pitch trace for OKAY in line 7 of Excerpt 18

Laura's OKAY in Excerpt 18 thus has all the trappings of an OKAY that does not mean okay (Beach 2018). Rather than suggesting full commitment to comply, it remains ambivalent about whether Laura will pick up the ice

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<sup>16</sup> Kendrick and Torreira (2015, 274) discuss further examples of responsive OKAY whose prosodic-phonetic marking indexes that the speaker's commitment to comply is *qualified*.

cream at all. As she herself goes on to remark, she will *try to remember*, implying that she may actually ‘forget’ to do so (line 8).

In sum, in deontically driven sequences, prosodically-phonetically marked variants of OKAY become interpretable in relation to the compliance or acceptance that such a response is signaling. In one case examined here, a wide rising-falling glide as well as high pitch register index strong willingness to comply, while in the other case low pitch, soft volume and level intonation are indicative of the opposite kind of stance: reluctance and lack of enthusiasm.

## **6. Summary and provisional conclusions**

At the conclusion of our survey, readers may feel bewildered at the number of different prosodic patterns for OKAY particles in the older and newer collections. And it is true that there is a good deal of variation. Yet recurrent patterns of delivery can be identified: The overview of prosodic-phonetic patterns at the end of the chapter shows the ones we have singled out here for discussion.

Several of the patterns shown in this overview are binding, in the sense that this is the only way OKAY is done in such and such a turn or sequential position. If a different pattern were to be used, sequential position permitting, OKAY would be doing a different job. For instance, if OKAY

accompanying a first-position action were to be delivered not with a low, short, soft first syllable and up-stepped or rising pitch on the second syllable but, say, with high pitch onset on the first syllable and a step down or fall on the second this would be hearable as the speaker abruptly transitioning to a different matter. If a sequence-internal (continuer) OKAY were produced with a pattern other than low pitch, soft volume and minimal pitch excursion the speaker would be heard to be taking a full turn at talk. And in both epistemic and deontic sequences, final rising pitch on second-position responsive OKAYs is binding if the prior turn is to be treated as preliminary. Without this prosodic-phonetic design, there is no such implication.

Other patterns are not binding but instead constitute particularly clear instances of the sequence-specific work accomplished by OKAY. This is, for instance, the case of the stylized patterns found when OKAY is proposing to close a sequence/topic or to pre-close a conversation. Not all sequence/topic closing OKAYs nor all conversational pre-closing OKAYs are prosodically stylized, but when they are, they identify OKAY as doing this job. The same might be said of the stylized pattern used to acknowledge a counter-informing (Excerpt 9): This design is not binding but when present, it identifies the responsive OKAY as doing this particular job.

Finally, there are a variety of patterns found in second and third position in epistemic and deontic sequences that are neither binding nor identificatory. We have attempted to single out 'neutral' designs for actions

implemented straightforwardly by second- and third-position OKAYs, and have contrasted these with similar cases in which the prosodic-phonetic marking of OKAY leads to emotive or affective overtones. What exactly the overtones are depends heavily on the nature of the prosodic-phonetic marking and the type of sequence in which the OKAY is embedded. OKAY produced with glides to high and with high pitch register can imply disbelief in epistemic sequences but keenness to comply in deontic sequences. Low pitch and volume as well as level pitch on OKAY in similar deontic sequences can imply lack of full commitment.

We conclude that the picture for OKAY and its prosodic-phonetic design in American English is complex, but not without its regularities.

## **7. Some observations on changes in the use of OKAY over time**

Has American English OKAY changed over time in its use as a particle? If so, how? In the following, we note changes in frequency, positional use, and prosodic-phonetic design of OKAY, based on observations that have emerged through a comparison of the older and newer collections.

### *Frequency*

OKAY occurs less frequently in the newer data, where there is on the average one token every 2 min. 22 sec., than in the older data, where one

token occurs on the average every 1 min. 26 sec.: see Table 2.<sup>17</sup> The greater frequency of OKAY in the older collection may have to do with the recent rise of new competitors for OKAY, e.g., *right* or *alright* (Gardner 2007). But it may simply be an artifact of the data: The newer collection includes data from face-to-face conversations and, in the case of the Call Friend/Call Home telephone calls, 30-minute excerpts prior to conversational closings. Consequently, there are no conversational pre-closing OKAYs in the newer collection. Furthermore, there is one conversation in the older data (Kamunksy-3) where the frequency of OKAY is well above average (one token every 19 sec.) due to the presence of driving instructions.

#### *Positional use*

There are some interesting developments in the way OKAY is used now (data from roughly 1994 onward) as compared to its earlier use (1960s). A number of these developments are captured in Table 1:

- (i) OKAY is found more often as a follow-up or tag accompanying a first-position action in the newer data. Although not evident from Table 1, OKAY appears more frequently as a tag (no intervening silence or talk) than as a follow-up (with intervening silence or talk) in the newer data. Moreover, the nature of the first action that OKAY accompanies is changing. In the older data, the action was always one that mandated

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<sup>17</sup> These frequency counts include not only freestanding OKAY but also OKAY in combination with other particles, e.g., *oh okay*, *oh okay right*, *yeah okay*, *yeah right okay*.



acceptance or rejection, e.g., an invitation or proposal (*I wanna buy you a drink, I'll see you about eight*). But in the newer data the action to which OKAY is attached is on occasion a self-deprecating assessment (*not my speciality*) or a prediction/promise (*it's just not gonna happen*). These actions do not mandate acceptance or rejection; at the most they invite acknowledgement, although the speaker does not pursue this if absent.

- (ii) The use of OKAY and OH OKAY in third position in epistemically driven sequences (Question-Answer-OKAY/OH OKAY) has risen dramatically since the 1960s.
- (iii) OKAY is found as a continuer (floor pass) in the newer data; this use was lacking completely in the older data.
- (iv) OH OKAY (not dealt with here) is found in second and third position of epistemic sequences only, and exclusively in the newer data.

### *Prosodic design*

For a number of the uses of OKAY, the same prosodic patterns are documented in both the older and newer collections. This is the case of OKAY as a follow-up to an initiating action (e.g., Excerpt 1), of unmarked responsive OKAY in deontic and epistemic sequences (e.g., Excerpt 3 and Excerpt 5), and of unmarked third-position OKAY in deontic and epistemic sequences (e.g., Excerpt 7 and Excerpt 8). It also holds for final rising second-position OKAY in deontic and epistemic sequences (e.g., Excerpt 4

and Excerpt 6) and it applies to transitional OKAYs (e.g., Excerpts 11/12). In all these cases, although the illustrative example may have come from one of the collections, the same pattern is attested in the other collection.

And yet there are prosodic patterns for OKAY that are documented only in the newer collection. This is trivially the case for the continuer OKAY, which is not found in the older data set. However, the tag use of a latched OKAY to accompany first-position epistemic actions (e.g., Excerpt 2) is not found in the older collection, and the stylized form of OKAY for responding to counter-informings (e.g., Excerpt 9) is attested only in the newer collection. This may be a genuine innovation.

Given the developments so far, we can undoubtedly expect both constancy and change in the frequency, positional use, and prosodic design of OKAY over the years to come.

Table 1: Frequencies for OKAY in different turn and sequence positions

<b>OKAY Position</b>	<b>OKAY</b> (Older data)	<b>OKAY</b> (Newer data)	<b>OH</b> <b>OKAY</b> <sup>18</sup> (Newer data)	<b>Total</b>
1-Follow-up or Tag	2	9	--	11
2-Deontic	26	22	--	48
2-Epistemic	5	14	7	26
3-Deontic	8	2	--	10
3-Epistemic	5	34	16	55
Continuer	--	4	--	4
Transitional_Preface	27	15	--	42
Transitional_Close	4	2	--	6
Conversational_Preclose	19	--	--	19
<b>Total</b>	96	102 <sup>19</sup>	23	221

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<sup>18</sup> Not dealt with here.

<sup>19</sup> Not included in table: OKAY in Reported speech (# = 11), Concessive OKAY (# = 4)

Table 2: Frequencies for OKAY in the older and newer data  
(including *oh okay*, *oh okay right*, *yeah okay*, *yeah right okay*)

**Older data**

<b>Conversation</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Tokens</b>	<b>Frequency (1 token every...)</b>
Debby & Shelley	457 s	8	57 s
Hyla II	1200 s	17	71 s
Joyce & Stan	508 s	11	73 s
Kamunsky-3	807 s	42	19 s
NB 27	107 s	3	36 s
NB 28	2671 s	8	334 s
SBL 10	738 s	3	246 s
SBL 11	232 s	3	77 s
SBL 15	208 s	8	26 s
SF2	880 s	8	110 s
Two girls	985 s	5	197 s
<b>Total</b>	8794 s = 146 min 57 s	116	76 s = 1 min 26 s

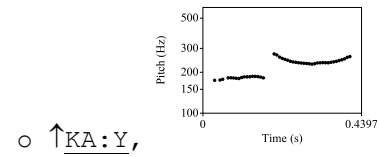
**Newer data**

<b>Conversation</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Tokens</b>	<b>Frequency (1 token every...)</b>
Before Bed	1085 s	4	271 s
Call Friend 4984	1800 s	26	69 s
Call Friend 5926	1800 s	11	163 s
Call Friend 6239	1800 s	9	200 s
Call Friend 6255	300 s	4	75 s
Call Friend 6278	524 s	3	175 s
Call Friend 6899	1800 s	25	78 s
Call Friend 6938	1800 s	14	129 s
Call Home 4544	1534 s	1	1534 s
Camp Reunion-1	1140 s	8	143 s
Camp Reunion-2	1140 s	10	114 s
Farmhouse	2316 s	20	116 s
Game Night	1320 s	7	189 s
Hey Cutie Pie	1517 s	7	217 s
<b>Total</b>	19,876 s = 331 m 27 s	149	133 s = 2 min 22 s

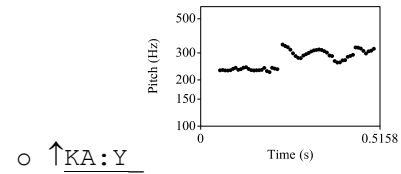
## Overview of prosodic-phonetic patterns in different turn and sequence positions

### *OKAY accompanying a first-position action*

(1) “A drink” (Older collection)



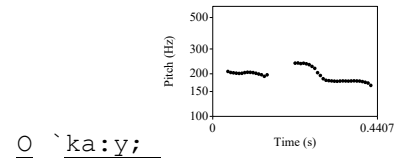
(2) “Tax and tipping” (Newer collection)



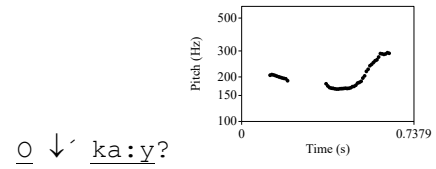
### *OKAY in the second position of a sequence*

*Deontic:*

(3) “University address” (Newer collection)

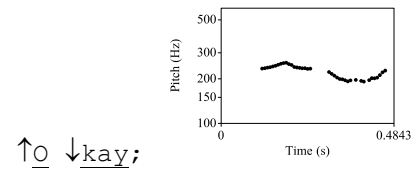


(4) “Some suggestions” (Older collection)

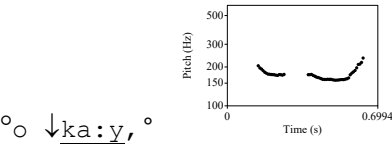


*Epistemic:*

(5) “A drink”, cont'd (Older collection)



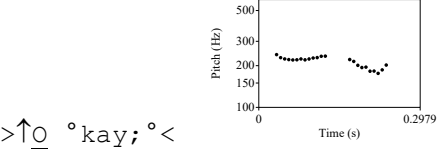
(6) "Native speaker" (Newer collection)



**OKAY in the third position of a sequence**

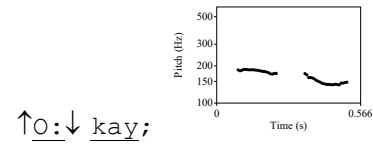
*Deontic:*

(7) "Water and coffee" (Newer collection)

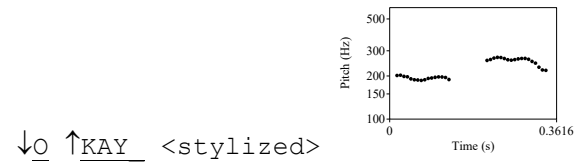


*Epistemic:*

(8) “Scheduling” (Newer collection)

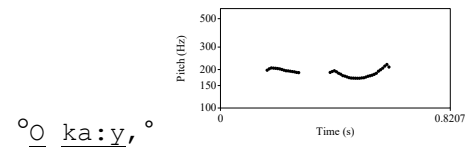


(9) “College tuition” (Newer collection)



***OKAY in sequence-medial position***

(10) “Waking up early” (Newer collection)

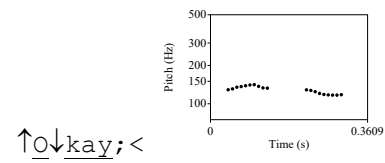


***OKAY in transitional positions***

*Preface:*



(11) “Reason I’m calling” (Older collection)



*Closure:*

(12) “What are you gonna wear” (Older collection)

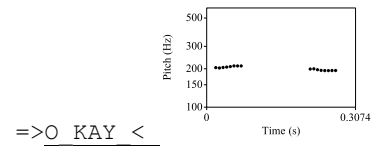


***OKAY in conversational preclosing***

(13) “Okay Stan” (Older collection)



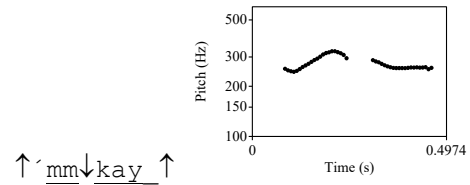
(14) “Gimme a call” (Older collection)



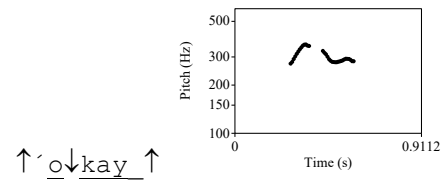
***Prosodically-phonetically marked second- and third-position OKAY***

*Epistemic:*

(15) “Blow off your girlfriends” (Older collection)

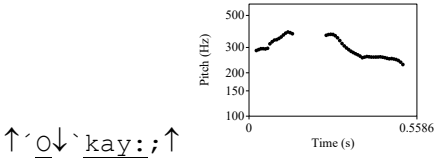


(16) “Funding” (Older collection)



*Deontic:*

(17) "Book back" (Older collection)



(18) "Chunky chocolate ice cream" (Newer collection)

