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# **Language over time: Some old and new uses of OKAY in American English**

Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen

## **Abstract**

This paper demonstrates how the tools of Interactional Linguistics can be applied to the study of change in language use. It examines the particle OKAY as used in everyday American English interaction at two different points in time, the 1960s and the 1990s/early 2000s. The focus is on the remarkable increase of OKAY as a response in epistemically driven sequences. Three uses of epistemic OKAY are identified in the newer data, one of which is unattested in the older data: OKAY in response to information that has no implications for the recipient's agenda or expressed beliefs. This novel use of OKAY appears in the newer data where OH would have occurred earlier, although OH is still attested with displays of affect such as surprise and empathy. The study concludes by arguing for an examination of 'possibility spaces', the set of options for filling a given sequential slot in conversational structure, at different points in time as a means for identifying changes in language use.

**Keywords:** OKAY, epistemics, response, informing, correction, longitudinal

## 1. Introduction

Since the inception of Interactional Linguistics (Ochs, Schegloff, & Thompson, Eds., 1996; Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, Eds., 2001), its proponents have been concerned to describe language as a resource for social interaction using audio and video recordings from a wide range of social encounters for empirical analysis. But little attention has been paid to *when* these social encounters take place: instead they are treated as occurring in an undifferentiated and indefinitely expandable "Now". Yet time does go on, and the conversational recordings studied, for example, by the first generation of conversation analysts (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson 1974; Sacks 1992; Lerner, Ed., 2004) are beginning to show their age. This is evidenced not only when participants refer to events of over sixty years ago (witness the Robert Kennedy assassination) as having just happened, but also when they use language in ways that sound dated today (witness expressions such as 'call collect', 'bone shoes', or 'nickel bag'). Nevertheless, the fact that we have access to these older recordings is a treasure not to be underestimated: they allow us, with the tools of Interactional Linguistics, to compare talk-in-interaction from then with talk-in-interaction now and explore how conversational language use has changed in the meantime. The present study does just this. However, rather than focusing on lexical

expressions it explores how linguistic practices for implementing social actions have evolved over the course of a generation.<sup>1</sup>

### ***1.1 The present study: Conception and development***

The current study grew out of a cross-linguistic project organized by the Helsinki Center of Excellence on Intersubjectivity and the Leipzig Institute for the German Language that set out to document the range of interactional uses of the particle OKAY<sup>2</sup> across thirteen different languages (Betz, Deppermann, Mondada & Sorjonen, Eds., In press). One of these was American English, where the word OKAY is thought to have originated (Metcalf 2010). A first investigation of American English OKAY within the cross-linguistic project focused on the prosody and phonetics of the particle in its various uses (Couper-Kuhlen, In press). Since one of the aims of the cross-linguistic project was to obtain as comprehensive a picture as possible, the American English OKAY collection was initially built to encompass approximately eight hours of everyday talk-in-interaction and included exemplars of OKAY from both early conversational data, recorded during the 1960s, as well as from more recent conversations, recorded during the 1990s and early 2000s. The two sub-collections, referred to as the “older” and the “newer” data, were analyzed separately, permitting a first glimpse of changes in the use of OKAY over time.

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<sup>1</sup> In this respect the present study follows in the footsteps of Clayman & Heritage (2002), who investigate the ways in which journalists’ questioning of U.S. presidents has changed over time.

<sup>2</sup> ‘OKAY’ in all capitals refers generically to the myriad phonetic and prosodic variations of the word on specific occasions.

For the current study the data set from the first investigation of OKAY was expanded from eight to more than 14 hours of conversational talk. It now includes audio recordings of two-party telephone calls and video recordings of multi-party face-to-face interaction with equal amounts of “older” data<sup>3</sup> and “newer” data<sup>4</sup> as measured in minutes of recording. The two sub-collections are comparable in that both contain recordings of family and friends talking on the telephone or chatting in informal settings: little else is going on in these situations than talk. There are no institutionally prescribed allocations of turns or topics of talk; the occasions for talking are equally varied in the two sub-collections. The two sub-collections thus embody mundane conversation at its best.

All tokens of the particle OKAY in the conversations were extracted in their context of occurrence. Included were freestanding OKAYs, i.e., cases in which the particle builds a turn-constructive unit of its own, as well as OKAY combinations, i.e., cases in which the particle co-occurs with another particle as part of a prosodically cohesive unit (e.g., *oh OKAY, yeah OKAY*). The frequency of OKAY tokens in the two sub-collections turned out to be roughly the same (see Table 1):

## *Insert Table 1 approximately here* ##

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<sup>3</sup> The “older” sub-collection from the 1960s included the multi-party video recordings known as Chicken Dinner, Chinese Dinner, Stew Dinner, and Virginia, as well as the audio recordings of all transcribed Newport Beach and the Santa Barbara Ladies telephone calls plus assorted other two-party telephone calls (Debby & Shelley, Geri & Shirley, Hyla & Rich, Hyla II, Joyce & Stan, Kamunsky 1-3, Linda & Jerry, Madeline, and Two girls).

<sup>4</sup> The “newer” sub-collection from the 1990s and early 2000s included the multi-party video recordings known as Americans (Rossi Corpus of English), Before bed and Camp Reunion 1 & 2 (Arizona corpus), Farmhouse and Game Night as well as 17 two-party telephone calls (8 selected randomly from the Call Friend collection and 8 from the Call Home collection plus 1 from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English).

## *1.2 Uses of OKAY in the older and newer data*

Once the sub-collections had been set up, each exemplar of the particle OKAY was examined in its context of occurrence to determine how it was being used, that is, to establish its *position* in conversational structure and, where relevant, its *composition* as a phonetic-prosodic object. The ultimate goal was to determine what *action* each OKAY token was implementing in the given conversational environment. In the following we survey the uses of OKAY identified in the two sub-collections.

### *1.2.1 OKAY in the older data*

There were five recurrent uses of the particle OKAY in the older data (ordered here from most frequent to least frequent). Most frequent was the use of OKAY in *deontic* sequences, that is, in those centered around a request/instruction, a proposal/suggestion, or an offer/invitation (Stevanovic & Peräkylä 2012, Drew 2012, Couper-Kuhlen 2014). In these cases, OKAY appears in second position, as, for instance, in the following exchange where it is used to acquiesce to a request:<sup>5</sup>

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

(1) “Whole town” (Newport Beach 18, 295.78) [Older data]

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<sup>5</sup> This and all subsequent data extracts have been transcribed according to the GAT2 conventions (Couper-Kuhlen & Barth-Weingarten 2011).

((Fran is planning to visit Ted at the beach; he has just given her instructions on how to get there by car.))

- 1 FRA: lI::sten I can't even find a whole TO:WN;  
 2→ so you'd bE:ttter give me your NU:Mber.= Request  
 3⇒ TED: =↓O:kay, Acceptance  
 4 (0.5)  
 5 TED: seven one FOUR, ((call-out of number continues))

Alternatively, OKAY can appear in the third position of a deontic sequence, where the original instigator of a request/proposal/offer acknowledges its acceptance or rejection by the interlocutor (Thompson, Fox, & Couper-Kuhlen 2015:224):

*OKAY in the third position of a deontic sequence*

- (2) “Richard’s for lunch” (Newport Beach 28, 2539.12) [Older data]  
 ((Lottie has been offering to take Emma shopping or to the hairdresser’s but Emma has declined both times.))

- 1→ LOT: ↑wEl1 i just thought maybe we could go over to  
           rIchard's for LUNCH then;=  
 2→ =after i get my HAIR ↓fix[ed. Proposal  
 3→ EMM: [aLR1 :GHT, Acceptance  
 4⇒ LOT: oKA:Y, Acknowledgment

In addition to figuring in deontic sequences, OKAY in the older data also appears in between sequences in a ‘continuative’ function to *transition* to ‘next-positioned matters’ (Beach 1993). In this use the particle prefigures a fuller turn by the speaker or the interlocutor involving a shift of topic or activity. For instance:

*OKAY as a marker of transition to a new topic or activity*

(3) “Reason I’m calling” (Kamunsky 3, 90.52) [Older data]

((Alan has called Maryanne to invite her to a party, but she preempts first topic by announcing news about a mutual friend, Tony. In this extract, the topic of Tony is currently being closed down.))

1	ALA:	that was what i TOLD him;	
2	→	it's <<rhythmic> ABOUT TI:ME.>=	
	→	=you kno[w.	Possible sequence closure
3	→ MRY:	[GO:.....[:...[D.]	Possible sequence closure
4	⇒ ALA:	[°hhh[Ok]ay;	Transition
5		well the REASON i'm calling;=	New topic/sequence
6		=there IS a reason behind my mAdness.	
7		((turn continues))	

Equally as frequent as transitional OKAY in the older data is the use of the particle OKAY in *pre-closings* to open up the closing of a telephone conversation (Schegloff & Sacks 1993):

*OKAY in pre-closings*

(4) “Okay sweetie” (Newport Beach 16, 354.04) [Older data]

1	→ EMM:	.hhhhhhh <<f> O:kay sweetie;=	Pre-closing1
2		=and i'll talk with you next↓WEE[K.>	
3	⇒ LOT:	[Okay	
		honey.	Pre-closing2
4	EMM:	b[y e] BYE.]	
5	LOT:	[bye] BYE.]	

Much less frequent than pre-closing OKAY in the older data is its use in *epistemic* sequences, that is, in those centered around an informing or



telling. In such cases OKAY can appear in second position, where it acknowledges a prior informing:

*OKAY in the second position of an epistemic sequence*

(5) “Knives” (Chinese Dinner, 17:13) [Older data]

1	BET:	Oh: wAit a minute we did:n't (0.3)	
2		i didn't (.) get out any KNI:VES.	
3		hey DON, ((to Don, off camera))	
4		could you brIng out some KNI:VES?	
5		(0.5)	
6	DON:	KNIVES.=	
7		=SURE=yeah.	
8→	BET:	they're kind of in a G:LA::SS;	Informing
9→		in the back of the hh	Informing
10⇒	DON:	<b>Okay.</b>	Acknowledgment
11		I sEe them;	
12	BET:	RED thing;	

Alternatively, OKAY in the older data can appear in the third position of an epistemic sequence, where it acknowledges an informing that has been elicited through a prior query:

*OKAY in the third position of an epistemic sequence*

(6) “Hear you fine” (Joyce & Stan, 0.55) [Older data]

1	JOY:	hullO:;	
2		(0.5)	
3	STA:	pt HI joyce;=	
4		=it's STAN.	
5	JOY:	<<stylized> HI STAN:;>=	
6→	STA:	=hI can you HEAR me okay?= =cuz the REcOrd player's on.	Query
7			
8→	JOY:	O:h yea:h i hear you FI:N[E.	Informing

9⇒ STA: [Okay;= Acknowledgment  
10 =GOOD.

Finally, OKAY in the older data is on occasion encountered in a *tag* position, attached to the end of a request/proposal/offer, where it solicits uptake:

*OKAY as a tag*

(7) “Get home early” (Linda & Jerry, 53.85) [Older data]

1→ LIN: NO: (0.2) ↑gEt home pretty EARly.= Request  
2⇒ =oKAY?.hh Tag  
3 (0.5)  
4 LIN: p[lEase.]  
5 JER: [well i]can leave right NOW if you wAnt;= Response  
6 LIN: =NO: hhh°

*1.2.2 OKAY in the newer data*

Most of the uses of OKAY documented in the older data were also observed in the newer data. However, one new use appeared: OKAY as a *continuer* (Schegloff 1982), where it occurs at a point of syntactic, intonational, and/or pragmatic incompleteness in the interlocutor’s turn, inviting the other to go on:

*OKAY as a continuer*

(8) “Moving” (CH 4248, 175.77) [Newer data]

1 BRE: .hhh if nOt when are you guys MOVing.  
2 (0.9)

3	ANI:	.hh ↑wE're not mOving for a YEAR,	
4		(0.2)	
5	BRE:	↑`OH:_okay=gOo:d.	
6		(0.3)	
7	BRE:	[.hh	
8→	ANI:	[we don't move tIll,	Incomplete turn
9		(0.5)	
10⇒	BRE:	<b>nkay;</b>	Continuer
11		(0.4)	
12→	ANI:	mm:::: (0.5) prObably (.) JUNE.	Continuation of turn

Table 2 summarizes the recurrent uses of OKAY in the older and newer data and their frequencies.<sup>6</sup>

## Insert Table 2 approximately here ##

If we now compare the uses and frequencies of OKAY in the two sub-collections, some interesting findings emerge. First, the *distribution* of OKAY has broadened in the newer data: It is now attested recurrently as a Continuer, although this is offset by the absence of Pre-closing OKAY in the newer data. This absence is presumably due to the fact that none of the telephone calls transcribed in the 1990-2000 sub-collection included the closing section of the conversation. Second, and more importantly, the *frequency* of OKAY in epistemic contexts has grown exponentially in the newer data: This use now accounts for more than half of all OKAY tokens in total. Epistemic OKAY in the newer data is more than twice as frequent

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<sup>6</sup> The 'Other' category in the older data set includes 6 tokens of OKAY used to introduce Reported speech. In the newer data set it includes 11 tokens of OKAY introducing Reported speech and 4 tokens of turn-internal OKAY marking a concessive relation.

as deontic OKAY, which in the older data accounted for almost half of the OKAY tokens in total. How can this be?

One explanation for the fewer instances of deontic OKAY in the newer data compared to the older data may have to do with the composition of the data base. Many of the telephone calls in the older Newport Beach and Santa Barbara Ladies collections, for instance, were made ‘for cause’, that is, to ask for a favor, arrange a get-together, or invite someone to a party – in other words, they contained numerous deontic sequences. But the telephone calls in the newer Call Friend and Call Home collections were ‘engineered’ to gather speech samples: participants agreed to make long-distance calls for free to friends and relatives and they were told they could talk about whatever they wanted. For this reason, there may be fewer deontic sequences than epistemic ones in the newer data.

But informing and telling sequences are by no means absent in the older data. Thus, there must be some deeper explanation for the remarkable increase in the number of OKAY tokens appearing in epistemic sequences in the newer data. The next section explores what is behind the rise of epistemic OKAY.

## **2. The rise of epistemic OKAY**

Let us first consider what epistemic sequences look like in the older data.

### ***2.1 Epistemic sequences in the older data***

Much as Heritage's early work has shown, following simple informings it is the token OH that is used to receipt information as something the speaker did not know before and to mark it as having brought about a change of state (1984:300). Here is a case from the older data: (a single arrow marks the informing, a double arrow the response, which is also bolded)

(9) "Coming down this weekend" (Newport Beach 14, 358.30) [Older data]  
 ((Emma is telling her sister Lottie about an upcoming visit from her daughter and family.))

1→ EMM: °h h h h well ↑thEy're coming do:wn thIs WEEKend. hh  
 2 (0.4)  
 3→ EMM: <<all>ALL\_of\_them.>  
 4⇒ LOT: **OH:.**  
 5 EMM: ((click)) so:: I'll HA[VE them] thi[s  
 6 LOT: [you- ] [you mean the  
 7 NEXT weekend.  
 8 (0.5)  
 9 EMM: ((click)) this next SATurday'n SUNday yeah.  
 10 they [have a PA]Rty;]  
 11 LOT: [(the COMing)] ye:]ah.

Likewise, it is typically OH that is found in response to question-elicited informings in the older data. Here are three instances, also noted by Heritage (1984:310): (single arrows mark the question and the answer, which is bolded; double arrows mark the response)

(10) "Freedland" (Hyla II, 678.58) [Older data]  
 ((Hyla has just told her friend Nancy that she recently tried to call her ex-boyfriend long-distance but when he answered the phone, she hung up.))

1 NAN: =[OH: H(h)y(h)la=  
 2 HYL: =[e-e-  
 3 HYL: =u-e-eh=  
 4→ NAN: =°hhh <<h>does he have his own aPA:RT[ment?]>  
 5 HYL: [°hhhh]  
 6→ HYL: **yEa:h,=**  
 7⇒ NAN: =↑^OH: ,  
 8 (1.0)  
 9→ NAN: <<h> hOw did you get his NUMber;>  
 10 (.)  
 11→HYL: **I (.) called inforMAtion in san franCISco!=**  
 12⇒NAN: =<<f>↑^OH:::..>  
 13 (.)  
 14 NAN: <<h> vEry CLEVe:r; hh>=  
 15 HYL: =↑thank you[: I- .hh- .hhhhhhhh ]hh=  
 16→NAN: [↑what's his LAST name;]  
 17→HYL: =uh:: **FREEDlA:nd.** .hh[hh  
 18⇒NAN: [↑OH[:;  
 19 HYL: [(or) FREEDland.

Finally, it is also OH that we find as a response after repairs in other-initiated repair sequences in the older data (see also Heritage 1984:316):

(11) “Acne” (Hyla II, 86.224) [Older data]

[Nancy is telling her friend Hyla about a recent trip to the skin doctor.]

1 NAN: bUt he goes (0.4) hE: (0.3) he goes  
 2 yOu have a rEa:lly mild CASE he goes;  
 3 (0.2)  
 4→HYL: of ^WHA[:T.]  
 5 NAN: [you] sh-  
 6 (0.2)  
 7→NAN: ^A:Cne-e;=  
 8⇒HYL: =OH[: , ]hhh ]  
 9 NAN: [so] you] shouldn't even ↑WORry abou:t it.

In sum, it is predominately the particle OH that is used following simple informings, question-elicited informings, and other-initiated repairs in the older data. In such cases OH receipts the information given in the prior turn as having led to a change of state from not-knowing [K-] to now-knowing [K+] (Heritage 2012-a) and implies that the sequence can now be closed.

Yet there are isolated instances of epistemic sequences in the older data where it is the particle OKAY rather than OH that appears as a response to an informing. These cases are particularly instructive for how OKAY has developed in the meantime. Consider, for instance, the following sequence from the older data:

(12) “What are you gonna wear” (HGII, 1136.840) [Older data]  
 ((Hyla has invited Nancy to the theater that evening to celebrate her birthday.))

1→NAN: ↑whAt're yOu gonna WEA::R;  
 2 (0.9)  
 3→NAN: just nice PA:NTS,=or sOme[thing,]  
 4→HYL: [YEAH. ]  
 5 <<all> i'm [ nOt go]nna get DRESSED,=  
 6⇒NAN: [ <<p> OKAY;> ]  
 7 HYL: ='cause it's supPOsed to> RAI:N tonight;=T[OO:; ]  
 8 NAN: [ <<f> Oh ]  
 9 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::;>

In line 1 Nancy orients to Hyla as the organizer of the evening’s program by asking what she intends to wear, providing a candidate answer herself after

a pause: *just nice pants or something* (line 3). Hyla confirms this with *yeah* – an informing which Nancy, in overlap with Hyla’s turn extension, now acknowledges with OKAY in line 6 and, following Hyla’s account for not wanting to dress up (lines 7 & 10), with a second OKAY in line 11.<sup>7</sup> But why does Nancy use OKAY and not OH to respond to Hyla’s informing? How is this sequence different from the one we saw in extract (10), where Nancy’s query *does he have his own apartment?* (line 4) receives a *yeah* response (line 6) which is acknowledged with OH (line 7)?

The answer appears to lie in the import of the question being asked, that is, in whether the information it is eliciting is *consequential* for that speaker’s agenda or not. While it is not consequential for Nancy to know whether Hyla’s ex-boyfriend has his own apartment, it is on the contrary highly relevant for Nancy to know what Hyla will wear to the theater that evening, because this has consequences for what Nancy herself should wear. Nancy goes on to draw those implications when she says a split second later *then I’ll just wear pants* (line 12).

Other instances of simple OKAY in epistemic sequences in the older data are like the one in extract (12): the tokens are used to acknowledge information that is consequential for the speaker’s future behavior in one way or another, often information that they themselves have elicited.

But there are also isolated cases of a second type of epistemic OKAY in the older data, namely, one used to acknowledge a correction or counter-informing. This type of OKAY may appear together with OH, as in:

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<sup>7</sup> These two OKAYs (in lines 6 and 11) – based on their position and (prosodic) composition – are clearly responding to Hyla’s informing about what she will wear, while the OKAY in line 14, with its stylized ‘sung’ prosody, functions as a transition to new matters (Beach 1993).



## (13) “One guy I wanna call” (Chicken Dinner, 14:42) [Older data]

((Vivian and her friends have been talking about a blizzard on the East coast, which contrasts with the warm weather they are having on the West coast. Shane is Vivian’s partner.))

1 VIV: One guy that i [wanna CA:LL=  
 2 MIC: [( )  
 3 VIV: =he usually comes ↑OU:T.  
 4 you know[so you just tEll him it's eighty deGREE:S;=  
 5 NAN: [mmhm,  
 6 VIV: =he'll get on a PLA:N[E;  
 7 NAN: [hhh[yheh]=  
 8→ SHA: [woah]=  
 9 VIV: =[n a h-ha-ha]  
 10 NAN: =[heh heh heh]  
 11→SHA: =[wai' wee way:o[ee-/(hey woah w[oah)  
 12 VIV: [ih hih hehh he[h  
 13→SHA: [wu wai'a wai'a wu.  
 14 (0.4)  
 15→SHA: one: gU::y you usually<<laughing>>CALL?>what[is THIS.  
 16 MIC: [mm-hm-  
 17 m-h[m  
 18→VIV: [nO wE [ ^C A: L L. ]  
 19 SHA: [what is THIS]:..  
 20 (0.5)  
 21⇒SHA: OH:.. Okay.=  
 22 =it was: a friend of MI:NE t[oo.al]rIg[ht  
 23 NAN: [O\_h: ]SHA[NE'S friend;  
 24 VIV: [(yeah.)  
 25 NAN: [yeah  
 26 SHA: [oh that's GOOD then.=that's MY friend.

Shane, as Vivian’s partner, teasingly plays the jealous lover and calls her on claiming that there is a guy she usually calls (lines 8, 11, 13 & 15), but Vivian clarifies that she calls this person together with Shane: *nO wE CALL* (line 18). It is this correction that Shane acknowledges after a brief pause with

*OH*: *Okay* (line 21). Here too the OKAY is indexing the consequentiality of the informing for Shane, yet its implications concern not his future behavior but rather his understanding of the situation: as he goes on to say, *it was a friend of MINE too. alrIght* (line 22). That is, any grounds for jealousy have now been eradicated. Together with OH, marking that Vivian's correction has led to a change-of-state in Shane's knowledge, this OKAY acknowledges the information as having brought about a revised understanding of the situation in question.

To summarize: In the older data it is predominantly OH that is found as a response in the second and third positions of epistemically driven sequences, including those built around simple informings, question-elicited informings, and other-initiated repairs. On occasion (19 times in seven hours of conversation), OKAY crops up instead of OH in such sequences; these are invariably cases in which the information that has been conveyed, often on solicitation, (i) is *consequential* for the speaker's agenda, or (ii) leads to the speaker's *revised understanding* of the situation in question. In the latter case OH often co-occurs with OKAY.

## ***2.2 Epistemic OKAY in the newer data***

In contrast to the relatively few tokens of epistemic OKAY in the older data, there are 140 tokens of OKAY in second and third positions of epistemically driven sequences in the newer data. In close to three-fourths of these cases, OKAY is used as in extracts (12) and (13) from the older data. In the following we examine these newer epistemic OKAY tokens more closely.

### 2.2.1 Consequential OKAY

Nearly half of the epistemic OKAYs in the newer data are used, as in extract (12), to acknowledge information which has some consequence for the speaker's agenda or future behavior. Here is a sampling of sequences where the informing (single arrow) has been volunteered and is receipted with OKAY (double arrow, bolded):

(14) "Hang on just a sec" (Hey Cutie Pie, 480.200) [Newer data]  
 ((While Jill is visiting a friend Jill2, she has called her boyfriend Jeff long distance.))

1 JIL: oh WAIT- (. )  
 2 Jeff can you HANG on just a sec?  
 3 (0.2)  
 4 JEF: YE:s.  
 5 JIL: whAt did you <<p>say?> ((to Jill2 off phone))  
 6→ JI2: <<p> I'm gonna go Over there.>  
 7 JIL: <<h> oh you ARE?>  
 8⇒ o[**KAY**].  
 9 JI2: [ <<p> yeah> ].  
 10⇒ JIL: **Okay** i'll come Over.  
 11 (1.3)  
 12 JIL: [um. ]  
 13 JEF: [where]'s JILL going.  
 14 JIL: she's going next DOOR?

(15) "Very shortly" (Game Night, 267.685) [Newer data]

((Pam has interrupted the board game she is hosting and gone into the kitchen to answer a phone call from her sister Jill. As she is talking on the phone, she looks in from the adjoining room and addresses line 1 to the other players.))

1→PAM: I'll be there very SHORTly.

2⇒TER: <<all> **Okay.** is that JILL?>  
 3 PAM: talk quietly amongst yourSELVES.  
 4 ye[s.  
 5 ABB: [(e)hh [huh huh huh  
 6 TER: [<<f>we're just tAlking about her arTI:Stic  
 7 young SO:N.>  
 8 (.)  
 9 PAM: oh that's RI:(h)GHT.

(16) “Clean up” (Camp Reunion 1\_5.23) [Newer data]

((Lauren has just brought in snacks for her guests. She addresses line 1 to her sister Sally and then instructs her daughter Maggie what to do in her absence. Overlapping talk due to a floor split has been removed.))

1→ LAU: i'm gonna RUN up and just- (0.3) ((to Sally))  
 2→ [clean UP.] so  
 3⇒ SAL: [**Okay.**]  
 4 LAU: tE::l1 (.) BRETT;  
 5 about U of M. ((to Maggie))  
 6 (0.4)  
 7 MAG: [i already DID.]  
 8 LAU: [which I:: ]  
 9 think you should GO. ((to Brett))  
 10 BRE: yeah.

In each of these cases, the information that the interlocutor has volunteered has implications for the recipient or recipients.<sup>8</sup> By responding with OKAY the recipient at once acknowledges the information and accepts the consequences it implies. In (14), for instance, when Jill<sub>2</sub> informs her guest Jill *I'm gonna go over there* (line 6), Jill responds with OKAY and then

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<sup>8</sup> Because these implications concern future actions that the recipients should undertake, the informings could be said to have deontic overtones, thus providing a possible clue as to how the consequential use of OKAY may have developed.

orients to its implication by promising *I'll come over* (line 10). In (15) and (16), the informings are accompanied by indications that they have consequences for the recipients: In (15) after the informing, Pam goes on to instruct her friends to continue talking among themselves while waiting for her to return (line 3), and in (16) Lauren announces that her informing has consequences by appending *so* (line 2). It emerges that she wants Maggie to tell Maggie's young cousin Brett about the University of Michigan while she (Lauren) is away (lines 4-5). If the recipients of the informings in (14)-(16) had responded not with OKAY but instead with OH, they would have receipted the information as having led them from a [K-] to a [K+] state, but they would not have acknowledged that this change of state has consequences for their own agenda. OKAY and OH are thus not interchangeable as response particles in these contexts.

Now consider a selection of epistemic sequences from the newer data in which the informing is question-elicited and responded to with OKAY:

(17) "Susan Werner" (Call Friend 4984, 1138.810) [Newer data]

1→ROB: a:nd u:h (0.3) ↑dId you ever get thA:t uh  
 2→ that TA:PE or cee DEE of tha:t sInger  
 3→ that i told you that you should GET  
 4→ or that i wanted [to get for]  
 5 LIZ: [which O:NE.]  
 6 (1.3)  
 7 ROB: uh susan WERner,  
 8→LIZ: **NO::;**  
 9 (0.4)  
 10⇒ROB: **OKAY;**  
 11 i'm SENDing it to you.=

12 LIZ: ≈<<h>O:h that's so [NI:C:E].>  
 13 ROB: [GOOD.]

(18) “Spending the night” (Call Friend 6899, 1665.397) [Newer data]

1 SAL: well i i thought i would (1.4)  
 2→ <<h> are you spending the NI:GHT?>  
 3 (0.3)  
 4→ SAL: in new JERsey then?=  
 5→ MOM: =**YES**..  
 6 (0.3)  
 7 MOM: [uh HUH?]  
 8⇒ SAL: [**Okay**. ]  
 9 MOM: hh [yeah we'll  
 10 SAL: [(w'then)  
 11 MOM: we'll go DO:WN (.) later this Evening.  
 ((more details about Mom's trip))  
 ...  
 28 SAL: cause chrIs and i (0.3) are going to be OU:T  
 29 tonight;  
 ((more talk about Sally's plans for the evening))  
 ...  
 49 SAL: but i wanted to CA:LL; hh  
 50 (0.5)  
 51 SAL: new JERsey while you all are dOwn there;  
 52 but i'll cA:ll (.) in the mOrning then.

Here too the information provided in response to an interlocutor's question is followed by OKAY: in (17), Liz informs Roberta that she did not get a tape of the singer Susan Werner, whereupon Roberta produces OKAY and announces that she will send her one. In (18), Mom informs Sally that she will be spending the night in New Jersey (line 5), and Sally responds with OKAY (line 8). As it later emerges, Sally plans to call Mom while she is in New Jersey (lines 49 & 51) but will not be able to do so that evening (line 28). The information that Mom will be spending the night in New Jersey

implies that Sally can reach her there the next morning (line 52). In neither (17) nor (18) is OKAY interchangeable with a simple OH response: OH would register that the recipient now knows something they did not know before but would not acknowledge that the informing has implications for what they plan to do next.

### 2.2.2 Revised-understanding OKAY

In a further set of cases comprising almost one-fourth of the epistemic OKAY tokens in the newer data, we find sequences similar to the one in extract (13) above: the recipient uses OKAY, often together with OH, to acknowledge a counter-informing or other-correction. Here is a sampling of such cases: (a single arrow marks the initial claim and, together with bolding, the counter-informing or other-correction; a double arrow marks the response)

(19) “A book” (Call Friend 4175, 1622.85) [Newer data]

1 PAU: .hhh and she said she has a BOO:K.  
 2 (0.5)  
 3 SAM: WO:W:.  
 4 (0.3)  
 5 PAU: °yeah.°  
 6 (0.9)  
 7→SAM: in BraZI::L.  
 8 (0.9)  
 9→PAU: **u:h NO: actually it was writ-**  
 10→ **I don't know WHAT it was written in;**  
 11→ **but the:y-**  
 12 **when she went to England they WA:NTed it.**

13→           **but it was out of PRI:NT.** [<i- they> ]  
 14⇒SAM:   **[O:H. OKAY;]**  
 15 PAU:       they were Already on the-  
 16           the second eDITION was already out of prin:t.  
 17 SAM:       uh huh,

(20) “Out of touch” (Call Home 4247, 419.117) [Newer data]

1 ALA:    ↑hOw long've you BEEN there by the way.  
 2           (1.7)  
 3 GIN:    over HERE? (.) um::  
 4           it'll be thrEe years in noVEMber.  
 5           (0.3)  
 6 ALA:    ^WOW.  
 7           (0.5)  
 8→ALA:   so yOu: really ARE out of touch arnch(h)a.  
 9           (0.3)  
 10 ALA:   heh heh  
 11          (0.6)  
 12 ALA:   .hhhh[h  
 13→GIN:           [<<h, laughing> **well i like to think i'm not**  
 14→       **Totally out of touch,>** heh [heh  
 15 ALA:   [WE:LL y-  
 16           I:[know what it's like.  
 17→GIN:       [°hhh ↑**I was never very ↑IN touch;=**  
 18→       =**even when i was still IN america. s(h)o** heh  
 19⇒ALA:    ↑`**OH\_`OKAY,=**  
 20        =you're ↑**THAT** type.  
 21        ^I gotcha. (.) eh [heh heh heh heh  
 22 GIN:   [eh heh heh i was always in my in  
 23        my Own wOrld ANyways. [so.  
 24 ALA:   [°heh

(21) “Myself and Guss” (Call Home 4074, 145.15) [Newer data]

1 ALE: SO:; ↑Anyway;



2       ↑how are you DOing these days.  
3   RON: things are going: very WELL,  
4→     i think i had mEntioned before that um that uh ghhh  
5→     that uh that there's a cOmpany now that i'm WORKing  
6       with?  
7       (0.6)  
8→RON: uhm uh which is vERY much just (.)  
9       jUst myself and GUSS?  
10      (0.9)  
11 ALE: [↑^OH.  
12 RON: [and that um  
13      (0.4)  
14→ALE: **nO you HADn't mentioned that,**  
15⇒RON: ↑^OH okay.  
16      okay so [um  
17 ALE:           [you'd tOld me that you were LEAVing the  
18      company that you were AT;  
19      and you were Entertaining Offers.=and uh  
20      (0.3)  
21 RON: °hh well i well it sEemed to make SENSE;;  
22      since i had a client;  
23      to to just kind of set up my own COMpany;  
24      °hh of sOrts.  
25      [SO um  
26 ALE: [ <<p>↑^OH.>  
27 RON: ↑sO things are going extremely WELL.

In these cases, the counter-informing or correction comes after an interlocutor has proffered a candidate understanding, as in (19), or a request for confirmation, as in (20) and (21). In both (19) and (20), the counter-informer provides 'reconciliatory information' that allows the interlocutors to resolve the incompatibility of their positions (Robinson 2009). In all three instances the recipient of the counter-informing/correction first receipts it with OH as something they did not know before, and then acknowledges with OKAY that it means they must revise their understanding of the

situation. In (19), after OH OKAY (line 14), Sam ceases to pursue the assumption that the woman in question has written a book in Brazil, while in (20), after OH OKAY (line 19), Alan formulates his new understanding as *you're THAT type* (line 20). In (21), after OH OKAY (line 15), Ron proceeds to act on the revised understanding that Alec does not know about his new company by explaining how it came about (lines 21-24). In all of these cases, OH receipts the informing or correction as having brought about a change of state and OKAY marks that the recipient now accepts what that implies.<sup>9</sup>

Yet there are also cases in the newer data where following counter-informings and other-corrections OKAY is attested as a response *without* a preceding OH. This is what happens in the following sequences:

(22) “Boston Jewish Film Festival“ (Call Friend 6239, 542.100) [Newer data]

((Debbie is a screen writer.))

1 SAR: °hhh ↑how did your THING go at the u:m w (0.2)  
 2→ was it the boston JEWish center?  
 3→DEB: °hhh (0.4) **boston jewish FILM festival?=  
 4⇒SAR: =OKAY.  
 5 (0.5)  
 6 DEB: ((lipsmack))u::m (0.3)  
 7 ↑it we:nt they k- it kind of-  
 8 it had TECHNical problems,  
 9 that were NOT my fault;=  
 10 =it was the fault of the SHO:W,  
 11 SAR: uh hu:h,**

---

<sup>9</sup> Of course, like all sequence-closing thirds, OKAY in these revised-understanding sequences, is also signaling ‘readiness to move on to next-positioned matters’ (Beach 1993). However, note that in a number of these cases (e.g., (20) and (21) here) OKAY is *through-produced* with OH, suggesting that it is the particle combination as a unit that is indicating revised understanding and possible sequence-closure (see also Couper-Kuhlen, Forthcoming).

## (23) "Bridesmaids" (Call Friend 6938, 1399.810) [Newer data]

((Renate is telling Anabel about the upcoming wedding of a mutual friend, which, however, will not take place that summer.))

1 REN: .hhh it ↑doesn't seem like there was any RUSH;=  
 2→ =but we're all BRIDESmaids.  
 3 ANA: we ARE?  
 4 REN: as far as i ↑KNOW;  
 5→ANA: **oh I'M nO:t,**  
 6 (0.4)  
 7 REN: you're NOT?  
 8 (0.5)  
 9 ANA: i ↑DOUBT it,  
 10 (0.3)  
 11⇒REN: **o↑KAY-**  
 12 ANA: [i ↑WISH i was,  
 13 REN: [well you're COMing ↑Anyway,

## (24) "College tuition" (Call Home 4544: 4544\_1246) [Newer data]

((Two middle-aged friends are talking about what tuition was like when they went to college.))

1 BET: °hh I wanted to go to the university of  
 2 rochester.  
 3 (0.5)  
 4 ANN: at thAt time,  
 5 and it [was ( )-  
 6 BET: [and ( )  
 7→ ANN: <<f> and at thAt time what WAS it.  
 8→ FIVE thOusand DOLLars?>  
 9→ BET: **NO it was much MORE=**  
 10→ =it was like (0.5) **TWELVE thousand dollars.**  
 11⇒ ANN: **↓o↑KAY-**  
 12 BET: it was like unbelIEVable.

In these sequences the other-correction, as in (22), or the counter-informing, as in (23) and (24), is acknowledged only with OKAY in next turn, that is, it is marked as having implications that lead the recipient to a revised understanding. But the response does not include OH: the prior turn is not receipted as news that has led to a change of state in the recipient's knowledge. This may be because in (22) Sarah's try at the name of the festival is not far off the mark anyway; in (23) because Renate's reiterated query in line 7 suggests disbelief;<sup>10</sup> and in (24) because Ann has already implied a belief that the cost of tuition was extremely high. In other words, in (22)-(24) the speakers are not making a big deal out of the corrections and counter-informings and what they imply for their beliefs or knowledge.

From a comparison of (19)-(21) and (22)-(24), we can conclude that it matters whether the response to a counter-informing includes OH or not. This is an indication that the tokens OH and OKAY are not interchangeable with one another following counter-informings and other-corrections: each makes a distinct contribution to the response and the way it deals with the prior informing.

So far, we have seen that almost three-quarters of the epistemic OKAY tokens in the newer data are used as in extracts (12) and (13) from the older data. These consequential and revised-understanding OKAYs are not interchangeable with OH as responses to informings and counter-

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<sup>10</sup> As Heritage (1984) points out, the production of OH after a counter-informing typically implicates the speaker's acceptance of the information as fact. In the context of contested information it may be avoided for precisely this reason (p. 339, n12).

informings: they have distinct work to do. Moreover, the uses are not new; they simply occur much more frequently in the newer data collection.

Yet there is a third kind of OKAY accounting for more than a quarter of the tokens in epistemic sequences in the newer data, which we refer to as *non-consequential OKAY*. This is a novel use, one not documented in the older data, and it is a major contributor to the remarkable rise of epistemic OKAY.

### 2.2.3 *Non-consequential OKAY*

In numerous sequences in the newer data, OKAY appears as a response to an informing that is neither consequential for the recipient's agenda, as in (12) above, nor corrective of the recipient's claims or expressed beliefs, as in (13). In these sequences, there are no implications deriving from the informing that might be relevant for the recipient; instead, OKAY appears to receipt the information much as OH would do. Here is a sampling of sequences in which such an informing is question-elicited: (a single arrow marks the question and the answer, which is bolded; a double arrow marks the response)

(25) "Weight Watchers" (Farmhouse, p. 37) [Newer data]

((Mom and Laura have been telling Donna about Weight Watchers and the recommendations their adviser gives them there.))

1→DON: wh[ere do you- where do you GO for thA:t.

2 LAU: [WHA:T?

3 (0.4)

4 DON: WEIGHT watchers.

5 (.)

6→MOM: u:m, (0.3) at- (0.8) be<sup>↑</sup>hind **SAFEway-**  
7→ at a (.) it's <sup>↑</sup>**Actually at an OLD folks home**  
8→ **in their (0.2) [like recreation:**  
9 LAU: [hhh heh °hhh  
10→MOM: **cEn[ter**  
11⇒DON: [<sup>↑</sup>**Oka:y-**  
12 (0.2)  
13 MOM: thIng,  
14 (0.2)  
15 DON: yeah=  
16 MOM: =(clears throat))  
17 (0.5)  
18 DON: hmm  
19 (0.3)  
20 MOM: kInd of a little bit (.) u:h wEst of sAfeway,

There is no evidence in this conversation that the location of Weight Watchers is consequential for Donna (she herself is athletic and jogs to keep in shape), nor is it correcting a prior understanding of hers. But Donna receipts it with OKAY (line 11). In this context it would have been just as appropriate for Donna to respond with OH: in other words, there is little difference between what this OKAY does and what OH would do here.

(26) “Bell Northern Research” (Call Friend 4175, 278.249) [Newer data]  
((Paul is describing to Sam his new job in interface design with Bell Corp.))

1→SAM: wh wh whO are they: n doing the SOFTware for.  
2 (0.5)  
3→PAU: ((click)) **they're doing the so:ftw uh uh:**  
4→ **Bell Northern Research is a sUb dgi s::Iduary of**  
5→ **Northern TELEco::m:, hh**  
6 SAM: uh HUH,  
7 PAU: **which i:s: a c- the c- mAi:n compETitor to ei tee**  
8 **n tEe: for: SWITCHing::;**

9 (0.2)  
 10⇒SAM: **O:kay;**  
 11 PAU: °stuff:°.  
 12⇒SAM: **Okay.**  
 13 PAU: and they also: desI:gn TELePho::nes

The information about who Paul's company provides the software for (lines 3-5 and 7-8) has no consequences for Sam nor does it counter anything he has claimed, but it is receipted with OKAY in line 10 and, after an increment, again in line 12. Here, too, Sam could easily have responded with OH.

(27) "Scheduling" (Call Friend 6239: 1662.625) [Newer data]  
 ((Debbie, a screen writer, has just declared that she does not want her temp job to become full-time.))

1 →SAR: what ↑ARE you doing.  
 2 (0.9)  
 3→DEB: ((click))(0.6) **well i- i'm wOrking in (0.8)**  
 4 ↑I mean it has nothing to do with FI:LM;  
 5 <<p> at A:ll. [you kno:w]>  
 6 SAR: [↑I know ]  
 7→SAR: is it like secreTARial stuff? or [what.]  
 8 DEB: [yEa:h]  
 9→ **it's (0.3) it's secreTARial;=**  
 10→ **=↑wE:ll\_ .hhh I- ↑what i do ↓m:Ost of the TI::ME;**  
 11→ **i:s u:m (0.5) i: (1.1) ↑Each (.)**  
 12→ **thEy bring in like these people to INterview,**  
 13→ **for hIgh level poSITions,**  
 14 SAR: [mhm:]  
 15→DEB: [°hhh] **and (0.2) when they come in to INterview;**  
 16→ **the:y (.) have to INterview with like eight**  
 17→ **PEOpl:e,**  
 18 (0.6)  
 19 SAR: [<<p>okay;>]  
 20→DEB: [**they ] have to do like Eight hours of**

21→           INterviewing. ↑and the(y)  
 22→           these pEople come from All over the COUNtry;  
 23→           so ↑I have to arrA:nge the schedules so that A:ll  
 24→           of the PANel members a:nd the (.) CANDidates,  
 25→           .hhh are free: on the sa:me da:y,  
 26→           and then i have to arrA:nge the schedule with the  
 27→           PANel members,.hhh ↑and thEn i have to li:ke sE:nd  
 28→           documentAtion to the cAndidate and to the PANels.=  
 29→           =so ↑THAT'S what i do most of the time;=  
 30→           =is SCHE:Duli:ng,  
 31⇒SAR:       [O:KAY;]  
 32   DEB:     [°hh    ] but (0.3) but i Also DO::-  
 33            like whatever E:LS:E<<creaky>they need me to do:>.

The detailed information that Debbie provides in response to Sarah's queries, culminating in the answer that she does scheduling, is not relevant in any way to Sarah's future actions nor does it not counter or correct any claim Sarah has made. And yet at line 31, when Debbie's telling has reached a point of possible completion, Sarah receipts it with OKAY.<sup>11</sup> In this extract as well as in (25) and (26), the particle OKAY appears to be functioning much like a sequence-closing OH: it is proposing that the information sought has been provided and the sequence can now be brought to a close (Schegloff 2007:119).

Non-consequential OKAY tokens can also be found in the course of extended tellings which have not been explicitly solicited. In the following extract they are produced by the recipient when the teller reaches intermediary points in his report:

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<sup>11</sup> Note that Sarah uses another OKAY in line 19, which however, occurs at a point when the telling is pragmatically incomplete: in this case OKAY is arguably serving as a continuer.



(28) "Multi-mode lasers" (Call Home 4074, 346.53) [Newer data]  
 ((Alec is working on his thesis and is explaining to Ron what it is about.))

1 ALE: they- bAsically they- (0.4)  
 2 i i'm looking at um m:Ulti-mode LAsers.  
 3 and one of the .hhh thIngs that (.)  
 they find experIMENTally;  
 4 are what they call ANti phased uh (.) STATES;  
 5 whEre (0.9) if you look at the total inTENSity?  
 6 (0.6)  
 7 RON: uh-[HUH,]  
 8 ALE: [of ]the LAser;  
 9 °hhh you gEt (0.5) an oscillAtion which is  
 chAracterized by (.) One FREquency.  
 10 (0.5)  
 11 RON: yEs.  
 12⇒ Okay; h  
 13 (0.3)  
 14 ALE: if you look (.) i- if you sEparate out  
 the different MODES of the laser; °hhh  
 15 RON: [m-HM, ]  
 16 ALE: [and look] at one of THOSE;  
 17 (0.5)  
 18 ALE: you get (0.5) MORE than one frequency.  
 19 (0.8)  
 20⇒RON: [Okay;]  
 21 ALE: [so: ] what's HAPpening is that the mOdes are  
 OScillating Out of PHASE; (.)  
 22 so that they completEly MASK each other's.  
 23 RON: exACTly.  
 24 ALE: oscil[LAtions on these other ↑FREquencies.  
 25 RON: [hm.  
 26 And (0.4) .hhh uh (1.0) you can (0.7)  
 with (0.3) a prEtty SIMple model;  
 27 you can find (0.3) that (0.4) F:REquency;  
 28 °hhh in a TRANsient, (0.2)  
 29 but you cAn't find that frEquency in a drIven (0.2)  
 uh (0.3) FRE quency,  
 30 (0.5)  
 31 you cAn't find so that it will sustAIN,  
 32 (0.5)

33⇒RON: **Okay.**  
 34       yEs.  
 35 ALE: so:: (0.2)  
 36       °hhh yeah thAt that partICular frEQUENCY;  
 37       accOrdIng to most MODels; (0.4)  
 38       dAmps OUT (.) very quIckly.  
 39       and so you shOuldn't actually rEally be able to  
       ever ↑SEE it.  
 40       (0.7)  
 41 RON: [HM. ]  
 42 ALE: [°hhh] the only thing IS that; (0.3)  
 43       when you do the exPERiment=you SEE it.  
 44       (0.6)  
 45 RON: °hh GOT it got it.  
 46       I SEE.

It is instructive to compare the use of OKAY here (lines 12, 20, and 33) with *uh-huh* in line 7 and *m-hm* in line 15. The latter objects occur after *if*-clauses, that is, at points of syntactic incompleteness, and with slightly rising final pitch they serve as standard continuers (Schegloff 1988). The three OKAY tokens, however, occur at points of possible syntactic completion and have final falling pitch; in two cases they co-occur with *yes*. As in (25)-(27), the OKAY tokens in (28) mark points of possible completion, but they are intermediary points within the larger telling.<sup>12</sup>

As with other non-consequential OKAYs, there is no sense in which the information that Ron is imparting to Alec in (28) has implications for Alec's future actions, nor does it counter any contrary opinion or belief Alec has expressed. Yet it is less clear whether OH would be an appropriate

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<sup>12</sup> Guthrie (1997), who examines academic advising sessions, also finds *mmhmm* being used as a continuer at points in an interlocutor's talk that are syntactically, intonationally and/or pragmatically incomplete, while *okay* is used as an acknowledgment token after utterances which are in some sense complete.

substitute: this may be because the telling is pragmatically incomplete at each intermediary point. In this sense the OKAY tokens in (28) play a role that is somewhere in between that of classic continuers such as UH-HUH and M-HM and sequence-closing thirds such as OH.<sup>13</sup>

### ***2.3 Factors contributing to the rise of epistemic OKAY***

To summarize our findings so far: We have identified three distinct uses of OKAY in informing and counter-informing sequences in the newer data: consequential, revised-understanding, and non-consequential. The first two of these are also attested, if much less frequently, in the older data: see Table 3.

*## Insert Table 3 approximately here ##*

Yet in contrast to consequential and revised-understanding uses, which are documented in both sub-collections, the non-consequential use of OKAY is an innovation in the newer data. In the 1960s, recipients of informings, especially question-elicited ones, do not produce OKAY after the information has been provided unless it is in some way consequential for their own actions or corrective of their beliefs or understanding.

There are thus two factors that can be held accountable for the remarkable rise of epistemic OKAY in the newer data: (i) OKAY is used significantly more often after informings that have implications for the

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<sup>13</sup> One anonymous reviewer suggested that there may be a parallel here with the use of *Right* in Australian and British English to mark epistemic dependency between two units of talk within a complex activity such as an extended informing (Gardner 2007).

recipient's agenda and/or lead to a revised understanding of the matter at hand (19 tokens, or 7% of the 277 OKAYs in the older set vs. 101 tokens, or 37% of the 273 OKAYs in the newer set), and (ii) OKAY is now used to respond to informings that are not in any way consequential for the recipient's agenda or beliefs and expectations (39 tokens, or 14% of the 273 OKAYs in the newer set vs. 0 tokens out of 277 OKAYs in the older set).

### **3. Discussion**

In the foregoing section, we explored the rise of epistemic OKAY in the newer data and documented its uses at some length. Two questions now arise in conjunction with these findings.

#### ***3.1 Consequential and corrective informings in the older data***

A first question concerns the large increase in consequential and corrective OKAYs in the newer data. Are there simply more consequential and corrective informings being made in the 1990s and early 2000s, or is OKAY gradually expanding its domain in epistemic sequences? Are consequential and corrective informings also responded to with OH in the older data?

The design of this study does not lend itself to a thorough exploration of this question, but there is some preliminary evidence to suggest that in the older data OH is also used to receipt question-elicited news with consequences for the speaker. Consider, for instance, the following

exchange, which takes place at the beginning of a phone call by Margy to her friend Emma:

(29) “Call out some numbers” (NB 27, 1.497) [Older data]

1→ MAR: =well whAt are you DOing. hh hnh  
 2 (1.3)  
 3 EMM: °hhh (hhoh:) MARGy?=  
 4 MAR: =eeyEah.[a-  
 5→ EMM: [Oh: i'm just sItting here with bill'n  
 GLADys,  
 6→ 'n haa:eh fIXing them a DRINK;=  
 7→ =they're gOing out to DINner:. (. )  
 8⇒ MAR: ^OH::::.  
 9⇒ <<subdued> OH.= >  
 10 EMM: =WHY:  
 11 whAt do you WANT.  
 12 (1.0)  
 13 MAR: hhuhh wEl1?h i wanted to come dOwn and i wanted  
 you to cAll some NUMbers back to me.=  
 14 =but it's no[t im[portant  
 15 EMM: [°hhh[OH:::: hOney i:'ll do it  
 A:Fterwards. uh:::

Emma’s informing that she is having drinks with Bill and Gladys (lines 5-6) is consequential for Margy: she (Margy) helps out with accounting in her husband’s firm and, as she later explains, she has called to enlist Emma’s help with calling back some numbers. In response to Emma’s informing that she has company and thus is otherwise occupied, Margy produces two prosodically modified tokens of OH (lines 9 and 10): the first, with its high rising-falling pitch contour, suggestive of surprise (Reber 2012), the second, with its ‘subdued’ prosody, suggestive of disappointment (Couper-Kuhlen

2009). This affect display is presumably what leads Emma to now ask what Margy had in mind (lines 10-11).

OH is also attested numerous times in the older data as a response to other-corrections and counter-informings. Here are two instances where this happens:

(30) “Ravioli” (Chicken Dinner, 13.14) [Older data]

1 NAN: we had raviOli ↑LAST sunday night?↑  
 2 (.)  
 3 NAN: we sAt in front of the (.) tee VEE?  
 4 (0.8)  
 5 MIC: °hh YAH.  
 6 (0.7)  
 7 SHA: YEH?  
 8 (0.5)  
 9 MIC: we wuh weh we were wa:tch[ing  
 10→VIV: [THAT must [be hard] to ma]ke,  
 11 NAN: [win(g)s of] wa:r.]  
 12 (0.6)  
 13→NAN: raviOli?  
 14 (0.4)  
 15→NAN: ↑NO it's ( ) FROzen. in a B[O:X].  
 16⇒VIV: [OH:.....

In line 15 Nancy corrects Vivian’s assumption that ravioli is hard to make (line 10) by explaining that what she prepared was frozen and in a box, whereupon Vivian responds with a lengthened OH (line 16).

(31) “Personal phone calls” (Chicken Dinner, 19.50) [Older data]

1 SHA: i- ruh- remEmber i called you up the other NIGHT? (.)  
 2 tuesday n-uh la- uh: ↑LAST ↓night. (0.2)  
 3 i called you UP.  
 4 from WORK?

5 'n i was on the phone for a long TI:ME? (0.5)  
6 my bOss says yOu know (1.2) wAtch those: (.)  
pErsonal PHONE cal[ls.  
7 VIV: [uhh!  
8 MIC: oh DID he? yeah,  
9 (0.7)  
10 SHA: shE- one of the- One of my bosses=  
11 =cause she said that (0.4) she said SHE didn't CA:RE.  
12 <<p>y'know.> but see the MO:Nitor;=  
13 =they have a-a: maCHINE in there that  
EVER[y time you call up ]  
14→MIC: [well if she didn't cAre] whY did she SAY.  
15 (0.3)  
16→SHA: **because the BO:SSes care;**  
17→ **and they're MO:Nitored.**  
18 (0.2)  
19⇒MIC: **OH:..**  
20⇒ **OO[H:..**  
21 NAN: [ye-a[h i ( )  
22→SHA: **[they know every d- every t- (.)**  
**ca[ll that's]=**  
23⇒MIC: [ **O H :** ]=  
24 MIC: =[y e a h ] y e a h ] y e[a h  
25 SHA: =[made out]where it's fro]m 'n[where it's c]all[ed.  
26 NAN: [y e\_\_a h . ] [yeah.

In line 14, Michael implies that if one of Shane's bosses claims not to care about his personal phone calls, there is no justification for her telling him to keep them to a minimum. But Shane corrects this assumption by explaining that other bosses care and that his phone calls are monitored by a machine (lines 16-17). Michael receipts and acknowledges Shane's correction with two tokens of OH in lines 19-20 and another, following further reconciliatory information, in line 23.

Based on examples such as these, we can provisionally conclude that in the older data it is primarily OH that is used to receipt consequential

informings and corrections/counter-informings. Since OKAY is only attested occasionally in these environments, it would appear that epistemic OKAY in the newer data is encroaching on territory where OH was used before.

### ***3.2 OH as a news receipt in the newer data***

A second question arising from our findings concerns the role of OH in the newer data. Does the new, non-consequential use of OKAY, which we have argued is interchangeable with OH, mean that OH has been replaced as a news receipt in the newer data? In other words, is the particle OH still found at all after informings and counter-informings in the newer data? If so, under what circumstances?

Here too, because the present study has focused on OKAY and not OH, we cannot answer this question conclusively. However, it is revealing that a number of the epistemic sequences we have encountered with OKAY also feature instances of OH after informings and counter-informings. For example, in extract (21) above, OH occurs in line 11 as a response to the news that Ron is working for a company involving just himself and Guss, and in line 26 it is used again in response to the unsolicited information that Ron has set up this company for himself. Both these OH tokens have a high, ‘pointed’ pitch peak, which has been associated in informing sequences with displays of surprise (Reber 2012).

There are also cases in the newer data where OH is used to receipt an other-correction. For instance:



(32) “Thesis” (Call Friend 4175, 787.238) [Newer data]

1 PAU: hey did you ever finish your THE:si:s?  
 2 (0.4)  
 3 SAM: ↑yEa::h i FINish:ed.  
 4 (0.3)  
 5 SAM: SOR:T o:f;;  
 6 hhh hhh hhh hhh  
 7 PAU: ^SOR:t o:f:,  
 8 SAM: °hhh well yeah i FINish:ed it;  
 9 but i ha:v:en't u::m-  
 10→PAU: wrI:ttten it up for publiCA[:]-  
 11→SAM: [NO]: it's wrIt-  
 12→ yEa:h it's wri- it's wrI:ttten U:P.  
 13→ I: hav:en't [handed in] the Actua:l (0.6)  
 14⇒PAU: [↑^O:H. ]  
 15→SAM: XEro:xes: of it to the::- to the: u::m- (0.4)  
 16→ like public (0.6) PEO:pl:e. (.) you kno:w,  
 17⇒PAU: O::H. [<<p> OH.>  
 18 SAM: [li:ke  
 19 PAU: but you dI:d ha:nd it IN:=  
 20 =the:y the:y si:gned all the ri:ght [PA:pers.]  
 21 SAM: [yEa::h.]  
 22 yEa::h.  
 23 PAU: O:ka:y.<sup>14</sup>  
 24 °hhh so:: th that mea:ns you don't hav:e to  
 PA:Y anymor:e.  
 25 SAM: RI:GHT.  
 26 yEa:h i'm all DON:E.  
 27 (0.3)  
 28 PAU: thAt's good.

When Sam adds *sort of* (line 5) to the report that his thesis is finished, he hints that there is something that he has not yet done, which he begins to

<sup>14</sup> Note this non-consequential use of OKAY to respond to an informing elicited by Paul's requests for confirmation in lines 19-20.

formulate with *but I haven't um* (line 9). Paul now provides a candidate turn completion: *written it up for publica(tion)* (line 10). However, Sam counters with *no it's written up* (lines 11-12) but explains *I haven't handed in the actual xeroxes of it to the public people* (lines 13, 15-16). Paul responds to each of these informings with an affect-laden OH token. His first OH (line 14) is done, in overlap, with an extra high, 'pointed' pitch peak indicative of surprise (Reber 2012). His second OH (line 17), produced in the clear, falls from high to mid and is lengthened, conveying approximately 'NOW I understand' (cf. Koivisto 2015).<sup>15</sup> It is immediately followed by another token of OH produced with soft volume.

These OHs, like the ones in extract (21), are delivered with marked prosody and make affective displays, here of surprise and 'now-understanding', respectively. It is still an open question whether OKAY can be used to display similar types of affect and if so, what kind of prosodic marking would be needed to do so.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, it could be cautiously hypothesized that in the newer data OH may be preferred over OKAY as an epistemic response particle when affective stances such as surprise and now-understanding are to be displayed.

The following extract suggests that empathy may be another affect display preferably accomplished with OH in epistemic sequences:

(33) "Unfortunate" (Farmhouse, 1009.04) [Newer data]

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<sup>15</sup> The contour used here is akin to the one described by Reber as displaying 'slow realization' (2012: 106).

<sup>16</sup> Beach (2020) considers some affect-laden displays brought about by prosodically marked OKAYs, but surprise and now-understanding are not among them.

((Mom and Laura have been telling Michelle and Donna about the surprise birthday party they organized for Dad. The guests arrived as he was out in the field tending to a prolapsed cow.))

1 MOM: so thEy were coming in THIS way;=  
 2 =and thEy were out THERE,  
 3 and so E:Verybody was in the hOuse. 'n  
 4 (0.3)  
 5 LAU: <<f>unFORtu-> I mean it w- (0.2)  
 6 it was cOol that it worked OUT;=  
 7 =but it was unfOrtunate WHY it worked out.=  
 8→MOM: =yeah because **the cOw ended <<aspiration> up DYing.**  
 9 (0.2)  
 10⇒MIC: **O:::[H.**  
 11 LAU: [(bu[t)  
 12 MOM: [(y'know)  
 13 MOM: it was SAD.

The news that the prolapsed cow died is part of the extended telling that Mom and Laura have been delivering to Michelle and Donna but it is one that calls for a special affective response. In Heritage's words this detail creates an empathic moment (2011). Michelle responds not with OKAY but with a breathy, drawn-out, downwards gliding OH, which, in the given context, serves as a display of strong empathy. It is an open question whether the same effect could be achieved with OKAY. It could nevertheless be speculated that a division of labor may be developing in the newer data whereby OH is preferred on occasions when the response to an informing or counter-informing calls for a marked display of affect such as surprise, now-understanding, or empathy, but that OKAY – whether prosodically unmarked or marked – is a choice elsewhere. Clearly, more work is needed in the future to investigate this.

### *3.3 Possibility spaces in informing and counter-informing sequences*

A hypothesis like the one above can only be supported empirically if we examine responsive slots in epistemic sequences more generally. For instance, in the case of an unsolicited informing with the following structure:

#### (34) Unsolicited informing sequence

1      A: Informing or telling  
2→    B: Response

we must ask, what options does B have for responding in second position?

And what affective stances can be relevantly displayed with each one?

Similarly, in the case of a solicited informing or of a counter-informing:

#### (35) Question-elicited informing sequence

1      A: Question seeking information  
2      B: Informing or telling  
3→    A: Response

#### (36) Counter-informing sequence

1      A: Statement or claim  
2      B: Counter-informing  
3→    A: Response

we must ask: What options does A have for responding in third position and what affective stances can be relevantly displayed with which ones? As Stivers (2018) has put it, structural slots such as the arrowed ones in (34)-(36) create ‘possibility spaces’ where speakers choose among options for

responding. Together the set of options form a ‘paradigm’ for responding to informings and counter-informings. In this paper we have examined only one response option in the informing-response paradigm, namely the particle OKAY, although we have contrasted it on occasion with freestanding OH. Needless to say, there are many other options and option types for responses in informing sequences, including the particles *mm-hm*, *uh-huh*, *yeah*, *(al)right*, and combinations thereof as well as phrasal and clausal forms (Thompson et al. 2015 discuss some of these). A future project – large-scale – would be required to explore the differences that each single choice in the informing-response paradigm has for the sequence and what this choice implies sequentially and interactionally for subsequent talk.

#### **4. Conclusion: Interactional Linguistics and language over time**

We began with a comparison of the particle OKAY in two sets of American English conversational data, one from the 1960s and the other, a generation later, from the 1990s and early 2000s. The comparison revealed differences in the use of OKAY – skewed frequencies and new uses – which could be only partially accounted for by the nature of the conversations involved. The most striking difference, the rise of epistemic OKAY, became the focus of this investigation, which aimed to explore how and why OKAY has increased so dramatically in frequency over the last few decades.

A first step involved determining how epistemic sequences, built around informings and extended tellings, were managed in the older data.

Much as Heritage's (1984) study documented, it is primarily OH that is used to receipt such informings there. In our older data set OKAY responses are rare in these environments: only 19 tokens of epistemic OKAY were identified in approximately seven hours of conversation. These OKAY tokens were used in two distinct ways: (i) to acknowledge information that is consequential for the speaker's future project or agenda, and (ii) (often together with OH) to acknowledge information that counters or corrects the speaker's prior claims or expressed beliefs.

These same two uses of epistemic OKAY are documented in the newer data collection as well, although they are significantly more frequent there. Since OH is also found following consequential and corrective information in the older data, it was provisionally concluded that OKAY is expanding its domain over OH in the newer data and is being used more and more as a response to these two types of information.

But also a third, new use of OKAY appears in the newer data, namely non-consequential OKAY, deployed to receipt information that is neither consequential for the speaker nor corrective of their beliefs in any way. Since this use comprises more than a quarter of all epistemic OKAY tokens in the newer data, it can be seen as a major contributor to the rise of epistemic OKAY. Yet OKAY has not fully replaced OH as a news receipt in the newer data. Instead, instances of OH are still found when an affect-laden response displaying surprise, now-understanding, or empathy is called for. A division of labor between OKAY and OH may be establishing itself in the newer data for the receipt of non-consequential information.

In conclusion, by revealing changes in the use of epistemic OKAY over the course of forty years, this study has shown that changes in the conversational use of language are ongoing and that we can investigate them with the tools of Interactional Linguistics. The procedure involves comparing and contrasting possibility spaces created by the structural slots of specific types of conversational sequences in two or more data sets from different periods in time. As we have shown, both the options in such possibility spaces and their relative frequencies can undergo change over time, allowing us to view language use longitudinally.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For general longitudinal studies of social interaction, see Pekarek Doehler, Wagner, and González-Martínez, Eds. (2018).

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**Table 1. Frequency of the particle OKAY in the sub-collections**

<i>Sub-collections</i>	<i>Sum of recording durations</i>	<i>Number of OKAY tokens</i>
Older data	25,308 sec. = 421.8 min.	277
Newer data	25,339 sec. = 422.3 min.	273

**Table 2.** *Recurrent uses of the particle OKAY in the older and newer data (with frequencies)*

	Deontic	Transitional	Pre-closing	Epistemic	Tag	Continuer	Other	Total
Older data	122 (44%)	59 (21%)	59 (21%)	19 (7 %)	12 (4%)	-	6 (2%)	277
Newer data	67 (25%)	32 (12%)	-	140 (51%)	8 (3%)	11 (4%)	15 (5%)	273

**Table 3.** Types of epistemic OKAY in the two data sets

	Consequential	Revised understanding	Non-consequential	Total epistemic OKAYs
Older data	10 (53%)	9 (47%)	-	19
Newer data	69 (49%)	32 (23%)	39 (28%)	140