Marking a ‘noticing of departure’ in talk: 
Eh-prefaced turns in Japanese conversation

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Abstract

Using the methodology of conversation analysis, this study explores the meaning of “eh”, a nonlexical response token in Japanese, by examining its deployment in a range of sequential and activity contexts. Evidence from participants’ orientation displayed in these diverse contexts indicates that “eh” is used by its producer to propose a noticing of something in the talk that departs from his/her pre-existing knowledge, supposition, expectation, or orientation. The specific sense of this generic noticing of departure proposal by “eh” is particularized by reference to a number of contextual aspects of its deployment, including the types of sequences in which it occurs, its placement within such sequences, the types of turn-constructional formats in which it is employed, and its prosodic features. To demonstrate this, the study examines three types of turns prefaced with “eh” produced in three different sequential environments: (i) “eh”-prefaced questions after informings; (ii) “eh”-prefaced responses to assessments; and (iii) “eh”-prefaced responses to inquiry. Analysis of the situated workings of “eh” in these contexts shows that the contextually based variability of the specific sense of the generic meaning of “eh” allows for the accomplishment of a diverse range of social actions in ways attuned to the contingencies of interactional contexts.

Keywords: Response cries; Turn-initial position; Departure; Conversation analysis; Japanese

1. Introduction

In every language, we find a repertoire of lexical and nonlexical tokens used to display speakers’ response to some prior talk or event in the physical environment. The workings of these ‘response tokens’ in talk-in-interaction have been the focus of much research in conversation analysis (CA) over the last 25 years or so (see Sorjonen, 2001 and Gardner, 2001 for useful reviews of this literature). In contrast to earlier studies that tended to treat a wide variety of response forms as an undifferentiated class of ‘backchannels’ (e.g., Yngve, 1970; Duncun and Fiske, 1977), CA research on response tokens has explicated a diverse and complex range of meaning conveyed by response tokens with regard to how their producers align themselves with co-participants’ talk or events in the world around them. This work has shown that the significance of response tokens in any instance of use is contingent on their position and composition (cf. Schegloff, 2007)—i.e., where they are placed in a sequence of talk, whether they are the only talk in their turn or accompanied by other turn components, and how they are realized prosodically (e.g. Heritage, 1984b; Schegloff, 1984).

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The purpose of this article is to explore the meaning of \textit{eh}, a nonlexical response token in Japanese, by examining its deployment in a range of sequential and activity contexts. Evidence from participants’ orientation displayed in these diverse contexts indicates that \textit{eh} is used by its producer to propose a noticing of something in the talk or in the interaction’s environment that \textit{departs from} his/her pre-existing knowledge, supposition, expectation, or orientation. The token, in other words, serves as a means to register a noticeable departure of the matter being addressed from what might otherwise be supposed, expected, or oriented to. The question explored in this study, then, is what interactional tasks participants accomplish by making such a noticing of departure proposal in various sequential environments.

An initial sense of how \textit{eh} is used to register a noticing of some kind of departure is available in the following fragment. In (1), C is describing a Coca-Cola commercial that the others have not seen, in which a beautiful woman gulps down a bottle of coke and then burps loudly.

\begin{enumerate}
\item C: ikkinomi shite:, .hh [ de:] hh (.)
\hug do:and and
She chugs it, .hh and:, hh (.)
\hug [ ]
\item ?:
\hug ["un:*"]
\hug "Mmm"
\item C: de GEE:: tte ya(h)tt(h)e [heh heh heh heh heh heh= and MIM QT do:and
And she goes 'geehh' \textit{(burping sound)}
\item B: \hug [ahuh [huh huh huh huh huh
\item A: \hug [ahah hah hah hah
\item C: =[heh heh ( )]
\item \rightarrow D: =[\textit{eh}: ma:ji de:;?] serious PT
\textit{Eh: are you serious?}
\end{enumerate}

In response to C’s informing of a commercial with unusual content, D produces a turn consisting of \textit{eh} followed by \textit{ma:ji de:;? ‘Are you serious?’} (line 7), a common expression for a ritualized display of disbelief. \textit{Eh} is thus used in an environment in which its producer expresses his/her ‘surprise’, i.e., a reaction arising from a noticing of something that departs from expectation. As discussed below, registering the unexpectedness of information conveyed by a prior turn is one of the most common tasks that \textit{eh} is used to accomplish.

\textit{Eh} is thus a type of what Goffman (1981) has analyzed as ‘response cries’, i.e., bits of speech that are understood by social members as “a natural overflowing” of one’s “presumed inward state” (p. 89). While these cries may be regarded as inadvertent manifestations of fundamentally private, psychological phenomena occurring in an individual’s mind, a number of studies have shown that their deployments are in fact thoroughly interactional events, oriented to by parties to talk as resources for interactional management in various social situations (Heritage, 1984b, 1998, 2002, 2005; Goodwin, 1996; Goodwin and Goodwin, 2000; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006; Bolden, 2006; Mori, 2006; Betz and Golato, 2008).1 Response cries are “interactional (rather than mental) objects employed to communicate the speaker’s public orientation to the particular issue—an orientation that may or may not correspond to whatever psychological reality the markers are designed to index” (Bolden, 2006:664). The present study pursues this interactional approach to response cries. The central claim developed in this article is that the act of proposing or registering a noticing of departure through the deployment of \textit{eh} is an interactional event rather than a mere

\footnote{To be fair, I should note that Goffman’s (1981) definition of response cries, i.e., “signs meant to be taken to index directly the state of the transmitter” (p. 116) implies that response cries are conventionalized signs that their producers deploy (a la Grice’s ‘meaningNN’) rather than mere externalizations of physiological or psychological phenomena. He also calls response cries “creatures of social situations” (p. 121) and alludes to various possibilities of how response cries might be used for social/communicative purposes. He does not present analysis of any actual instances of their social/communicative use, however.}
a manifestation of some psychological state in the speaker’s mind. The aim of this study, then, is to explicate how *eh* is used by its producers as an interactional resource for implementing a variety of social actions in ways attuned to the contingencies of sequential contexts in which they are employed.

Some previous accounts of *eh* are found in the Japanese linguistics literature (e.g., Moriyama, 1989; Takubo and Kinsui, 1997; Togashi, 2004). With a few exceptions (e.g., Ohama, 2001), however, these accounts are based on researchers’ intuitions about constructed examples and do not pay sufficient attention to how *eh* is used as a resource for executing divergent social actions in a range of different contexts. There is a small, but growing number of conversation analytic studies on *eh* (Shimotani, 2007, 2008, forthcoming; Tanaka, forthcoming), which have begun to uncover the complex workings of *eh* in social interaction. The present study builds on, and contributes to, this latter body of work.

After a brief overview of data and method (section 2), this article is organized into four main sections. As a first analytic step, section 3 presents evidence for the claim that *eh* makes a generic noticing of departure proposal. For this, analysis is focused on the uses of *eh* as a stand-alone token (i.e., cases in which *eh* is produced as the only component in the turn) in order to assess how the production of *eh* alone is oriented to by both its producer and recipient. Participants’ orientation reveals that three types of departure are regularly indexed by the stand-alone *eh*: non-hearing, non-understanding and expectancy departure. Based on the understanding of *eh* as a noticing of departure marker, the next three sections examine turns prefaced with *eh* (i.e., cases in which *eh* is immediately followed by additional turn components produced by the same speaker). Three types of *eh*-prefaced turns produced in three different sequential environments are discussed: *eh*-prefaced questions after informings (section 4), *eh*-prefaced responses to assessments (section 5), and *eh*-prefaced responses to inquiry (section 6). In each section, it will be shown how *eh*-prefacing is used to index some kind of departure, disjunction or discrepancy in the relationship between the prior talk and what the current speaker is about to say. Section 7 summarizes the findings and discusses their implications for future research.

2. Data and method

The method used in this study is conversation analysis, an empirical methodology for closely examining the detailed and patterned organization of talk (and other conduct) in interaction in natural settings (Heritage, 1984a). The data for this study come from 20 hours of video-recorded face-to-face conversations and 1 hour of audio-recorded telephone conversations among native speakers of Japanese from a variety of different dialectal areas. In this data set, I identified a total of 393 instances of turns containing *eh* either as a stand-alone token (*n* = 103; 26%) or as a preface to additional components (*n* = 290; 74%). For the latter, I only included those turns in which *eh* is immediately followed by an ensuing turn component without a pause in between. In other words, in those *eh*-prefaced turns, *eh* and the subsequent turn component are through-produced as one turn-constructional unit (TCU). (They are thus better termed *eh*-prefaced TCU’s than *eh*-prefaced turns.) When there is a pause between *eh* and a subsequent component produced by the same speaker within the same turn, I regard the initial *eh* as a separate TCU from the following component rather than a preface to it (cf. fragment (5)).

3. Evidence for *eh* as a noticing of departure marker

This first analytic section provides evidence for the claim that *eh* is used by participants to propose a noticing of ‘departure’ of some kind in the prior talk or events in the physical environment. To this end, I examine uses of *eh* as a

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2 See Schegloff (2007:87) for a discussion of an ‘interactional noticing’ that needs to be distinguished from a ‘perceptual/cognitive noticing’. He notes:

The initial common understanding might be that an interactional noticing can only follow a perceptual/cognitive one, but of course, one can say, “Isn’t that a new X?” when one “knows” it is not; an interactional noticing need not be engendered by a perceptual/cognitive one. And many (perhaps most) perceptual/cognitive noticings do not get articulated interactionally at all. (emphasis added)

Along these lines, the present study argues that the type of noticing proposed by the deployment of *eh* is an interactional noticing that does not necessarily match the perceptual/cognitive state of its producer.

3 This distribution between stand-alone *ehs* and *eh*-prefaced turns is consistent with previous studies’ observation that *eh* is more likely to be used as a preface to an additional turn component than as a stand-alone token (Ohama, 2001; Shimotani, 2007, 2008; Tanaka, forthcoming).

4 In this article, I only discuss *ehs* responsive to preceding talk, and not those responsive to events in the physical environment, because only a very small number of instances of the latter are found in the current data. An example of *eh* responsive to an event in the physical environment is provided below. In this example, H is flipping through pages of a photo album put together by S, and H’s *eh*-refaced turn in line 5 is prompted by her observation of the photo album.
stand-alone token in order to investigate how the production of *eh* alone is oriented to by both its producer and recipient. Analysis shows that the stand-alone *eh* is regularly treated as indexing three types of departure that may or may not call for the need of repair—i.e., non-hearing, non-understanding, and expectancy departure.

3.1. *Eh* as indexing an encounter with problems of hearing/understanding

Let us focus first on *eh*s deployed to deal with problems of hearing and understanding. On a most general level, it can be argued that conversation is designed for achieving and maintaining intersubjectivity (Heritage, 1984a; Schegloff, 1992). That is, achieving and maintaining mutual intelligibility is an unmarked state of affairs provided for by the “procedural infrastructure of interaction” (Schegloff, 1992). Against this background, then, failure to achieve understanding, whether due to a problem in auditory reception of another’s talk or due to a problem in comprehension, is a marked occurrence; it is a deviation or departure from the normal state of affairs that needs to be dealt with by mobilizing a set of procedures specifically designed to address it, i.e., repair. It is in this sense that *eh*s deployed to deal with problems of hearing and understanding are regarded as registering their producers’ noticing of ‘departure’. Since the stand-alone *eh* does not specify what in the preceding turn is the source of the trouble it indexes, it serves as an ‘open-class’ repair initiator (Drew, 1997; Tanaka, forthcoming).

Fragments (2) and (3) present cases in which the stand-alone *eh* is treated as indexing problems of hearing and understanding, respectively. Compare how the recipient of *eh* responds to the preceding open-class repair initiator.

(2) [KMI:13:06-15]

((K, in her late 20’s, discusses how she and her friend Nakata are the last ones among their friends to get married, and claims that they form a ‘last line of defense’.)

1 K: nakata san to atashi wa (. ) saigo no toride ne tte shikk(ar(h)i::
Nakata TL and I TP last LK fort FP QT firmly
Saying Ms. Nakata and I (. ) are the last line of defense, we
f(h)irml(y):: ...

well such thing saying:if be.betrayed FP
Well gh- if you’re saying such a thing, you’ll be betrayed.
[ [ ] ]

3 K: [hehh! .hhhhhhhhhh [(kessoku o)]
unite O
hehh! .hhhhhhhhhh ((we firmly)) unite...

4 → K: *eh*?

5 (0.3)

(i) [RKK:08:58-09:04]

1 A: a:: mada minna kutteru n?
oh still everyone eating FP
Oh:: are you guys still eating {{your cake}}?

2 (.)

3 A: .hhh watashi mo tabeyoo.
I also eat:will .hhh I’ll eat {{mine}}, too.

4 (2.3)

5 → H: *eh kore de ippon bun? ((To S))
this PT 1.role amount
*Eh* is this one roll’s worth of photos?

6 (1.5)

7 S: u:::::::ijn.
Yeah:::::

Though there is no space to demonstrate this, the account presented in this section based on *eh*s responsive to preceding talk is applicable to those *eh*s that are responsive to events in the physical environment. *Eh* is also commonly observed in reported speech, but such usage is set aside for future study.
In (2), the turn immediately prior to the stand-alone *eh* is produced in overlap (line 2), which may provide a basis for the interpretation (for the participants as well as for the analyst) that the talk produced in that turn may not be adequately heard. Following the stand-alone *eh* in line 4, then, H repeats the turn prior to *eh*, thereby displaying his understanding that *eh* registers K’s encounter with trouble in auditory reception of the preceding turn. This understanding is confirmed (albeit implicitly) by K in the subsequent turn (line 7) when she responds to H’s repeated utterance in a way that shows that her prior trouble has been resolved.
In (3), rather than repeating the turn prior to the stand-alone *eh*, S in line 8 ‘unpacks’ and clarifies a potentially problematic item in his prior turn in line 5, i.e., *DOCCHI MO*: ‘for both’, and thereby displays his understanding that *eh* indexes T’s encounter with trouble understanding S’ prior turn. In line 9, T accepts S’s clarification as sufficient for a solution to the trouble he indexed with the *eh* in line 7, thereby indicating that S’s treatment of *eh* as a display of understanding trouble was correct.5

Given that *eh* (or any other open-class repair initiator, for that matter) does not itself specify the exact type of trouble it indexes, its recipient sometimes orients to possibilities of both hearing and understanding problems. This is shown by the following fragment.

(4) [OBS:02:19-30]

((The participants are sharing a piece of cake, appreciating the taste and flavor of different ingredients in it.))

1 C: kore koko [ga atashi shirita]i no. [kore] nani?
   this here SP I want.to.know Q this what
   I want to know this one here. What is this?
   [ ]
   2 D: ['sappari shiteru'] ['un']
      refreshing
      'Tastes refreshing' 'Mhm'
  3
   (0.3)

4 B: .hh kore dooyuu [namae ga tsuiteru to omou]:i? kore dattara.
     this what.kind name SP have QT think this CP:if
     .hh What kind of name do you think is given to this? If it’s this
     one.
     [ ]
  5 C: [{'
  6
  7 A: Eh?

8 B: kono keeki dattara. nan te yuu [namae ga ]
    this cake CP:if what QT say name SP
    If it’s this cake. What name is...
    [ ]
  9 D: [nan daroo.]
     what CP
     I wonder what it would be.
  10
  11 B: nan te yuu namae o tsukeru?=
     what QT say name O give
     What name would you give it?
  12 C: ="na:n daroo na:[::"]
     what CP FP
     ="What would it be:::" [ ]
  13 A: [kara]huru::
      colorful
      Colorful::

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5 It may be worth noting here that the stand-alone *eh* is produced after a rather long silence (line 6). At least in the data available to me, when open-class repair initiators (*eh* or otherwise) are produced after a considerable gap of silence following the trouble-source turn, they are always treated as indexing problems of understanding rather than those of hearing. (The reverse is not the case, as *ehs* produced immediately after the trouble-source turn may be treated as registering either type of trouble.) This is consistent with Robinson’s (2006) finding based on his English data that open-class repair initiators produced after a gap of more than 0.4 s are regularly treated as communicating something more than a simple hearing problem, such as a struggle to process and comprehend the prior turn.
Following a rather abrupt initiation by B in line 4 of a new activity within the ongoing cake-tasting session, one of the recipients, A, produces a stand-alone *eh* (line 7). In response to this, B first orients to it as indexing a problem of understanding, as evidenced by her unpacking of the demonstrative pronoun *kore* in the first unit of her talk in line 8 (i.e., from *kore dattara* ‘if it’s this one’ in line 4 to *kono keeki dattara* ‘if it’s this cake’ in line 8). Then, in the second (incomplete) unit in her turn, B shows an orientation to a possible hearing problem (perhaps due to the overlap between B’s and C’s talk in lines 4–5) by virtually repeating a key phrase in the inquiry she produced in the trouble-source turn (I say ‘virtually’ because there is a slight change in the wording, i.e., from *dooyuu namae ga* ‘what kind of name is’ in line 4 to *nan te yuu namae ga* ‘what name is’ in line 8). Thus, the recipient of the stand-alone *eh* in this fragment shows orientation to possibilities of both hearing and understanding problems indexed by the token. 6

Though space does not allow me to present additional examples, the fragments examined so far should be taken as representatives of many other cases found in the current data set in which the stand-alone *eh* is treated by its recipient as indexing an encounter with problems of hearing and understanding. Let us turn now to another type of departure routinely indicated by the deployment of the stand-alone *eh*: expectancy departure.

### 3.2. Eh as indicating a noticing of expectancy departure

Quite frequently, the stand-alone *eh* is used by its producers to propose a noticing of something that departs or deviates from their expectation. In fact, nearly 80% of all the stand-alone *ehs* observed in the current data set (*n* = 103) are used to mark some kind of unexpectedness. The following fragment presents examples. A relevant piece of background information is that, generally speaking, elementary schools and junior high schools in Japan are located within walking distance from students’ homes. Therefore, it is comparatively rare for the students to use public transportation (e.g., bus, train, etc.) to go to school.

(5) [DEM6:14:23-32]

((A is describing how children go to school in his hometown located in a rural area.))

1 A: chuugaku wa (.) basu toka imasu yo yappari.  
   junior.high TP bus etc. exist FP as.expected 
   There are some junior high school students who go to school by bus, 
   you know.

6 In some cases, the equivocality of the nature of trouble indexed by *eh* is offset by an additional turn component produced immediately following *eh* that serves to specify what type of trouble the *eh*-producer has encountered. See:

(ii) [KMI:03:21-5]

1 K: "ya ne" jooshi to oriai ga warukutte ne::[:::]
   well FP boss with not.get.along FP
   Well I don’t get along with my boss:::,
   [ ]

2 ⇒: [eh!] dar- dare to-
   wh- who with
   eh! with who- whom-

3 ⇒ na|ni to-)
   what with
   [ ]

4 K: [jooshi] to.
   boss with
   With my boss.

(iii) [KG:06:50-4]

1 Y: are wa muccha omorokatta kedo ng:::
   that TP terribly was.fun but FP
   That was an awful lot of fun.

2 (1.5)

3 ⇒: [eh suki ga?]
   skii SP
   eh skiing was?

4 Y: UN.
   YEAN.
After A’s announcement in line 1 that some junior high school students in his hometown go to school by bus, two recipients (from other parts of the country) respond as follows: K in line 2 provides a virtual repeat of the gist of A’s announcement, thereby registering some kind of noticeability (perhaps unusualness) of the information conveyed by A’s talk (cf. Jefferson, 1972). N then produces an elongated form of *eh* addressed to A in line 3. Note here that, after a micro pause, N goes on to mention her experience when she was a junior high school student (line 4), i.e., that she and her fellow students were not even allowed to use bicycles to go to school, let alone buses. This serves to provide an account for why A’s announcement is regarded by N as counter to expectation. The move by the *eh*-producer to provide an account contrasts with cases like those discussed in footnote 6, in which the *eh*-producer goes on to produce a further turn component that pursues a solution for a problem of hearing or understanding. Thus, N’s orientation displayed in her account in line 4 provides evidence that the deployment of *eh*: in line 3 was prompted by expectancy departure, rather than by a problem with auditory reception of A’s talk or with the comprehension of its content.8

In overlap with N’s talk in line 4, A starts to produce further talk (lines 5–6), which constitutes a counter to the stance displayed by K and N. That is, while K and N display (or at least suggest) a stance that it is contrary to their expectation that junior high school students go to their schools by bus (i.e., that their schools are not located within walking distance), A states that he was already using a bus to go to school when he was in elementary school, thereby implying that what is mentioned in line 1 is nothing out of the ordinary for him. In response to this, K produces a stand-alone *eh* (line 8), elongated like the one that N produced in line 3, but with a more pronounced rising pitch movement. This token is met with two different kinds of response: while A in line 9 orients to retrieving an element in his prior talk that was produced in overlap (*shoogakkoo* ‘elementary school’), S, a third party, offers an account for why the situation in A’s hometown diverges from what the other participants would expect to be normal (line 10). This account shows S’s orientation to K’s *eh*: as indexing expectancy departure. Thus, we have at least partial evidence that the stand-alone *eh* is used to mark (lines 3–4) and is treated as marking (line 10) the unexpectedness of the prior informing.

In this fragment, then, we have seen that the deployment of *eh* as an index of expectancy departure exposes differences in assumption among the participants about what the ‘normal’ state of affairs is regarding the issues being addressed, and that the different stances toward the matter under discussion displayed by the participants manifest a certain level of interpersonal disalignment. The act of registering expectancy departure, however, does not always embody an interactionally disaffiliative move. In fact, it is quite common that an expression of expectancy departure is

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7 Here, *busu* ‘bus’ refers to public transportation, not school buses. It is not common in Japan for schools to provide school bus service, since, as mentioned above, students in elementary school and junior high school usually go to a school within walking distance.

8 It is also common for *eh*-producers to show their orientation to expectancy departure by producing lexicalized expressions of surprise after *eh*, such as *uso* ‘you’re kidding’, *maji de* ‘are you serious’ (cf. fragment (1)), etc.
used as a means to align with the previous speaker who designs his/her talk specifically to elicit such a response from the recipient. The following fragment provides a case in point. Fragment (6) is taken from a longer stretch of telling sequence in which each of the three participants tells the others what kinds of goods they have received for hikidemono (thank-you-for-coming gifts given to guests at a wedding by the families of the bride and groom) at various friends’ weddings.

(6) [KG:15:26-36]

1  K: nanka atashi mo MAE NA::
like I also before FP
Me, too, like, one time,

2  >dare [n toki] ya< nanka akko chan toki ka::<
who  LK time CP like Akko TL time Q
>Whose wedding was it< I guess it was Akko’s,
[ ]

3  C: [][u: :n. ]
Mmhm

4  C: u:n.=
Mmhm=

5  K: =ni: >nanka< (0.5) obon?:
at like tray
(I got) like (0.5) a tray?

6  A: u[:n.]
Mmhm

7  C: [u:::][:n. ]
Mmhm

8  K: [konna] KIN no: obon
like this gold LK tray
A GOLD tray like this

9  C: EH:::

10 A: =[KIN:?]
gold
GOLD?

gold powder like
Like, ((decorated with)) gold powder?

12 "datte sonnan asoko MEccha [](datte::: )
because EMP there terribly because
"Cause, I mean, they are so:::

13 C: [kane kake]ru mon na:::
money spend N FP
extravagant, aren’t they.

Within a round of telling about noteworthy and mentionable gifts that the participants have received at various people’s weddings, K mentions one such gift and formulates it as obon ‘tray’ in line 5. This formulation, however, is only met with acknowledgment tokens from the recipients (lines 6–7), which do not treat K’s announcement as particularly noteworthy. K then reformulates and upgrades the description of the gift by adding KIN no: ‘GOLD’ produced with heightened prosodic prominence, thereby (re-)presenting the object as worthy of attention (line 8). It is in this context that one of the recipients, C, revises her previous response and produces an elongated form of eh as an index of expectancy departure (line 9), thereby aligning with and endorsing the prior speaker’s stance that the gift being described is something unusual or counter to expectation. This aligning work is extended further into the subsequent course of interaction, as evidenced by C’s collaborative completion of K’s account of why she received
such an expensive gift (lines 12–3). As shown by this instance, marking unexpectedness or ‘surprise’ is an interactionally organized activity: one presents something surprising and the other aligns with it by producing a surprised reaction. Thus, a performance of surprise/disbelief in interaction is not simply an externalization of inner mental state, but is a collaborative achievement that co-participants work to bring off together (see also Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006; Robinson and Kevoe-Feldman, 2007; Tanaka, forthcoming).

As readers may have already noticed, the prosodic make-up of ehs in the fragments examined in this subsection is rather different from that of the ehs discussed in the previous subsection in that the former is much more elongated than the latter. The next subsection discusses correlations between prosody and action observed in the deployment of the stand-alone eh.

3.3. Notes on prosody

As is the case with other nonlexical tokens such as oh in English (Local, 1996) and hee in Japanese (Mori, 2006), there is a wide range of variation in the prosodic manifestation of eh.

First, there is a considerable variation in the length with which the token is produced. Roughly speaking, these variants may be grouped into two types: the short form (eh produced in ‘one beat’, i.e., 0.1–0.2 s) and the elongated form (eh::: produced with varying degrees of elongation—up to 1.3 s in the current data). The majority of the tokens observed in the present data set, both stand-alone tokens and one used as a preface to additional components included, are in the short form (n = 275; 70%).

Second, there is also a great deal of variation in the pitch contour with which the token is produced. The short form may be produced in a flat contour (often ending with a glottal stop, as in eh-) or in a rising contour (as in eh?). The elongated form may be produced in a flat contour, typically in a high pitch (eh::), or it may be produced in a rising contour, ranging from a slight rise (eh:::) to a dynamic rise (eh: ::?). The following figures show four different types of prosodic realizations of eh: the short form in a flat contour (from a fragment not shown above; Fig. 1), the short form with a sharp rise (from line 4 of fragment (2); Fig. 2), the elongated form in a slightly rising contour (from line 3 of fragment (5); Fig. 3), and the elongated form with a dynamic rise (from line 8 of fragment (5); Fig. 4).

It is important to note that, as interactional studies on prosody have shown (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 1996; Couper-Kuhlen and Ford, 2004; and articles therein), prosody does not operate independently of the lexical, grammatical, and sequential contexts in which it occurs. Therefore, it is highly unlikely to find a simple one-to-one correspondence between prosodic forms and the meanings they convey or the actions they accomplish across different types of interactional environments. However, the current data suggest that there is at least a certain degree of correspondence between the prosodic form of eh and the type of action accomplished by it. That is, at least in the current data, the use of the elongated form is always associated with marking expectancy departure. In other words, no

9 No instance of eh produced in a falling contour is observed in the current data. This may be because, if eh were produced in a falling contour, it would be indistinguishable from a form of affirmative response, ee ‘yes’.
instance of elongated *eh* is treated by participants as indexing problems of hearing or understanding. The reverse does not hold, as the short form is used in all the three action environments. Given that elongation is a type of prosodic emphasis and that the elongated form is typically produced with a marked pitch contour (either a high flat contour or a rising contour), what we see here is a strong association between prosodic emphasis both in terms of length and pitch.
and the eh-producer’s stance of having noticed something counter to expectation (and perhaps registering disbelief/surprise at it). This is consistent with what Mori (2006) has found about the prosody of the nonlexical token hee in Japanese: “The more surprising or significant a piece of news is, the more likely it seems for the recipients to extend and raise the pitch of hee” (p. 1191). Mori in fact speculates that this finding about the correspondence between prosodic emphasis and the particular stance indexed by hee would extend to other nonlexical tokens like huun. The present study lends empirical support to her speculation by providing similar observations with regard to eh. Further research on other nonlexical tokens in Japanese (aa, huun, hoo, haa, and the like) may corroborate this finding. If that turns out to be the case, we may be able to say that, at least for nonlexical response tokens in Japanese, the combination of lengthening and high flat or rising pitch contour is a rather generic, cross-situational resource to index a particular (i.e., surprised) stance toward prior talk or events in the physical environment to which they are used to respond.11,12

In this section, I have shown that the deployment of the stand-alone eh is oriented to by both its producer and recipients as indexing its producer’s encounter with something that departs from what would be regarded as ‘normal’—whether it be a departure from the generic assumption that, in order to have a conversation at all, one has to be able to hear and comprehend what another says, or whether it be a departure from one’s personal supposition, awareness, or expectation. Based on this understanding of eh as a noticing of departure marker, the next three sections examine turns (or turn-constructional units) prefaced with eh and explore the range of interactional tasks achieved by the practice of eh-prefacing across different sequential environments. The next section examines deployments of eh-prefaced questions in the context of informings.

4. Eh-prefaced questions in the context of informings

While turns prefaced with eh occur in a wide variety of sequential/activity contexts, by far the most common environment for their occurrence is after ‘informings’: 216 (75%) out of a total of 290 eh-prefaced turns observed in the current data are produced in response to informings. And of these 216 eh-prefaced turns, a great majority (167 cases; 77%) contain ‘questions’ as the additional component prefaced by the turn-initial eh. Thus, eh-prefaced questions in response to informings represent the most common configuration of “position and composition” (Schegloff, 2007) for eh-prefaced turns identified in the present data.

In this common occurrence of eh-prefaced questions in the context of informings, it is recurrently observed that a speaker uses this turn format to implement some kind of ‘follow-up question’ targeted at some aspect of the prior informing. What is notable about these eh-prefaced follow-up questions is that they are launched in a sequentially displaced manner, i.e., with some ‘distance’ between the question and the bits of prior talk that the question targets. I am going to argue, then, that eh-prefacing is used as a way to deal with such a displaced/delayed deployment of a follow-up question by presenting the stance that the questioner has ‘just now realized’ a lack of understanding or resolution in his/her mind about some aspect of the prior informing, which has then prompted the questioner to deploy a follow-up question in a sequentially displaced manner.

As numerous CA studies have shown (e.g., Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff et al., 1977), a fundamental principle for relating utterances in conversation is adjacent positioning: “adjacent utterances are, wherever possible, to be heard as related” (Heritage, 1984a:261). Conversation operates under the general assumption—held both by speakers and recipients—that utterances placed immediately next to some prior are to be understood as produced in response to that prior. This general assumption entails that, if one wants to produce an utterance that addresses a particular utterance by another speaker, the most natural place to do so is the position immediately after that other speaker’s utterance. Thus, if a question designed to address some aspect of a prior informing is not placed in the position immediately after the utterance that contains its target, it is understood to be

10 Selting (1996) also reports that, when comparing the prosody of ‘normal’ initiations of repair (i.e., those addressed to problems of hearing or understanding) and ‘astonished’ initiations of repair (i.e., those addressed to problems of expectation), the ‘astonished’ ones are prosodically marked—they are longer in duration, rise higher in fundamental frequency, and are realized with greater perceived loudness.

11 By a ‘generic, cross-situational resource’, I mean that the same type of prosodic configuration can be used flexibly across many different contexts to register a ‘surprised’ reaction. Of course, the specific sense of the reaction that the tokens perform on any given occasion depends on its local interactional context.

12 That the combination of lengthening and high flat or rising pitch is not a cross-linguistic universal for indicating a ‘surprised’ reaction is shown by the fact that oh in English is produced in a wide-range rising-fall pitch to perform a surprised receipt (Local, 1996:202–206) rather than a high flat or simple rising pitch.
sequentially displaced from the most natural position for that question. It is in this sense that the *eh*-prefaced follow-up questions observed in the current data are deployed in a sequentially displaced manner.

Let us consider an example. The following fragment is taken from a longer stretch of K’s telling in which she tells H about her job situation. Prior to this segment, K told H that she does not get along with her boss at the company that she works for, and that she is quite unhappy about the situation.

(7) [KMI:04:02-30]

1 H: sono kaisha de wa sono hito no shita de shi- (0.3) shika i- that company in TP that person LK under PT onl- only
   Is it the case that working under that person is the only

2 (0.5) i- irenai n desu ka?
   can’t.be N CP Q
   option for you in that company?

3 K: dakara::: haizzoku::: ga:: kawarimashite ne:::.
   so assignment SP changed FP
   Y’see, my assignment ((in the company)) has changed.

4 H: ha:::=
   Uhuh.=

5 K: =ano::: gijutsubu datta n- kikaku kaihatsu tte yuu uhm technology.department was N planning development QT say =Uh::: I was in the Tech Department- I was transferred to a place

   toki ni utsutta n desu yo.=
   place to transfer N CP FP
called the Planning and Development Department.-

7 H: =haa haa.
   =Mhm mhm.

8 (.)

9 K: de soko wa::: atarashi busho de::,
   and there TP new department CP
   And it’s a new department, and;,

10 H: hai.=
   Mhm.=

11 K: =ataashi to sono hito dake shika orehen ne y(h)an k(h)a:=
   I and that person only only not.exist FP TAG Q
   =There’s only me and that person.=

12 H: =a(HH)aa ha:(h):(h):(h):
   =a(HH)aa ha:(h):(h):(h):

13 (.)

14 K: .hhhh de maa:: (0.3) ma sugu idoo tte koto wa mazu and well well soon transfer QT thing TP certainly
   .hhhh and uh::: (0.3) well there’s almost certainly no chance of

15 nai kara::,
   NEG because
   getting transferred again soon, so;,

16 H: naruhodo.
   I see.

17 K: nn shibaraku wa:: taenaakan na:::
   for.a while TP have.to.endure FP
   nn I’ll have to be patient for a while.-
In response to K’s telling about her dissatisfaction with her boss, H asks her whether there is no possibility for her to work under someone else in the company (lines 1–2). By way of answering this question, K produces a multi-TCU account (lines 3, 5–6, 9, 11, 14–5, 17) that serves to inform H of why working under someone else is not an option for her at least for a while. It is after this question-elicited informing that H launches an *eh*-prefaced follow-up question (line 18). Note that this question does not directly address the information provided in the immediately preceding part of K’s account (line 17, or the combination of lines 14–5 and 17). Rather, the most direct target of H’s question is what K mentions in line 3 (and perhaps lines 5–6 as well), as the question follows up on the telling of her transfer to a new position and seeks elaboration on it by asking when the transfer took place. Thus, we see here an *eh*-prefaced follow-up question launched in a position at some remove from its most direct source or target. \(^{13}\) How are we to understand the work achieved by the *eh*-prefacing used in this sequentially displaced deployment of the question?

A key to understanding what *eh*-prefacing is used to accomplish here is to appreciate the workings of *eh* as a response cry. As discussed above, response cries are commonly understood by social members as an involuntary overflowing of their producers’ internal states. Using this common understanding as a communicative resource, then, a speaker can present the stance that what s/he is saying now is a spontaneous reaction, prompted here and now by something that has just occurred in his/her mind. Of course, this is an *interactional* stance designedly presented by the speaker, which does not need to match his/her actual state of mind. For example, Bolden (2006), who examines *oh*-prefacing used to introduce ‘self-attentive matters’ in English, shows how *oh*-prefacing is used to convey the speaker’s stance that the self-attentive topic being introduced is ‘just now remembered’ (as opposed to having preoccupied his/her mind for a long time), even when there is clear evidence in the data that the matter has indeed been on the speaker’s mind for quite some time. \(^{14}\) In our case of *eh*-prefacing, what appears to be indexed is the stance that the speaker has ‘just now realized’ that there is something that s/he still lacks a complete understanding of regarding some aspect of the prior informing, and that this ‘sudden realization’ has prompted him/her to produce a follow-up question albeit in a rather displaced/delayed manner. Recall that *eh* is commonly used to signal its producer’s encounter with a problem of understanding (see fragments (3) above and (iii) in footnote 6). This indication of ‘sudden realization’ serves to frame the forthcoming question as a ‘blurtling out’ of an ostensible ‘processing trouble’ that just occurred in the speaker’s mind and is used as a license to launch the question outside its sequentially most natural position.

Additionally, it is significant that *eh* is placed in turn-initial position, i.e., “a prime location for the placement of sequential markers that convey some relation between what the current speaker is about to say and what the previous speaker has just said” (Heritage, 2002:197). Such sequential markers provide recipients with the framework of interpretation for the subsequent talk in relation to the prior (cf. Goodwin, 1996; Heritage, 1998, 2002; Sidnell, 2007; among others). In our case, a turn-initial indication of ‘sudden realization’ of some departure from a normal state of affairs (i.e., lack of understanding) by the speaker serves as an alert to the recipients that what follows it may not be completely in line with what came immediately before it in the local sequential

\(^{13}\) One may argue that the *eh*-prefaced question is placed in ‘next-turn’ position in that K’s multi-TCU account as a whole constitutes a responsive turn to H’s question in lines 1–2. While this is a valid observation, it is also important to point out that there are more ‘local’ opportunities for H to relevantly bring up the question, such as lines 4 and 7, which he passes up by producing continuers. As Koenig (2006) shows at least for English, recipients can and do come in and ask clarification questions at such points during the course of a multi-TCU turn in progress. Thus, though the *eh*-prefaced question is indeed deployed in next-turn position, its deployment still involves displacement from the first possible and relevant opportunity (see Schegloff, 2000 for a similar observation regarding delayed other-initiations of repair).

\(^{14}\) According to Bolden (2006), speakers work to present personal issues as being “just now remembered” in order to downplay their import to the speaker and thereby avoid the perception that one is excessively preoccupied with self-oriented matters.
context and may thus constitute a sequentially disjunctive move. What we see here, then, is a marker of an ostensibly psychological phenomenon used as a resource to manage sequential relations of utterances.

The next three fragments present further examples of *eh*-prefaced follow-up questions initiated in a sequentially displaced/disjunctive manner. Fragment (8) is taken from a longer stretch of topic talk in which three graduate students in economics discuss their research projects. Prior to this segment, A initiates a troubles telling in which he confesses his struggle with finding the right project for him. In response, S offers a possible direction A should look into to solve his problems by reminding him of their professor’s positive reaction to one of A’s projects that he presented at a graduate student colloquium in the past (line 1).

(8) [RKK:17:37-52]

1  S: demo ichiban saisho omoshiroi toka itteta jan.=
   but very first interesting etc. was.saying TAG
   But he was saying the very first one was interesting.—

2  =[nakamura sen]see.
   Nakamura teacher
   =[Professor Nakamura.]

3  H: =[huhuhuh huhuh]

4  A: ichiban saisho no daroo:?=ano shi]gatsu no.=
   very first N CP uhm April N
   The very first one, right?=Uh the one ((I presented)) in April.=

5  S:
   [u:::n.]
   Yeah::.

6  A: =ma kasetsu ga omoshirokkatta n daroo na:.
   well hypothesis SP was.interesting N CP FP
   =W’l I guess my hypothesis was interesting.

7  (.)

8  S: u:::[n.]
   Yeah::..

9  A:
   [ken]shoo wa shitenai mon na
test TP haven’t.done FP FP
   I haven’t tested it, though.

10 (0.2)

11 S: u::::[n.]
   Mmm.

12 H: [eh] kasetsu tte nan datta no.=a! ka da!
   hypothesis QT what was FP oh mosquito CP
   Eh what was your hypothesis?=Oh there’s a mosquito!

   // (lines omitted in which the participants deal with the mosquito)

21 S: suisan: kakooogyoo no:: (talk about A’s research continues))
   marine.product processing.industry LR
   It’s “Marine Product Processing Industry’s…”

In line 12, H produces an *eh*-prefaced follow-up question whose direct target is A’s talk in line 6. H could have issued the question immediately after the target turn (e.g., lines 7–8), but instead, she launches it in a sequentially displaced position. Note also that, up to line 11, the sequence unfolds as an exchange between S and A—the two participants who attended the colloquium in April in which A presented his project and which H did not attend. Though H shows a limited amount of involvement in the sequence with laughter in line 3, she in fact focuses her gaze down on a piece of cake in front of her that she is eating throughout the sequence. Thus, we see here that an *eh*-prefaced
follow-up question is delivered by someone who has not been party to the sequence in progress.\(^{15}\) Moreover, H’s question addresses something that has been treated as given and shared by the other two participants in the preceding sequence—i.e., the content of A’s hypothesis. The question, then, proposes a shift in the trajectory of the ongoing activity from one in which A tells the others about his struggle with his research projects to one in which the two ‘knowing’ participants explain the details of A’s hypothesis to the ‘unknowing’ participant. Thus, there are many layers of disjunctiveness observed in H’s move in line 12: (i) displaced from the position adjacent to its target; (ii) initiated by someone not party to the sequence so far; and (iii) introducing a shift of focus in the ongoing activity and a shift in the participation framework. Like the previous instance, then, the speaker uses a ‘spontaneous cry of lack of understanding (or knowledge, in this case)’ as a resource to present the stance that what follows it is a ‘blurring out’ of an ostensible processing problem that just occurred in the speaker’s mind, and presentation of such a stance is used as a license to launch the question in a sequentially and topically disjunctive manner. And by placing such a marker in turn-initial position, the \(eh\)-producer alerts the recipients to the sequential and topical disjunctiveness embodied by her forthcoming action.

Now consider fragment (9). Prior to this fragment, A and B, husband and wife, invited another couple, C and D, to various future events, including a cookout. In response, C enumerated a number of weekend obligations he has that are related to his company (for which A also works), thereby conveying difficulty accepting the other couple’s invitation. The tour to Korea that A mentions in line 1 below is one of the obligations that C has listed.

(9) [TYC:35:22-29]

1 A: (da)kara hangoosuisan yaru hi nii: (1.4) kankoku tsuua ga
  so cookout do day on Korea tour SE
  So, on the day we have a cookout, (1.4) he has a tour

2 aru n (da yo). ((To B))
  exist N CP FP
to Korea.

3 (0.5)

4 B: haa::n
  I see:::

5 A: >dakara< [ima datt-]
  so now CP
>So< now ...
  [ ]

6 B: [eh ohu]tari de iku n desu ka. ((To C))
  two PT go N CP Q
  Eh are you two both going?

7 (0.2)

8 A: [ja nakute:]
  CP NEG:and
  It’s not that,
  [ ]

9 C: [ie:: hito]ri::: de.
  no alone PT
  No::: I’m going alone.

10 A: =kumiai no
    union LK
    =It’s ((a trip organized by)) our labor union.

11 (1.0)

\(^{15}\) In his discussion of delayed other-initiated repair, Schegloff (2000) reports that those other-initiated repairs launched by a participant who has not been party to the sequence in progress are regularly displaced from their trouble-source turns.
In line 1, A tells his wife B that the tour to Korea that C has previously mentioned falls on the same day when they are going to have a cookout. B registers receipt of this informing with a news-receipt token 'I see:' with a prosodic emphasis on it (line 4). Upon hearing B’s receipt, A goes on to produce further talk (line 5), which appears to move the sequence forward. However, this move of A’s is overlapped by a delayed and precipitous initiation of a follow-up question by B (line 6) that seeks elaboration on the information that she has already received. Not only is this question displaced from the position immediately after its target (and displaced by her own receipt token, for that matter), but it is also launched interruptively after the informing sequence has already started to progress forward with A’s >dakara< ima datt- ‘So, now’ in line 5. Once again, it appears that a ‘spontaneous cry of lack of understanding/knowledge’ is used to present the stance that the speaker has just realized something that she still lacks a complete understanding of regarding the prior informing, and such a stance is exploited as a resource to deploy a follow-up question precipitously and disjunctively.

A similar kind of disjunctive initiation of a follow-up question is observed in fragment (10). In this fragment, R, the researcher setting up a video camera for taping a conversation, asks one of the participants, E, whether he has a camcorder like the one being used for the taping.

(10) [TG:05:16-23]

1 R: mottan no. (0.2) konn yatsu.
   have FP like this stuff
   Do you have one? (0.2) Stuff like this.

2 E: aa arimasu yo.=
   oh have FP
   Yes I do.

3 R: =HOMma.=
   =REALly. =

4 T: =aa ii desu ne:. (To E)
   oh good CP FP
   =Oh good for you.

5 → R: .hhhh (so) kka [jaa kondo ka-] eh sore wa mmmoo kazoku de=
   so:Q then next time bo- that TP EMP family PT
   .hhhh I see. Then next time I’ll bo- Eh are all your family=
   [ ]

6 Y: [ "s:goi nat." ]
   great FP
   "That’s great."

7 → R: =minna d[e tsukatteru]
   all PT are using
   =members using it?
   [ ]

8 E: [aa soo desu.]
   oh so CP
   That’s right.

9 R: ho:::n.
   I see:::.

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16 In this case, the informing targeted by the follow-up question is carried out by A, but the question is addressed to C, because the information on which elaboration is being sought ‘belongs to’ C.

17 Schegloff (2000) also discusses cases in which other-initiated repair is displaced from its trouble-source turn by a response produced by the same party that eventually initiates repair. In other words, in those cases, the participant who initiates repair on some prior turn does so after s/he responds to that prior turn in ways other than initiating repair.
After registering receipt of the question-elicited informing (line 2) with a news-receipt token *HOMma* ‘REAlly’ with a prosodic emphasis on it (line 3), R goes on to produce further talk in which he appears to be on his way to make a certain kind of future arrangement (e.g., asking E if he could borrow E’s camcorder next time he does videotaping), and by doing so, he appears to move the ongoing sequence forward. However, before this unit of talk is brought to completion, R abruptly changes the course of action; he launches a follow-up question targeted at E’s utterance in line 2 and asks for elaboration about whether E owns the camcorder to his exclusive use or whether it is owned by his whole family (presumably to check on a possibly important consideration for the incipient request, i.e., whether borrowing the camcorder may inconvenience E’s family members as well). Like the previous case, the *eh*-prefaced question is not only displaced from the position immediately adjacent to its target, but it is also launched interruptively after the sequence has already started to progress forward. Unlike the previous case, however, it is the trajectory of R’s own talk rather than someone else’s that gets interrupted and redirected by his *eh*-prefaced question. Here as well, a ‘spontaneous cry of lack of understanding/knowledge’ is used as a resource to present the stance that something that the speaker does not have a sufficient grasp of just occurred to him, and this stance is exploited as a license to implement an abrupt and disjunctive shift in the ongoing course of talk. And the turn-initial placement of such a marker serves as an alert to the recipients of the incipient disjunctive shift.18

So far, we have discussed *eh*-prefacing used to initiate a follow-up question in a sequentially displaced/disjunctive manner. Now, there are some cases in which this practice of *eh*-prefacing for introducing a sequentially disjunctive move is exploited and extended as a vehicle for accomplishing something other than launching a follow-up question seeking elaboration on an aspect of the prior talk. In these cases, *eh*-prefaced questions are used to initiate a new topic that has little topical connection with the prior talk. The turn-initial *eh* is used almost as a pro forma marker for indicating the stance that something that the speaker lacks knowledge of has just occurred in his/her mind, which then prompts the speaker to launch a question about it in a sequentially and topically disjunctive manner. *Eh*-prefaced questions of this type constitute a kind of ‘topic proffer’—a practice for implementing disjunctive topic starts (Schegloff, 2007). Fragment (11) illustrates this usage of *eh*-prefaced questions.

In this fragment, the participants are discussing Mr. Meyer, an American who works for the same company as A and C. Prior this segment, C mentioned that Meyer had made a surprising announcement to him that his (Meyer’s) great grandfather is shared with actor Kevin Costner. To understand the blood relationship between Meyer and Costner, the participants have been comparing it to the relationship between two characters (Tara and Ikura) in a well-known Japanese cartoon, *Sazae-san*, which features an extended family living in the same house. The following segment begins in the middle of the sequence in which the participants engage in this comparison.

(11) [TYC:17:38-54]

1 C: demo tara chan to ikura chan tte ittara daibu koo shinmitsudo
   but Tara TL and Ikura TL QT say:if fairly like closeness
   If you think about Tara and Ikura, they are pretty close to

2 takai yo na:(h):.
   high FF FF
   each other.

3 A: u:::n.
   Yeah:::
   [  

4 D: [ahh hahah hahah .hhh hah
   [  

5 B: [are soba ni iru kara ja na:?:
   that close in exist because CP NEG
   That’s because they live close to each other, isn’t it=  

18 In fragments (9) and (10), the *eh*-speaker first receipts the prior informing with a news-receipt token, and only moments later s/he revises the response and launches an *eh*-prefaced follow-up question. Shimotani (2007) observes a similar phenomenon with regard to *eh*-prefaced other-initiated repair and terms *eh* a ‘claim-of-reanalysis token’. As shown by many other instances of *ehs* described in this article, however, a ‘claim of reanalysis’ seems to apply to only a subset of the wide variety of tasks accomplished by *eh*.
When the sequence containing the comparison between the relationship of Meyer and Costner and that of two cartoon characters comes to possible completion (circa line 14–15), D launches an *eh*-prefaced question (line 17), inquiring about whether Meyer still has a mustache. Unlike the other cases examined so far in this section, this question has no apparent ‘target’ to seek elaboration on either in the immediately prior talk or any other portion of this conversation prior to this point, as no one has mentioned anything about Meyer’s appearance (or anyone else’s, for that matter). Rather, it is used to introduce a new topic into the conversation abruptly and disjunctively by exploiting the format of indexing ‘sudden realization of lack of understanding/knowledge about something’ that has just occurred in the speaker’s mind as a license to launch a question about it ‘on the spot’. In the previous cases, such ‘sudden realization’ is shown to have been prompted by and grounded in some aspect of the immediately prior talk, albeit in a somewhat delayed manner. In the case at hand (and those similar to it), such grounding appears lacking, and the practice of *eh*-prefacing is mobilized simply as a vehicle for, and an alert to, a disjunctive initiation of a new topic that has no or oblique (if any) relation to the prior talk. 19

In this section, I have examined *eh*-prefaced questions produced in the context of informings and argued that *eh* as a marker of an ostensibly psychological phenomenon—sudden realization of lack of understanding—is used as a resource

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19 One may speculate that the new topic on Meyer’s mustache may have been touched off by the fact that Kevin Costner had a mustache at the time of this conversation (mid-1990s). Even if this is the case, the relationship between the *eh*-prefaced question and the prior talk is far more oblique than what is observed in fragments (7) through (10).
to deal with sequential displacement/disjunctiveness with which the question is being launched. The next section discusses *eh*-prefaced turns of a different form produced in a different sequential context: *eh*-prefaced responses (in the form of statements rather than questions) in response to assessments (rather than informings). *Eh*-prefacing in this context is used not so much to manage sequential fittedness of utterances as to deal with interpersonal alignment.

5. *Eh*-prefaced responses to assessments

When a participant in conversation offers an assessment or an opinion about something, the assessment/opinion regularly makes it relevant for its recipient to produce a response that displays his/her position toward the offered assessment/opinion (Pomerantz, 1984; Mori, 1999). While responses aligning with the prior assessment are generally delivered in a simple and unmarked fashion, disaligning responses are routinely marked with such features of turn design as delays, prefaces, accounts, etc. (Levinson, 1983). *Eh*-prefacing used in responses to assessments is one such design feature of turns embodying disaffiliative actions in Japanese. As a marker of a noticing of departure, *eh* indexes its producer’s treatment of the prior assessment as divergent from his/her own, and thereby serves as an alert to the recipient that a disaligning response such as a disagreement, rejection, counter argument, etc. will be forthcoming. *Eh*-prefaced responses to assessments comprise 14% (41 cases) of all *eh*-prefaced turns in the current data.

The following fragments illustrate *eh*-prefaced turns that embody disaligning responses to assessments/opinions. Fragment (12) is taken from a longer stretch of talk in which the participants discuss commuting situations in Japan, especially with regard to the horrendous pain of riding overcrowded commuter trains to and from work. In this context, A distances herself from the other two participants by saying that, in her hometown, people do not take trains to commute because there is no extensive train network like the ones that are commonly seen in urban areas of Japan (line 1).

(12) [DEM10:17:44-55]

1 A: inaka da kara::: [amari so->] kootsumoo hattatsu shitenai=: 
   rural CP because much traffic.network develop do:NEG 
   ((My hometown)) is in a rural area, so transportation networks 
   aren’t developed much.- 
   [ ]
   "u: --------n"
   "Mhm"

2 H:  
   "Mhm"

3 N: =ja nani basu:?= 
   then what bus 
   =Then, what, do you take a bus ((to get around))?= 

4 A: =kuruma kuruma. 
   car car 
   =It’s a car, it’s a car.

5 H: eh [kuruma:?] 
   car 
   *Eh you use a car:? 
   [ ]

6 A: =shigoto ] iku no mo kuruma. 
   work go N also car 
   Going to work is also by car.

7 (0.8)

8 H: ii:: ne::: [::::] ja ameri]ka mitai janai= 
   good FP then America like TAG 
   That’s gooo:id. It’s like America, isn’t it, then?= 
   [ ]

9 ➔ A: [eh ii:: ka na- ] 
   good Q FP 
   *Eh I wonder if it’s good-

10 A: =juutai demo suru yo::: 
   traffic.jam but do FP 
   =There are traffic jams, though.
In line 1, A claims that her hometown is in a rural area and therefore that there is no extensive train system to begin with. N then asks A if people take a bus to get around (line 3), which A disconfirms by saying that they use their own cars to get around as well as to go to work (lines 4 and 6). Hearing this announcement, H makes a positive assessment (‘That’s good’) in line 8, conveying a sense of envy about the use of personal cars for commuting in A’s hometown as opposed to having to ride overcrowded trains as in urban areas. In response to this assessment, A uses *eh*-prefacing (line 9) to register a noticing of divergence between the position taken by the previous speaker and the one that she is about to take. Placed in turn-initial position, it projects, and gives the recipient an alert to, the type of action to be produced in the subsequent turn component, i.e., a disaligning move. Indeed, following *eh*, A continues on to deliver a modulated disagreement in the form of casting doubt on the prior assessment. She also subsequently backs up her disaligning position by providing an account of why commuting by car is not necessarily better than using a train (line 10).

The following fragment provides a case in which *eh* prefaches a counter assessment to the previous speaker’s assessment. In this fragment, two women, B and D, both of whom had their respective weddings recently, are discussing bridal gowns while flipping through pages of a wedding magazine. The focus of this segment is on how the two participants present different positions toward a traditional Japanese wedding garment called *uchikake* (especially in line 15ff). As a side note, it is common in Japan to rent wedding gowns rather than purchasing them, and the package deals mentioned in the fragment below refer to rental packages that offer different combinations of garments. As it is common for a bride to change her garments once or twice during a wedding reception, prospective brides usually choose two or three different kinds of garments from the rental selection offered by their wedding companies.

(13) [TYC:42:05-34]

1 D: moo uchikake takai desu kara ne:::.
   EMP garment expensive CP because FP
   The uchikake garment is pretty expensive ((to rent)), so...

2 (0.4)

3 B: aa soo na n=demo moo nanka PAKKU n nattemasen?:
   oh so CP N but EMP like package PT become:NEG
   Oh, is that right—But isn’t it included in package deals?

4 D: ya demo iro uchikake wa takai desu=.
   well but color garment TP expensive CP
   Well, but colored uchikake is expensive=.

5 B: =aa soo na n desu ka?= 
   oh so CP N CP Q
   =Oh is that right= 

6 D: =n pakuu n natte, daitai uedingu doresu to:, shiromoku
   package PT become mostly wedding dress and white.kimono
   =n Most package deals include just a wedding dress and

7 na n desu yo:.
   CP N CP FP
   shiromuku *(white kimonos)*.

8 B: =@:: soo na n da.
   oh so CP N CP
   =Oh:: is that right.

9 (0.5)

---

20 Note in this case that, although A’s *eh*-prefaced response presents a disaligning stance (disagreement) to H’s prior assessment, it may not necessarily be completely disaffiliative when seen as a statement of envy/compliment, just like a disaligning/disagreeing response to another’s self-deprecation may not be seen as disaffiliative. I owe this observation to Hiroko Tanaka.
In the beginning of this fragment, D suggests that the *uchikake* garments, especially colored ones, are of extra value because they are usually not included in package deals and are more expensive to rent than other garments (lines 1, 4, 6–7). B then mentions that, even though the package deals from her wedding company in fact included colored *uchikake*, she was not interested in wearing it. Note here that B refers to *uchikake* as *sonna no* ‘*such a thing*’ (line 13), which displays her stance that she does not regard *uchikake* as particularly desirable. To this announcement, D presents her assessment, *maa mottainai* ‘*Oh, what a shame*’ (line 15), which again shows her stance divergent from B’s regarding the value of wearing *uchikake* at a wedding. It is in response to this assessment that B deploys an *eh*-prefaced turn (line 17), in which she presents a disaligning assessment that, for her, wearing white garments only was good enough. Subsequently, she upgrades her disaligning position by saying that, in her view, wearing a white Japanese kimono (*shiromuku*) and a white western-style wedding dress only would be more stylish than adding a colored garment to the mix. Thus, as in the previous fragment, *eh*-prefacing is used here to index divergence between the positions taken by the previous speaker and by the current one and provide the recipient with advance notice, or projection, of the type of action—disaffiliative response—about to be delivered.

In this section, I have examined the use of *eh*-prefacing in responses to assessments and shown that, as a marker of a noticing of departure, the token is used to display its producer’s stance that the position taken by the previous speaker on the matter being discussed departs from the stance to be taken by the current speaker. It is thus used as an indicator
of incipient interactional disaffiliation. In the next section, I will discuss yet another type of eh-prefaced turn produced in a different sequential context: eh-prefaced responses to inquiry.

6. Eh-prefaced responses to inquiry

Answering a question is not a simple matter of providing the information requested by the questioner. As recent CA research has shown, respondents to questions have at their disposal a variety of ways to display their stance toward the question addressed to them (Heritage, 1998; Raymond, 2003; Bolden, 2008; Stivers and Hayashi, 2008). For example, Heritage (1998) has shown that, by prefacing responses to questions with oh, speakers of English can imply that the question addressed to them was “unexpected, unlooked for, or ‘out of left field’” (p. 294) and thereby indicate a problem about the question’s relevance, appropriateness, or presupposition. In Russian, according to Bolden (2008), speakers may preface a response to a question with a repeat of (a part of) the question, and, by doing so, they indicate their resistance to, or rejection of, the underlying premises displayed by the design of the question. The current data indicate that eh-prefacing is used for similar ends in responses to questions in Japanese. As a marker of a noticing of departure, eh appears to register its producer’s stance that the question addressed to him/her embodies a move that departs from his/her expectation or supposition, either because it introduces a trajectory tangential to that being pursued by the prior talk, or because it displays a presupposition that is incongruous with that held by the eh-producer. Eh is thus used to point to problematicity of the preceding question in terms of its relevance or appropriateness from the perspective of the eh-producer. Quantitatively, eh-prefaced responses to inquiry comprise 7% (19 cases) of all eh-prefaced turns in the current data.

The following fragments illustrate this. In Fragment (14), the participants (two married couples who live near each other) talk about how often they run into people they know (including each other) on a bus that runs between their apartment complex and the nearest train station (lines 1–2).

(14) [TYC:05:55-00]

((A and B are husband and wife, and C and D are husband and wife, respectively.))

1 B: nanka shitteru hito tte kekko .hhh hui ni deta somehow know person QT rather casually went.out
Somehow, when we go out, we unexpectedly run into people we

2 toki ni yoku au n desu yo ne. when PT often went N CP FP FP know quite often.

3 C: a::[:::][:::]
oh::::::::

4 D: ["u::[:::]:n"
"Yeah:::"

5 A:

6 B: [a konaida mo oashimashita mon [ne oh the.other.day also met FP FP Oh we ran into each other the other day, too, didn’t we.

7 D: [oashimashita ne:::
met FP
We sure did.

8 A: nan no [kaeri] da kke. (To B)
what LK on.the.way.home CP Q
What was it we were coming home from (when we ran into them)?

9 B: [( ] (To D))

10 (0.2)
In line 6, B mentions a recent encounter with D on a bus as an example of ‘running into people unexpectedly’, and D confirms it in the following turn. Then, B’s husband A addresses a question to his wife, asking her what outing he and his wife were coming home from when they had the just-mentioned encounter with D (line 8). It is in response to this question that B prefaces her answer with *eh* (line 11).

Note first that A’s question in line 8 introduces a trajectory that is tangential to that being developed by B’s talk. The project that B is pursuing here is to make a point about how often they unexpectedly meet acquaintances on a bus, and the encounter with D in a recent past is presented as but an example of that. To this project, what A’s question pursues, i.e., where he and his wife were coming home from when they met D, is quite irrelevant, if not altogether inappropriate, and such a shift of attention may well come off as unexpected for B. Second, B’s answer contains *dakara*, which roughly translates as ‘so’ or ‘therefore’. In her account of interactional functions of *dakara*, Maynard (1993:92) states that, when *dakara* is used in an answer to a question, it “signals that the speaker answers the question as if expecting the addressee to already know the answer” and that it therefore conveys a trace of irritation or reluctance on the part of the answerer. *Dakara* in line 11 thus implies B’s supposition that A should know what he has just inquired about. Given this supposition, A’s act of asking the question in line 8, which displays his lack of knowledge of what he is supposed to know, is deemed inappposite from B’s perspective. Thus, A’s question is problematic from B’s perspective both in terms of its relevance to B’s current project and in terms of her supposition regarding what her husband should know and remember. As a marker of a noticing of departure, then, the turn-initial *eh* points to this problematicity by registering the incongruity between the trajectory introduced by A’s question and that being pursued by B’s talk so far, as well as the incongruity between the presupposition displayed by A’s question and that held by B regarding the matter addressed by the question.

Fragment (15) presents another case. This is taken from the same conversation as (14), and the segment below is a part of a longer stretch of talk in which the participants discuss how, in Japanese companies, employees are discouraged from growing facial hair because of the rather strict behavioral code imposed upon them. Just before this segment, the participants named some co-workers who have tried but failed to grow facial hair, and, in lines 2 and 5 below, D joins this discussion by mentioning another person, her former boss, who once grew facial hair but gave it up because he was reprimanded by his superior.

(15) [TYC:19:17-30]

1 C: =.hh[hhhh (.)] u:::n. ]
   =.hhhhhh (.)] Yeah:::
   [ ]

2 D: [ikkai uchi no joo]shi de mo ita kedo::,
   once I LK boss PT also exist but
   I used to have a boss ((who grew facial hair)), but ...

3 B: he:::::::::::
   Oh:::::::::
   [ ]

4 A: [he::::::
   Oh::::::::
   [ ]

5 D: [sono ue ni shikararete:: yamem(h)ashita [kedo.
   that above by was.scolded gave.up but ...
   he was reprimanded by his boss, so he gave it up.
   [ ]

---

21 The supposition that A should know what he has just inquired about may in fact be oriented to by A himself as well. A’s question in line 8 is marked with the sentence-final particle *kke*, which is used to “ask for confirmation or clarification about something that the speaker has forgotten or is unsure about” (*Shinmeikai* Japanese language dictionary). The use of *kke* thus conveys the sense that the questioner is asking for help remembering something that s/he once knew.
After D mentions her boss as another example of employees who have attempted and failed to grow facial hair (lines 2 and 5), A issues a question inquiring about the identity of the person that D just mentioned (lines 6–7). It is to this question that D deploys an *eh*-prefaced answer (line 8).

There is evidence in the design of D’s talk in the beginning of this segment that the trajectory introduced by A’s subsequent question is tangential to D’s project. That is, when D mentions her former boss in line 2, she uses the reference form *uchi no jooshi* (‘a boss of mine’). This is what Sacks and Schegloff (1979) have called a non-recognitional reference form. Uses of non-recognitional reference forms convey to the recipients the speaker’s assumption that the identity of the person being referred to is either unknown to the recipients or irrelevant to the current activity being pursued (Schegloff, 1996b). In other words, the reference form used by D displays her supposition that the person she is referring to in line 2 is not recognizable to her recipients or that his identity is unimportant to the project she is pursuing. Given this supposition, A’s act of asking for the name of the person in lines 6–7 can be seen as unexpected and inapposite from D’s perspective. It is in this context that D prefaces her answer with *eh*. As a noticing of departure marker, *eh* indexes the incongruity between its producer’s supposition about the non-recognizability of the name of the person being referred to and A’s move to request the name. And D continues to display her supposition about the non-recognizability of the referent in the subsequent component of her answer turn: in line 8 she uses another non-recognitional reference form, *Kohara san te yuu* ‘a person) named Mr. Kohara’, which, even though it contains a name, still implies her stance that the named person is not recognizable to the recipient. This continued use of a non-recognitional reference form provides further evidence that D’s *eh*-prefaced answer treats A’s prior question as irrelevant and inapposite to the project that D has been pursuing.

In the two instances examined so far, the *eh*-prefaced response provided an answer to the preceding question. That is, even though the respondent used *eh*-prefacing to point to the problematicity of the prior question, s/he nonetheless provided the information requested by the questioner. The next fragment presents a case in which an *eh*-prefaced turn provides a ‘response’, but not an ‘answer’, to the preceding question. Fragment (16) is a part of a longer stretch of talk in which the participants discuss how A met her husband and got married.

(16) [Tanaka, forthcoming; slightly modified]

```
1 F: jaa kekkon shite yokatta koto? ((To A))
then marriage do good thing
Well then, what are the benefits of being married?

2 (3.0)
```

---

22 A himself may be oriented to the unexpectedness or misfit of his question vis-à-vis D’s prior statement by prefacing his question with *eh* (line 6). As discussed in section 4, *eh*-prefacing used in follow-up questions of this sort regularly indexes the disjunctiveness of the trajectory to be introduced by the forthcoming question.
Having been asked what have been the benefits of being married (line 1), A shows a number of signs of difficulty answering that question. Following a lengthy pause after the question (line 2), A repeats a part of the preceding question with rising intonation (line 3), a practice often used to indicate that its producer is having some problem with the prior talk (Robinson and Kevoe-Feldman, 2007). Following laugh tokens and another lengthy pause, A produces an eh-prefaced response that in effect diverts the question. By pointing out that things were better before she got married, A shows her resistance to the underlying premise of the preceding question, i.e., that there are mentionable ‘benefits’ of being married that one does not have before getting married. Here again, eh is used to point to the problematicity of the prior question by registering incongruity between the questioner’s supposition displayed by the question and that of the respondent who believes that things used to be better before she got married.

In this section, I have examined eh-prefaced responses to questions and argued that eh-prefacing is used to indicate the preceding question’s departure from the respondent’s expectation or supposition with regard to what is a relevant and apposite question in the local interactional context. Placed in a “prime location” for sequential markers to convey relationships between the current and prior utterances, the turn-initial eh in responses to inquiry is used to display its producer’s resistance to or rejection of the trajectory introduced by the prior inquiry.

7. Summary and conclusion

The goal of this study has been to investigate the workings of the nonlexical response token eh in Japanese in a variety of sequential and turn-constructional environments. Based on the orientation displayed by the participants to the deployment of eh as a stand-alone token, I argued that the fundamental ‘semantics’ of eh is to propose that its producer has noticed some kind of departure in the talk (or in the interaction’s environment) with reference to his/her pre-existing knowledge, awareness, expectation, or orientation. The specific sense of the token’s generic noticing of departure proposal is particularized by reference to a number of contextual aspects of its deployment, including (1) the types of sequences in which it occurs, (2) its placement within such sequences, (3) the types of turn-constructional formats in which it is employed, and (4) its prosodic features, especially its length and pitch contour. For instance, when used as a stand-alone token, the sense of ‘expectancy departure’ is often conveyed with prosodic emphasis, typically realized through extensive lengthening and rising pitch contour with which the token is produced. Placement of a short eh after overlapping talk or lengthy pause appears to provide its recipient with resources to interpret the stand-alone token as indicating the speaker’s trouble in hearing or understanding, respectively. When eh is used as a preface to an additional turn component, it is crucial for determining the sense conveyed by eh to consider what type of sequence the eh-prefaced turn participates in (i.e., whether it is used to respond to an informing, an assessment, or a question) as well as to examine what type of additional component it prefaxes (i.e., whether it prefaxes a turn in ‘first position’, i.e., one that initiates a new sequence, such as a question, or whether it prefaxes a turn in ‘second position’, i.e., one that is responsive to a sequence-initiating action). When used as a preface to a question in response to an
informing, *eh* conveys the sense of ‘sudden realization of lack of understanding’, which is then used as a license to initiate a follow-up question in a sequentially displaced/disjunctive manner. The turn-initial placement of such a “fugitive commentary on the speaker’s state of mind” (Heritage, 1984b:300) then serves to raise an alert for the recipient about the sequential displacement/disjunctiveness of the forthcoming action. When *eh* prefaces a response to an assessment, it points to a divergence between the position displayed by the prior speaker’s assessment and that to be taken by the current speaker. Its turn-initial deployment thus serves as an alert to the recipient of incipient interpersonal disalignment regarding the matter being discussed. When *eh*-prefacing is used in a response to a question, the token indexes the preceding question’s departure from the respondent’s expectation or supposition with regard to its relevance or appositeness in the local context. As a turn-initial marker, it delivers an alert about the respondent’s stance with which s/he is responding to the question—i.e., a resistance to, or rejection of, the presupposition displayed by the preceding question. In sum, variations in the sense of a ‘noticing of departure’ proposal made by *eh* are managed on each occasion of its occurrence through sequential, turn-constructional, and prosodic particularizations of the token’s deployment. And it is this contextually based variability of the specific sense of the generic ‘semantics’ of *eh* that allows for the diversity and flexibility of the interactional tasks that can be accomplished by the token.

The findings presented in this article underscore the importance of turn-initial position as a strategic site for the organization of sequences of actions in interaction. As a number of studies have noted, objects produced in turn-initial position provide an important resource not only for indicating the relationship of the talk being launched to what has preceded, but also for projecting aspects of what is being launched before the entire course of the current action is fully disclosed (Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 1987, 1996a; Heritage, 2002; Sidnell, 2007). As discussed above, the practice of *eh*-prefacing serves to provide the recipient with an alert to the type of action to be produced next (e.g., a disjunctive shift, a disaligning response to an assessment, a resistance to a question), thereby preparing the recipient for how to hear the subsequent turn component. Projectability of unfolding courses of action such as that provided by *eh* is a central resource for the achievement of coordinated action by interactants. This is because, without projectability, “it would be impossible for separate parties to recognize in common not only what is happening at the moment, but more crucially, what range of events are being projected as relevant nexts, such that an addressee can build not just another independent action, but instead a relevant coordinated next move to what someone else has just done” (Goodwin, 2000:1491). Small turn-initial objects like *eh* are therefore important discursive resources that parties use to achieve mutual intelligibility of what is happening and what is going to happen, and to build socially coordinated courses of action together. Studying such objects can thus contribute to our understanding of some of the most important aspects of the mechanisms underlying human social coordination.

On a final note, the present study has sought to contribute to a large body of research on response tokens in Japanese. In this extensive body of work, much attention has been paid to the frequency of response tokens in Japanese conversation (Maynard, 1986, 1990; Yamada, 1992; Clancy et al., 1996). These studies have claimed that Japanese speakers use response tokens much more frequently in conversation than Anglo-American speakers, and this finding is often directly linked to such cultural values of the Japanese as *omoiyari* ‘empathy’ and *wa* ‘harmony’ (LoCastro, 1987; White, 1989). However, because their primary interest is in counting numbers for the aggregate occurrences of response tokens across situations, these quantitative studies tend to treat response tokens as isolated from their local contexts of use, glossing over the details of the interactional contingencies to which the participants might be oriented when producing response tokens in each given context. Only a few studies to date have explored how a single response token can accomplish a wide range of different interactional tasks depending on its sequential placement, turn-constructional environment, and prosodic features (Mori, 2006; Shimotani, 2007, 2008, forthcoming; Tanaka, forthcoming). Given the diversity and frequency of response tokens used in Japanese conversation as reported in the past quantitative literature, it appears to me to be imperative to begin to pay serious analytic attention to the details of the “position and composition” of their deployment in order to understand the rich and complex workings of response tokens as an integral part of social interaction in Japanese (or in any other language, for that matter). I hope the present study has provided compelling enough findings to motivate future studies of response tokens in this direction.

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Appendix A

A.1. Transcript symbols

[ ] The point where overlapping talk starts
( ] The point where overlapping talk ends
(0.0) length of silence in tenths of a second
( ) micro-pause
underlining relatively high pitch
CAPS relatively high volume
↑ sharp rise in pitch
:: lengthened syllable
- glottal stop self-editing marker
= "latched" utterances
?/./, rising/falling/continuing intonation respectively
! animated tone, not necessarily an exclamation
( ) unintelligible stretch
(word) transcriber’s unsure hearings
(( )) transcriber’s descriptions of events – e.g., ((sniff))
hh audible outbreath
.hh audible inbreath
(hh) laughter within a word
> < increase in tempo, as in a rush-through
⊙ ⊗ a passage of talk quieter than the surrounding talk

A.2. Abbreviations used in the interlinear gloss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>various forms of copula verb <em>be</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FP</td>
<td>final particle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIM</td>
<td>mimetics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>object particle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>question particle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>subject particle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL</td>
<td>title marker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMP</td>
<td>emphasis marker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LK</td>
<td>nominal linking particle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>nominalizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PT</td>
<td>particle</td>
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<td>QT</td>
<td>quotative particle</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAG</td>
<td>tag question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TP</td>
<td>topic particle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


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