The multi-functionality of accounts in advice giving

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Accounts have traditionally been understood as explanations designed to exonerate the speaker from an untoward act (e.g. account for lateness) (Scott and Lyman 1968). In this paper, I examine the use of accounts in advice giving, adopting a broader view of accounts as the reasoning provided to bolster the viability of the advice. The data set consists of 15 graduate peer tutoring sessions and a total of 143 advising sequences collected over a period of four years. Using the methodology of conversation analysis, I show that besides their remedial utility of ‘repairing the broken,’ accounts can also be used proactively to validate and promote a current agenda. In particular, I argue for the multi-functionality of accounts in addressing face threats, managing resistance, and doing pedagogy.

KEYWORDS: Accounts, advice giving, managing resistance, face threats, conversation analysis

INTRODUCTION

We give accounts in a wide variety of social encounters. This paper focuses on the use of accounts with specific reference to the activity of advice giving. I show that accounts are routinely found in four different sequential positions: (1) pre-advice; (2) immediately post-advice; (3) post-problematic uptake; (4) post-acceptance. The main argument to be developed is this: in the institutional context of graduate peer tutoring, accounts can be used to address face concerns, manage resistance, and socialize graduate student writers into the discursive practices of academic writing. I begin by considering the two bodies of accumulated research on advising and accounts. Both have produced important insights that anchor and motivate my current inquiry.

Advising

Advising refers to any activity that involves one party conveying to another what the former believes to be beneficial to the latter regarding some performance or behavior (cf. definition of ‘advice’ in Searle 1969). Such activities would range from simple grammar corrections to life-changing lectures, and can take on labels
such as ‘proposal,’ ‘remedy’ or ‘solution.’ An essential feature of advising is its assumed or established asymmetry (Hutchby 1995), where the relevance for advice lies in a problem that the advisee has, which often holds implications for the latter’s insufficient competence in a certain area. Advice giving, therefore, is what Brown and Levinson (1987) would call a face-threatening act (FTA), threatening both the positive face (the want to be well-regarded) and the negative face (the want to be free of imposition) of the advisee (cf. Holtgraves 1992; for a more dynamic and multi-faceted treatment of face and facework in interaction, see Geyer forthcoming).

Not surprisingly, advice resistance is a routine problem encountered by advice givers (Heritage and Sefi 1992; Silverman 1997). Such resistance is found not only in situations where advice is uninvited (Jefferson and Lee 1992) but also in settings where advice is actively sought (Waring 2005). Stivers (2005a, 2006), for example, found that treatment decisions are routinely negotiated between pediatricians and parents, where parents’ resistance is a regular component of such negotiations.

For the advice givers then, the challenge is to deliver the advice in ways that minimize such resistance. One practice is to fit the advice to the recipient instead of delivering a general piece of advice to an unprepared recipient. As Kinnell (2002: 389) notes, ‘counselors must have a warrant for giving clients information about risk and prevention rather than simply providing information in a didactic manner.’ A second practice is to create ambiguities. One can package the advice as something else or blur the distinction between advice giving and some other ‘innocuous’ activities such as information giving (Kinnell and Maynard 1996; Perakyla and Silverman 1991). One can also render the target of advice vague or indeterminant (e.g. ‘hypothetical case formulation’ in Linell et al. 2002; ‘oblique proposals’ in Peyrot 1987; ‘pragmatic ambivalence’ in Wajnryb 1998). Finally, Stivers (2005b) found that during parent–pediatrician interaction, a recommendation for a treatment is more likely to obtain acceptance than one against a treatment, and that a specific positive recommendation followed by a negative recommendation is more likely to secure parents’ alignment.

The current project builds upon this existing literature by examining an additional resource – accounts – used for addressing face concerns and managing resistance in advice giving.

**Accounts**

As a phenomenon of great interest for social scientists from various disciplines, accounts may be broadly conceived as answers to the ‘why’ question (Sacks 1992) or ‘explanatory talk used to propose a cause, to make plain, and to warrant’ (Antaki 1994: 2). In their review of the accounts literature, Buttney and Morris (2001: 286) acknowledge the distinction between: (1) accounts that address troublesome conduct; and (2) accounts that do not necessarily involve troubles

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– giving a description or narrative of events. The mainstream understanding of accounts, however, is bound up with the notion of troublesome conduct as originally conceptualized by Scott and Lyman (1968).

In Scott and Lyman’s classic essay, accounts are remedial statements given retrospectively to explain problematic behavior that is unanticipated or untoward:

Our concern here is with one feature of talk: its ability to shore up the timbers of fractured sociation, its ability to throw bridges between the promised and the performed, its ability to repair the broken and restore the estranged. This feature of talk involves the giving and receiving of what we shall call accounts. (Scott and Lyman 1968: 46)

Scott and Lyman (1968: 47) also distinguish accounts from explanations, noting that the latter bears no association with untoward actions. Their further division of accounts into ‘excuses’ and ‘justifications’ very much hinges upon the notion of ‘untoward’-ness. Excuses are accounts in which the speaker accepts the problematic nature of the act but denies his/her responsibility by appealing to various circumstances beyond his/her control (Scott and Lyman 1968: 47). For example, when accounting for one’s lateness for a meeting, one might say, ‘There was a police investigation at the subway.’ Justifications, on the other hand, are accounts in which the speaker accepts responsibility but denies the problematic nature of the act, proposing that the problematic act is not problematic after all (Scott and Lyman 1968: 51–52). In the same case of lateness, one might say, ‘We can’t start the meeting on time without the main speaker anyway.’

In a broader sense, ‘excuses’ invoke the causes (i.e. ‘factors beyond my control’) for the problematic event and ‘justifications’ call attention to its effect (i.e. ‘no harm incurred’). This broader conceptualization of cause and effect, however, engages a more ‘innocuous’ line of reasoning behind the accounted-for conduct. It is less wedded to the notion of ‘untoward’ behavior and therefore stages a departure from Scott and Lyman’s (1968) core definition of accounts.

The view of accounts as explanations for problematic behavior is in broad consonance with the role of accounts in preference organizations as described by conversation analysts (e.g. Buttny 1987, 1993; Heritage 1984a, 1988; Pomerantz 1984; Sacks 1987), where accounts participate in performing dispreferred actions such as refusals to requests, offers or invitations. These actions are problematic in the sense that they threaten the ‘positive face’ (the desire to be liked) of the first speaker, and their affiliated accounts – inability to comply or lack of need – feature a ‘no fault’ quality in that they do not ‘threaten the face of either party or the relationships between them’ (Heritage 1984a: 271). One might argue that by appealing to causes ‘beyond my control,’ these accounts fit into the ‘excuse’ category of Scott and Lyman’s (1968) framework and accomplish a face-saving purpose. In the following exchange, for example, S’s rejection is accounted for by a lack of need – a reason that specifically avoids
the implication of any lack of regard for H (see Appendix for a list of transcription notations):

[H: And we were wondering if there’s anything we can do to help
S: [Wel ‘at’s]
H: [I mean ] can we do any shopping for her or something like that?
(0.7)
S: Well that’s most kind Heatherton,hhh At the moment no:
→because we’ve still got two boys at home.

In the conversation analytic literature, the ‘face-saving’ use of accounts has also been shown in the context of advice receiving, where participants deploy accounts either to neutralize the disaffiliative action of advice resistance (Waring 2005) or to forestall the interpretation of one’s advice acceptance as thoughtless compliance (Waring 2007). Both are mobilized to address the face concerns of either the advice giver (in the case of advice resisting) or of the advice recipient (in the case of advice acceptance).

Note that while the untoward behavior to be accounted for in Scott and Lyman’s (1968) framework refers to some past event located outside the interaction, the dispreferred action as shown in the conversation analytic literature emerges in interaction and is sequentially inseparable from its affiliated account. In other words, on the one hand, the conversation analytic treatment of accounts is similar to that of Scott and Lyman’s (1968) in its focus on exonerating the speaker from an untoward or face-threatening act; on the other hand, it departs from Scott and Lyman’s (1968) approach by dealing with accounts in situ as a sequential object made relevant in interaction.

A further departure with regard to the empirical treatment of accounts can be found in Houtkoop-Steenstra’s (1990) study on the use of accounts in issuing proposals. Four observations may be made with regard to this departure. First, rather than examining the use of accounts in responsive actions such as rejections or advice receiving, Houtkoop-Steenstra (1990) foregrounds the use of accounts in an initiating action. Second, the problematic nature of the accounted-for act also differs from that of blatantly untoward actions such as lateness or rejection, which threatens either the recipient’s or the speaker’s positive face (the desire to be well-regarded). Houtkoop-Steenstra’s (1990) account-worthy proposal, on the other hand, is that which the speaker does not like to make or the recipient may not like to accept. It is a delicate act that is more likely to be threatening the recipient’s negative face (the need to be left alone). Third, although Houtkoop-Steenstra (1990) specifically cites Scott and Lyman’s (1968) definition of accounts as a starting point for her study, she does not further divide her accounts into ‘excuses’ and ‘justification.’ A closer look at her data may reveal why:
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[Houtkoop-Steenstra 1990: 112]

R: Is: N: I around?
Proposal H: U: h could you call back in 5 minutes?
N-Y-Acc. R: Pardon me?: =
Proposal H: = could you call back in 5 minutes?
N-Y-Acc. (0.8)
Account H: → She’ll be there then.
Accept R: Oh yeah. I will.

In this case, the delicate request of asking H to call back is accounted for by the fact that Nel will be back to take the call by that time. One might notice that the account cannot be easily categorized as either ‘excuse’ or ‘justification,’ and neither can the other ones found in her data:

(a) ‘I’m a little short of money’ as an account for a request for money.
(b) ‘You go along very well with Lex’ as an account for ‘You’d test the waters with Lex.’ (Houtkoop-Steenstra 1990: 115)

These accounts provide reasons for the affiliated proposals, but do so without denying either the responsibility of the speaker or the problematic nature of the proposal. In the case of (a), for example, ‘short of money’ works neither as a ‘no fault’ excuse nor as a ‘no harm incurred’ justification for the money request. Instead, the accounts simply offer a ‘neutral’ sort of reasoning behind the proposals. One might perhaps argue that these accounts present the causes for the delicate action, ‘cause’ being a more generalized category that subsumes ‘excuse’ (cf. ‘effect’ being a more generalized category that subsumes ‘justification’).

Finally, Houtkoop-Steenstra’s (1990) analysis has shown that besides their remedial function of saving face or ‘repairing the broken,’ accounts are also instrumental in handling potential or actual resistance of the proposal. In other words, they carry the additional proactive function of problem-solving. Firth (1995) also shows that accounts can be used creatively in problem-solving business negotiation to reach substantive agreement.

In sum, researchers seem to have held slightly varying views of what constitutes ‘account-worthy’ conduct or what specific sort of face-threat is contained in that conduct. Also shifting is the understanding of the nature or design of the accounts themselves, that is, between the narrowly construed division of ‘excuses’ or ‘justifications,’ where the focus is placed upon denying the responsibility for, or the problematic nature of, the accounted-for behavior, and the broad view of accounts as a general line of reasoning (e.g. cause and effect) produced to explain the accounted-for behavior. Finally, the functions of accounts range from addressing face-threats to solving problems.

The current study contributes to this existing literature by exploring the use of accounts in performing the delicate action of advice giving in the institutional context of graduate peer tutoring.
ACCOUNTS IN GRADUATE PEER TUTORING

For the purpose of this paper, accounts are defined broadly as the reasoning (i.e. cause and effect) provided to bolster the viability of the advice, and in the context of advice giving, such reasoning is specifically presented as the problems that trigger the advice and the benefits that the advice can potentially generate. The problem-accounts typically transpire as an explicit or implicit ‘complaint,’ which grounds the completed, ongoing, or projected advice. For example:

(01) y’ kind’ve- drift a little bit.
(02) there’s like a lot’v (0.5) > I don’t know < how important everything is.
(03) cuz I- I kinda [get it, and I keep g- going back ]> and say this is what it means.

It should be noted that the problem-accounts may be doing complaining implicitly. Invoking a rule, for example, implicates the breaking of that rule. The benefit-accounts, on the other hand, promote the desirability of the advice:

(04) that’ll save you time.
(05) it’s- it gives the text more cohesion.
(06) It’s easier for the reader to process.

Just like the problem-accounts that may not be ostensibly doing problematizing, benefit-accounts may not always be explicitly naming a benefit. The account in the following turn, for example, simply offers factual support for the advice. The fact itself is not a benefit per se, but it appeals to the external validity of the advice, and ultimately, its desirability and benefit to the text.

(07) you can also mention (.) er- ( ). cuz he was a major force in that. 
 an’ a CUNY graduate. ◦
 (CUNY stands for ‘City University of New York’)

In contrast to Scott and Lyman’s (1968) excuse-justification division of accounts, this problem-benefit division appeals to the broader categories of cause and effect in accounting, and accordingly, orients less to the ‘untoward’ nature of the accounted-for behavior and more to its rational organization.

DATA SET

The data set consists of 15 graduate peer tutoring sessions and a total of 143 advising sequences collected over a period of four years at a graduate writing center. The clients are graduate students working on their course papers, MA theses or doctoral dissertations; the consultants are either fellow graduate students or alumni of the same school. Tutoring is a paid service at this center.

Depending on the individual pairs of participants, some sessions were audiorecorded and some videorecorded. One client never gave consent to videorecording; one moved from audio to video in later sessions; the rest started
out with video. Audio records force the analysis to isolate the linguistic from the non-vocal cues in these encounters. One possible advantage of audiorecording in general, however, is that it might be one way to address, if not solve, what Labov (1970: 47) calls the ‘observer’s paradox’ – what linguists strive to observe closely (i.e. how people actually speak) is the very style speakers use when they are not being observed. In the situation of audiorecording, the participants are no doubt still aware of the fact that they are being observed, but perhaps not to the extent were there a tripod and video camera in sight.

Consultants generally go about the tutoring business in two ways. Some read the manuscript before the meeting and use the meeting time to go over their prepared comments – what Vehviläinen (2006) refers to as ‘text feedback.’ Some encounter the manuscript for the first time at the meeting, in which case they may read the paper silently and voice their comments intermittently. The reading may also be done aloud by either the consultant or the client.

Although the tutoring to be considered in this paper occurs outside of a classroom and sometimes even outside of the writing center, the interaction is primarily institutional (Drew and Heritage 1992). First, it is goal-oriented. The client comes to the writing center with the specific goal of improving the quality of a manuscript as well as with the broader goal of learning the craft of academic writing. Second, special constraints exist upon what is an allowable contribution to the business at hand. Although conversation between the consultant and the client may slip into chatting from time to time, those portions of talk are typically not considered as doing tutoring, and are thereby often marked as digressions and quickly abandoned. Finally, inferential frameworks and procedures particular to the tutoring context may be in operation. For example, questions normally interpreted as information seeking in ordinary conversation might be understood to be doing advice giving.

The analysis proceeds as follows: I first show some cases where accounts are not invoked in advice giving by way of gaining an initial understanding of what accounts do interactionally. The bulk of my analysis is devoted to those accounts that do occur in advice giving. I consider first their sequential positions in relation to client responses, and, based on these considerations, I make an argument for their interactional utilities. In the transcript, AC refers to ‘account,’ AD refers to ‘advice,’ and words placed inside single quotes refer to written words being read out aloud.

GIVING ADVICE WITHOUT ACCOUNTS

Accounts are not an invariable fixture in advice giving. Approximately one-third (47 out of 143) of the advising sequences in my data are account-free. Advice tends to be delivered without accounts under two conditions: (1) when it deals with local problems such as grammar, mechanics, conventions, wording, and style (see segments 08–10 below); and (2) when it involves some client initiative in either requesting (segment 09) or inferring (segment 10) the advice, which
the consultant subsequently provides or confirms without any account. In other words, although my collection includes both consultant-initiated and client-initiated sequences, the consultant’s advice is routinely not accounted for when client initiation is involved. This seems to parallel Fisher and Groce’s (1990) finding that doctors, in their responses to patient questions, never append any accounts.

(08)

1 Priya: “Okay.” ‘I have been raised in the Eastern culture
where some of these concepts are not existent and
the test gave me ( ) on my own adolescence.’
2 Liam: AD→ are no::n ( ) not existent. are non ex- or
don’t exist. Just simply say that where
these ( ) concepts don’t ex↑ist.
3 Priya: All right ((continues reading))

(09)

1 Jeff: ‘in a study (0.5) u:h by Rudden an’-’ (0.5)
2 Caitlin: >I should say < in a study. = ‘right? in- >‘instead of
3 in the study. ◦<
4 Jeff: AD→ Ye: ( ) in a study right. = ln (2.0) ((writing)) a in a
study by ( .) in a study by yeah ( .) Rudden and ( ).
5 okay .hhh ((continues))

(10)

1 Jeff: ‘CU:NY remediation. one.’
2 (0.5)
3 ‘Through↑ou- CUNY, (0.8)↑history:’ ((clears
throat)) uh ‘>throughout CUN-<’ (0.5)
4 Keith: Throughout CU: NY’s =
5 Jeff: AD→ = Ri:ght. Exactly. CUNY’s ( .) history =

Houtkoop-Steenstra (1990: 122) found that some proposals are not accounted for because the accounts are implicitly present and inferable ‘from the conversational context or from the situation.’ Similarly, she notes in her earlier work that ‘proposals are to be accounted for when the account is not apparent’ (Houtkoop-Steenstra 1987: 152). In other words, accounts remain unspoken when they are self-evident.

In the case of segment (08), the self-evident nature of the account comes from its intuitive quality. If the client were to seek an account, she might get something like ‘It just sounds better.’ In the cases of segments (09) and (10), the implicit accounts are grammatical rules – items not subject to challenge (cf. statements such as ‘Everyone does.’ or A3Ns in Sacks 1992: 23–24).

In what follows, I turn to the accounts that do occur in advice giving. I begin by examining their sequential positions in relation to client responses.
ACCOUNT POSITIONS AND CLIENT RESPONSES

This section is devoted to detailing the sequential positions of the accounts used in advice giving, and more specifically, their relevance to client responses, which may range from simple acceptance token ‘Okay’ and/or its verbal or non-verbal equivalent (e.g. nodding, writing), complex forms of acceptance (Waring 2007), to the more problematic silence, delay, repair initiation, weak acceptance or overt resistance (Waring 2005). As will be shown, depending on their temporal distance from the affiliated advice, the accounts may be designed to avoid advice delivery altogether, forestall potential resistance, reassert advice in the face of actual resistance, or solidify acceptance.

In what Cody and McLaughlin (1990: 233) call the canonical sequence of accounts – ‘reproach–account–evaluation’ – accounts occupy a single position: after the reproach of some sort of failure event. In contrast, four sequential positions of accounts related to advice giving have been located in my data: (1) pre-advice; (2) immediately post-advice; (3) post-problematic uptake; (4) post-acceptance.

In some cases, the same advice is accounted for in more than one position, creating what I call the ‘hybrid’ sequence. There are a total of 20 hybrid sequences in my data, fifteen of which begin with first-position pre-advice accounts, and five with second-position immediately post-advice accounts. The most frequent type of hybrid accounts are pre-advice first-position accounts in conjunction with post advice fourth-position accounts.

A total of 125 instances of the four types of position-based accounts are found in the data, and they are distributed as follows (see Figure 1). Note that the counting was conducted and the graph produced not before, but after, a detailed analysis of the individual segments.

**First-position accounts: Pre-advice**

Accounts may be positioned before any advice is launched. As Houtkoop-Steenstra (1987: 152) notes, ‘proposals are usually accounted for in the preface
of the proposal, in which speakers may, for example, state a problem, after which they will come up with a proposal, which may solve this problem.’ As shown in Figure 1, these first-position accounts are the most frequently utilized in my data – almost 40 percent of the total number of instances.

First-position accounts usually identify a problem in the manuscript, and in so doing, invite the recipients to formulate the advice itself as an ‘upshot’ of the problem with which they concur. It is a maximally face-saving strategy designed to avoid the delicate action of advice giving. The overwhelming occurrences of first-position accounts may offer one sort of evidence for the preference for avoiding explicit advice giving.

In the segment below, Heidi the consultant begins the sequence by seeking confirmation on the number and gender of the subjects in Lena’s manuscript. Lena provides the correct information in line 3, which makes evident the inaccuracy of Heidi’s candidate formulation. The misunderstanding revealed in lines 1–3 is then used as a basis for Heidi’s subsequent ‘complaint,’ which alludes to Lena’s lack of clarity and serves as a problem-account for her forthcoming advice, which she ends up not having to articulate.

(11)

1 Heidi: Um (.) It’s six people >three male three female<
2 right?
3 Lena: U:h four female, two male.
4 Heidi: AC→ Okay, I guess ( ) >i- i-< it’s hard for me
5 [to figure out wh]ich- ( ) male [( )fe ] male( )
6 Lena: [>all right.< ] [“okay.”]
7 AD→ So: [shall I say fo ]ur? >okay.<
8 Heidi: AD→ [(so it’s four ) ] Y[e a h. ]
9 Lena: [>“all right.”<]

In lines 6–7, Lena interruptively acknowledges her lack of clarity (‘all right’ and ‘okay’) and proceeds to specifically infer Heidi’s advice (‘shall I say four’). Heidi confirms that inference in line 8, which is then acknowledged by Lena in line 9. As shown, it is Lena the client, not Heidi the consultant, who eventually articulates the remedy for the problem – the advice.

One advantage of doing a pre-advice account is that it maximizes the opportunities for client-inferred advice. In fact, there seems to be a preference for client-generated solutions in these advising sequences (Waring 2006). Vehviläinen (2003) also shows that counselors orient to students’ self-directedness in career counseling.

Of course, not all pre-advice accounts automatically lead to client-inferred advice. The following segment begins with the consultant identifying a problem, thereby providing a problem-account (lines 1–2) for his forthcoming advice. It turns out that although the client fully agrees with the consultant’s assessment of the problem (see collaborative completion in line 3), this agreement does not lead to her inferring the advice.
Line 5 is where Priya could have provided a solution or inferred the advice but didn’t. What she proceeds to do is deny her responsibility for the problem by attributing it to an external condition (‘He’s not there!’) – a classic ‘excuse.’ Only when it has become very clear that no solution is forthcoming from Priya (see the two gaps in lines 8 and 10 and Priya’s reassertion of her ‘excuse’ in line 9) does Liam explicitly launch his advice in line 11, which is then rejected outright by Priya in line 12.2 Liam’s multiple delays that exhibit a preference for client-inferred advice fit nicely with the preference for self-correction shown in Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977).

In short, an important gain of using pre-advice accounts is that, if successful, they circumvent the face-threat of executing the delicate act of advice giving, and in the meantime, promote advice acceptance. After all, there is no stronger form of acceptance than the client’s articulating the advice him/herself. As Houtkoop-Steenstra (1990: 122) points out, pre-proposal accounts play a role in ‘establishing the acceptance of the proposal.’ This is not to say, however, that minimizing face threat and managing resistance are the only accomplishments of first-position accounts. By allowing for client-generated solutions, pre-advice accounts may also be advancing client autonomy and thus performing a certain ‘teaching’ function. Koshik (2005: 154), for example, notes ‘a preference in middle-class North American culture, at least in some types of teaching sessions, for teaching by eliciting from the student rather than informing the student directly.’

**Second-position accounts: Immediately post-advice**

Accounts are also produced in the ‘second position’ immediately after the advice as part of the advising turn, where, noticeably, the advice itself tends to be delivered with some mitigation, which may compensate for the absence of pre-advice account and its face-saving utility. These accounts also appear to be
problem-oriented, though not as overtly so as first-position accounts. Unlike the explicit complaint of ‘you just mentioned X out of the blue,’ for example, the account of ‘becuz you’re using some of these terms’ in segment (13) below only alludes to the writer’s problematic conduct of not giving proper credit to her sources. This might be attributed to the fact that the advice itself already presupposes a problem that does not need further exacerbation. By offering a rationale for the advice, second-position accounts work to preempt the ‘why’ question from the client, and in so doing, forestall potential resistance.

In the following segment, Jeff the consultant’s carefully formulated (‘you might wanna’) advice in lines 4–5 is followed immediately, without any gap or a falling intonation, by a ‘becuz’ account in line 6. Caitlin’s ‘Ye:ah’ in line 7 aligns with the account, and her ‘◦’kay.’ in line 9 accepts the advice.

(13)

1 Jeff: Oka:y, ‘an’ prompt- feedback corrections .hhh are
2   given (.) for selective,°
3 Caitlin: m[hm?
4 Jeff: AD→ ‘˃errors˂ now, .hhh with these you might
5   wanna cite somebody
6 AC→ becuz you’re usin’ some of these ter:ms,
7 Caitlin: Ye:ah.
8   (0.6)
9   ◦’kay.◦

In segment (14) below, as Liam the consultant begins to deliver his advice in the form of a comment (line 2), Priya interruptively launches a candidate assessment ‘Is it bad?,’ thus orienting to Liam’s incipient comment as being negative. Liam’s ensuing silence in line 4 foreshadows his dispreferred response: aligning with Priya’s ‘self-deprecation’ (Pomerantz 1984). In line 5, Liam’s high-pitched ‘well’ along with its cut-off further delays his upcoming response. His actual advice of ‘tighten it up a little’ (line 6) is then delivered with a continuing intonation that projects further talk – an account of why the tightening is needed (lines 7–8). The account begins with ‘there’s like a lo:t’v,’ which appears to be heading toward some sort of complaint about the text, but subsequently abandoned for the mitigated ‘I don’t know how important everything is’ that frames the problem as Liam’s own uncertainty. Again, we are witnessing the delicate formulation of the advice, the no-gap follow-up of an account, and the toned-down quality of the account.

(14)

1 Priya: Where are we.
2 Liam: Ah::m (0.5) >My only< [comment]
3 Priya: [Is it bad? ]
4   (1.0)
Liam: AD→ W↑ell- what I think you need to focus on (.) is
tighten it up a little bit.
AC→ there’s like a lot ’v (0.5) ⇒ I don’t know < how
important everything is.
( . )
when you discuss it. ((7 lines omitted))
Liam: [Each one of them has to have- has to be =
Priya: [That’s-
Liam: = like a building block of what you’re sa:ying.
Priya: But that’s what- is not th↑e:re.

Priya’s uptake, however, is a bit different from Caitlin’s in the previous segment. Particularly noticeable is her absence of uptake during Liam’s extended multi-unit account. The disaffiliation implicit in that absence is then made explicit in her eventual response in line 14, which rejects the feasibility of Liam’s advice by appealing to an external circumstance beyond her control (’But that’s what- is not th↑e:re.’).

In segment (15) below, Heidi’s advice delivery is preceded by and mitigated with ‘I was wondering if you could...’ and without any gap, the quietly uttered account of ‘I don’t think that’s your focus’ ensues. Again, ‘I don’t think that’s your focus’ is a subtle rendering of an organization problem. In this case, however, Lena immediately accepts the advice without having heard the account, showing that what the advice giver treats as accountable might not be perceived by the advice recipient as such.

(15)
Heidi: AD→ ((reading the list of headings)). I was ↑wondering, =
Lena: = Okay?
Heidi: if you ↑could ( . ) for the general organization I
wanna make the rejecting part ( . ) part of your intro
to the chapter
AC→ [⇒ I don’t think that’s your focus.]
Lena: [⇒ Okay? <
⇒ I agree. <
Heidi: Yeah [that’s like a background ( )]
Lena: > [I totally agree. I didn’t even know if I]
⇒ just cut it. < You know I mean,

As shown, in all three cases, the advice is delivered without any pre-advice account, and this fronting of the advice is clearly treated by the advice giver as a delicate event, as shown in the (1) mitigated and delayed design of the advice itself as well as the (2) no-gap launching of the account thereafter. There is, therefore, a visible orientation towards treating the stand-alone advice as dispreferred. Two implications of this orientation may be entertained. Firstly, an immediate sequential consequence of a ‘solo advice’ may be its possibility to incur the ‘why’ question from the client, and the ‘why’ query can at its best delay advice
acceptance and at its worst lead to advice resistance. The account, therefore, plays a role in pre-empting these undesirable outcomes. Secondly, in an educational context, advice is given not just to be accepted, but also to be understood, and grounding one’s advice in critical reasoning is integral to establishing such an understanding. In the absence of a pre-advice account, making sure that one’s advice is nevertheless accounted for, and accounted for immediately may thus be the consultant’s way of orienting to this institutional goal of socializing the clients into the discourses of academic writing.

*Third-position accounts: Post-problematic uptake*

Post-advice accounts may also be produced in the ‘third position’ – following some problematic uptake from the client, which can consist of any response other than clear acceptance (e.g. delay, repair, weak acceptance, resistance). The accounts are then invoked to specifically address such problematic uptake, and these accounts can be either problem- or benefit-oriented (see discussion towards the end of this section on the implication of benefit-accounts). Typically, the consultant initially treats his/her advice as not account-worthy only to discover otherwise later on (see Houtkoop-Steenstra 1990 for a discussion on the negotiability of the necessity of accounts).

The following segment deals with a mechanics issue. As Jeff the consultant begins to read the section heading ‘No Child Left Behind’ in Caitlin’s manuscript, he notices an extra line space between the heading and the preceding paragraph (i.e. triple instead of double). His ‘this needs to go up’ therefore asks Caitlin to move the heading one line up so that the extra line can be deleted. Note that this advice is delivered without an account. As discussed earlier, account-free advice giving is usually done when the advice relates to local problems such as mechanics and involves non-negotiable rules, which is the case here – Jeff proposes to fix the spacing of the text. No immediate acceptance comes from Caitlin. In line 3, she produces a ‘mhm,’ which Jeff subsequently treats as a continuer by adding an increment in line 4. A gap of (0.8) second silence ensues during which Caitlin again fails to provide any clear uptake:

(16)

| 1 | Jeff: AD→ ‘No child left behind’ >now< this |
| 2 | needs to () go up. |
| 3 | Caitlin: mhm= |
| 4 | Jeff: =one. |
| 5 | (0.8) |
| 6 | Jeff: AC→ (>to get more like< ^) t- Nothing should be () |
| 7 | >I mean < everything should be double |
| 8 | spaced. |
| 9 | Caitlin: mhm? ((nods)) |
| 10 | Jeff: So, there’s not- this is two spaces [here ]. |
| 11 | Caitlin: [mhm?] |
| 12 | ((nods)) |
In line 6, Jeff begins to elaborate his advice, heading towards noting its potential effect. He then abandons that trajectory with a cut-off before launching a rule-based account, which is initially designed as a negative statement (‘Nothing should be’) but quickly revised into a positively formulated one (‘everything should be’). This careful account-formulation may in part be displaying Jeff’s orientation towards Caitlin’s problematic uptake as evidence of some face threat incurred by the advice. Note that Jeff’s account follows the absence of any clear display of acceptance from Caitlin, and thereby specifically addresses the problematic nature of that absence, and does so successfully (see Caitlin’s nodding in line 9).

In segment (17), Heidi the consultant’s advice (lines 3–4) is delivered in a quiet tone after a long pause of (2.5) seconds. Note that the advice-relevant issue is not of simple mechanics but concerns the organization of the paper. It is certainly an account-worthy one. The (2.5) silence, the quiet tone, and the mitigation of ‘we should probably’ thus combine to evidence Heidi’s understanding of the absence of an account up to this point as dispreferred.

Not surprisingly, the account-free advice receives a (0.5) gap of silence (line 5) and Lena’s weak acceptance token “okay” in line 6, which is then treated by Heidi as inadequate.

As shown in line 7, instead of moving on to a new point, Heidi proceeds to provide an account, which comes in the form a wh-question (cf. Koshik 2003 on wh-questions functioning as statements: ‘When have I?’ = ‘I have never.’), arguing for the lack of relevance of ‘learning environment.’ The wh-question then forms a problem-account for the advice of ‘cutting learning environment,’ providing a basis upon which the advice may be understood, and by extension, unequivocally accepted. Houtkoop-Steenstra (1987: 13–14) also shows that ‘The initial speaker, not having received a (full) acceptance, often goes on to account for the reason the proposal is made or, why it is made this way.’ In fact, more needs to be said about Heidi’s taking issue with the strength of Lena’s acceptance. Given that weaker acceptance may be more indicative of the client’s problem in understanding the advice than stronger acceptance, Heidi’s action may in part display her treatment of understanding as an equally important, if not the ultimate, goal in this institutional encounter.
Two points may be noted of Lena’s response in lines 8–9, where she defends the inclusion of ‘learning environment’ by pointing out its relevance to the larger theme of the section: it retrospectively provides an understanding of her earlier problematic uptake as incipient resistance; and it shows that, again, an account is not always successful in accomplishing what it is designed to accomplish.

Finally, third-position accounts are not always problem-based, as shown in segment (18) below:

(18)

1 Jeff: ‘so this as an (..) o- as an opportunity ↑to impro:ve
2 .h academic quality (..) of a- CUNY (.)
3 >education.’ =okay.<
4 (.)
5 AD→ I- I would use ‘institution.’
6 (.)
7 AC→ quality of a CUNY institution. .hh I think-(0.9)
8 that’s o↑kay. This is alright ↑now. =this is
9 alright=but I think institution
10 [works a little bit better. ]
11 Keith: [institution perhaps a little] better. =yeah. =
12 Jeff: =it works a little better. =Therefore they’re both
13 okay.

In line 5, Jeff the consultant delivers his advice ‘I would do X.’ without an account, and in so doing, treats the reason for the simple word replacement as self-evident. After all, CUNY does primarily refer to an institution. However, Keith produces no immediate uptake. In line 7, Jeff clarifies the replacement target by pre-framing it with ‘quality of a CUNY,’ thus treating Keith’s silence as a need to understand what ‘institution’ is replacing exactly.

As Keith continues to remain silent, Jeff takes an in-breath and proceeds with an account. What is particularly noticeable about this account is that it foregrounds the modest benefit of the advice (‘works a little better’). Moreover, the stated benefit is prefaced by an acknowledgement of the account as being specifically not problem-based (‘that’s o↑kay. This is alright ↑now. = this is alright’). Thus, the account plays a role not only in rallying alignment from Keith but also in attending to the latter’s face concern: the desire to be seen as competent. In line 11, Keith aligns with Jeff’s account with a slightly hedged ‘perhaps a little better’ and ‘yeah.’

As can be seen, third-position accounts are primarily given as resistance-management devices to address the clients’ problematic uptake. They can also, especially in the case of benefit-accounts that avoid attributing any ‘fault’ to the client’s work, exhibit an enhanced level of sensitivity towards the possibly threatened face of the recipients. Finally, by treating any weak acceptance as insufficient, third-position accounts serve to display the consultants’ orientation towards ‘understanding’ as both a critical basis for true acceptance and an important goal of this institutional encounter.
The cases of accounts presented so far, regardless of their varying accomplishments, share the common interest in and utility of managing potential or actual advice resistance. The final category of accounts is markedly different in that they are produced post-acceptance, where resistance is no longer a relevant interactional issue.

**Fourth-position accounts: Post-acceptance**

As shown in Figure 1 earlier, fourth-position accounts are the least used type in my data. One of their notable features is that they are mostly benefit-based and have a distinctly forward-looking quality (e.g. ‘That’ll save you time.’). They clearly play a role in solidifying the advice as well as the already obtained acceptance. At the same time, they also seem to be doing other things. A fourth-position account, for instance, can simply be doing closing by recapitulating an earlier account or by appending an additional benefit of the advice just to ‘close the deal’ on a positive note, so to speak. These add-ons are often delivered in a soft tone or a quick pace, which marks their final-item status. These cases in which accounts play a mainly structural role in sequence-closing will not be the focus of my analysis.

Segment (19) below begins with Jeff the consultant reading the first sentence of a new paragraph in Caitlin’s manuscript, which is, ‘In language teaching, we have moved away from only explicit teaching methods . . . ’ His reading stops at the word ‘from,’ which, after the (1.0) second pause, prompts a candidate self-correction from Caitlin. Jeff’s focus, however, is not on what comes after ‘from,’ but on what comes before the entire sentence, that is, the final sentence in the previous paragraph, which ends in ‘(2000)’ – a year citation for the author Colombo’s work, and Jeff’s advice targets the lack of need for this citation (lines 5–6). The mismatch of the focal points between Jeff and Caitlin seems to have resulted from the fact that Jeff is delivering his comments ‘online’ rather than from a prepared list of feedback. Presumably, consultants are less likely to be retrospectively ‘looking at’ and reconsidering a portion of text during the giving of prepared comments.

In line 7, Caitlin receives the advice in transitional overlap (Jefferson 1983) with a change-of-state token (Heritage 1984b) followed by a token of acceptance (‘okay.’). Here we have a claim of not just acceptance, but also understanding. With the token ‘Oh,’ Caitlin makes evident her doing of realization. In other words, without having heard any account, Caitlin has clearly treated Jeff’s advice as both adequate and agreeable.

(19)

1 Jeff: .hhh ‘In language teaching, (0.2) we have (.)
2 moved away from’ (1.0)
3 Caitlin: teaching only explicitly? h[eh heh h]
4 Jeff: [u: :::::::: ]:::m
5 AD→ >I’m just looking at here = y- y-< I don’t
Nevertheless, in line 8, Jeff proceeds with an account, which Caitlin receives with a soft-toned ‘kay.’ Jeff’s account appears to be solidifying both his advice and Caitlin’s acceptance. The question is, why solidify now? Is there any evidence that either the advice or the acceptance needs solidifying?

The answer may be ‘yes.’ First, Jeff’s ‘Yes. right.’ in line 10 does the self-confirmation which recontextualizes his earlier advice as a candidate proposal rather than a final solution. It may be argued then that the account is in fact doing some persuasive work by addressing the consultant’s own uncertainty. Second, Caitlin’s ‘Oh’ in line 7 claims rather than shows her understanding of why the year citation is not needed. Thus, Jeff’s account may also be addressing the possibly unfounded nature of Caitlin’s understanding-claim.

Briefly, a distinct interest of fourth-position accounts seems to lie in the rational basis for, or understanding of, the advice, not simply its acceptance. This concern for reason and understanding is consistent with the institutional goal of this particular pedagogical setting, that is, to socialize the graduate student writers into the discursive practices of academic writing.

The final segment is a more dramatic exemplar of the consultant’s persevering with fourth-position accounts despite the client’s acceptance of the advice. The segment begins with Heidi’s advice demonstrating how to organize a claim and its evidence, which ends up being a mini-lecture disregarding Lena’s multiple understanding-claims. Heidi’s initial advice is treated by Lena as immediately agreeable with no need for any further accounts: ‘mhm?’ (line 3) implicitly claims understanding of the advice; ‘Got it’ (line 6) explicitly does so; ‘I hear you’ (line 8) reformulates her prior understanding-claim; the non-verbal gesture of putting this advice down in writing (line 12) signals actual acceptance; ‘that make sens:::e.’ justifies that acceptance (line 15). Heidi’s advice has so far received multiple preferred responses, and the sequence is possibly closed.

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Still, Heidi’s mini-lecture continues with two benefit-accounts: first in line 10 by appealing to the desirable effect of an ‘internal organization,’ which ends up being submerged in simultaneous talk, and then again in line 16 by invoking the aesthetics of the text (‘a look of text data text data’). The two accounts solidify the advice by accentuating its benefits with regard to both logic and aesthetics. They appear to serve a primarily pedagogical purpose – that of helping Lena understand the reasoning behind this particular way of organization. After all, acceptance does not presuppose understanding, and while Lena has claimed her understanding of the advice in multiple ways, she has not shown this understanding by, for example, volunteering a candidate rationale for the advice.

Some interesting insights may also be gained from examining the ways in which Lena the client treats these accounts. Since she might not have registered Heidi’s first account due to the overlap, we will focus on Lena’s uptake of Heidi’s second account. The (1.0) second gap of silence in line 20 is a place where Lena could have displayed some sort of alignment with Heidi’s account but didn’t. As noted earlier, before the account, Lena had clearly been orienting to the closing of the sequence, and her silence at this particular juncture may be one way to display her understanding of the exhausted state of the topic. Still, Heidi resumes her account in line 21, to which Lena responds with the interruptively launched, redundancy-signaling, multiple ‘yeah’s, specifically indicating that Heidi has persisted unnecessarily (Stivers 2004). At the same time, by underscoring the attempt as her ‘first shot,’ Lena may also be claiming that she simply was not ready to consider the logic and aesthetics of the text at this earlier stage, and that this lack of readiness does not automatically equal a lack of understanding that warrants the accounts. What these responses show is that for Lena the client, once
the advice has been accepted, any further account from the advice giver becomes pointless. This particular stance evidences Lena’s understanding of accounts as devices for securing advice acceptance.

Thus, in this case, on the one hand, the accounts are produced by the consultant to further solidify her advice and the client’s acceptance, and in so doing, achieve the pedagogical goal of socializing the client into the discourses of academic writing. On the other hand, the client treats the account in a way that shows her understanding of accounts as a resistance-managing practice, thereby their irrelevance once acceptance has already been established.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I have examined the use of accounts by reference to the specific activity of advice giving. I have shown that within this activity, accounts are the explanations given to bolster the viability of the advice by either grounding the advice in some problem (problem-accounts) or highlighting the benefits that may be generated by the advice (benefit-accounts). These accounts appear in four canonical positions: pre-advice (1st position); immediately post-advice (2nd position); post-problematic uptake (3rd position); and post-acceptance (4th position). Taken together, they accomplish three main interactional goals: save face, manage resistance, and doing pedagogy.

The face-saving function of accounts is most evident when they are produced prior to the advice in the first position, where the problem-account itself may prompt the recipient to infer the solution and allow the speaker to sidestep the delicate act of advice giving altogether. Benefit-accounts given in the third position may also neutralize the face-threatening act of advice giving by framing the advice not as a problem-fixer, but an alternative to be considered (e.g. ‘Education’ is fine, but ‘institution’ might work a little better).

Besides dealing with the face-threatening nature of advice giving, accounts also play an important role in minimizing resistance and expediting acceptance, and to various degrees, this function can be observed in all four positions. First-position accounts accomplish this goal by inviting the recipient to formulate the advice as an ‘upshot’ of the account with which they concur. Second-position accounts can forestall resistance by grounding the advice before it is questioned by the recipient. Third-position accounts, by virtue of their sequential position, are specifically produced to address any lack of clear display of acceptance from the client. Fourth-position accounts may be produced to manage the advice giver’s own uncertainty/resistance and are often treated by the recipients as resistance-management devices. On a more general note, the very practice of rationalizing the advice, by invoking either the problem that grounds the advice or the benefit that enhances the desirability of the advice, contributes to establishing its acceptability, and by extension, to managing resistance.

Finally, by demonstrating, underlining, and elaborating the advice-relevant problems as well as benefits, accounts also accomplish the important institutional
goal of socializing the graduate student writers into the various practices of academic writing. Two main observations may be useful in anchoring our understanding of this pedagogical utility of accounts. First, as one might recall, first-position accounts can serve to promote self-discovery through eliciting, not informing. Second, advice givers, in their use of accounts, display a keen interest in the recipients’ understanding, not just acceptance, of the advice. This interest is displayed not only in fourth-position accounts (though most visibly so in fourth-position accounts) but also in second- and third-position accounts. As the ‘why’ question is an important pedagogical resource for understanding and learning, the accounts help the recipients learn from the advice by presenting the general principle behind the advice. Both the propensity to promote self-discovery and the concern for reaching new understandings are integral to the pedagogical mission of the particular institutional context.

The nature of these interactional accomplishments discussed above is consistent with our understanding of advice giving as a face-threatening activity, of advice resistance as a routine challenge for that activity, and of the broader pedagogical goal of advice giving in an academic context.

The findings contribute to the literature on both advising and accounts. In the advising literature, given what appears to be a broad consensus on the delicate nature of advice giving, researchers have discovered and described a range of methods for neutralizing the intrinsic face threat and managing potential resistance. These methods often involve the ways in which advice is formulated or the order in which advice is given. By giving serious consideration to the utility of accounts in coping with the advice-relevant face threats and resistance, this study expands our understanding of the intricate maneuvers involved in advice giving. Research in the accounts literature, on the other hand, has typically (though not always) concerned the deployment of accounts in responding actions (e.g. rejection) as well as their remedial functions. The current study demonstrates the use of accounts in the initiating action of advice giving as well as their multiple uses that encompass both remedial (i.e. address face threats or actual resistance) and proactive (i.e. pre-empt potential resistance and promote a pedagogical agenda) functions. In particular, it showcases the contribution of accounts to constructing the institutionality of discourse. By proposing and illustrating the ‘problem vs. benefit’ division of accounts, this study also underscores the context-specific nature of accounts while furthering the need to expand upon Scott and Lyman’s (1968) original ‘excuse vs. justification’ categorization.

In closing, I have mainly tackled the question of what accounts are used to accomplish when they are used, and only touched upon the question of when they are used. Other interesting questions regarding the sociolinguistic distribution of to whom and by whom accounts are used remain unanswered. Is it possible, for example, that the presence of Priya as a native speaker of Indian English has incurred more use of accounts by the consultant given the potentially larger linguistic and cultural gaps between the participants? It is hoped that the findings of this study have laid down some ground work for broadening our inquiry into
the rich array of interactional issues surrounding the use of accounts in advice giving.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Association for Applied Linguistics Annual Conference (AAAL) in Montreal, Canada, 2006. I gratefully acknowledge the helpful feedback provided by the three anonymous reviewers. In particular, I thank the editors Nikolas Coupland and Allan Bell for their guidance, vision, and professionalism. All remaining errors are mine, of course.

2. Priya’s rejection of the advice might be a result of cross-cultural difference or even misunderstanding, given her status as a non-native speaker of American English (Allan Bell p.c.).

REFERENCES


Vehviläinen, Sanna. 2006. Students’ advice initiating questions in academic supervision. Paper presented at the International Conference on Conversation Analysis, Helsinki, Finland.


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**APPENDIX**

**Transcription conventions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>untimed perceptible pause within a turn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_</td>
<td>stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAPS</td>
<td>very emphatic stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↑</td>
<td>high pitch on word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>sentence-final falling intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>yes/no question rising intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>glottal stop, or abrupt cutting off of sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:</td>
<td>lengthened vowel sound (extra colons indicate greater lengthening)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>latch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→</td>
<td>highlights point of analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[]</td>
<td>overlapped talk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007
°soft°  spoken softly/decreased volume
> <  increased speed
( )  (empty parenthesis) transcription impossible
(words)  uncertain transcription
( ))  comments on background or skipped talk
.hhh  inbreath
‘words’  written words being read out aloud

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