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Claiming Insufficient Knowledge

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When speakers produce "I don't knows" in ordinary conversation, they claim insufficient knowledge about the matters at hand. Analysis of diverse conversational environments reveal, however, that speakers' claims nevertheless accomplish a variety of subtle actions. "I don't knows" may be strategically and ambiguously deployed across the following achievements: (a) marking uncertainty and concerns about next-positioned opinions, assessments, or troubles; (b) constructing neutral positions, designed to mitigate agreement and disagreement, by disattending and seeking closure on other-initiated topics (e.g., moving toward completing stories or working to avoid troubling issues); and (c) postponing or withholding acceptance of others' invited and requested actions. By examining moments where insufficient knowledge claims are contingently used as a resource, understandings of proactive yet delicately managed interactional conduct are forwarded. Such conduct is shown to be anchored in ordinary conversations but adapted in similar yet distinct ways within institutional interactions such as courtroom cross-examination.

Vernacular understandings of utterances such as "I don't know" in ordinary conversation may reveal that speakers simply, and unequivocally, do not know what they are talking about and are making that limitation known to others. Intuition alone makes obvious the fact that one's stock of knowledge is essentially incomplete, recurrently uncertain, and therefore limited in scope and application. For interactional participants and analysts alike, however, attributing verbatim meanings to words and utterances disregards the acutely organized nature of social interaction. When speakers' utterances are understood as literal descriptions of the information they impart, as isolated from the interactional environments they were designed to be reponsive to, the semantic content of an utterance such as "I don't know" is commensurate with such matters as *claiming insufficient knowledge*. Yet, constituent features of "claiming" as a collaborative achievement remain elusive and underspecified, and there is ultimately no assurance that the situated work being done through "I don't know" has anything at all to do with

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whatever claiming might be taken to mean. Therein lies the paradox of vernacular (and commonly, theoretical) invention, a dwelling for intuition and assumption, out of which arise ungrounded, hypothetical examples for making cases and proving points.

Such problems have been systematically addressed and share as a focal concern basic misunderstandings about the work speakers get done in the course of recruiting words and utterances to achieve not just any but particular and situated *actions* (see Levinson, 1983, 1992; Sacks, 1992a, 1992b; Schegloff, 1988, 1995). Social actions get constructed by speakers as responsive to what was heard and understood as meaningfully produced through immediately prior utterances. The practical upshots of these involvements make available the distinctive character of conduct in interaction. Speakers' emergent social actions are thus finely coordinated not by relying on "face value" assumptions or semantic content but, instead, as embedded displays of a practical and universal task: navigating one's way through here-and-now relevancies and contingencies of jointly constructed, often unexpected and unthinkingly produced, interactional circumstances (see Jacoby & Ochs, 1995).[1]

But how do researchers gain access to the predicaments such interactional circumstances entail? The initial step requires extending analysis beyond conceptualizations as the following: "Actual knowledge at hand differs from individual to individual [but] . . . even the simplest interaction in common life presupposes a series of common-sense constructs" (Schutz, 1967, pp. 14, 23). It is the routine and empirical nature of "commonsense constructs" that are of concern in this analysis, particularly the kinds of problems arising when knowledge at hand is brought to the forefront of interaction. In the ways that "I don't know" will be shown to rarely stand alone but preface subsequent talk in interaction, "knowing" and "not knowing" are not interactionally dichotomous but work together as inherently equivocal resources for organizing interaction. As speakers work in nontrivial ways to inform others that what they do or do not know is best heard as doubtful and uncertain regarding immediate circumstances and/or topics being addressed (but see Excerpt 4), the use of "I don't know" (and some variations thereof, e.g., "I don't remember," "I havta/gotta see") creates real-time ambiguities about the actual status of knowledge *claimed* and/or knowledge *demonstrated/possessed* (see Sacks, 1992b).[2] Speakers' "I don't knows" may have little or anything to do with not knowing, because claiming and demonstrating knowledge (or lack thereof) can be revealed as distinct sorts of activities. Distinctions are thus offered between claiming and demonstrating by examining interactional contingencies where such distinctions are of practical import for participants' projects. These distinctions, essentially between theoretical and empirical ambiguities (Schegloff, 1984), give rise to two related matters taken up in this article.

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First, speakers build into "I don't know" and its variations a range of actions, understandings of which demand treating claiming provisionally when it comes to insufficient knowledge. These kinds of interactional possibilities may appear contradictory and thus counterintuitive. But in practice, such trajectories are nevertheless apparent and readily observable when speakers' situated actions are examined on their own merits and, in these ways, are made available for analysts' inspection. For example, speakers' claims nevertheless demonstrate that and how they have some knowledge on what is being talked about. Such knowledge may be used to achieve a wide range of frequently interrelated actions, at times strategically, across a diverse medley of interactional environments: qualifying guesses and opinions; offering instructions as to how one's uncertainty and doubt should be conditionally heard and oriented to; reporting troubles and concerns; initiating and extending topics (e.g., getting off troubling topics and moving to complete stories); avoiding confirming and thereby neutralizing others' projects and trajectories by delaying, and possibly rejecting, such actions as invitations and/or requests for action.

Second, for all practical and, in these ways, inherently *empirical* circumstances, precisely because "I don't know" need not be tantamount with literal versions of what speakers' claims of insufficient knowledge might imply, they should be analytically approached as with promises or bets:

> Sacks has noted that for a great many cases (I should hazard a "most" here) of utterances like "I promise" or "I bet," it is not "promising" or "betting" at all that is going on, but rather an attempt at unit closure, such as topic or argument or "making arrangements" closure. (Schegloff, 1984, p. 30).

Or as Pomerantz (1984a, 1984b) has shown, just as abilities to make assessments of activities and events reveal speakers' knowledge base,

> The speakers' claiming insufficient knowledge serves as a warrant for their not giving assessments because assessments are properly based on the speakers' knowledge of what they assess. One of the ways of warranting a declination, then, is to deny the proper basis, that is, sufficient knowledge, for its production. (Pomerantz, 1984a, p. 59).[3]

Attention is first given to the data, conversation-analytic methods, and somewhat unique background for this study—attempts to locate and anchor in casual talk what "I don't know/remember" uses in courtroom cross-examination have revealed. Analysis then proceeds to three predominant social activities gleaned from "I don't knows" in environments where claiming and demonstrating "not knowing," and referencing knowledge in response to calls for action, are demonstrated: (a) marking uncertainty and concerns about next-positioned guesses, opinions, assessments, or troubles; (b) displaying "not caring to know" by disattending and seeking closure on other-initiated topics, actions designed to

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construct neutral positions to mitigate agreement and disagreement; and (c) postponing or withholding acceptance of others' invited and requested actions. This article concludes by discussing how the coconstruction of claiming insufficient knowledge in ordinary conversation reveals a distinct assembly of identifiable practices and routine predicaments, yet also how such pragmatic concerns are not limited to utterances within which "I don't knows" are embedded. Attention is also drawn to contrasts between casual interactions and courtroom cross-examination, and brief consideration is given to issues arising when comparisons are made between the present analysis and alternative approaches to interpersonal communication.

DATA, METHOD, AND BACKGROUND: FROM INSTITUTIONAL TO CASUAL INSTANCES

Excerpts of interaction examined for this study are drawn from a corpus of some 60 instances, across both casual and institutional (e.g., legal, medical) involvements, where speakers produce "I don't know" (and/or, e.g., "I don't remember/recall") in response to prior questions. The present conversation-analytic focus on casual interactions attends closely to indigenous features of everyday life by making explicit how interactants use and rely on utterances to achieve diverse, inevitably local, and delicately managed social actions (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Beach, 1989, 1996; Drew & Heritage, 1992; Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Heritage, 1984b; Hopper, 1992; Pomerantz, 1990; Schegloff, 1991). Through repeated listenings to recordings and inspecting transcriptions of naturally occuring events, careful examination of the moment-by-moment contingencies of social interaction are made available to analysts and readers alike. What participants come to treat as meaningful is evident in the practices or methods they employ, demonstrably to particular recipients, in shaping practical and identifiable courses of action. The unfolding and distinctive character of actions in a series reveals not only the kinds of interaction getting built but also their consequences for subsequent talk in interaction (see Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 1968).

This particular investigation may be contrasted with traditional conversation-analytic studies as follows: Analysis of ordinary conversational materials, both single-case and aggregate, normally form the basis for subsequent understandings of more formal and constrained institutional encounters such as interviews, lectures, or emergency phone calls (see Drew & Heritage, 1992; Greatbatch, 1992). In contrast, this inquiry into casual interactions emerged, in an altogether unmotivated fashion, from inspections of question/answer sequences in courtroom cross-

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examination (see Drew, 1992; Metzger & Beach, 1996). Initially addressed by Drew (1992) in the context of a trial for rape, interrogation and testimony can be managed, in part, through witnesses' "I don't know/remember" answers to questions in variably subtle ways. In environments of cooperative questions such as direct examination as well as more hostile cross-examination, "I don't know/remember" answers can function as claims that details being raised simply went unnoticed and were not attributed special significance in real (versus reconstructed) time. These actions imply innocence of a defendant's suspected sexual intentions, as with the cross-examination in Excerpt 1 (see transcription conventions in appendix):

Excerpt 1 (Da:Ou:1:6; Drew, 1992, pp. 482-483)

((A=Attorney; W=Witness; arrows added))

	A:	How many phone ca:lls would you say that you
		(.) had received from the defendant, betwee:n
		(0.6) February and' June twenny ninth:,
		(1.1)
→	W:	Ah don' know
		(0.7)
	W:	Ah didn't answer all of them
		(0.8)
	A:	'Scuse me?
→	W:	Ah don't remember,=I didn't answer all of them.

Here W's "Ah don' know" claims insufficient knowledge but also implies the insignificance of counting phone calls over 5 months at the time they occurred, a position elaborated with "Ah didn't answer all of them." Following A's "'Scuse me?," notice that W's lack of knowledge is next transformed into not remembering such unimportant details and is, once again, further elaborated: Because a reason for noticing and monitoring them in the first place was absent, a posture of innocence is, subtlely and delicately, maintained.

In adversarial and thus hostile environments such as courtroom cross-examination, not knowing or remembering works to preserve alternative and competing versions of past events by avoiding confirmation of information designed to challenge and discredit a witness's intentions, actions, and reconstructed stories. At times, utterances such as "I don't know/remember" can also be heard as answers constructing "neutral" ground, because they simultaneously avoid disconfirming creating more direct disagreement. As Drew (1992) observed, a "witness's answers [display] a

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delicate management of withholding confirmation of, whilst not overtly contradicting or disagreeing with, versions of events which the attorney proposes in his questions" (p. 486). In other cross-examination moments, institutional constraints imposed on interaction can be evident in more explicit and purposely designed questions and answers, built to uphold or even provoke contrasts between descriptions and explanations of alleged past conduct. In Excerpt 2, A treats W's inability to remember as purposive evasion:

Excerpt 2 (SDCL: State of California vs. Broderick, 13-21)

	A:	(Well) do you remember ripping the- the wrappers off the presents =
→	W:	= I'm sorry I don't =
	A:	=Do you remember testifying the la:st? time. > when you testified that you remembered doing that. < =
→	W:	= I could've done that. (.) I could've done that.=
→		I mean that's: no:t some[thing real vi::olent]
	A:	[So you could have] done a lot of these things but you're not remembering them now.

By evoking past and contradictory testimony given by A, and insinuating the strong possibility that W's lack of knowledge is inauthentic and thus deceptive, A disattends W's explanation ("I mean . . .") and moves interruptively to treat W's actions as one instance of a "strategically deployed object to frustrate a line of questioning" (Drew, 1992, p. 483).

It is a universal feature that questions and answers are, therefore, both sensitive to, and reflective of, the kinds of institutional and casual environments in which they occur. In courts, matters of guilt and innocence possess nontrivial consequences and are attended to accordingly. By contrast, in opening moments of medical interviews, the adversarial nature of cross-examination is replaced with other potential ambiguities:

Excerpt 3 (Sacks, 1992a, p. 377: Spring 1971, April 30: 19-21)

	DR:	Can I help you?
→	PT:	I don't know hheh I hope you can
	DR:	uh hah Tell me about your problems

The doctor opens the encounter by asking "Can I help you?" which is one means of soliciting from the patient a complaint or problem underlying

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the reason for a visit.[4] This question can be seen as something other than the doctor questioning his own ability to help. Yet, the patient's "I don't know" treats the query literally and, with laughter, the patient states, "I hope you can." In recognition of the patient's displayed ambiguity, the doctor reciprocates laughter and moves directly and explicity to official business ("Tell me about your problems"). This requested action essentially recycles the invitation to start the encounter by focusing on problems rather than pursuing matters such as the purposeful or inevitable ambiguity faced by the patient (see Beach, 1995; Bergman, 1992; Heath, 1992).

In shifting analysis from institutional interactions to ordinary (casual) conversations, the task remains to offer comparative analysis of social activites on which more specialized (institutional) turn-taking systems get developed. Toward this end, there are several important features to be gleaned from Excerpts 1 through 3. First, whether a recipient producing "I don't know" actually knows or not is a matter to be interactionally worked out. Second, *it remains to be seen whether and how claiming insufficient knowledge functions not only to avoid confirming and disconfirming other-initiated actions but also to accountably retain a posture of "innocence."* This appears to be one key feature, among others addressed below, as speakers claiming insufficient knowledge further elaborate their positions; it appears that "I don't knows" and related versions (see Excerpt 2) are not freestanding but are situated in more complex utterances and activities involving "explaining" one's orientation or "warranting a declination" (Pomerantz, 1984a, p. 57). Finally, we consider the kinds of alternative characterizations of events that occur in everday interactions, the ambiguities that emerge, and the ways in which "I don't know" is recruited as a solution to contingent problems.

CLAIMING AND DEMONSTRATING "NOT KNOWING"

Speakers producing "I don't knows" may display an inability to provide an informative response to a prior query. In Excerpt 4, C queries B about a newly formed educational institution they had been discussing:

Excerpt 4: SDCL: Yeah Bros: 242-245

	C:	[Are they] gonna have a full complement of s- of subjects and stuff? er:
→	B:	U:m:, (.) I couldn't tell you that either. (.) I don't know.

From B's floor-holding "U:m:" emerges a reference to an earlier point in their conversation, and by likening this matter to it, a state of continued

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"not knowing" is offered. Tagged onto B's response is "I don't know," which summarizes his claim of insufficient knowledge on the subject and bolsters what is put forth as an inability to address the issue in an explicit manner. There is little uncertainty or doubt evident in B's response, and no partial or possible information about "subjects" is made available.

In contrast, F's "I:::: I don't know" in Excerpt 5 prefaces an abbreviated hunch or guess in response to S's self-reflective utterance:

Excerpt 5: SDCL: Malignancy No. 1: 280-283

	S:	=Wonder how he found out an all that,
		(0.4)
→	F:	I:::: I don't know through work or Kay probably,

Although insufficient knowledge is claimed by F, what may "probably" be the case is made available to S for his consideration as a consequence of F's own search and reflection achieved through the prolonged "I::::."

Marking uncertainty and doubt appears to be a central feature of a variety of claims of insufficient knowledge, especially when placed as prefaces to subsequent opinions or assessments. Yet, the work such prefaces are built to achieve varies considerably. Speakers may employ utterances like "I don't know" or (as below) "Wal I can't tell: (you-)" to preface additional talk and thereby characterize the turn-at-talk in a distinctive, essentially ambiguous, fashion. If the speaker is offering an opinion or assessment in response to a prior request for information, claiming a lack of knowledge functions instructionally to hear the information that follows in light of the speaker's own uncertainty. The following excerpt, from a phone call between President Kennedy and a senator, demonstrates a speaker indicating his inability to "tell," followed by his carefully constructed assessment of the "voting" situation:

Excerpt 6: SDCL: Nuclear Treaty: 1-10

	K:	and uh: what about Jackson (.)
		is he going to vote for it,
		(0.2)
→	F:	Wal I can't te[ll:] =
	K:	[(Ye]ah)=
→	F:	=(you-) he is such an advocate of ( )
		and he's so devoted to [h]im and >all this eh:<
→		I can't tell what he's goin' to do eh:: (0.5)
		it's incredible to me that a fella of his eh: (0.4)
		normal common sense (w)ould vote against it

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Signaling that a "yes/no" answer to K's question would not provide an adequate appraisal of F's ability to predict Jackson's vote, a claim of insufficient knowledge treats as conditional his following assessment. In first raising the likelihood that Jackson will not vote in K's favor, F then moves quickly to insinuate that to do so would strike against "normal common sense." This prefaced and uncertain assessment is built in specific ways, designed so that K hears F's support, thus minimizing the likelihood that F comes off as favoring Jackson's rather than the president's position; by claiming insufficient knowlege, yet constructing Jackson's possible actions as nonsensical, F avoids alignment with Jackson's allegiances while retaining for himself a posture of commitment to the president. This is a remarkably subtle action, one shaped to avoid alleged wrongdoings having potentially negative political aftershocks.

Excerpts 4 through 6 reflect how claims of insufficient knowledge emerge in interactional environments of simply not knowing (Excerpt 4), to offering an abbreviated guess (Excerpt 5), to prefacing what is next built as a more elaborated and tailored assessment avoiding one political allegiance in favor of another (Excerpt 6). In Excerpt 7, S's "I don't know:" prefaces a trouble reporting. Immediately following a negotiation by G and S to "drop" the topic of S's alleged bulimia, G shifts by soliciting information regarding bridesmaid's dresses for S's wedding:

Excerpt 7: SDCL: G/S: 499-510 (Beach, 1996, p. 87)

```
    G:   Well (th-) eh h- ha- have you really decided
         on on the. bridesmaid's s- dresses [(      )]
→   S:                                      [ Well ] (.) [ I- ]
    G:                                                   [Did]
         you find anything?
→   S:   I don't know: to tell ya the truth::
         I kinda wanted a black 'n white wedding.
         But everybody else has been saying
         (.) .hh do:n't have a black 'n white wedding.
         (.) Maybe I'll have a fuc:ia or real pretty pink:.
                 (1.2)
    G:   Uh huh
```

Rather than announce that a decision had been made, S's "I don't know: to tell ya the truth::" gives rise to an upcoming reporting of trouble involving her preference for, and others' advice against, a "black 'n white wedding." By next stating "maybe I'll have a fuc:ia or real pretty pink:." as an alternative for G's hearing, S employs a "fishing device" (Pomerantz,

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1980) that indirectly rather than directly solicits G's opinion or advice—actions that G's delayed "Uh huh" can noticeably be seen to withhold, creating ongoing interactional problems (see Beach, 1996). What is of relevance here, however, is that by moving from "I don't know" to "to tell ya the truth," S displays her uncertainty about the dresses by next reporting what she does know: There are differences of opinion about colors for bridesmaids' dresses. It is in this sense that S's insufficient knowledge is itself situated within a larger set of concerns with which she is preoccupied: simultaneous troubles with planning the wedding and an attempt to mobilize G's assistance (which she next withholds) in making the very decision to which G's initial query brought attention.

REFERENCING KNOWLEDGE IN RESPONSE TO A CALL FOR ACTION

In response to prior inquiries, it is clear that speakers in both Excerpts 6 and 7 addressed their uncertainties and concerns by first claiming insufficient knowledge. Such claims appear to mitigate, subtlely and delicately, the responsibility of directly answering questions asked; at least minimal competence is demonstrated by displaying understandings of actions made relevant through prior solicitations of information. As Sacks (1992b) noted, "How one knows what one is saying is a common feature of answers" (p. 539; see also Button, 1992). Yet, speakers also find ways to elevate their own priorities (e.g., inserting allegiance, reporting troubles) by means of qualification and elaboration. In interactional environments of this sort, the dual task of being responsive, yet moving to matters deemed relevant, are made possible by first alleviating the expectation that fuller knowledge is available. So doing clears the way for potential conflicts between what one "should" and "does" know, whether the focal concerns rest with delicate matters surrounding "votes" or "bridesmaids' dresses."[5]

Displaying Neutrality: Disattending and Transitioning

Speakers do not always work at demonstrating their responsiveness, however, especially in moments where priority is given not to explaining how and what they do or do not know. In such cases, claiming insufficient knowledge is a resource for disattending matters addressed by prior speakers in favor of extending or initiating topic closure/shift. In so doing, speakers display neutrality by avoiding both agreement and disagreement and by circumventing implications contained in the prior talk.

In Excerpt 8, a claim of insufficient knowledge postpones alignment with a prior speaker's assertion:

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Excerpt 8: SDCL:Gossip: 312-316

	D:	Doesn't he know he's supposed to stay on the ro:ad when he's dri:ving en not (.) drive on the side wa:lk?
→	J:	°Oh I don know° .hhh (0.2) he's like Hey ma:n:. where have you be::en?

Here, J's "Oh-prefaced" "I don know°" displays an "inapposite character" routinely preceding topic shifts (see Beach, 1996; Heritage, 1990), treating D's prior query as essentially irrelevant. In this instance, D's question about the man's stock of knowledge places J in a position of knowing the man well enough to assess such knowledge or, literally, having the capability of "reading another's mind." Pomerantz (1984b) noted that a preface such as "I don't know," "is aimed at undoing a presumption that [someone] knows first hand about the situation" (p. 611). Thus, J's "°Oh I don know°" avoids any implications that her relationship with the man is sufficient to support an assessment of the man's knowledge of proper driving. These actions circumvent the need to construct her own assessment of the man in response to D's opinion, thereby minimizing further talk of the man's driving ability en route to story continuation. By avoiding a strongly valenced response, J's actions resemble displays of "neutrality" in court proceedings (Atkinson, 1992; see also Clayman, 1992): Court-appointed arbitrators, for example, frequently respond with the word *certainly* not to display agreement but to demonstrate an understanding of the prior utterance while maintaining a neutral demeanor.

A similar display of neutrality is evident in Excerpt 9:

Excerpt 9: SDCL: Blamings: 102-109

	T:	=I think he li:kes you.
	C:	He's cu::te
		(2.0)
	C:	He's hot =
→	T:	= I don't know =
	C:	= He's s:exy =
→	T:	=As so:on as like you start getting out of liking into should we have a relationship

In response to C's obvious admiration for the man being discussed, T expresses doubt without agreeing or disagreeing with C's assessments and moves back to the general issue of "should we have a relationship."

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By essentially putting off others' contributions, claims of insufficient knowledge may therefore allow for actions in progress to be completed:

Excerpt 10:(7: Schegloff, 1984, pp. 35-36; arrow added)

	B:	Because- an'he did the same thing, in War of- The War of Eighteen Twelve, he said the fact that we were interested in expansion, t'carrying farther, was ( ) something against. Y'know a-argument t'use against. But see the whole thing is he's against, he's [very- he's ( )
	A:	[Is he teaching history or Divinity
→	B:	I don'kno(h)w. But he's very anti-imperialistic

About this datum, Schegloff (1984) observed, " 'Is he teaching history or Divinity' is not asking subject matter, and 'I don't know' is not a confession of ignorance. This is not questioning and answering, though a question-answer format is used to 'package' the sequence" (p. 36). The alternative is to recognize that A's contribution is not taken literally by either A or B: B's "I don't know" is thus not displaying a need to be responsive but disattending the comment as getting in the way of, or unnecessarily postponing, B's conclusionary assessment "he's very anti-imperialistic."

A similar instance appears below:

Excerpt 11: SDCL: Malignancy #23: 214-223

	S:	This is her buddy that lives like in New York right?=
	F:	=Yea:::[h r]ight
	S:	[Yeah] the one that bitched about my answering machine (.) [he he he]
→	F:	[I don't kn]ow.
	S:	he he She did yeah=
→	F:	=Anyway (.) she was- had made arrangements to come out she wanted to visit Laura and a couple of friends so (.) she came into town

In the midst of F's concluding telling a story about a friend's visit to see his wife, this excerpt begins by S asking a question of clarification about "her buddy." While F's "Yea:::h right" quickly confirms that the subject of

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conversation is the same person S is referencing, S continues by nominating potentially complainable information about some incident with an answering machine. Notice that S finalizes his utterance with laugh tokens and by supplying his own confirmation ("he he he he he She did yeah="), both of which F disattends en route to "I don't know [+ anyway + story conclusion]." Once again, a claim of insufficient knowledge is not elaborated on but tailored to the work of moving toward finalizing the ongoing story.

Repeatedly, then, speakers' claims of insufficient knowledge appear in environments of failed attempts at extending the topic and move toward closure/next topic. Excerpt 12 more fully contextualizes previously examined Excerpt 4:

Excerpt 12: SDCL: Yeah Bros: 240-254

	C:	They're not gonna have any tea:ms right away or anything are they
	B:	No (.) oh phhf:: no I doubt that [seriously]
	C:	[Are they] gonna have a full complement of s- of subjects and stuff? er:
→	B:	U:m:? (.) I couldn't tell you that either. (.) I don't know. (0.2)
	C:	hh They're not gonna try to be like a two year institution first are they
→	B:	Oh I doubt it (.) I doubt it (1.0)
	B:	.hhh
	C:	°Wow that's great (.) that's great°
→	B:	Yeah so
	C:	.hh Um (1.4)
→	C:	So you're still living with Ronan

As the sole activity of B appears caught up with being unable to provide C with detailed information regarding the newly formed university, C eventually ceases pursuit of the topic. Through attrition driven by B's insufficient knowledge and apparent unwillingness to elaborate on what he knows little about, C offers a sequence-closing assessment ("°Wow that's great (.) that's great°"). And following the extended (1.4) silence, C initiates a new topic about B's living arrangements.

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Speakers displaying insufficient knowledge may also move directly to close the topic:

Excerpt 13: SDCL: G/S: 446-452 (Beach, 1996, p. 122)

```
    G:   And then for lunch whad'ya want.
                 (.)
    G:   Some (good)
→   S:   I dunno
    G:   Som:e .pt [(about) what. ]
→   S:              [↓Oka::y      ] Grandma I'm tired
         I just wanna go to bed (.) whatever?
```

By displaying a lack of knowledge and minimally elaborating her "tired" state, S's "I dunno [+ "↓ Oka::y"]" pushes off G's concerns about lunch by moving directly to close the topic. In the ways S's actions in this particular conversation get repeatedly designed as reluctance to talk about a possible eating disorder (e.g., "let's just drop it for t'night okay? (.) I don't wanta talk about it anymore," Beach, 1996), her attempts to terminate a problematic topic and her basic lack of interest in continuing the discussion are apparent.

From Excerpts 8 through 13 it is clear that by disattending and transitioning (or, as with Excerpt 12, creating an environment wherein cointeractant moves to transition) to matters treated as more important—completing stories, finalizing conclusionary assessments, getting off troubling topics—speakers work to regulate what will be talked about and even for how long. By relying on utterances in which "I don't know" is embedded, efforts are made to put others' modes of pursuit in abeyance. In these kinds of interactional environments, one set of ways for avoiding agreeing and disagreeing is to construct positions displaying neutrality. It appears, for example, that the offering of unwanted assessments can be delayed or possibly prevented by claiming insuficient knowledge and moving next to alternative issues and considerations, providing at least a momentary respite from attending more fully to what others made available. This is the case even though avoiding agreement through a claim of insufficient knowledge may be seen as slightly disaffiliative. Yet, such actions are certainly less disaffiliative than a direct denial or opposing assessment, especially when claiming insufficient knowledge effectively warrants the declination of responding more fully to cointeractants' contributions (see Pomerantz, 1984a, 1984b).

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Avoiding Invitations and Requests

By beating around the bush, speakers can essentially preserve their options in ways of keeping topics open yet withholding commitment, "deploying ambiguity—a feature that is considered to be delicate on any occasion—systematically for interactional purposes" (Sacks, 1992b, p. 435). In the course of demonstrating an inability to commit, "I don't know" may be employed as a responsive yet noncommittal reply to an invitation or request for action (Davidson, 1984; Drew, 1984; Pomerantz, 1984a). Through providing ambiguous responses, speakers work to legitimately not accept calls to action by constructing allusive and evasive postions.

In Excerpt 14, S essentially leaves it for L, the inviter, to formulate the "upshot" (Drew, 1984, p.146) of what comes off minimally as a delayed acceptance, if not a rejection-implicative reponse (Pomerantz, 1984a), to a prior invitation:

Excerpt 14: SDCL: Allergies: 145-150

	L:	pt. Any:way (0.4) .hh anyway
		>when=er you gon::na come by?<
		(0.4)
→	S:	Well: I don't know I'm going te=to school tomorrow
		b:ecuz Suzanne and Joan are taking me to lunch?
	L:	.hh Are they real:ly?

Following a (0.4) pause, S's well-prefaced response is upgraded with the ambiguous "I don't know,", followed with a timely reference to prior plans. Rather than allowing L the opportunity to pursue acceptance of the invitation for a visit, S responds with what Drew (1984) called a reporting "designed to have implications for a plan or proposal . . . concern[ing] their ability or availability to do something" (p. 131). In this way, L is left to determine the implication of the reporting for her invitation to visit. Although it has been prefaced by doubt ("Well I don't know"), S further and neatly avoids a direct acceptance and rejection of the invitation by offering a response that leaves for the recipient the work of deriving the upshot of S's upcoming plans and impacts on visiting L.

The following interactional segment is similar:

Excerpt 15:[Computer]:Davidson, 1984, p. 108

A:	Oh I was gonna sa:y if you wannid to:, .hh you
	could meet me at U.C. Be: an' I could show yih some

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a' the other things on the compu:ter, (.) maybe
even teach yuh how tuh program Ba:sic er something.
.hhh
(0.6)
→ B: Wul I don' know if I'd wanna get all that
invo:lved, hh hhh! [(.hh)
→ A: [It's rilly intresti:ng:.

But here, after B clearly displays disinterest in getting "all *that* invo:lved," A responds with a subsequent version of the invitation. This orientation to the rejection-implicative nature of B's response further pursues the interest B's "Wul I don' know" failed to provide (Davidson, 1984).

In Excerpts 14 and 15, speakers' "I don't knows" first delay then make available the possibility of rejection: "Given a silence following an invitation or offer, then the inviter or offerer may take this silence as a display of some sort of trouble or problem that the recipient is having with the invitation or offer" (Davidson, 1984, p. 104). Although well-prefaced responses do not offer outright rejection of the invitation/request (see Pomerantz, 1984a), next-positioned "I don't knows" cast doubt on the possibility of an acceptance while also confirming hearings of prior turns *as* invitations.

The following excerpt also demonstrates how speakers, by first seeking information that is next reflected on, do the work of delaying a commitment to a call to action by not claiming knowledge (i.e., "It's a possibility," "I havta se:e"):

Excerpt 16: SDCL: The metro: 1-19

J: Whatta? ya doin' this weeke:nd
(1.0)
B: I:m >pro(bl)y gonna go t-to the ↑ Metro. on Saturday.
(.) Ya wanna go<
(1.0)
→ J: pt (.) U:h: who else is goin? ←**Postponed acceptance**
(1.0)
B: U:h my friend Joni > and a buncha other people <
I guess- (.) I think it's her friend's birthday =
→ J: = Hhm:.
B: > Like a buncha people are gonna go <
(1.0)

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→	J:	Hm::.	
		(1.0)	
→	J:	It's a possibility	←**Possible acceptance**
		(0.2)	
	B:	Ye:a. g:o.	←**Encouragement**
		(1.2)	
→	J:	I havta se:e	←**On-hold decision**
		(0.4)	
	B:	Oh:h	

In this excerpt, J employs alternate forms of not claiming knowledge that delays acceptance of the invitation by B. By asking a question pertaining to the outing and the people who would be participating, J demonstrates minimal interest in the event by eventually indicating possible acceptance that, despite B's next subsequent version/encouragement, retains a position of uncertainty ("I havta see") and thus options by delaying a commitment.

The next excerpt contains a similar instance of a speaker referencing his stock of knowledge to provide a legitimate postponement of accepting an invitation:

Excerpt 17: SDCL: Derek's calls: 155-165

	F:	You gonna come up	←**Invitation query**
	D:	Labor day?	
	F:	Yeah=	
	D:	=Yeah maybe so	←**Possible/weak acceptance**
	F:	Well do	←**Encouragement**
→	D:	Okay, we:ll I gotta see what's up becuz that's the first after school starts	←**On-hold decision**
	F:	You have to do what?	
→	D:	I have ta see what's goin' on cuz that's the first weekend after school starts	
	F:	Well (.) really try to get up there?	←**Subsequent invitation**

D's initial response to the invitation to visit on Labor Day, once clarified, was to indicate the possibility of visiting. F offers an encouragement, perhaps as a form of subsequent invitation, in response to which D states his need to accumulate more information that is only available at some

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future time. The postponed response makes rejection possible and is prefaced with a "well" that delays the production of acceptance. By stating he will need to see what is "goin' on," because of school and scheduling, D leaves hanging both a commitment and rejection to F's invitation.

Excerpts 15 through 17 display how speakers can reference their knowledge bases, and claim them as insufficient, in response to invitations/requests for action. By doing so, speakers delay possible rejection or acceptance, on the basis of the claimed need for additional information required for a decisive response. One practical consequence is that speakers claiming insufficient knowledge remain noncommital by avoiding direct acceptance and rejection of calls to action.

DISCUSSION

Despite the literal appearance of "I don't know" utterances as uninformed and passive, analysis reveals them to involve proactive displays of interactional conduct. "I don't know" can function as a resource for qualifying responses to prior inquiries, avoiding and neutralizing others' projects and trajectories. In some cases, "I don't know" was shown to be employed as a craftily devised method for disattending, neutralizing, and implementing topic transition. In other environments, "I don't know" functioned to delay and possibly reject invitations and/or requests. Here, it is seen how ambiguity is, *interactionally rather than mentalistically speaking* (see Heritage, 1990-1991; Mandelbaum & Pomerantz, 1991), strategically used and altogether interwoven with actions such as offering assessments, completing stories, and reasonable uncertainty in arranging plans when not committing to future (particularly, other-initiated) actions. Claims of insufficient knowledge delicately delete appropriate or expected "nexts" (e.g., immediate acceptance of an invitation) by replacing them with a displayed inability to "answer." In short, when responding to such actions as recipient-driven comments and queries in the midst of stories (see Mandelbaum, 1989), requests, or invitations, speakers employ insufficient knowledge claims to ward off, to imply, or at least to delay rejection of a call to action. If a speaker alludes to information that is unknown, a decision cannot be made at that interactional juncture. In this way, a participant neatly avoids rejecting a call to action by allowing a possible acceptance at some future time when more information is obtained.

Claims of insufficient knowledge most frequently preface additional talk, much like "Oh" and "Okay" have been revealed to do (see Beach, 1993, 1995; Heritage, 1984a). Just as utterances such as "I don't know" are rarely freestanding, a prefaced claim of insufficient knowledge may necessitate additional talk simply because participants orient to such a claim

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as somehow troublesome and construct other talk to ward off the consequences of the claim. Participants assume a common stock of knowledge and thus hold others accountable for producing sequentially understandable activities that indicate an understanding of the prior talk. An omission or unexpected response may signal an "incorrect" understanding of the prior turn—even purposeful withholdings giving rise to pursuit of response (see Beach, 1996; Pomerantz, 1984c)—and can be demonstrably treated as somehow insufficient in subsequent actions (Drew, 1992; Goodwin, 1987). The chaining rule, as explained by Sacks (1992a, 1992b), necessitates that after a speaker responds, the floor is returned to the original speaker, allowing the first speaker to assess what was produced as a response. This provides a powerful impetus to produce an "acceptable" response. Participants may orient to "I don't know" and other claims of insufficient knowledge as inadequate, and when referencing one's stock of knowledge as insufficient, an explanation for the difference in the common stock of knowledge is constructed in an attempt to circumvent disruption of the interaction or trouble (Sacks, 1992b). The possibility of a negative assessment may in these ways be similar to the motivating factor behind disclaimers such as "don't quote me on this" or "I think" before other utterances, as explicated by Hewitt and Stokes (1972); additional explanation is included with the reference to insufficient information to avoid having the response treated as unresponsive or unacceptable.

Although "I don't knows" have been the focus of this present analysis, it is certainly the case that interactional circumstances are universally organized through social actions rather than literal or verbatim assumptions and semantic content (see Turner, 1971). It is not difficult to come up with an array of examples to support these pragmatic notions, but three will suffice:

1. A repeated "um hmm" and/or "uh huh" need not signal nor claim attention but the possibility of rushed-through disinterest (Beach, 1990; Schegloff, 1982).
2. In a host of sequential environments, speakers' "yeahs" or "okays" are not equivalent actions displaying only agreement and affiliation but repeatedly shift-implicative movements across speakership and topic (Beach, 1993, 1995; Drummond & Hopper, 1993; Jefferson, 1981).
3. During phone openings (and this applies equally, although in most general terms, to face-to-face greetings), in response to "How are you" a recipient's "Fine" need not be heard as "everything's all right," especially if a recipient prosodically conveys concern, being upset, sadness, and/or fails to offer a reciprocal "How are you" (see Beach, 1993; Hopper, 1990, 1992; Schegloff, 1968, 1986). Similarly, an "Oh pretty good" response typically cues not-yet-disclosed though upcoming trouble, the revealing of which casts into doubt,

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perhaps even contradicts, what "pretty good" might literally be taken to represent (Beach, 1996; Jefferson, 1980a, 1980b, 1988).

With these considerations in mind, as a bedrock for examining and understanding ordinary conversational activities, the primordial basis of institutional interactions becomes clarified. First, it is clear that claims of insufficient knowledge in casual talk have considerably more diverse functions and characteristics than, for example, courtroom examination or other institutional involvements (e.g., displaying "not caring to know"; through self-selection, initiation, elaboration, and closure of topics and stories; options for accepting and rejecting requests and invitations). Formalized constraints on speech exchange do limit variability, especially when professional/lay interactions are tailored to specific kinds of tasks, goals, and even periods of time (see Drew & Heritage, 1992). Because courtroom interaction, and cross-examination in particular, are conducted within predetermined and relatively prescribed patterns of turn taking, it is probable that witness's "I don't knows" are more frequently freestanding until and unless lawyers pursue with follow-up questions: Witnesses are not typically allowed to freely elaborate in ways addressing their own concerns and priorities, although such utterances as "justifications, explanations, and excuses" routinely follow lawyers' questions heard as projecting "accusations and challenges" (Atkinson & Drew, 1979).

Second and more specifically, from the analysis provided herein it is clear that working to avoid agreeing/confirming and disagreeing/disconfirming with other-initiated actions have roots in casual interactional circumstances (which may, at times, be "hostile"), as do essential ambiguities involving whether or not speakers are actually "telling the truth." Matters of innocence and accountability are not exclusive features of legal systems but are carried over from the delicate work of ordinary speakers. In the course of attempting to describe and explain just what they may and may not know and why, after all, these concerns actually make a difference for them and others, essential ambiguities cannot be alleviated by speakers regardless of the settings in which they are routinely enacted. Thus, when witnesses in court construct "innocent" postures by avoiding confirming and disconfirming attorneys' alleged and wrongful versions of past events built into "question" slots, it is critical that the primordial basis of such actions be understood as anchored in less restrictive and thus casual circumstances—environments where, for example, attempts are made at not being fully responsive—and on occasions where disattending another appears to be a set of ordinary enactments achieved delicately, but certainly without the accountability constraints seen in courtroom interaction. Attempts to mark uncertainty in specific ways, to construct

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neutral positions, and to maintain options in the face of invited and requested actions obviously carry over to courts and other institutional environments, but future and systematic research is necessary if the kinds of contrastive possibilities suggested through the present analysis are to be verified and refined.

Finally, this analysis bears directly on extant approaches to interpersonal communication, suggesting some contrasts in assumptions and empirical orientations revolving around three related issues: individual versus collaborative approaches to social order, "context" as external to versus created by interaction, and a priori versus contingent understandings of phenomena such as "goals." First, in uncertainty reduction theory (e.g., Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Gudykunst, 1991; Gudykunst, 1995), uncertainty is a state and avoided problem of individual speakers. Through selection and adaptation to interactional goals, attempts are made by individuals to minimize uncertainty and its described (rather than realized) consequences. In this present conversation-analytic approach to "I don't knows," what might be considered expressions of uncertainty are treated as conversational devices recruited (although not necessarilty intentionally) to achieve specific kinds of actions recognizeable in real time and produced collaboratively. A second point of contrast is apparent in the work of Bavelas and her colleagues (Bavelas, 1983; Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990; Chovil, 1994) on "equivocal communication." Bavelas treats equivocation as emerging from broad types of context that can be described in terms of features often removed and thus abstracted from interaction. Contexts with a particular configuration of features, equivocation theory argues, will give rise to a greater number of equivocal messages. In contrast, this analysis reveals how the inherently equivocal nature of insufficient knowledge claims is apparent: In and through participants' displayed orientations to sequences of indigenous and organized actions, "contexts" are interactional achievements sensitive to and designed to address, to resolve, and/or to create equivocation as a practical matter. Third, this work differs from most of the work on goals and discourse (e.g., Tracy, 1991) in which notions of "intention," "consciousness," and "goals" are understood as a priori individual processes guiding and directing social action. For speakers and thus for conversation analysts, however, such processes are relevant only as tailored to the moment-by-moment contingencies of ordinary interactional circumstances. Although more fully assessing the detailed rationales underlying these contrastive approaches rests well beyond the scope of this article, it would be fruitful to engage in such dialogue.

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APPENDIX

The transcription notation system employed for data segments is an adaptation of Gail Jefferson's work (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984, pp. ix-xvi; Beach, 1989, pp. 89-90). The symbols may be described as follows:

:	*Colon(s)*: extended or stretched sound, syllable, or word.
_	*Underlining*: vocalic emphasis.
(.)	*Micropause*: brief pause of less than (0.2).
(1.2)	*Timed pause*: intervals occurring within and between same or different speakers utterance.
(( ))	*Double parentheses*: scenic details.
( )	*Single parentheses*: transcriptionist doubt.
.	*Period*: falling vocal pitch.
?	*Question marks*: rising vocal pitch.
↑↓	*Arrows*: pitch resets; marked rising and falling shifts in intonation.
° °	*Degree signs*: a passage of talk noticeably softer than surrounding talk.
=	*Equal signs*: latching of contiguous utterances, with no interval or overlap.
[ ]	*Brackets*: speech overlap.
[[	*Double brackets*: simultaneous speech orientations to prior turn.
!	*Exclamation points*: animated speech tone.
-	*Hyphens*: halting, abrupt cutoff of sound or word.
> <	*Greater than/less than signs*: portions of an utterance delivered at a pace noticeably quicker than surrounding talk.
OKAY	*CAPS:* Extreme loudness compared with surrounding talk
hhh .hhh ye(hh)s	*H's*: Audible outbreaths, possibly laughter. The more h's, the longer the aspirations. Aspirations with periods indicate audible inbreaths. H's within parentheses mark within-speech aspirations, possible laughter.
pt	*Lip smack:* Often preceeding an inbreath.
hah heh hoh	*Laugh syllable:* Relative closed or open position of laughter.
$	*Smile voice:* Laughing/chuckling talk between markers.

NOTES

1. These concerns only begin to address inherent problems with "speech act theory" and the assumptions it entails, including the reliance on unexplicated "translation rules" to determine utterance functions and the interpretive work involved in gaining access to speakers' intentions (see Beach, 1990, 1996; Levinson, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1992; Sacks, 1992a, 1992b; Schegloff, 1988, 1992; Streeck, 1980).

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2. There are many ambiguity-generating possibilities in conversation, not the least of which involves what Schegloff (1984, p. 50) described as an "overhearer's problem," as when nonratified speakers or analysts try to figure out what's going on in a particular or set of conversational moments and, in so doing, fail to possess the requisite knowledge about what has been discussed and, further, what is currently being talked about. Yet, ambiguity is also a ratified speakers' problem (e.g., see Drew, 1992; Schegloff, 1992), in that neither speakers nor their recipients necessarily know exactly what is being talked out, for what purposes, and with what actual consequences for subsequent talk in interaction.

3. For example, Pomerantz (1984) addresses one of the ways speakers invoke insufficient knowledge as follows:

(SBL: 2.2-2; p. 57)
A: An how's the dresses coming along. How d'they look.
→ B: Well uh I haven't been uh by there- . . .

Or, by reporting third person assessments, speakers' own abilities to assess are shown to be limited:

(JS:11.61; p. 96)
→ E: No I haven't seen it
Mae sed it 'n she said she
f- depressed her terribly
(SBL: 2.2-1; p. 96)
→ A: How is Aunt Kallie
→ B: Well, I (suspect) she's better
→ A: Oh that's good.
→ B: Las' time we talked tuh mother
she was uh better

4. In contrast, "How are you" questions are routinely enacted, leaving for the patient a possible ambiguity as to whether to respond socially by extending the greeting sequence (e.g., "Fine, and you?") or to treat the physician's query clinically so as to solicit disclosure of problem/complaint/reason for the visit (see Frankel, 1995).

5. An interview conducted by Ted Koppel (T) provides a related moment requiring delicate management about what an assumed expert "should" or "does" know. Here, however, T works to accomodate S's insufficient knowledge by providing his own candidate answer rather than continuing to pursue S's "not knowing" (e.g., by holding S accountable and/or working to "put S on the spot"):

SDCL: Nightline: 1-7

T: How many prisoners- ↑ Senator Batten do you happen to know
how many prisoners we ha:ve uh incarcerated in the United States
today (.) roughly?
→ S: No I don't uh again Ted I uh I should know[that but I]
T: [I mean] for some
reason
the figure [six hundred thousand is-]
→ S: [But I don't °know that (one)°]

By downplaying the need for specificity in answering the question via "happen to know" and a tag-positioned "roughly," T exerts minimal pressure for the senator to rely on his role-incumbent expertise in providing an informed answer to the question. When S responds

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in an apologetic mode that he does not but should know, T repairs and overlaps by nominating an answer (see Schegloff, 1992). Before the candidate number is fully produced by T, however, S recycles what he had previously left incomplete, namely, claiming by reiteration that he does not have the information in his stock of knowledge. Yet T's actions nevertheless reveal that he not only may have had an estimate in mind prior to his question but that he is responsive to S's predicament in being willing to assist by offering a candidate answer in lieu of S's insufficient knowledge.

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