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On “whistle” sound objects in English everyday conversation

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((8576 words))

On “whistle” sound objects in English everyday conversation

In this paper we study the forms and functions of whistling in social interaction (see also Reber, 2012; Reber & Couper-Kuhlen, 2010). Our analysis identifies two basic forms of conversational whistling, 1) *melodic whistling*, when participants whistle the tune of, e.g., a familiar song, and 2) *non-melodic whistling*. The focus in this paper lies on non-melodic whistles, which come in two contours linked to specific actions: a) the *tonal* whistle deployed for summoning (e.g., a domestic animal but also human participants) and b) the *gliding* whistle used for affect-laden responses to informings that breach a norm, often ones containing a numerical reference. The pitch contour used on the latter type of whistle matches those found for more lexical sound objects, e.g., “oh”, “ah”, and “wow”. The data base for the study comprises a wide range of audio and video recordings of mundane American and British English telephone and face-to-face conversations.

Keywords: melodic whistling; non-melodic whistling; sound objects; English

1 Introduction

Although whistles are not part of the English language, we argue in this paper that specific types of whistle are “sound objects” which English speakers deploy systematically for implementing both initiating and responsive actions in social interaction. The argument is based on our findings from a study of whistles in American and British English mundane conversation (see also Reber, 2012, for British English). The study aims to

- (1) identify and describe “whistle” sound objects as used systematically in social interaction,
- (2) work out why whistles are deployed where they are, and what practical social-interactive problem they provide a solution for, and
- (3) address the implications – and challenges – of treating *non-lexical* vocal tract sounds as part of the inventory of communicative resources for social

interaction. To shed light on (3), we will compare the use of the *lexical* response token *wow* with a *non-lexical* responsive whistle in similar interactional environments and discuss whether a responsive whistle can, like *wow*, function as a turn-constructional unit (TCU).

2 Literature review

In terms of how whistling sounds are used across speech communities, there is a distinction to be made between “whistly fricatives” (e.g., /ʃ/ /ʒ/ of Southern Bantu), “whistled languages” (e.g., Silbo Gomero, a Spanish-based whistled language of the Canary Islands; Rialland, 2005; cf. also Meyer, 2008), and “recreational whistles” (e.g., in English, German; Shosted, 2006, p. 2; cf. also Busnel & Classe, 1976; Laver, 1994; Shadle, 1997). According to Shosted (2006, p. 2), the recreational whistle, which can be labial or palatal, can also have paralinguistic functions. There is no vibration of the vocal folds, and the fundamental frequency can range from 500 Hz to 4,000 Hz (Shadle, 1983, 1997, p. 61–62; Shosted, 2006).¹

Whistling as an interactional resource has not received much attention in past research. As the use of the label “recreational” in the phonetic literature suggests, whistling is commonly associated with melodies and tunes, often involving a light-hearted pastime. In his paper on whistling, Schegloff (2005) is concerned with the whistling of a well-known tune in an American English context, which he compares to “the surfacing of a ‘leak’ from a stream of ‘subconsciousness’” (Schegloff, 2005, p. 19) on the part of the whistler. By contrast, Stevanovic (2013) focuses on the whistling or

1. In the conversational data we have examined, the whistles used do not exceed 2500 Hz in fundamental frequency (see below).

humming – which she treats as functionally equivalent – of an “unidentifiable” tune. Her analysis of English, Estonian, and Finnish data finds that humming is “not only a ‘symptom’ of nonparticipation, but it can also be used as a resource to establish non-participation and, thereby, to manage different kinds of interactional problems” (Stevanovic, 2013, p. 119). We will call this type of whistling, which involves melodies or tunes that may or may not be immediately recognizable to co-participants, **melodic whistling** (see Section 4).

On the other hand, our earlier work has shown that participants can also whistle specific contours to perform specific social actions, forms of whistling which we will call **non-melodic whistling** (see Section 5). Reber describes a whistling sound which comes in the form of a high-pitched, gliding (rise-)fall that fades out towards the end and exceeds the speaker’s regular voice range markedly. She argues that this kind of whistle can serve as a news receipt in ways similar to lexical “sound objects”, i.e., certain types of *ahs* and *ohs*, in that it is produced in the same sequential slot following informings.² What is specific to the sound object “responsive whistle” is that participants often deploy it to take up informings which make reference to a numerical figure, displaying heightened appreciation but not ascribing specific affective valence to the new information (Reber, 2012, p. 236–241).

2. *Sound objects* are defined as “conversational objects with [phonetic substance but] minimal semantic content”. The term *sound object* “aims to reflect the fact that these objects are spoken language resources for which the sound pattern and its context-specific use are distinctive for the meaning”. Included are “so-called ‘primary interjections’, such as, e.g., *oh*, *ah* and *ooh*, and non-lexical sounds such as clicks and whistling, which have been found to function similarly in talk-in-interaction” (Reber, 2012, p. 12; s. also Reber, 2009, Fn 5).

While this earlier work was restricted to a very limited sample of British English telephone conversation, the present study revisits these findings with a broader and more varied data base, incorporating American English and videotaped interaction as well. Following a short discussion of melodic whistling, we provide an in-depth analysis of two types of non-melodic whistling, which we will call the “tonal whistle” and the “gliding whistle”, showing that non-melodic whistles can be deployed as non-lexical sound objects with recurrent forms and functions in social interaction. In this sense, they are well-integrated communicative signs in a grammar of embodied face-to-face interaction (Reber & Couper-Kuhlen, 2010; see also Reber, 2012, 2018, in press). The analysis of non-melodic whistles as non-lexical sound objects gives us insight not only into our understanding of language (and its margins), but also into what constitutes the fundamental unit of interaction, the TCU. As we will see, these two issues are closely intertwined.

2.1 Non-lexical sound objects at the margins of language

In linguistics, not only paralinguistic sounds but also primary interjections have commonly been treated as marginal to language because their sound shape is often not phonemic (as in clicks or whistles), and because they do not have a proper semantics (as, e.g., most nouns and verbs do) nor do they seem to be syntactically functional as are, e.g., nouns or verbs in clauses.³ To cite some relevant examples from recent

3. In linguistics, there is a general distinction between *primary interjections* (e.g., *oh*, *ah* oder *ugh*), and *secondary interjections* (e.g., *oh my God*, *good heavens*). This distinction originated with work by the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt at the beginning of the 20th century, in which he describes primary interjections as remnants of *non-linguistic Naturlaute* (natural sounds) which interrupt speech for the expression of emotion. On the

linguistic work on English, Goddard (2014) considers secondary interjections such as *Shit! Fuck! Christ!* as “identical to other words”, whereas primary interjections are described as “Word-like” (e.g., *Wow! Yuck! Gee!*) or only “Noise-like” if they come with a non-phonemic sound structure (e.g., *Ugh! Psst! Tsk tsk!*) (2014: 54). According to Wharton (2003), only derivations of interjections, e.g., *to wow* or *yucky*, constitute “language proper” and serve to say something. At the other extreme of the continuum, *ugh*, *ow*, *oh*, and *ah* are placed next to bodily movements such as “shiver” and “smile”, which are functional in “showing” something in a “natural” fashion (Wharton, 2003, p. 210). Yet these descriptions conflict with both historical and cross-linguistic findings: Historically, seemingly “word-like” interjections have developed through language change, i.e., they stem from linguistic structure and thus represent linguistic structures: For instance, *Gee!* goes back to the proper name *Jesus!* (Gehweiler, 2008), and German *oje!* to *oh mein Jesus!* (Nübling, 2001). Cross-linguistic evidence shows that interjections are not “natural” but arbitrary linguistic signs which are not necessarily equivalent across language boundaries: It has been argued that English *oh* (/əʊ/) not only translates to German *oh* (/o:/) but also to *ach* and *achso* (Couper-Kuhlen, 2009; Golato, 2012; Golato and Betz 2012), although more research is needed to explore the full picture (Reber, 2018).

In keeping with early research which studied vocal tract sounds in their home environment of social interaction (e.g., Heritage, 1984; Jefferson, 1984a), we have argued widely for the study of non-lexical sounds from a “bottom-up” perspective (Couper-Kuhlen, 2009; Reber, 2012, Reber & Couper-Kuhlen, 2010). The study of the sounds of

other hand, secondary interjections are treated as *linguistic* forms of pure emotional expression (Wundt, ³1911, p. 320–321).

naturally occurring interaction has revealed a formal and functional continuum between non-lexical and lexical sounds. For instance, the phonetician Pompino-Marschall (2004) identifies a *formal* continuum of what he calls “interjectional utterances” (*interjektionale Äußerungen*) in German, including what are known as “fillers”, e.g. *äh(m)*, and primary and secondary interjections, e.g., *n(a)ja*, *toitoitoi* and *Mensch*. These interjectional utterances range between the two extremes of “quasi unarticulated vocal gestures” (*quasi unartikulierten Lautgebärden*) and “canonically correct pronunciation of underlying words” (*kanonisch [korrekte] Aussprache des zugrunde liegenden Wortes*, Pompino-Marschall, 2004, p. 82). He argues that what are heard as quasi unarticulated vocal gestures in fillers constitute a display of weak articulatory tonus (*artikulatorischer Tonus*, Pompino-Marschall, 2004, p. 81) accompanied by a high speech tempo. In other words, their production is due to the articulatory constraints of spontaneous speech (rather than being a remnant of animal sounds).

In line with Pompino-Marschall’s findings, we have proposed a *functional* continuum ranging from non-lexical sounds – including clicks and whistles – to more lexical vocal track sounds such as, e.g., *ah* and *oh*, on the grounds that they fulfil similar conversational tasks in English interaction. The present study provides additional evidence for such a continuum.

2.2 Non-lexical sound objects as TCUs

According to Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson’s classical definition, the turn can be composed of a single word, a phrase or a clause (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 702). Their examples illustrate that primary interjections can function as single-word turns:

Extract 1: “Huh?” as a TCU [NB:I:5:4] (Sacks et al., 1974, p. Fn 12)

1 GUY: Is Rol down by any chance dju know?
2 -> EDDY: Huh?

3 GUY: Is uh Smith down?
4 EDDY: Yeah he's down,

Huh? in line 2 serves as an open-class repair initiator (Drew, 1997): It treats the whole of Guy's prior turn *Is Rol down by any chance dju know* (line 1) as problematic.⁴ There follows a transition relevance place (TRP) and a smooth transition back to Guy, who now repairs his original turn to *Is uh Smith down?* (line 3). It is this non-delay of a next-positioned turn which serves as evidence for the sound object *Huh?* being treated as a TCU by participants:

We may note that it is empirically evident, from sequential materials, that projectability is the case; i.e., we find sequentially appropriate starts by next speakers after turns composed of single-word, single-phrase, or single-clause constructions, with no gap -- i.e. with no waiting for possible sentence completion (Sacks et al., 1974, Fn 12).

Drawing on Sacks et al. (1974), from which the example sentence in Figure 1 below is taken, Lindström (2006) is concerned with the organization of clausal TCUs in conversation. His examples suggest that lexical sound objects can be deployed as pre-segments (*m:m*) and post-segments (*hunh*) of possible clausal turns (cf. also Culpeper & Kytö, 2010; Schegloff, 1996, on this point), and that they have the potential to be prosodically integrated.

@@Insert Figure 1@@here

Figure 1: Topological model for turn and/or TCU organization (Lindström, 2006, p. 83)

This raises the question of whether all sound objects which are treated as TCU cores (*huh?*) (but not necessarily pre-and post-segments) must be lexical. Based on evidence

4. See also Dingemanse, Torreira, and Enfield, 2013, who argue that *huh* has the status of a universal word.

that non-lexical sound objects such as the “tonal whistle” and the “gliding whistle” can function to implement both initiating and responsive actions, we will argue that this is not the case. Note that it has recently been established that social actions can be achieved and made relevant through the full range of embodied resources in space (e.g., Keevallik, 2013), even forming “nonverbal action sequences,” i.e., courses of actions which are achieved through physical actions only (Levinson, 2013, p. 125). Gerhardt and Reber (2019) conclude:

Actions in embodied activities are not necessarily built exclusively through turns or turn-constructual units (TCU), i.e. through talk, but also involve non-verbal resources whose form cannot be described solely in terms of TCUs (Gerhardt & Reber, 2019, p. 5).

In this paper, we will propose a perspective on TCUs as consisting not only of lexical, phrasal, and clausal units in their core, but also of non-lexical items such as non-melodic whistles. This implies that words, phrases, clauses as well as non-lexical sounds can serve as speaker resources for action formation and ascription.

3 Data and methodology

Our study is based on a wide range of audio and video recordings of American English and British English telephone and face-to-face conversations, which have been combed through for all occurrences of communicative whistles.⁵ Exemplars have been transcribed in their context of occurrence, for the most part according to GAT II (Couper-Kuhlen & Barth-Weingarten, 2011) – and where relevant – Mondada’s (2014)

5. The data used for our analysis were collected with informed consent and names, images and other identifiers have been anonymized. In the case of the NB corpus, which was compiled in the 1960s, the origins are unknown.

conventions for multimodal transcription. Our methodology is informed by Interactional Linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 1996, 2001, 2018), meaning that we use the descriptive tools of Linguistics, the micro-analytic approach of Conversation Analysis and the framework of Contextualization Theory to analyze linguistic structures in ongoing social interaction.

Our analysis identifies two basic forms of whistling in social interaction: First, what we call **melodic** whistling, that is, when participants whistle the tune of, for instance, a familiar song, to display their non-participation in, and/or lack of availability for focussed interaction. And secondly, what we call **non-melodic** whistling. Non-melodic whistling can be found in initiating actions when participants summon, for instance, domestic animals or people. They are implemented with “tonal whistles” in our data. On the other hand, non-melodic whistling can also be used in responsive actions, when participants treat a prior informing as involving a breach of norm. These are shaped as “gliding whistles”. Our paper describes both melodic and non-melodic whistling but focuses primarily on non-melodic whistles.

4 Melodic whistling

Melodic whistling involves producing melodies or tunes which may or may not be immediately recognizable. Here is a case where Guy, who is talking to his golf partner Jon on the phone, does a rendition of “Whistle while you work” as he waits for Jon to look up the number of a local golf course in his telephone book.

Extract 2: “Whistle while you work” (NB 01)

((Guy has called his friend Jon to arrange a golf date for the next day. In this excerpt they are trying to decide which golf course to go to.))

1 GUY: have you gotta PHONE number for: san juan? h

2 (0.4)
3 JON: uh I THINK so=d'you wanna HOLD on a minute?
4 h[h
5 GUY: [yEa[h.
6 JON: [are yOu calling long DIStance?
7 GUY: I'm uh I'm:-: in: uh
8 NO I'm not'n in: uh,h long DIStance=I'm in: uh: balbOa.
9 JON: alright well HOLD o:n=I'll s:Ee if I have a CARD.
10 I °h I mAy HA:VE.
11 (0.3)
12 GUY: alrIght-
13 (0.6)

((12 lines including off-phone background conversation omitted))

26 -> GUY: ((MELODIC WHISTLING))
27 ((jauntily whistles first phrase of "Whistle While You Work"))

((40 lines including off-phone background conversation omitted))

68 JON: HI:, °hh[h
69 GUY: [yEa:h.=
70 JON: =I got all the OTHers but I[haven't got THAT one=
71 GUY: [<p>yeah>

In our data, melodic whistling is a way of actively maintaining “non-participation”

(Stevanovic 2013). In (2) it displays that although Guy is linked to Jon through the telephone wires, he is not engaged with him in focussed interaction. Yet the whistling makes it hearable to Jon that Guy is still connected at the other end of the line.

As Extract (3) shows, melodic whistling can also be used to establish that a participant is *not available* for focussed interaction. In this case the whistling accompanies physical withdrawal from engagement. Here three housemates (Alice, Bill, and Dan) are cooking a meal together. In the multimodal transcription, bP stands for Bill’s bodily position, dH for Dan’s head movements, and dW for Dan’s bodily movements.

Extract 3: “Sausages” (RCE09_UK Housemates II, 7.05)⁶

1 **BILL:** you know %all these SAUSages==
bP %kneels in front of oven --->
2 **BILL:** =they're taking (.)

6. Our thanks to Giovanni Rossi for sharing this data extract with us.

3 ALIC: they take Ages-

4 *+(--)
dH *visual disengagement from co-participants --->
dW +walks towards right counter --->

5 -> DAN: [((MELODIC WHISTLING))]
6 BILL: [xxx absolutely# xxx xxx xxx (---)]
fig #Fig. 2

7 -> DAN: [((MELODIC WHISTLING))]
8 BILL: [xxx]

9 -> DAN: [((MELODIC WHISTLING))]
10 ALIC: [HUN+gry- h'#]
dW --->+stands at counter, dancing --->
fig #Fig. 3

11 -> DAN: [((MELODIC WHISTLING))]
12 [%(2.06)+ (1.82)]
bP --> %
dW --->+ walks back towards left counter --->

13 ALIC: my BROCColi's not done (yet);

14 (2.47)+
dW --->+

15 ALIC: +i CAN'T believe#
dW +opens drawer --->
fig #Fig. 4

16 ALIC: you're making mAshed *+ #potato in the fucking
dH --->*orients towards A --->
dW +closes drawer --->
fig #Fig. 5

17 ALIC: micro*+wave-
dH --->+
dW --->+

18 (--)
19 DAN: that's outRAgeous,
20 (1.09)
21 ALIC: that IS (.) outrA[geous,]
22 BILL: [<<all>it's nOt] outrageous it's how
it's meant to be DONE.>
23 (--)
24 ALIC: <<h>NO_it's nOt;>
25 (--)
26 DAN: <<all>it was nEver meant (xxx xxx xxx)>
27 BILL: <<all>in the microwave that's how the PACKet tells you
it's meant to be dOne;>

Dan takes a piece of aluminum foil out of the drawer, while Alice and Bill are complaining about how long the sausages take (lines 1-3). There follows a pause, during which Dan crosses the kitchen and walks towards the right-hand counter, showing

visual disengagement from his co-participants (line 4). Dan next begins to whistle a tune. A split second later, Bill begins to talk, looking into the oven, with Alice being positioned towards him. (lines 6-8, Fig. 2). Although line 6 is partly inaudible, Bill seems to expand on the complaining sequence, affiliating with Alice's prior talk.

@@Insert Figure 2 here@@

Figure 2: Dan crosses the room, whistling and with visual disengagement (line 6)

While standing at the counter, Dan continues to whistle in overlap with more talk (another complaint) and accompanies it with dancing moves (lines 9-10, Figure 3).

@@Insert Figure 3 here@@

Figure 3: Dan dances at the counter, whistling and displaying visual disengagement (line 10)

Doing some more whistling in the clear, Dan walks back to the left-hand counter to open a drawer (lines 11-12). When he stops whistling, Alice produces another complaint (line 13). Note that Dan shows continued visual disengagement from his participants (Figure 4).

@@Insert Figure 4 here@@

Figure 4: Dan opens drawer, showing visual disengagement (line 15)

It is only in orientation to the production of the second-person address form *you* in Alice's next complaint (line 16) that Dan briefly moves his head to gaze at her (Figure 5).

Although Alice's reference here is to Bill, Dan's gaze behavior and his lack of whistling here signal renewed availability for interaction, and in fact he now joins in the

mocking complaint about Bill making mashed potatoes in the microwave (lines 19 and 26).

@@Insert Figure 5 here@@

Figure 5: Dan orients his gaze towards Alice (line 16)

We interpret Dan's melodic whistling in Extract (3) as establishing that at the moment he is not available for focussed interaction. This is in line with the physical withdrawal and visual disengagement from his participants, maintained before and during his whistling. Only once melodic whistling is discontinued and visual contact with Alice reestablished does Dan again become an engaged participant in the interaction.

5 Non-melodic whistling

In contrast to melodic whistling, non-melodic whistling involves conventionalized contours that are deployed in the service of specific social actions, including summoning (e.g., a dog, a horse, or a person) and – most frequently - responding appreciatively to informings that involve a breach of norm.

5.1 The tonal whistle

In our data one type of non-melodic whistling is deployed by participants to summon non-attentive domestic animals and people.⁷ The type of whistle used in summoning tends to be short and sharp. It involves typically one tone or at the most two.

7. Presumably cat-calls would belong in this category, although in addition to summoning, they incorporate an element of appreciation or aggression as well. We do not have any examples of cat-calls in our collection.

Here is an example of summons whistling with a single sharp tone. It is taken from a video recording of a face-to-face conversation at a family home. Since Maggie, the speaker who produces the whistle, is off camera at the time of the recording, no stills are provided.

Extract 4: “Chloe” (Camp Reunion Part III, 12.47)

((Sue has been telling her niece Linda about the man who works as her house cleaner. Maggie, Sue’s grown daughter, reports that her mother tried to get her to date him but Sue explains that she later realized the man does not have any money. Chloe is Maggie’s dog.))

```

1      LIN:  ↑hE wouldn't be so GOOD for you. hhh
2           .h hah hah
3      MAG:  he's thirty-EIGHT.
4           didn't he live at HOME then?
5      SUE:  NO;;
6      MAG:  (<<p> i'm sorry>)
7      SUE:  NO;
8           he's been on: (.) his OWN <<all> for a long time;>=
9           =°h but he's lIving in a nOt too good Area;
10          (-)
11     LIN:  well your frIend must ^LOVE that;
12     SUE:  ↑Oh YEAH; (-)
13          in fAct [he tells me (-) STOries,]
14 -> MAG:  [chlOe (come) ] ((SINGLE-TONE
           WHISTLE))
15     SUE:  that- (.)
16          shE's never HEARD these;

```

As Sue moves to respond to a follow-up question from Linda (line 11), Maggie takes advantage of the altered participation framework to call her dog. She first summons the dog verbally and then uses a sharp, single-tone whistle to call her (line 14). See Figure 6.

@@Insert Figure 6 here

Figure 6: Narrow-band spectrogram of single-tone whistle in Extract (4)

Here is another case of a single-tone whistle, this time used to attract the attention of a non-attentive co-present interlocutor located at some distance from the summoner:

Extract 5: “Toma cabron”⁸

((Two construction-site workers are aligning large rebar “cages” so that they can be coupled with “couplers” (cylindrical components). Horacio is above using a wrench to loosen a particular rod and have it descend. Damian is below and has visual access to the coupling site where the two rebar cages meet, so he can tell Horacio if the components have descended enough.

In this extract Horacio tries to hand the wrench down to Damian, saying *toma cabron* (Spanish “take [this] dude”), but is initially unsuccessful.))

```
1    HOR:   comin' DOWN.
2          (5.0)
3    HOR:   it went down a LOT right?
4    DAM:   yeah yeah. (it did.)
5          yeah I wouldn't (          )
6          yeah yeah right there's good.
7    HOR:   right THERE?
8    DAM:   a LI::Ttle bit more a LI::Ttle bit more.
9          THERE
10         ( [ ] )
11    HOR:   [toma caBRON;
12          (1.0)
13    DAM:   (Horacio)

14 -> HOR:   #((SINGLE-TONE WHISTLE))
        fig   #Fig. 7a,b

15    HOR:   WHA[T.
16    DAM:   [(          )
17    HOR:   nO good. HOW.
18          (1.0)
19    DAM:   (          )
```

Observe that in order to hand the wrench down to Damian, Horacio directs Damian to “take” it (*toma*), attaching a term of address *cabron* “dude” to his directive (line 11). Damian does not attend to this, however, but instead summons Horacio himself (line

8. Our thanks to Elliott Hoey for providing us with this example.

13). Horacio now produces a sharp and loud single-tone whistle⁹ (line 14, Figure 7a, b) in pursuit of Damian's attention but then immediately responds to Damian's summons with *what* (line 15).

@@Insert Figure 7a here@@

Figure 7a: Horacio produces a single-tone whistle to summon Damian

@@Insert Figure 7b here@@

Figure 7b: Damian's bodily orientation during the summons

Another kind of summons whistling uses two tones with the second being approximately three semitones lower than the first: His tonal configuration when aligned with, e.g., a proper name is known among linguists as the "calling contour" (Ladd, 1996). In the following case the two-tone whistle is used to summon a horse:

Extract 6: "Sheeba" (SBSCAE 56)

((Julie, a horse breeder and trainer, is introducing her horses, Sheeba and Beamer, to her guest Gary.))

```

1    JULI:  sEe there's SHEEba?
2              (1.3)
3    GARY:  hey SHEEba,
4              (--)
5    JULI:  <<all>((CLICK)) ((CLICK)) ((CLICK)) ((CLICK))>
6              (-)
7              come ↑HERE girl,
8              (-)
9 -> GARY:  ((TWO-TONE WHIS[TLE]))
10   JULI:  [ ((CLAP)) ] ((CLAP)) ((CLAP))
11              (-) are you SLEEpy?
12              (2.1)
13              and THAT'S her boyfriend bEamer?

```

9. This whistle has an offglide but we categorize it as 'tonal' because it is sharp and fast in contrast to 'gliding' whistles, which are smooth and slow.

The summons sequence begins in line 3, where Gary greets the horse using a greeting formula and the horse's name (*hey SHEEba*, line 3). After a pause, Julie summons the horse through multiple clicks (line 5) and verbal resources (*come ↑HERE girl*, line 7). Following another pause, Gary produces a bi-tonal whistle (See Figure 8). In partial overlap, Julie claps three times. We can infer that the use of these multiple summoning practices (lexical and non-lexical) are an orientation to the horse's delayed uptake (*are you SLEEpY*, line 11).

@@Insert Figure 8 here@@

Figure 8: Narrow-band spectrogram of bi-tonal whistle in Extract (6)

Although more research is necessary, we can provisionally conclude that non-melodic tonal whistling in order to summon pets or people is one of a variety of practices used to perform this action. In all of our cases, mono-tonal or bi-tonal whistling is produced in pursuit of uptake after a verbal summons in which the pet or the person is addressed by a nominal term of address. These terms of address are generally names (with the exception of *cabron*, which constitutes a non-name term of address).

5.2 The gliding whistle

A second type of non-melodic whistling has a shape that is distinct from the tonal whistle: It begins on a high tone and glides slowly downwards. Exemplars produced by different speakers on different occasions are recognizable as belonging to the same type.

The most common function of this type of gliding whistle in our data is in response to a news informing that implies a breach of norm. A common practice to convey a breach of norm is the use of numerical references (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006). In what follows, we will exemplify how gliding whistles are deployed to respond to various kinds of informings.

We begin with a case in which an informing is built to be impressive. This informing contains a numeral, produced in response to Laura's query *how far do you WALK*. (0.6) *Usually*, directed to Donna, who has just arrived at the gathering in a jogging outfit:

(7) "Five miles" (Farmhouse_2:12)¹⁰

1 LAUR: how far do you WALK. (0.6) Usually. (.) [(every day)
 2 DONN: [↑(bou:t/OH:) fIve
 MILES.
 3 (1.2)
 4 DONN: but I've been trying to <<creaky> RUN part of that.>
 5 MICH: hm[m
 6 DONN: [which dOesn't come EAs[y.
 7 LAUR: [wO[w.
 8 MOM: [mmm:
 9 -> MICH: #((GLIDING WHISTLE))[::
 fig #Fig. 9
 10 LAUR: [you should do the Bolder BOULder
 with us next year.
 11 (0.7)

When Donna reports that she walks five miles every day, this is not treated by the participants as especially noteworthy (see the 1.2 sec. silence in line 3). However, when Donna adds that she tries to *run* part of this distance (line 4)¹¹ and that this is not easy for her, her informing is transformed into a report of an even more noteworthy effort (line 14). Now all three participants respond affectively, Laura with *wOw*, Mom with *mmm*., and Michelle with a gliding whistle (lines 7-9, Figure 9). The gliding whistle then is, like the particle *wow*, one resource for displaying appreciation in response to an informing that is built to impress the recipient(s).

@@Insert Figure 9 here@@

10. Our thanks to Barbara Fox for providing us with access to this example.

11. The phrase *rUn part of that* is produced with creaky voice.

Figure 9: Michelle, who sits at the back on the right, produces a responsive gliding whistle.

While in (7) it is a report of the speaker's stance towards a quantification that leads to a gliding whistle response, on other occasions it is the quantification itself which conveys the extremity of a state of affairs and makes "gliding whistle" a relevant type of response:

Extract 8: "Between twenty and twenty-five horses" (SBCSAE 56_14.36)

((Julie, a horse breeder and trainer, is showing her barn to Gary, who has just sold his wife's pony to her.))

```
1      GARY:    what is ↑THAT.
2      JULI:    ↑it's a GRAnary,
3              it holds about FOUR thousand pounds of GRAIN,=
4      GARY:    =OH:::. <<p> wOw:..>
5      JULI:    yeah.
6              (.)
7      JULI:    I [have-
8      GARY:    [(I've) never seen anybody HAD one of thOse at a bArn.
9              (0.2)
10     JULI:    well I feed (0.6) between twEnty and (.) twEnty-five
11              HORsEs all year round.
12              (0.3)
12 -> GARY:    ((GLIDING WHISTLE))[::      ]
13     JULI:    [so I can't] bUy it by the SACK.
```

Following a lengthened news receipt *OH::* (Heritage 1984), Gary displays appreciation of the size of Julie's granary with a soft *wOw* (line 4). He goes on to profess never having seen one that size in a barn (line 8).¹² In other words, Gary treats the size of the granary as a "breach of norm", which Julie now accounts for by invoking the number of horses she must feed. While she could have said "I have to feed a lot of horses every year", she instead specifies the number of horses she feeds: *between twEnty and twEnty-*

12. It may be worth noting that earlier in the conversation Gary has explained to Julie that he builds barns for a living: he is thus an expert in this domain.

five HORses and adds an extreme-case formulation: *all year round* (line 10). It is this information that Gary receipts with an appreciative gliding whistle. See Figure 10.

@@Insert Figure 10 here@@

Figure 10: Narrow-band spectrogram of gliding whistle in Extract (8)

A gliding whistle is neither inherently positive nor inherently negative in valence. In (7) it was used to respond to something treated as a tribulation (running a lengthy distance “which dOesn’t come EAsy”, line 6). But in (9) it is used to receipt an informing that is framed as positive in nature:

Extract 9: “Conveyancing” (HOLT:M88:2:4 A)

((Hillary is telling her cousin Mark about her future son-in-law Mike, who is going to do the conveyancing for the property he and Hillary’s daughter are about to purchase.))

```

1 Hil: <<p>and ]mIke's qui[te> (.) quite a brAIIny CHAP,=
2 Mar: [.hhh
3 Hil: =<<p>he's> .hhh hE's doing his own con↑VEYenci[ng;
4 Mar: [.h<<f>↑oh
      YEA:H>?=
5 Hil: =because it's gonna ↑sAve them <<f>EIgh[teen hUndred
6      [ ((clock clock))
7 Hil: ↑POU:ND>;=
8 ( ): =((click))
9 -> Mar: ((GLIDING WHISTLE))
10      (0.4)
11 Hil: ((clears her [throat)) and as ↑fAr as mIke's conCE:R[NED,=
12 Mar: ^` [C:RU:MBS; [hhh
13 Hil: =it's (0.6) a gOO- ↑YOU know;=
14 =i mEAn ih- it=Is a lot of [( )
15 Mar: [well of COURSE itI:s;

```

Here too Hillary could have said about her son-in-law’s conveyancing “it’s gonna save them a lot of money”, but instead she specifies the precise amount <<f>Elghteen *hUndred* ↑*POUND*> (lines 5 and 7) in a prosodically “pumped up” fashion (Wilkinson & Kitinger, 2006). This invites Mark to appreciate it, which he does with a well-timed gliding whistle (line 9). See Figure 11. Note that after a brief pause, Mark goes on to produce another mark of appreciation, the formulaic expression *CRUMBS*, in line 12.

@@Insert Figure 11 here@@

Figure 11: Narrow-band spectrogram of gliding whistle in Extract 9

6 The gliding whistle compared to lexical response tokens

As in Extract (7) above, gliding whistles often appear together with lexical response tokens such as *wow*. If they are produced by the same speaker, the lexical token on occasion follows the gliding whistle in a separate turn-constructive unit: this is what we saw happening with *crumbs* in (9). Yet on other occasions, the lexical response token precedes the gliding whistle. Here is a case in point:

Extract 10: “Impound the horse” (SBCSAE 56_7:36-8:22)

((Julie has been explaining to Gary what a legal brand inspection for a horse is and why it is important.))

```
1      JULI:    and
2              (.) sEe the thing IS-
3              what makes it GOO:D;
4              is if yOu don't have a lEgal (0.3) brAnd inSPEction?
5              (0.5)
6      JULI:    on a hOrse when you take him to the AUction;
7              <<acc> yOu can't run him through the AUction;>
8              ↑thEy will impOund the HORSE.
9  -> GARY:    [WOW].
10     JULI:    [.hh] SO::=
11              =i[f somebody goes and]
12  -> GARY:    [(( GLIDING WHISTLE)) ]
13     JULI:    fOrges a little bill of sAle that looks like THIS
14              (0.5) ((paper rustling until end of turn))
15              and stEals a hOrse out of my PASTure=
16              =and tAKes it to the AUction;
17              they can impOund the hOrse and chEck it OUT.
18              (0.8)
19     JULI:    lOok for idEntifying MARKS.
20              .hh (.) A:nd (.) not SEND that horse to the killer[s.]
21     GARY:                                [O:]kay.
22              oKAY.
```

In response to Julie’s shocking information that a horse will be impounded at an auction if there is no legal brand inspection for it, Gary first produces a *WOW* (line 9) and then, before Julie can pursue continuation of her turn, a gliding whistle (line 12). Both

responses target the unexpected breach of norm implied by Julie's dramatic *impOund the hOrse* (line 8).

As Extract (10) suggests, it could be argued that gliding whistles and lexical tokens such as *wow* accomplish much the same work: they both express appreciation of something that is treated as "out of the ordinary". Like *wow*, a gliding whistle is not valenced either positively or negatively (Local & Walker, 2008). And like *wow*, the contour of a gliding whistle, beginning on a high tone and falling downwards, resembles one possible pitch contour for *wow*, although it is produced at a much higher frequency and without vibration of the vocal folds.

Yet a more careful comparison of *wow* and the gliding whistle as used, e.g., in (10) above cautions against overstating their similarity. Note, for instance, that Julie produces an inbreath after her drastic announcement *they will impOund the hOrse* (line 8), done as a source of surprise in the sense of Wilkinson and Kitinger (2006). This leaves space for Gary to produce *wow* in the clear (line 9). Julie does not recommence speaking until Gary's *wow* has come to completion (see Goodwin, 1986, for similar cases). But Gary produces his subsequent gliding whistle (line 12) in overlap with Julie's turn continuation, which is launched by a lengthened *so::* (Raymond 2004). This whistle overlaps fully with what Julie says next *if somebody goes and*, yet neither speaker cuts off or recycles their turn. That is, the co-participants do not treat the overlapping gliding whistle as making recycling or repair necessary (Schegloff, 1987). This is a pattern encountered again and again in our data: overlap appears to be more tolerable with a gliding whistle than with a lexical response token such as *wow*.

At the same time, a gliding whistle *can* be used as a resource to build a freestanding turn-constructive unit. In (7) – (9), for instance, the whistle is produced at a TRP and is well-timed with respect to the turn it is responsive to. However, in two

of these cases, (7) and (8), a co-participant sets in with their next turn before the whistle has been completed. This may be attributable to the fact that the end of a gliding whistle is difficult to project before it actually happens: falling tones may flatten out and be prolonged indefinitely. Therefore, the terminal overlap between the gliding whistle and a coparticipant's next turn (Jefferson 1984b) may come about *inadvertently* if the whistler lengthens their sound object.

Yet there are several instances in our data where the overlap between a gliding whistle and talk by other is an *achievement* brought about by the co-participant pursuing a turn regardless of the fact that the interlocutor has begun a responsive whistle. This is what happens in the following extract:

Extract 11: "Twenty thousand acres" (SBCSA 56_10.49)

((Julie is telling Gary about how she uses thirty-two English foxhounds at her club to go foxhunting.))

1 GARY: what clUb is THAT.
2 JULI: it's the BIjou springs-
3 (0.4)
4 JULI: BI-
5 (0.4)
6 JULI: no-
7 (0.6)
8 JULI: BIjou hUnt club.
9 (1.2)
10 JULI: B- BIjou springs hUnt club <<dim>I guess it's cAlled.>
11 (0.3)
12 JULI: and it's Out at (0.2) BIjou springs RANCH;=
13 =(it's) we lEase (.) twEnty thousand acres to HUNT on
14 out [there.=with the] KENnels.
15 -> GARY: [((<<p> GLIDING WHISTLE>))]
16 JULI: °hhh
17 JULI: ↑cOsts us (0.3) twElve thousand sIx hundred dollars a
 year for the LEASE;
18 (0.6)
19 JULI: for the right to HUNT out there and have the clUbhouse
 and the KENnels.

The gliding whistle in line 15 is produced in orientation to a projectable TRP after *HUNT on out there* (lines 13-14). But although Julie can clearly hear Gary's whistle,

she nevertheless proceeds to add an increment: *with the KENnells* (line 14), thus talking in overlap with Gary's whistle. Neither participant orients to the fact that they are speaking in overlap. In fact, it might even be doubted that they are both "speaking": actually one is speaking while the other is (softly) whistling. At the completion of her turn (line 16), Julie appears to monitor for a more substantial (lexical) token of appreciation, given the fact that she has just announced that she leases an inordinately large acreage of land. When this is not forthcoming, she proceeds to produce another "out of the ordinary" number, namely what it costs to lease the land (line 17). Again she monitors for some token of appreciation (line 18), which Gary withholds.

The data thus lead us to the (preliminary) conclusion that a gliding whistle is in many ways equivalent to a lexical response token such as *wow* in terms of what it is used to accomplish and the way it can build a freestanding turn-constructional unit. But at the same time, a gliding whistle is only a *partial* equivalent to a response token such as *wow* in terms of how participants orient to its turn-taking potential (cf. also Goodwin, 1986). A gliding whistle is often produced in overlap; moreover, when overlap with a gliding whistle occurs, no recycling or repair ensues.

7 Implications and Challenges

In our study, we have distinguished between three formal types of whistling in English social interaction: melodic whistling, the non-melodic tonal whistle, and the non-melodic gliding whistle. Each formal type is used for a specific interactional purpose.

The analysis of melodic whistling confirmed previous research: melodic whistling appears in the form of tunes that may be recognizable or not for participants. It is deployed as a display of non-participation in and/or lack of availability for focussed interaction in both telephone and face-to-face interaction. This kind of whistling strongly contrasts with non-melodic whistles, which constitute sound objects

characterized by a set of constant and recognizable forms and functions. Non-melodic whistles are used to implement conventionalized, sequentially situated actions, both initiating and responsive. Unlike melodic whistling, which has been shown to be interchangeable with humming (Stevanovic, 2013), non-melodic whistles cannot be replaced by hums.

When used as a summons, the non-melodic whistle is tonal: it tends to be short and sharp, typically involving one tone or at the most two. Non-melodic responsive whistles, on the other hand, are produced as slow glides with a falling contour. There is some gradience in terms of how high the initial pitch peak goes,¹³ and in contrast to non-melodic initiating whistles, they can be produced with a lax, “whispery” quality.¹⁴

As an *initiating* action, the non-melodic tonal whistle generally serves as a summons of non-attentive domestic animals and people. Our data suggest that this sound object is produced in a position following a verbal summons or term of address, in pursuit of a response. In these environments, tonal whistles form separate TCUs. On the other hand, the gliding whistle is used systematically to build *responsive* turns following informings that contain a numerical reference or some other detail that is treated as impressive or shocking. Here the prior turn has often been set up to be impressive by incorporating extreme-case formulations, intensifying emphasis (Ogden, 2012; Reber, 2012), and/or “punched up” prosody (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006). When they are produced as responsive actions, the status of whistles as separate TCUs seems less clear, but this ambiguity may be part of their usefulness.

13. The span covered by the gliding whistles in our collection ranges from 4 to 12 semi-tones.

14. The “whispery” quality presumably comes from the whistle being softer with more friction at the lips (p.c., Richard Ogden).

Our analysis has revealed that the sound object “gliding whistle” can co-occur with the lexical token *wow* in the same responsive environments. Like *wow* as described by Local and Walker (2008), a gliding whistle displays appreciation (for something positive) or being impressed and on occasion shocked (for something negative or counter to the norm). Although the gliding whistle can build a freestanding TCU, it can also be delivered legitimately in full overlap with ongoing talk. Co-participants who find themselves speaking at the same time as a gliding whistle is being produced do not orient to the overlap as requiring cut-off or recycling. Nor do co-participants always orient to it as a full-fledged response: on occasion they appear to expect a lexical uptake.

In conclusion, we wish to propose that non-melodic whistles constitute conventionalized spoken signs: both the initiating tonal as well as the responsive gliding whistle represent stable form-meaning pairings. Granted, these types of whistle do not have referential semantics nor much phonetic substance (no vowels or consonants). Produced by the speech organs in a way that is similar to speech, they are like clicks, but in contrast to clicks, they do not have an orthographic representation.¹⁵ We noted that a two-tone whistle is similar to what linguists know as the “calling contour” (Ladd, 1996), i.e., a stylized intonation contour which is associated *inter alia* with the function of summoning. This contrasts with the “gliding whistle”, which has not been acknowledged as a linguistic entity in previous research. Nevertheless, our data suggest that it a conventionalized sign for building responsive turns.

15. It is true that the IPA has a phonetic representation [w] for ‘whistle’, but this representation does not necessarily correspond to the sounds observed in our data nor does it capture the difference between a ‘tonal’ whistle and a ‘gliding’ whistle.

We conclude that there is a continuum of sound objects that function as spoken communicative signs, with “gliding whistle” and “tonal whistle” being at one – non-linguistic – extreme and lexical tokens such as, e.g., the word *hey* or *wow* being close to the other, thus reflecting different degrees of lexicality (Figure 12). We conceptualize the entity *crumbs* as being more lexical than, e.g., *hey* and *wow*, because of its etymological origins.¹⁶

@@Insert Figure 12 here@@

Figure 12: Non-melodic whistling at the margins of language

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16. Historically, *crumbs* seems to stem from the mild oath *By crum!* (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/edible-interjections/crums>).

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Figure 2: Dan crosses the room, whistling and with visual disengagement (line 6)

Figure 3: Dan dances at the counter, whistling and displaying visual disengagement (line 10)

Figure 4: Dan opens drawer, showing visual disengagement (line 15)

Figure 5: Dan orients his gaze towards Alice (line 16)

Figure 6: Narrow-band spectrogram of single-tone whistle in Extract (4)

Figure 7a: Horacio produces a single-tone whistle to summon Damian

Figure 7b: Damian's bodily orientation during the summons

Figure 8: Narrow-band spectrogram of bi-tonal whistle in Extract (6)

Figure 9: Michelle, who sits at the back on the right, produces a responsive gliding whistle.

Figure 10: Narrow-band spectrogram of gliding whistle in Extract (8)

Figure 11: Narrow-band spectrogram of gliding whistle in Extract (9)