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Just say no? The use of conversation analysis in developing a feminist perspective on sexual refusal



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ABSTRACT. This article aims to show the value of conversation analysis for feminist theory and practice around refusal skills training and date rape prevention. Conversation analysis shows that refusals are complex conversational interactions, incorporating delays, prefaces, palliatives, and accounts. Refusal skills training often ignores and overrides these with its simplistic prescription to 'just say no'. It should not in fact be necessary for a woman to say 'no' in order for her to be understood as refusing sex. We draw on our own data to suggest that young women are able explicitly to articulate a sophisticated awareness of these culturally normative ways of indicating refusal, and we suggest that insistence upon 'just say no' may be counterproductive insofar as it implies that other ways of doing refusals (e.g. with silences, compliments, or even weak acceptances) are open to reasonable doubt. Finally we discuss the implications of our use of conversation analysis for feminist psychology, both in relation to date rape and more generally.

KEY WORDS: *conversation analysis, date rape, dispreferreds, feminism, refusal skills, young women*

The teaching of 'refusal skills' is common to many date rape prevention, assertiveness training and social skills programmes for young women. The assumption underlying such programmes is that young women find it difficult to refuse unwanted sexual activity. A common goal of such programmes is to teach women to 'just say no', clearly, directly, and unapologetically: they aim to 'provide women with the skills to avoid victimisation by learning to say "no" effectively' (Kidder et al., 1983: 159).

The aim of this article is to show the value of conversation analysis (CA) (Psathas, 1995; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998) for feminist theory and practice in the

area of refusal skills training and date rape prevention. We review the existing CA literature on how people 'say no' in ordinary everyday interactions, and consider what we know about how such refusals are done both in relation to what young women already know about 'saying no' and in relation to the educational literature on refusal skills. Illustrating our argument with our own data, we first support the claim that young women *do* indeed find it difficult to 'just say no' to unwanted sex, and we outline some of the explanations commonly offered for why this might be the case. Second, we draw upon CA to offer an alternative explanation for this difficulty. We show that the empirical findings of CA demonstrate that refusals are complex and finely organized conversational interactions, and are not appropriately summarized by the advice to 'just say no'. Third, we use our data to show that young women already have, and can explicitly articulate, a sophisticated awareness of these culturally normative ways of doing refusals and we suggest that it is precisely their knowledge of the cultural rules documented by conversation analysts which explains why they do not 'just say no' in response to unwanted sex. We suggest that date rape prevention (and similar) programmes which insist upon 'just saying no' as appropriate behaviour are deeply problematic in that they ignore and override culturally normative ways of indicating refusal. Fourth (and with important consequences for education in refusal skills), we use the conversation analytic research on refusals to show that *it should not in fact be necessary for a woman to say 'no' for her to be understood as refusing sex* and that insistence upon 'just say no' may be counter-productive insofar as it implies that other ways of doing refusals (which do not include the word 'no') are less than adequate. Finally, we discuss the implications of our use of conversation analytic work for feminist psychology, both in relation to young women's experiences of date rape, and more generally.

We would like to emphasize that our focus here on the conversational problems entailed in 'just saying no' does not mean that we have no *other* criticisms of date rape education and refusal skills programmes and their theoretical/political rationale. Many of them (e.g. 'Sex Respect', cf. Driscoll and Greig, 1994) are based on right-wing fundamentalist Christian ideas of chastity and sexual continence with which we are in profound disagreement. Many offer the teaching of refusal skills as an alternative to contraception (e.g. Campbell and Barnlund, 1977) or to safer sex (e.g. Howard, 1985b), while we would advocate the wider availability of contraception and information about safer sex practices. Even those programmes which operate with a broadly liberal or even feminist perspective often raise concerns. In particular, we would draw attention to their implicit (sometimes explicit) reliance on 'miscommunication' theory (Tannen, 1991), according to which date rape is often the result of miscommunication between the sexes: he misinterprets her verbal and non-verbal communication, falsely believing that she wants sex; she fails to say 'no' clearly and effectively. As Carole Cocoran (1992: 135) points out, 'most acquaintance rape programs stress misinterpretation as the cause of date rape and therefore suggest that the remedy lies in assertive verbal communication on the part of the female'. For example, assuming that there are differ-

ences of interpretation between men and women, the American College Health Association (cited in Turner and Rubinson, 1993: 605) advises women that 'often most men interpret timidity as permission' (which is why it is important to 'say no when you mean no'). Consequently, women's 'undercommunication of disinclination to have sex' is viewed as a contributing factor in date rape (Allgeier, 1986, cited in Murnen et al., 1989) and psychologists conclude that 'if more women were able to communicate their disinterest [sic], more of the unwanted sex would be eliminated' (Murnen et al., 1989). As we have noted elsewhere (Frith and Kitzinger, 1997), this theory places the burden of responsibility for date rape back on to women and obscures institutionalized gender power relations. As Ehrlich (1998) demonstrates, the miscommunication model of date rape is a useful resource for defendants in sexual assault tribunals seeking to construct themselves as innocent: complainants are represented as deficient in their efforts to signal non-consent.

Our argument here does *not* rely upon the idea that there are gender differences in the expression or understanding of refusals. Rather than attempting to define gender differences in talk, or to characterize the interactional styles of men and women, we explore the ways in which young women themselves talk about sexual refusals. Drawing on the conversation analytic literature, and on our own data, we claim that both men and women have a sophisticated ability to convey and to comprehend refusals, including refusals which do not include the word 'no', and we suggest that male claims not to have 'understood' refusals which conform to culturally normative patterns can only be heard as self-interested justifications for coercive behaviour.

Young women find it difficult to 'just say no' to unwanted sex

It is common for women to report that they find it difficult to refuse unwanted sex (e.g. Campbell and Barnlund, 1977; Howard, 1985a, 1985b; Warzak and Page, 1990), and victims of sexual assault often report feeling that they had 'failed to make their refusal sufficiently clear' (Cairns, 1993: 205). Forty-five percent of participants in one study (Warzak et al., 1995) 'reported that they lacked effective refusal skills' and 77 percent of all participants in the study 'responded in the affirmative when asked if they had an interest in learning more effective refusal skills'.

Our own data from focus groups (cf. Wilkinson, 1999) with 58 female school and university students support these findings. There are many discussions throughout our data about the difficulty of saying no (see Frith and Kitzinger, 1998; Frith, 1997, for more details). For example, in the following extract, Tara and Pat recount how difficult they find it to reject someone sexually, even at a fairly early stage in the proceedings.

Tara: My male friends are always thinking, you know, that I've... I've got that sort of problem where somebody's keen, I just can't... I just can't say to somebody, 'look, sorry, I'm not', and I'll end up... I'll avoid it in the end, but I'll quite often end up

speaking to them for hours and hours, and I'm just thinking like, 'I really don't want to be here; I want to be doing something else' [...] I just can't drop it.

Int.: Why?

Pat: You don't want to hurt their feelings. [...] I really try and avoid ever having to be in the situation of having to say to somebody, 'look, no, I'm sorry' [...] I wouldn't really risk to have a sort of a flirty jokey sort of conversation with someone that I don't know very well in case they suddenly just say, 'okay, how about it?', and then it would just be like 'uuuuuhhhh!'.

For both Tara and Pat, then, saying 'no' is so difficult that they try to avoid ever having to do it. In the following extract, another young woman describes the problem of trying to refuse particular sexual activities once a sexual encounter has commenced.

Liz: You've sat there and all through it you've been thinking 'I don't want to do this, I should have said no, I should have stopped him before, and I can't stop him now, because we're half way through the swing of it all, and I'm just so stupid. Next time I'm just going to sort it all out. . . ' [...] But you never do. . . .

Asked how one might go about refusing sex with men, one young woman resorts to fantasy as the only way she can imagine of doing this successfully.

Sara: Have a supersonic button, right (laughter), and then, just before you have sex, and you didn't want to, you could press it and vaporize them.

Of course, this is not the only way in which young women talked about refusing sex. Sometimes, they say, refusing sex is a relatively simple matter of just saying no: 'you just get straight to the point' (Jane); 'I personally feel that I could say no, and I have done' (Jan). Quantification of our data (i.e. what percentage of women report finding it difficult to refuse sex and what percentage report finding it easy) is, however, not a straightforward counting exercise. Some women avoid ever commenting directly on the relative ease or difficulty of refusing sex, and many say at one point in the group discussion that it is easy, and at another that it is difficult. On one occasion, for example, Liz, comments that a forthright no is simple and effective ('that's what I said to my present boyfriend, "I'm not having sex with you"'); later she talks about finding refusals difficult and embarrassing ('it just doesn't seem right to say no when you're up there in the situation'). These contradictions and ambiguities arise, we believe, because talk is not simply a transparent report of experience; rather it is doing interactive business between focus group participants. Handbooks which advise researchers on how to conduct focus group research often warn against the dangers of inappropriate quantification of focus group data (e.g. Morgan and Krueger, 1993: 14). According to Morgan (1988: 119), 'numbers and percentages are not appropriate for focus group research and should not be included in the report'. Others (e.g. Krueger, 1988) are inclined to admit some quantification, but disagreement centres around whether the group, the participant, or the participants' utterances constitute the appropriate unit of analysis. For the purposes of this article, then, we consider it sufficient to note that there are relatively few occasions on which

the 58 young women in our study reported that they felt able to say a clear and direct 'no', and fewer still instances of actual examples from their own experience of times when they had done this. Many researchers would see young women like these as prime candidates for sexual assertiveness training courses where they can be taught how to 'just say no'.

Why is it apparently so difficult for young women to refuse unwanted sex? A wide range of explanations is offered in the literature. The failure to 'just say no' is often attributed to internal personality characteristics such as low self-esteem (Stere, 1985), lack of assertiveness (McConnch, 1990) or lack of perseverance (Sandler et al., 1992). According to Murnen et al. (1989) internalization of traditionally feminine gender role stereotypes ('passivity, submissiveness, nurturance, acquiescence to male needs and helpfulness') means that 'women are often trained to be ineffective communicators in a sexual relationship'. Other researchers suggest that young women find it hard to 'just say no' because they are concerned about the damage to their reputations if they do not comply with male sexual demands (e.g. fear of being labelled 'frigid' or 'lesbian'; Muehlenhard and Cook, 1988); because they are committed to safeguarding the emotional and sexual well-being of their partners (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993, 1996); or because they are the victims of sexual scripts according to which (for example) 'going too far' in some assumed sexual sequence means that a woman then forfeits the right to say 'no' (e.g. Goodchilds et al., 1988; Quinn et al., 1991). It is also often suggested that sexuality is a particularly difficult topic for open and clear communication, and that young women who might be fully able to communicate their desires (or lack of them) in other situations, are unable to do so in the sexual situation, with its heavy cultural loading and high level of personal investment. We think all of these explanations may sometimes be useful, and our own data indicate that young women themselves often use explanations like these to account for their own (and other people's) difficulties in refusing unwanted sex.

However, what these explanations leave out is the simple fact that saying no is difficult in *any* context. These young women's reported discomfort with, and inability to say, open, clear and direct 'no's is not specific to their age, to the situation, or even to their gender. It is common for people to experience difficulty in refusing invitations or declining offers, at whatever age, and across a wide variety of situations. Advice on how to say no is widely available in Anglo-American culture – even on the Web ('How to say no with style' from www.synapsenet/oracle). Assertiveness books routinely include role play exercises in saying no (e.g. Fensterheim and Baer, 1975; McConnch, 1990) and management books have sections with titles like 'Knowing How to Say No' (Burley-Allen, 1983), or lists of techniques for helping people to say no in the work environment (Stubbs, 1986). Saying no 'nicely' has always been a key question of etiquette (e.g. Coudert, 1993; Martin, 1982: 87–9) and therapists and counsellors also often find themselves giving advice on how to say no. Such advice would not be so widely available if most people experienced saying no as unproblematic. The difficulty of 'saying no' is so well known that it has generated an endless stream of 'jokes' (see

Crombie, 1994, for examples) which underscore the apparent need people feel to come up with (sometimes implausible) excuses and justifications to explain their refusals (e.g. 'I'd love to but I'm staying home to work on my cottage cheese sculpture' or 'I'm teaching my ferret to yodel' – both in *The Guardian* 10 January 1997). Allegedly 'humorous' books offer 'helpful' translations of phrases like these, indicating their status as refusals. In *The Little Book of Romantic Lies*, for example, Bruce Smith and Laura Goeke Burns (1996) include a 'translation' of a woman's statement, 'Can't we just talk for a while': this, they say, translates as 'I'd rather make love to a trailer hitch'. Of course, what makes these books understandable as 'funny' is that readers can be assumed to 'already know' that 'Can't we just talk for a while' is a sexual rejection, i.e. that refusals are awkward to perform, and that (polite) rejections are often done inexplicitly.

Refusal skills training is one of a set of 'verbal hygiene practices' (Cameron, 1995) which has been directed disproportionately at women, commonly seen as suffering from gendered linguistic problems associated with oppressive expectations about 'feminine' or 'ladylike' speech. Deborah Cameron quotes a feature on assertiveness training in the US feminist magazine *Ms.* of March 1975 which began by relating the experiences of women involved in what they described as 'the first course of its kind in Seattle':

We are 10 women who find it difficult to say No or to express an opinion at all. Education, experience and feminism may make us *feel* equal. But learning how to speak up for ourselves and what we believe in is something else again. That is why we have signed up for a course in verbal self-assertion. (Withers, 1975, quoted in Cameron, 1995: 178)

Assertiveness training and other types of refusal skills courses address this widespread difficulty in 'saying no' by routinely advising that refusals are best accomplished through plain unvarnished 'no's. For example, the authors of the classic handbook, *The Assertive Woman* (Phelps and Austin, 1987) devote an entire chapter to 'Saying "No"', and claim that:

It is crucial that you give a simple 'no' rather than a long-winded statement filled with excuses, justifications, and rationalizations about why you are saying 'no'. It is enough that you do not want to do this, simply because you do not want to do it. (Phelps and Austin, 1987: 123–4)

Refusal skills training routinely emphasizes the importance of the unvarnished, direct, unhesitating word 'no' in communicating refusals. Many books recommend *repeated* 'no's (as in the so-called 'cracked record' technique, e.g. Phelps and Austin, 1987) – and many labour the point that refusals should not normally be accompanied by explanations. Writing for physicians concerned to help teenagers to postpone sexual involvement, Marion Howard (1985a: 82) counsels them to 'emphasise to young teenagers that they have the right to say "no"' and 'to reinforce the idea that they do not have to give a reason or explanation': they should just 'say "no" and keep repeating it' (p. 87).

In sum, then, refusals skills training of the sort employed in date rape prevention and other similar programmes aimed at young women routinely teach that refusals are best accomplished with clear, direct, straightforward 'no's.

Conversation analysis shows that refusals are complex and finely organized interactional accomplishments

The field of CA, which emerged from the pioneering work of Harvey Sacks in the 1960s (reprinted as Sacks, 1995), is generally viewed as part of the wider intellectual programme of ethnomethodology – the study of the mundane ways in which ordinary members of a culture produce and recognize intelligible courses of action. CA aims to provide an elaborate and systematic account of the way in which talk, especially talk-in-interaction, is constructed and understood by the speakers. Researchers have studied talk across a wide range of different situations including a suicide prevention helpline, talk in court, news interviews, medical settings, and therapy sessions, as well as ordinary telephone conversations and talk over the dinner table. Classic works in the field (which include studies of talk in all of these listed settings) include the recent publication of Sack's early lectures (Sacks, 1995); the work on talk in judicial settings by Atkinson and Drew (1979); and the collections of papers in the edited volumes by Atkinson and Heritage (1984), Button and Lee (1987), Boden and Zimmerman (1991) and Drew and Heritage (1992): for a general introduction to CA see Nofsinger (1991), Psathas (1995) and Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998). The aim of CA is to develop an understanding of the underlying structural organization of naturally occurring conversation.

Conversation analysts have built up a considerable body of work about the structure of refusals in ordinary everyday conversation (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Davidson, 1984; Drew, 1984; Pomerantz, 1984). This body of work (like all of that in CA) relies upon careful attention to small details of talk, such as short pauses, hesitations, false starts, and self-corrections. One important finding of CA is that speakers (and listeners) are very finely tuned in to these small details such that all of these micro-level features have interactional relevance. For example, 'mm hm' and 'yeah' are both used as ways in which one person acknowledges what another is saying, but they have been shown to have very different functions (Jefferson, 1984); and very short pauses (of less than a second) between one person finishing speaking and the next person starting to speak have been shown routinely to influence the first person's perception of what the second person is about to say (Pomerantz, 1984; Levinson, 1983; Heritage, 1984). For conversation analysts, then, 'even the finest levels of conversational detail, every speech error, pause, overlap or lexical correction, might be there as a "designed" or consequential feature of social action' (Edwards and Potter, 1992: 6).

Conversation analysts' general focus on the small details of talk is reflected in work on refusals. In analysing how refusals are done, conversation analysts rely

on transcripts of tape-recorded interactions (in which people refuse or do not refuse an invitation, offer, proposal etc.). Unlike most qualitative research (which uses a conventional orthographic transcription method, which 'cleans up' the data and makes it more readable) conversation analysts have developed elaborate transcription systems designed to preserve and convey some of these intricate details of speech. The most widely used system, the Jeffersonian transcription system (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Jefferson, 1984; Psathas and Anderson, 1990), involves the transcription not only of *all* words (every 'yeah', 'oh' and 'mm hm') and part-words (e.g. 'the fro-, toad') audible on a tape, but also includes symbols to indicate features of delivery such as pauses, intonation, volume, elongation and cut-off of sounds, and so on. For most readers new to conversation analysis, this transcription notation is very off-putting and makes data extracts frustratingly hard to read. It is, however, essential to the research; and some of the most robust findings, such as the work on 'preference organization' which is presented here, would be impossible without this kind of careful transcription. We have simplified the transcription as much as possible in quoting the data extracts which follow, and we refer our readers to the transcription key in the Appendix for a full explanation.

Analysis of these transcripts of naturally occurring conversations in which people either accept or refuse invitations (offers, proposals, etc.) shows that acceptances and refusals follow very different patterns: acceptances do, indeed, often involve simply 'just saying yes', but refusals very rarely involve 'just saying no'. Acceptances generally involve (i) simple acceptance; and (ii) no delay (Heritage, 1984: 266–7), as in the following examples. (Note that the '[' symbol indicates overlapping speech.)

Example 1

A: Why don't you come up and see me some[time
 B: [I would like to
 (Atkinson and Drew, 1979: 58)

Example 2

A: We:ll, will you help me [ou:t.
 B: [I certainly wi:ll.
 (Davidson, 1984: 116)

These acceptances are typical in being immediate and direct. There is no pause between the request and the acceptance (in fact, the person providing the acceptance often produces speech which overlaps with that of the person making the request) and the acceptance itself is simple and straightforward. (It is possible that *sexual* acceptances – especially from women – may be somewhat different in form; for example, there is some evidence that sexual agreement is often conveyed nonverbally, and may even be communicated via a token refusal, cf. Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh (1988). We are not aware of any research which has used as data actual naturalistically occurring acceptances – or refusals – of sexual interaction.)

In contrast with the ‘unvarnished acceptances’ (Heritage, 1984: 266), typical in the non-sexual domain, non-sexual refusals are typically neither immediate nor direct. Here are two examples of refusals, incorporating those features which conversation analysts have identified as typical. (Note that pauses too short to time accurately are indicated as ‘(.)’ and longer pauses are timed in tenths of a second; also, pauses can be filled with audible in- or outbreaths – the ‘hehh’ in Example 4 indicates an outbreath before B starts to speak.)

Example 3

Mark: We were wondering if you wanted to come over Saturday, f'r dinner.
(0.4)

Jane: Well (.) .hh it'd be great but we promised Carol already.
(Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 86)

Example 4

A: Uh if you'd care to come and visit a little while this morning I'll give you a cup of coffee.

B: hehh Well that's awfully sweet of you, I don't think I can make it this morning. .hh uhm I'm running an ad in the paper and-and uh I have to stay near the phone.
(Atkinson and Drew, 1979: 58)

Conversation analysis shows that refusals are routinely designed to incorporate at least some of the following features:

- (i) delays, e.g. pauses and hesitations, like the four-tenths of a second pause in Example 3, and the filled pause ‘hehh’ in Example 4;
- (ii) prefaces (also referred to as ‘hedges’) e.g. use of markers like ‘uh’ or ‘well’ (‘well’ is used in both the preceding extracts);
- (iii) palliatives, e.g. appreciations, apologies, token agreements etc. which serve to alleviate the pain caused by the refusal; compliments such as ‘it'd be great’ or ‘that's awfully sweet of you’ are both examples of palliatives. Other possible palliatives would include accompanying a refusal with a delayed acceptance (‘not today, but tomorrow’), or with the offer of an alternative (‘I can't come round to your place, but why don't you come round to me?’) (Antaki, 1994: 79); and/or
- (iv) accounts, i.e. explanations/justifications/excuses for why the invitation is not being accepted such as a prior engagement or commitment as in Examples 3 and 4. It is common (as in the preceding examples) for people to present accounts which suggest that the person refusing the invitation *cannot* accept it (rather than that s/he *chooses* not to), i.e. that they are *unable* rather than *unwilling*. The advantage of this account is that it has a ‘no blame’ quality, which avoids the implication that the invitation is unattractive or unwanted: it functions to constitute a refusal while avoiding negative or critical consequences (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 86). It is also common for refusals to be qualified or mitigated in some way (as in ‘I don't think I can make it this morning’ in Example 4).

In sum, then, careful attention to the details of naturally occurring conversation shows that it is conversationally most unusual to 'just say no'. Rejections and refusals are commonly delayed and indirect and follow a typical pattern which generally includes *delay* in responding, some kind of *prefacing* of the refusal (with words like, 'well', or 'ahhh . . .'), a *palliative* remark, and some kind of *account* aimed at softening, explaining, justifying, excusing, or redefining the rejection. It is important to note that refusals are almost always accompanied by explanations or justifications (Labov and Fanshel, 1977: 86–8). This is what conversation analysts mean when they describe rejections as 'dispreferred' actions. Actions which are characteristically performed straightforwardly and without delay (like acceptances) are termed 'preferred' actions, while those which are delayed, qualified and accounted for are termed 'dispreferred'. The concept of 'preference structure' is widely used in CA: another example of a 'preferred action' is agreeing (e.g. with someone's opinion), which, like accepting an invitation, is usually carried out quickly and directly; disagreeing, by contrast is described as 'dispreferred', because it is characteristically marked by the same pattern (of delay, prefacing etc.) that we have noted in refusals. Note that the terms 'preferred' and 'dispreferred' are not intended in any way to refer to the private desires or psychological proclivities of individual speakers: they are simply descriptive of the different ways in which acceptances and refusals are routinely done in ordinary talk (including the acceptance of invitations the individual may actually want to reject, or the refusal of invitations s/he may wish to accept).

This analysis of ordinary (non-sexual) conversational interaction offers an explanation of why it might be difficult for people to say clear, immediate and direct no's (whatever their desires) in sexual situations. Quite simply, that is not how refusals are normatively done. As we have seen, refusals are usually delayed and indirect, and this means that immediate and direct no's, particularly those for which no explanations are provided, are often experienced as rude or hostile (Heritage, 1984: 268). Advising someone to 'just say no', then, may not be very good advice. In sum, CA shows that communicating a refusal is a far more elegantly crafted interactional activity than we might have imagined, and that it is not adequately captured in the simplistic advice offered by refusal skills training programmes to 'just say no'.

Young women talking about refusals display their knowledge of the cultural rules documented by conversation analysts

The data we have collected are based on tape-recorded interactions in which young women *talk about doing refusals*. Data in which refusals were actually *being done* by young women would show that they, like other competent members of their language community, have an *implicit* understanding of the culturally accepted rules for refusals, as documented by conversation analysts. Our data, by

contrast, in which young women *talk about doing refusals* illustrates the extent to which they are able to articulate and to make *explicit* these normative conversational patterns.

Of course, young women describing the doing of refusals do not sound like academic conversation analysts. We would be very surprised if one of the young women in our focus groups used terms like ‘dispreferred’, or ‘palliative’, in discussing the refusal of unwanted sex. Nonetheless, we show here that it is possible to identify, in young women’s talk about the doing of refusals, a great deal of ‘common-sense’ knowledge about how refusals are normatively done – and that this can be characterized as a lay version of conversation analytic theory. (For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between ‘common-sense’ and ‘expert’, e.g. conversation analytic, knowledge about communicative norms, see Kitzinger, 1998.) In this section we show how young women’s talk about refusals demonstrates their sophisticated understanding of culturally acceptable ways of refusing – understandings which map on to the empirical findings of CA, but which are often at variance with the simplistic prescriptions of date rape education (and similar) programmes.

First, although young women do not, of course, use the term, they know that refusals are *dispreferred* conversational actions, i.e. that they necessitate a great deal more interactional work than do, for example, acceptances. Whereas date rape prevention programmes insist on direct and straightforward no’s, young women display their sophisticated knowledge about talk in interaction by describing feelings akin to wrongness, rudeness or foolishness which accompany the unvarnished ‘no’, and by insisting on the need to explain and justify their refusals.

Liz: It just doesn’t seem right to say no when you’re up there in the situation.

Sara: It’s not rude, it’s not rude – it sounds awful to say this, doesn’t it.

Liz: I know.

Sara: It’s not rude, but it’s the same sort of feeling. It’s like, ‘oh my god, I can’t say no now, can I?’

In general, the young women in our focus groups characterized explicit refusals of sex as having negative implications for them. Later in the same group discussion quoted earlier, Sara comments that ‘they’d probably think you were really arrogant if you turned round and said, “I’m not going to have sex with you though, alright”’, and Liz agrees with her, saying, ‘you’d feel a right prat’. In another focus group, Rachel admits that ‘I’ve very rarely said to someone, “I’m sorry, I’m not interested at all”’, and Megan agrees that to make such a clear and direct statement would make her ‘feel a complete charlie’. In sum, these young women’s talk about the rudeness and arrogance which would be attributed to them, and the foolishness they would feel, in saying clear and direct ‘no’s, indicates their awareness that such behaviour violates culturally accepted norms according to which refusals are dispreferred actions.

Second, in line with their understanding that refusals are dispreferreds, young women often insist that it is necessary to offer *accounts* (reasons or excuses) for

their refusals. This again runs counter to the advice offered by many date rape and refusal skills training programmes. The slogan 'just say no' implies that nothing other than 'no' needs to be said. Consider, for example, the 'positive self-statement' offered by Muehlenhard et al. (1989) as part of their cognitive-behavioral treatment programme for women at high risk of acquaintance rape: 'I have a right to say no without explaining my reasons' (Muehlenhard et al., 1989). As a statement of the rights of an individual, this is certainly true, but it is equally true that to say no without explaining one's reasons is conversationally very abnormal. Young women are clear that refusing sex *is* something for which reasons are needed. They point out that 'just saying no in a relationship is not enough if you've got a good relationship' (Wendy); Jan says, 'I think it's better if you try to be nice and explain why [you are refusing sex]'; and Jill describes how she would respond to unwanted sexual pressure by saying '“oh no, I don't want to have sex with you because . . .” and then explain it'.

Third, as conversation analysts have also claimed, young women talk about good excuses as being those which assert their *inability* (rather than their unwillingness) to comply with the demand that they engage in sexual intercourse: from the vague (and perhaps, for that reason, irrefutable) statement that they are 'not ready', through to sickness and menstruation. Several women reported that they relied on some kind of illness as an excuse: a 'headache' (Karen and Cath), feeling 'tired' (Cath), 'knackered' (Jane and Pam) or just feeling 'really ill' (Wendy). Other excuses which emphasized the practical difficulties which made them *unable* (rather than unwilling) to have sex were 'you've got nowhere to do it' (Ros), 'you could get expelled' (Zoe) or 'you're scared of getting pregnant' (Rose). Note that these were offered by the young women not as genuine reasons for their not wanting sex, but as excuses which they believed young men would find relatively acceptable – and they sometimes made explicit their belief that the relative acceptability of these excuses derives from their focus on *inability* rather than *unwillingness* to have sex. Jill explains that saying no to sex with a boyfriend 'not for any reason, but if you just didn't want to' could result in a partner becoming 'really upset about it'. In order to avoid such an outcome, a plausible excuse is necessary. Pretending to be menstruating was one much-discussed excuse: 'being on your period' was seen as an effective excuse, at least in the short term, because 'that would stop the boy from blaming you' (Jill). These young women's view that effective excuses are those rooted in inability rather than unwillingness conforms with the empirical findings of CA, but is at variance with the advice of refusal skills training programmes which often model statements of *unwillingness* as paradigmatic assertive behaviour (e.g. 'I don't feel like making out tonight', 'I don't want to get in bed with you tonight', 'I just don't want to', all from Smith, 1975: 246–7).

Their refusals are also often qualified or mitigated in some way. One form of refusal which was very often recommended by young women in our focus groups was the 'delayed acceptance', i.e. the statement that one is 'not ready' for sex, or 'not ready yet'. Cath comments that 'one way is not to say “no” as in you never

want to, but “no” as in “not now”, and this was a very commonly reported strategy: ‘I’d say, “look, maybe sometime in the future”’ (Michelle); ‘I’m not ready yet; can we wait a while?’ (Sam); ‘I start by telling him that it is all too soon’ (Maggie); ‘just say you’re not ready yet, or you want to keep it for a special time’ (Zoe). The disadvantages of giving delayed acceptances as a form of refusal were also discussed at some length by the young women in our groups; the young women shared, however, a sense that delayed acceptances, whatever longer term problems follow in their wake, are more interactionally acceptable ways of avoiding sex than are explicit ‘no’s. Again, young women’s views about how refusals are done, while mapping nicely on to the conversation analytic literature, run counter to the recommendations of the refusal skills literature which warns:

Telling the man that you do not want to have sex by saying things like ‘I really don’t know if we should do this’, ‘Not now, can’t we wait?’ or “I really like you but I’m not sure’ is not effective. All these statements can be misconstrued as meaning that you need a little more urging to be cooperative. (Wiseman, 1994: 65)

Fourth, young women explicitly state that it is a good idea to offer (what conversation analysts call) *palliatives* in refusing sex. Young women report refusing sexual activity with phrases such as: ‘well, it’s very flattering of you to ask’ (Sharon), or ‘look, you’re a really nice guy and I do like you, but that’s it’ (Pat). Phrases like these serve to ‘soften’ the refusal (Atkinson and Drew, 1979: 58); as Judy says ‘you’ve got to soften the blow somehow, haven’t you’. This search for palliatives or attempt to ‘soften’ refusals is often expressed as a concern to find ways of refusing sex ‘without hurting his feelings’ (Carla), and other research on young women’s sexuality has documented the extent to which this is a major concern for them (e.g. Howard and McCabe, 1990; Frith and Kitzinger, 1998). According to Sharon: ‘If you have to reject someone sexually, then the best thing to do is to make it up to them in some other direction, so that you can reject someone sexually by offering them friendship back’. Again, as the extract from Wiseman (1994: 65) quoted here (‘I really like you . . .’, etc) indicates, palliatives are actively criticized in the refusal skills literature.

What these data illustrate, then, is that the young women in our focus groups have a sophisticated awareness of normative communication patterns around refusal which permit them not only (presumably) to do refusals in the culturally appropriate way, but also to verbalize some aspects of what is involved in doing this. Our data suggest that young women’s concerns about appropriate refusal technique are fairly sophisticated compared with the crass advice to ‘just say no’. Date rape education (and similar) programmes are prescribing behaviour which violates basic cultural norms and social etiquette, and young women know this. Our claim here is supported by the findings of Amy Gervasio and Mary Crawford (1989) who have reviewed research on how people evaluate so-called ‘assertive’ behaviour. It seems that what experts think is healthy assertion strikes others as ‘aggressive’ and ‘rude’, and they suggest that one reason for this is because it breaks the rules of normal conversation. The evidence is that ‘just saying no’ is

rude, and that young women know this. Date rape prevention (and similar) programmes which insist upon 'just saying no' as appropriate behaviour are deeply problematic in that they ignore and override culturally normative ways of indicating refusal.

It should not be necessary for a woman to say 'no' in order for her to be understood as refusing sex

Thus far we have shown that conversation analysts have demonstrated that refusals follow a normative pattern, and that young women are able to articulate at least some features of this pattern in their own talk about refusals. There is, however, a crucial feature of refusing which we have not yet mentioned, although it has important implications for refusal skills training programmes based on the slogan, 'Just say no'. Simply put, the word 'no' is neither sufficient, nor necessary, for a refusal to be heard as such.

Most date rape (and similar) prevention programmes have incorporated the idea that saying 'no' is not *sufficient* for a refusal to be heard as a refusal. The widespread use of 'token resistance' (saying 'no' but meaning 'yes') has been well-documented and studies have repeatedly found that about 40 percent of US female undergraduates report saying to their dates that they did not want to have sex when actually they 'had every intention to' and were 'willing to engage in sexual intercourse' (Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh, 1988; Muehlenhard and McCoy, 1991; Sprecher et al., 1994). Because women sometimes apparently mean 'yes' but say 'no', refusal skills teaching often encourages women to disambiguate genuinely meant no's by reinforcing their meaning with (for example) a firm tone, eye contact, or other forms of non-verbal communication (e.g. physically leaving the room, slapping the man). A 'genuine' no is supposed to be clear and definite in order to distinguish it from token refusals.

But while refusal skills education acknowledges that saying 'no' is not *sufficient* for refusal what it does *not* usually acknowledge is that saying no is also not *necessary* for refusal. Indeed, the slogan, 'just say no' puts the word 'no' in pride of place as the key semantic component of a refusal. This is mirrored in virtually *all* date rape education (and other refusal skills) programmes; an 'explicit and audible NO' is part of the operational definition of a 'refusal' in the study by Warzak and Page (1990), and the teaching of 'how to assertively yet emphatically say "No"' is the key pedagogic aim of the self-help book by Smith (1975). Yet, CA demonstrates conclusively that it is not necessary to say 'no' in order to refuse a request effectively, and to have a refusal heard as a refusal.

In fact, neither of the data extracts quoted earlier (Examples 3 and 4) to illustrate the key components of refusals includes the word 'no'. In both cases, however, the person addressed apparently understood them to be refusals, and responded as though the speaker were refusing the invitation. Let us look at another example in more detail:

Example 5

- A: If you wanted to: 'hh you could meet me at UCB an' I could show you some a' the other things on the computer,
(.)
maybe even teach you how to programme Basic or something
- B: (0.6) Well I don't know if I'd wanna get all that invo:lved, hh'hhh!
(Davidson, 1984: 108; transcription simplified)

In this extract, A's offer to show B some things on the computer is not immediately accepted (note the short pause '(.)' which follows it). A then modifies the invitation, offering to even teach B how to programme Basic. But still, B doesn't respond immediately: A's offer is met first with a short pause, then with the word 'well' (the preface), and then with the statement, 'I don't know if I'd wanna get all that involved'. Note that B does not say 'no'. Nonetheless, most of us will recognize that this is what B means – as, indeed, A does. The extract continues:

- A: It's really interesti:ng.

In other words, A 'hears' B as refusing (even though B hasn't actually said the word 'no'), and tries to persuade B ('it's really interesting'): the effort to persuade someone indicates (obviously) that you understand that they don't want to do it, but that you hope you can change their mind. So, B has successfully communicated a refusal, despite not saying a direct, clear, and immediate 'no'.¹ Conversation analysis shows that this is absolutely normal: this is the way most refusals are done, and they are heard (or, as conversation analysts say, 'oriented to') as refusals in the course of ordinary conversation. (For other examples see Davidson, 1984; Heritage, 1989; Antaki, 1994). This is even the case for parents refusing children's requests. In a study of over 100 request sequences transcribed from audiotapes made in the homes of 4-year-old boys and girls in Aberdeen, Scotland (across a range of different social class backgrounds), Wootton (1981) found that the word 'no' was notably absent from many of the exchanges in which children's requests were refused, and that parents generally followed the normative pattern for refusing (delay, preface, palliative, mitigated or qualified refusal, account) which we have already identified.

So, the evidence is that people usually hear refusals without the word 'no' necessarily being uttered. In fact, people often respond to just one part of the refusal sequence as signalling refusal in and of itself. For example, one of the most potent indicators of refusal is a delay in responding. According to Davidson (1984: 103) 'a silence offering immediately after an invitation, offer, request or proposal may be taken as displaying that it is possibly going to be rejected'. In fact, a pause of two-tenths of a second seems to be taken as evidence for an invitation rejection coming up (Levinson, 1983: 336). The following examples illustrate the way in which speakers, having issued requests or invitations, attend to pauses (in which their conversational partners *could* speak, but do not), as foreshadowing refusals. (Remember that (.) means a pause of less than two-tenths of a second, and longer pauses are indicated in seconds and tenths of seconds.)

Example 6

C: So I was wondering would you be in your office
on Monday (.) by any chance?
(2.0)
Probably not
(Levinson, 1983: 320)

Example 7

R: What about coming here on the way
(.)
Or doesn't that give you enough time?
(Levinson, 1983: 335)

Example 8

C: Well you can both stay.
(0.4)
Got plenty a' room.
(Davidson, 1984: 10; transcription simplified)

In these three examples, speakers, hearing the silences which follow their requests or invitations, indicate that they are anticipating refusals. The third example is interesting because the speaker attempts to forestall rejection by dealing with what might be causing it (the belief that perhaps there isn't enough room for her guests). It is common to find that when people issue invitations, offers, requests or proposals and are met with brief silences, they reformulate or elaborate on the original invitation so as to make an acceptance more likely – as A also does in Example 5. The very fact that these 'subsequent versions' (Davidson, 1984) are produced demonstrates, of course, that the initial silence was heard as heralding a refusal. So CA indicates that a brief pause (of no more than two-tenths of a second) following a request or invitation is often, in and of itself, heard as implying refusal.

The production of palliatives in response to an invitation, offer or request is also generally heard as a refusal in and of itself. In an example cited by Antaki (1994: 81), N responds to a lunch invitation (after the short pause we know to be typical of refusals), 'well, you're real sweet, hon., uh::m': note the preface ('well') and the palliative, which in this case takes the form of a compliment. This is *all* N says, but it is enough to constitute an implied refusal, as we can see from the response of the person making the invitation: 'or do you have something else'. If, in everyday conversation, a simple palliative is heard as implying refusal, then young women who respond to sexual invitations with palliatives like 'well, I do like you' or 'it's flattering to be asked' should likewise be heard as implying refusal – especially if these responses are preceded by a couple of tenths of a second of silence.

Furthermore, in ordinary, naturally occurring speech, weak *agreements* (such as half hearted 'yeah's or 'uh huh's) are often heard and reacted to as if they imply *disagreement* or refusal (Pomerantz, 1984). In the extract which follows, A asks B to telephone someone tonight. Notice that B says 'yeah' (which sounds like

a – not very enthusiastic – agreement), but A (after waiting a short time, perhaps to offer B the opportunity to say why s/he isn't keen to make the call), reacts as *though* B had said 'no': 'Plea::se', A begs.

Example 9

A: 'hhhhh Uh will you call 'im tuhnight for me, =

B: =eYea:h,

(.)

A: Plea::se,

(Davidson, 1984: 113)

Here we have a 'yes', which is understood by the person making the request as if it were a refusal. We can see why this is if we compare it with conversations in which requests are accepted (see Examples 1 and 2 cited earlier): the evidence is that acceptances (real ones – that is, ones which are understood as such by the person making the request) occur quickly and without delay. This explains why, in Example 9, A understands the delayed and weak 'acceptance' as a refusal. In sexual situations, too, then, we might expect weak or delayed acceptances to be heard as refusals.

In sum, refusals do not have to be – and generally are not – emphatic, direct, and immediate 'no's. In ordinary conversation they are signalled by relatively subtle cues such as pauses, palliatives, and even weak agreements. It is clear that the word 'no' is not a necessary semantic component of refusals. It is not normally necessary to say 'no' in order to be heard as refusing an offer or invitation – pausing, hedging, producing a palliative, and even delayed or weak 'acceptances' are typically understood as refusals in everyday talk.

Conclusion and implications

To conclude, then, if we read the literature on young women's sexual negotiation in conjunction with the conversation analytic work on refusals, then it seems that young women responding to unwanted sexual pressure are using absolutely normal conversational patterns for refusals: that is, according to the research literature (and our own data) on young women and sexual communication, they are communicating their refusals indirectly; their refusals rarely refer to their own lack of desire for sex and more often to external circumstances which make sex impossible; their refusals are often qualified ('maybe later'), and are accompanied by compliments ('I really like you, but . . .') or by appreciations of the invitation ('it's very flattering of you to ask, but . . .'); and sometimes they refuse sex with the kind of 'yes's which are normatively understood as communicating refusal. These features are all part of what are commonly understood to be refusals. Yet the feminist and the date rape prevention literatures (and refusal skills training programmes more generally) present refusals of this kind as inadequate and insufficiently communicative. By contrast, we would suggest that young women are communicating in ways which are usually understood to mean refusal in other contexts and it is not the adequacy of their communication

that should be questioned, but rather their male partners' claims not to understand that these women are refusing sex. As conversation analyst Michael Moerman (1988: 45) puts it:

In any society, the recurrent and systematic attainment of misunderstanding between members of social categories who regularly converse with one another must thus be regarded as an artful, complicit, and damning accomplishment.

The conversation analytic literature leads us to question the source of men's alleged failure to 'understand' women's refusals.

If there is an organized and normative way of doing indirect refusal, which provides for culturally understood ways in which (for example) 'maybe later' means 'no', then men who claim not to have understood an indirect refusal (as in, 'she didn't actually say no') are claiming to be cultural dopes, and playing rather disingenuously on how refusals are usually done and understood to be done. They are claiming not to understand perfectly normal conversational interaction, and to be ignorant of ways of expressing refusal which they themselves routinely use in other areas of their lives.

While feminists have enthusiastically embraced the slogan 'yes means yes, and no means no', some anti-feminists have been virulent in opposition. For example, Gilbert (1991), criticizing the 'radical feminist effort to impose new norms governing intimacy between the sexes' (p. 61) complains that 'the awesome complexity of human interaction is reduced to "No means no"'. Conversation analytic research (like the work on token resistance) suggests that Gilbert is right: human conversational interaction is indeed intricately complex: 'yes' may sometimes mean 'no', 'no' may sometimes mean 'yes', and the word 'no' is not necessarily part of a refusal. What are the implications of this for feminism?

This article has argued that young women find it difficult to say 'no' to sex at least partly because saying immediate clear and direct 'no's (to anything) is not a normal conversational activity. Young women who do not use the word 'no', but who refuse sex with delays, prefaces, palliatives and accounts are using conversational patterns which are normatively recognized as refusals in everyday life. For men to claim that they do not 'understand' such refusals to be refusals (because, for example, they do not include the word 'no') is to lay claim to an astounding and implausible ignorance of normative conversational patterns. We have suggested that the insistence of date rape prevention (and other refusal skills) educators on the importance of saying 'no' is counter-productive in that it demands that women engage in conversationally abnormal actions which breach conventional social etiquette, and in that it allows rapists to persist with the claim that if a woman has not actually said 'NO' (in the right tone of voice, with the right body language, at the right time) then she hasn't refused to have sex with him.

Our analysis in this article supports the belief that the root of the problem is not that men do not understand sexual refusals, but that they do not like them. Confronted with a date rape education 'no means no' poster campaign, seeking to disambiguate women's refusals, nine male students at Queens University in

Canada responded with posters of their own including slogans such as 'no means kick her in the teeth', 'no means on your knees bitch', 'no means tie her up', 'no means more beer' and 'no means she's a dyke' (cf. Mahood and Littlewood, 1997). Similar evidence comes from a recent study of 16-year-old boys who were asked 'if you wanted to have sex and your partner did not, would you try to persuade them to have sex? How?': the researchers comment that there was 'clear evidence of aggression towards girls who were not prepared to be sexually accommodating' and quote interview extracts in which boys say that in such situations they would 'root the fucking bitch in the fucking arse', 'give her a stern talking to', or just 'shove it in' (Moore and Rosenthal, 1992, cited in Moore and Rosenthal, 1993: 179). The problem of sexual coercion cannot be fixed by changing the way women talk.

In the present study, CA has made clear that there are normatively understood ways of doing refusals which are generally understood to *be* refusals, and consequently we believe that there is no reason why feminists concerned about sexual coercion should respond to men's allegations of their 'ambiguity' by taking upon ourselves the task of inventing new ways of doing refusals. As feminists, we have allowed men (disingenuously claiming not to understand normative conversational conventions) to set the agenda, such that we have accepted the need to educate women to produce refusals which men cannot claim to have 'misunderstood'. This, in turn, has led only to an escalation of men's claims to have 'misunderstood', to *be* 'misunderstood', and, in general, to be 'ignorant' about women's (allegedly different and special) ways of communicating. Men's self-interested capacity for 'misunderstanding' will always outstrip women's earnest attempts to clarify and explain.

The technical field of CA has not been attractive to feminists (but see Stokoe, 1998; Wetherell, 1998, for recent exceptions). Conversation analysis is often viewed as nit picking, obsessively concerned with details, and as unable to see beyond the 'micro' level of the 0.2-second pause to the 'macro' level of oppression. It is so-called 'critical' discourse analysis (rather than the ethnomethodologically rooted variety drawing on CA) which is usually seen as most likely to advance political ideals. We hope we have illustrated here one way in which knowledge of the details of talk in interaction can help in formulating political arguments and practical programmes. Date rape prevention and refusal skills programmes need to be based on empirical evidence of how refusals are actually done and understood to be done, not on idealized prescriptions which fly in the face of cultural conventions. Educators have lamented the alleged absence of 'an empirical basis by which to guide efforts to say no effectively' (Warzak and Page, 1990: 134): the findings of CA provide just such an empirical basis. The slogan 'yes means yes, and no means no' may make a good campaign slogan, but it is neither a description of actual human behaviour, nor a suitable prescription for dealing with the sexual coercion. We would urge feminist researchers to consider these and other ways in which a close attention to the details of language use in ordinary conversation may be of broader social and political relevance.

Appendix: transcription notation

Most conversation analysts use a version of the transcription notation developed by Gail Jefferson (for a complete description see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). We have provided here only what the reader needs to make sense of the extracts cited in this article.

[indicates onset of overlapping speech
:	indicates that the preceding sound is lengthened or drawn out (more colons indicate greater prolongation, e.g. Ah:::)
<u>underlining</u>	indicates emphasis
(.)	pause less than 0.2 of a second
(0.3)	pause, timed in tenths of a second
.hhh	inbreath (more 'h's indicate a longer inbreath)
hhh	outbreath (more 'h's indicate a longer outbreath)
=	indicates no pause between speakers; one turn runs into another with no discernible pause
, (comma)	not used as a punctuation mark, but to indicate a slightly rising 'continuing' intonation

NOTES

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1. To be absolutely accurate here, we should note that we do not in fact know anything about what B *intended* to communicate – and indeed B's intentions and desires are unknowable by, and irrelevant to, conversation analysts. Conversation analysts do not claim to be able to use what people say to read off psychological phenomena like intentions, desires, emotions, or other cognitions. The claim is only that A *reacts* to what B says as though B were refusing the invitation, and hence that the structure of B's speech is the kind of structure which ordinary members of the speech community commonly orient to as a *refusal*. See Edwards (1997) for a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between talk and cognition.

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