

Examining two explicit formulations in university discourse

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Abstract

A formulation is a type of metapragmatic utterance that enables participants to comment on some segment of the ongoing talk and to negotiate meaning within an interaction. Formulations have often been investigated in therapeutic and counseling interactions, but little is known about the use of formulations in other institutional settings. Broadening the scope of inquiry to higher education, the present study explored the distributions, functions, and responses to two types of explicit formulations (those prefaced by what you're saying is and are you saying that) in university discourse. Using MICASE as a source of data, the study focused on the two explicit formulations in different types of university speech activities (e.g., lectures, study groups, research labs). The study's findings indicate that in higher education—just as in therapeutic contexts—the production of formulations is highly constrained by participants' institutional roles and their relative power. This article further illustrates the ways in which formulations can serve as didactic tools in educational contexts. Finally, the article concludes by highlighting potential interactions between formulation frames, response types, and participant structures.

Keywords: formulations; spoken academic discourse; metapragmatics; university discourse; institutional discourse.

1. Introduction

A formulation is a discursive resource that enables participants to negotiate meaning within an interaction. When speakers use formulations (e.g., *so what you're saying is that you don't really understand*), they reference the discussion itself, rather than continuing within the frame of the current discussion. Therefore, formulations allow a speaker to, in a sense, put the current discussion “on hold,” and to move temporarily “to a so-called metalevel” in order to

comment on the ongoing talk (Buttny 1996: 150). More specifically, formulations offer up to the interlocutor a candidate reading of what a preceding stretch of talk has been about (Heritage and Watson 1979). Recently, Antaki, Barnes, and Leuder (2005: 643) have provided the following broad definition of “formulation”: “. . . any commentary by one speaker, in whatever format, which may be taken to propose or imply a reworking of events described or implied by a previous speaker.” This particular definition of formulation, adopted in the present study, underscores the fact that the phenomenon involves at least two speakers. While these types of formulations have been studied extensively in therapeutic and counseling contexts, little is known about their distributions and functions in other institutional settings. The present study examines two explicit formulations in a corpus of spoken university discourse. (The term “explicit” here indicates the formulation is preceded by a syntactic frame, such as *what you’re saying is . . .*)

Formulations belong to a larger category of language functions referred to variously as *metapragmatics* (e.g., Bublitz and Hübler 2007; Caffi 1994; Silverstein 1993), *metacommunication* (e.g., Bateson 1972), *metalinguage* or *metadiscourse* (e.g., Jaworski et al. 2004). Although there may be subtle gradations of meaning reflected in each one of these terms—and indeed, multiple definitions of each exist—the types of utterances thought of as metapragmatic, metacommunicative, metalinguistic, or metadiscursive are typically characterized as having at least two functional dimensions: the textual and the relational. The textual dimension refers to the fact that metapragmatic utterances are about the content of what is being said (or written), and the relational dimension refers to the discourse-managing function of metapragmatic utterances (Hübler and Bublitz 2007). Formulations are no exception. They simultaneously perform the textual-level work of clarifying meaning, and they also serve the interpersonal functions of negotiating and establishing common ground among participants within an interaction.

The conversation analytic study of formulations in interaction has its roots in ethnomethodology. Building upon the earlier work of Garfinkel and Sacks (1970), Heritage and Watson (1979) further developed ideas about formulations and their functions in discourse. Specifically, Heritage and Watson first introduced the differences between gist and upshot formulations. Stated simply, a gist formulation is one that only summarizes the preceding discourse, whereas an upshot formulation is one that draws out some relevant implication(s) of the preceding talk. Heritage and Watson also made the important observation that formulations typically occur as an adjacency pair, with the second part showing strong preference for agreement. Hak and de Boer (1996: 85) explain that, as far as responses to formulations are concerned, “confirmations are massively preferred [. . .] because disconfirmations may jeopardize the sense of ‘the talk so far’ as an accountable test which is available

as an unequivocal resource for the ongoing members' collaborative constructions." In other words, because a nonconfirmatory response would threaten any sense of intersubjectivity that may have developed between speakers, this type of response is strongly dispreferred. Hak and de Boer (1996) propose the following taxonomy of three possible responses to formulations: plain disconfirmation (strongly dispreferred), plain confirmation (most common), and qualified confirmation.

Although formulating may occur in everyday conversational contexts, in the past few decades, formulations have been most often studied within institutional contexts, typically in psychotherapeutic, psychiatric, or counseling discourse.¹ In these institutional contexts, formulations take on special functions. Davis (1986) was one of the first researchers working in this domain to demonstrate how a therapist uses formulations to transform the client's troubles talk into a professional problem. Drawing attention to the fact that formulations represent one of the main conversational activities of the therapist during the session with the client, Davis also underscored the transformative nature of formulations. Antaki et al. (2005: 629, emphasis in the original) note that "Indeed [Davis's] point was that such a move was better termed *reformulation*, given the change it proposed." Buttny (1996) explains this special function of formulations in therapeutic contexts: "Therapists, as members of a specialized speech community, do more than simply reproduce the clients' terms, accountings, and assessments of the problems. The therapist reformulates the client's problems into different terms—to a discourse consistent with the therapists' perspective" (1996: 126).

Other investigations of formulations in medical settings include Hak and de Boer's (1996), which illustrated how formulations serve slightly different functions during the various phases of a psychiatric interview, and Antaki et al.'s (2005), which examined gist and upshot formulations in a number of psychotherapeutic encounters. More recently, Muntigl (2004, 2007) has shown how formulations work in his interactional data from couples' therapy sessions. He (2007: 235) explains that the therapists' formulations of their talk "allow clients to understand or construe their 'problematic' experiences from different or multiple perspectives. In this way, they might find 'new' solutions to their 'old' difficulties." Thus, the therapist's or counselor's use of formulations has an important institutional function: to recast a patient's/client's talk into specific terms that enable it to be addressed by therapy.

A defining characteristic of most institutional interactions is their asymmetry. In other words, counselor–client or therapist–patient relationships are not power-neutral: "Counsellors and clients do not enter each session as 'equal' partners with 'equal voices'" (Muntigl 2004: 133). Rather, institutional roles and relationships shape and constrain the types of contributions that each participant can make during these types of interactions.² Thus, one important

finding is that, in these types of encounters, formulating is a move that is almost exclusively performed by the therapist/counselor.³ While formulations may occur in all types of social interaction (Davis 1986; Muntigl 2007), it can be said that within institutional encounters, institutional roles, responsibilities, and realities tend to constrain the production and distribution of formulations as well as responses to formulations.

Examined in various types of counseling and therapeutic discourse, formulations have been found to be frequent and productive, and researchers have concluded that they serve a number of important professional functions in these settings (e.g., Antaki et al. 2005; Davis 1986; Hak and de Boer 1996; Muntigl 2004, 2007). However, little if any work has explored these types of formulations in educational settings. In particular, not much is known about their presence, distribution, or functions in the context of higher education. Because higher education is an institution where participants' roles and relationships are organized hierarchically, it can be expected that—just as in medical contexts—participants will be constrained by their roles and relationships in the types of contributions they can make during different speech events.

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to explore two explicit formulations in higher education. Using a corpus of spoken university language, the analysis focuses on two types of explicit formulations (i.e., those preceded by *what you're saying is . . .* and *are you saying that . . .*), and examines their distribution and functions, as well as interlocutor responses to them. In contrast to therapeutic discourse, where one of the primary functions of formulations is to transform the client's troubles into a professional concern to be further addressed in the interaction, it will be shown that in educational settings, the primary function of formulations is to demonstrate, negotiate, or achieve a sense of mutual understanding. Furthermore, it will be shown that although there are differences in functions in the two contexts (i.e., medical and educational), similar institutional constraints related to participant roles and relative power (which operate both in therapy and in education) are relevant to understanding which participants tend to use explicit formulations more than others.

2. Method

The data analyzed in the present study come from the Michigan Corpus of Spoken Academic English (MICASE). MICASE is a free, publicly available, online corpus comprised of 152 transcripts and nearly two million words. A number of speech activity types (e.g., academic lectures, office hours, dissertation defenses, service encounters) as well as a broad range of disciplines (e.g., Anthropology, Chemistry, Engineering, Women's Studies) are represented in this corpus. Furthermore, MICASE transcripts also provide some demographic

information about speakers, such as age range, gender, academic status, first language, etc.⁴ Because each MICASE transcript includes information about the type of speech activity, participant demographics, as well as surrounding discourse, it allows for the qualitative study of targeted language features in context.

The present study takes a form-to-function approach to the identification and analysis of formulations. Such an approach is not uncommon in discourse analytic work which uses large corpora to explore a particular language function (Adolphs 2006). Moreover, MICASE has been used for the exploration of a number of discourse/pragmatic phenomena in spoken academic discourse, such as discourse markers, metaphor, politeness, reported speech, and speech acts, to name a few. As for examinations of related phenomena in MICASE, the focus has tended to be on first-person (i.e., self-directed rather than other-directed) types of metapragmatic utterances. For example, Murille (2006) explored the role of “reformulation markers” or speaker self-reformulations (such as *in other words*) in academic lectures; Pérez-Llantada (2006) examined instructors’ “textual metadiscourse” (including expressions such as *I’d like to* and *we’re gonna*) in academic lectures; and Mauranen (2003) examined the types of metadiscourse in negotiating criticism or differences of opinion in different types of academic speech events (e.g., thesis defenses, seminars, student presentations) in MICASE. However, to date, no studies of spoken academic discourse have focused specifically on explicit formulations involving two (or more) speakers.

Due to the exploratory nature of the present study, the following analysis is tightly focused on only two formulation frames: *what you’re saying is* and *are you saying that*. These frames were selected on the basis of having been identified across a number of previous studies of formulations (e.g., Antaki et al. 2005; Heritage and Watson 1979; Muntigl 2004, 2007). (Formulations that are preceded by syntactic frames such as these have been called “explicit” formulations; Antaki et al. 2005.) It is, of course, highly likely that there are other examples of formulations in MICASE which occur either with no syntactic frame, or with a preface of *so*, for example. However, short of reading all of the transcripts in the corpus from beginning to end to identify these examples based on their co-text, such formulations are difficult to identify with any systematicity. Therefore, the present study focuses only on explicit formulations (Antaki et al. 2005) that are preceded by either of these two metapragmatic frames (Janney 2007).

For the analysis, the corpus was first searched for the two formulation frames, and 15 tokens were identified. Each of the 15 instances was manually screened to ensure that its function was, in fact, a formulation according to Antaki et al.’s (2005) definition. (In only one instance, one of the two phrases occurred but did not have the function of a formulation; this case was removed

Table 1. *Speaker demographics and speech event information for what you're saying is*

#	Gender	Role	Relative status*	Age	Speech event	Discipline
A1	M	graduate student	=P	31–50	research group	AI
A2	M	graduate student	=P	31–50	research group	AI
A3	M	professor	+P	31–50	lecture	Engineering
A4	M	teaching assistant	+P	24–30	research lab	Psychology
A5	M	discussion leader	+P	24–30	study group	Philosophy
A6	M	teaching assistant	+P	24–30	research lab	Psychology
A7	M	teaching assistant	+P	24–30	research lab	Psychology
A8	M	professor	+P	31–50	lecture	Geography

* P = power; +P indicates the speaker is in a more powerful position than his/her interlocutor, whereas =P indicates that the speaker is on equal footing with his/her interlocutor.

from the data set and it is not included in the discussion below.) In the next section, the distribution of the formulations with respect to participant demographics is discussed. This is followed by close textual analyses of representative examples of both types of explicit formulation, in the context of the speech activity in which they occur, taking into account speakers' institutional roles as well as the kinds of responses that follow them.

3. Findings

3.1. *Frame 1*: “what you're saying is . . .”

The search for the first frame, *what you're saying is*, yielded a total of eight instances by five different speakers in six transcripts in MICASE. Table 1 illustrates the speaker variables of gender, institutional role, status relative to interlocutor(s), age, as well as the type of speech event and discipline. All of the speakers were native or near-native speakers of English, and, as can be seen in Table 1, all speakers were also male and between the ages of 24–50. Furthermore, all speakers were either in a position of relative power (i.e., professors, teaching assistants, discussion leaders) in relation to their interlocutors, or they were status-equals (i.e., fellow students). More specifically, of the eight tokens, the speakers of six were instructors, lecturers, or discussion leaders; the remaining two speakers were both graduate student peers in a mock proposal defense presentation.

The following discussion of excerpts begins with three instances of the frame *what you're saying is*. It is worth noting that these three instances (i.e., A1, A2, and A5) come from a research group and a study group, both of which are speech activity types that tend to be more discussion-based and interactive than lectures or research labs.

The first two examples come from an Artificial Intelligence Research Group Meeting, which involves seven participants, all of whom are graduate students. (These excerpts correspond to A1 and A2, in Table 1, respectively.) In this meeting, Speaker 3 (S3) is engaged in a practice run of his thesis proposal presentation, while his peers (fellow students) frequently interrupt and ask for clarification. Example (1) illustrates an instance of a fellow student (S2) using a gist formulation to summarize back the presenter's (S3) words. This formulation occurs approximately in the middle of S3's presentation. As can be seen in (1) below,⁵ the formulation occurs during a particularly interactive sequence of Speaker 3's presentation, in which other participants (S4 and S7) are attempting to better understand the meaning of Speaker 3's remarks, and Speaker 3 is attempting to clarify his position.

(1)

- S3: because if this [S4: i mean why do you want to force him to be] w- well first thing, we have to remember, this this producer, has to acquire this input. [S4: right] so that means that, this this producer cannot_ should not be allowed to, [SU-m: (xx)] so that therefore this producer has to supply this input since this_ and therefore this producer shouldn't end up buying anything, it since it, since it can't buy this, it shouldn't do anything at all by the equilibrium conditions it sh- either, sell its output and buy th- all its inputs or else do nothing. that's the only way to have a solution here.
- S7: i get it. the constraint on uh, price of C, should that be greater than or equal to one?
- S3: no less than or equal to one because, we don't want this supplier [S7: okay] to be active.
- S2: you might_ you could put, for the consumer's value V between seven and, eleven. or i don't_ i mean f- so what you're saying is for any, value in that range, there's no equilibrium.
- S3: yeah, y- that might be clearer just to say, well

Speaker 2, who produces the utterance with the formulation, is another male student of approximately the same age as the presenter. The turn that contains Speaker 2's formulation actually begins as a suggestion ("you might_ you could"). Speaker 2's eventual formulation then offers back to the presenter (S3) a more clear and concise way of expressing his idea ("for any value in that range, there's no equilibrium"). In his turn which immediately follows, Speaker 3's response ("yeah, y- that might be clearer") is one of affirmation, which—as discussed earlier—is the preferred response to a formulation. In this example, the formulation serves as a resource for a participant to clarify and sharpen the presenter's meaning, thus highlighting its sense-making or sense-negotiating function.

The next excerpt includes another instance of a formulation from the same meeting. In (2), the same presenter (S3) from the previous example is now concluding his presentation, and has just finished discussing the unique contributions that his study will make to his discipline. Speaker 1, presumably responding to some sort of visual aid (as can be inferred from his reference to “bullets” and “sub-bullets”), offers a critique of the way in which the presenter has organized his supporting visual material (“those two bullets are just really not equal”). This critique is followed by a suggestion (“what I might suggest . . .”) in the same turn. Speaker 3, the presenter, produces a number of minimal responses during Speaker 1’s critique, and ultimately he produces the formulation as his first turn-length response to Speaker 1’s critique-turned-suggestion.

(2)

S1: so i mean i don't disagree with that but i think, those two bullets are just really not equal, [S3: okay] the first one is, much more significant than the second, [S3: okay] but what, what i might suggest is just getting rid of the sub-bullets under the second and maybe- maybe add another . . . set of quo- set of, you know of things at that level, so, the main thing is you've got this decentralized solution method [S3: right right] right? [S3: mhm] and it's sort of on the side you've got quiescence detection, efficiency analysis, um, you know, activity properties, a- all those things that go with it [S3: mhm] they're all sort of, there's equal things about that, but they're sort of enhance the the main show, which is, the the method itself.

S3: mhm, so so (what) you're saying is, so add more bullets under this at this level? or, i'm i'm a little bit, (xx)

S1: yeah actu- actually,

Speaker 3’s formulation (“so (what) you’re saying is, so add more bullets under this at this level?”) adds greater specificity to Speaker 1’s original utterance (i.e., “maybe add another [. . .] set of, you know of things at that level”), and it enables Speaker 3 to check his own understanding of his peer’s critique-turned-suggestion. This gist formulation offers Speaker 1 the opportunity to respond to whether the presenter’s interpretation of his suggestion is, in fact, correct. Once again, Speaker 1’s response of affirmation to the presenter’s formulation is the preferred response.

In both (1) and (2), the speakers producing the formulations are peers (i.e., fellow graduate students) and therefore can be presumed to be status equals in this institutional context. The general tone in these examples—and indeed, throughout the rest of this transcript—is a collaborative one, as speakers overlap one another’s talk with response tokens to signal their active listenership, and with a good amount of constructive “give-and-take” taking place, which is highlighted by the formulations actually comprising either a suggestion

(example [1]), or a response to a suggestion (example [2]). Thus, in this specific context of a practice presentation, the formulations, which are produced by peer equals, are used to achieve a sense of mutual understanding, with the ultimate goal presumably being to help Speaker 3 express himself both verbally and visually in the clearest possible terms during his eventual proposal defense.

The next example comes from another type of relatively interactive genre: a study group. Example (3) is an excerpt from a philosophy study group that is comprised of five advanced undergraduate and graduate students. This excerpt follows an eight-second pause, after which the graduate student discussion leader (S1) nominates one of the students (S5) to answer a particular question. In response, Speaker 5 provides a definition of the term “axiom,” and in the turn that follows, the discussion leader (S1) uses a formulation to elaborate more on the response given by Speaker 5.

(3)

S1: okay. uh do you want to try number, two?

S5: alright i got the easy one actually. um, an axiom, it's just the, the very fundamental of the fundamental. it's the very starting point, of everything about philosophy. so you begin with them, <LAUGH> it's a starting point. i mean i- everything is based on it so, if you're gonna, talk about, epistemology, you can't talk about it unless you know, what your base, for that is or for ethics. i mean, [S1: mm] you have to start from the ground up, <LAUGH> or you can't build it.

S1: yeah, i had two uh, two parts, to my idea of this one. one was, i think that, yeah i think this is also related to what you're saying. is that you need to validate, u- or if you want to validate, your principles, you wanna make sure that, the principles the fundamental principles are correct. [S5: mm that's right yeah] so, so for validation purposes, and for, the purpose of, when t- when do you know to use that principle.

In this example, the formulation serves as a means for the discussion leader, S1, to build on Speaker 5's previous utterance (i.e., “you need to validate [. . .] your principles, you wanna make sure that [. . .] the fundamental principles are correct”). And once again, the student's response of affirmation (“mm that's right yeah”) to the discussion leader's formulation represents the typical and preferred response.

However, unlike the previous two examples (in which the participants were peers), in this example, S1, the speaker identified as “discussion leader,” is in a leadership position with respect to the other participants in the study group.⁶ This has interesting implications, as S1's formulation both directly references S5's previous utterance (repeating *fundamental*, for example), and extends, or elaborates on, S5's utterance (e.g., by introducing related notions such as

principles and *validation*). In other words, with his formulation, the discussion leader not only references the student's (S5) contribution, but he also uses the formulation as a foundation to build up a more detailed understanding of the question under discussion.

Another interesting difference between this example and the previous two examples is related to the formulation response. Whereas in (1) and (2), the responses to formulations were represented as separate speaker turns, here the transcription conventions suggest that Speaker 5's confirmatory response to the formulation overlaps with the discussion leader's ongoing talk. In other words, the discussion leader doesn't actually pause and wait for a response to his formulation. Thus, in this case, more than clarifying or checking a participant's understanding of a previous utterance (as in the previous two examples), here the formulation takes on more of a didactic function: S1 uses the formulation to help further develop S5's line of thinking about the term *axiom*.⁷

The remaining example of this category occurs in a lecture, a speech activity that is typically characterized as more monologic and less interactive than research or study groups, for example. Example 4 comes from a Dynamic Earth lecture, which is comprised of 18 students. This particular lecture is somewhat interactive, with the lecturer's medium-to-long turns regularly interspersed with student responses (i.e., eight of the 18 students have speaking turns in this particular transcript). In (4), the lecturer (S1), at the end of a long turn, poses a question in order to elicit a particular response. After several students' attempts to respond to the lecturer's question fail to generate the response that he is seeking, the lecturer then uses a formulation as a means of extending one of the student's (S5) responses.

(4)

- S1: [*part of a very long turn . . .*] this is, a very very wide area, and yet when we look at environments in which sediments are being deposited today, we see that, any given unit like a sandstone or a conglomerate, is being deposited over just a very narrow belt and my question to you is, how do we go from, having sediments deposited in a very narrow area, to having that particular sediment cover, an entire state. how does that happen?
[S3: con-] yes?
- S3: conditions were different?
- S1: uh, in what sense, it's gonna have to do with conditions yes you're right,
- S3: as far as like, well, um
- S1: conditions are changing, but in what way? Drew.
- S5: um maybe it was all covered by ocean before.
- S1: okay what did the ocean do? [S5: uh] so, i mean, what you're saying is if uh, if we have an ocean that's rather extensive, okay it will still have a beach somewhere. and what i'm pointing out is, well let's take the ex-

ample of uh, the eastern seaboard of the United States. okay there's Florida, New York City is over here somewhere, Long Island, what i'm pointing out here, is that we are depositing sand, over a very narrow strip, if we assume that all of this is beach, from New York to Florida. so it's a very very narrow belt, how do we go from having sediments deposited over such a narrow belt, to actually covering, <WRITING ON BOARD> several states, like so, as i showed you in the example of Colorado? yes.

S7: glaciers?

In this example, the lecturer uses his formulation (i.e., “if we have an ocean that’s rather extensive”) of the student’s response (i.e., “maybe it was all covered by ocean before”) as a lead-in for generating a specific example and for eventually re-asking his original question at the end of his turn (i.e., “how do we go from . . .”). Therefore, similar to the previous example, here the speaker producing the formulation (i.e., the lecturer) uses the formulation to rephrase the prior speaker’s utterance, and continues to build on that utterance by extending it in various ways. Interestingly, unlike in examples (1), (2), and (3), in this example, there is no second-pair part produced by the speaker (i.e., S5) whose words are being formulated.⁸ Looking closely at this sequence, it becomes evident that the lecturer considers the student’s (S5) response to be inadequate—or only partially the answer to his question. Thus, in this instance the formulation has less to do with clarifying the meaning of the original speaker’s utterance, and functions more as a resource for the lecturer to acknowledge that the student’s response was—though partially correct—in need of further elaboration to be accurate.

The formulations in these four examples can perhaps best be thought of as falling somewhere on a continuum. On one end, in the most interactive types of speech activities—and particularly when participants are status equals—formulations function primarily as a resource to gloss, or to summarize, another speaker’s words in an effort to negotiate and arrive at some shared meaning or understanding. These types of formulations anticipate a response from that speaker whose words are formulated. In contrast, at the opposite end, formulations are used as a resource to refer to, or to summarize, another speaker’s words in order to advance a particular idea that a more expert participant (such as a lecturer) has in mind. In these cases, the original speaker’s verbal response to the formulation may become optional (as was the case in [3]), or perhaps even irrelevant (as in [4]). At this end of the spectrum, we see how the formulation can be employed as a didactic tool: as a means for the instructor to validate the input of a student, and to simultaneously use that student contribution as a basis for arriving at a more complete, complex, or correct response.

Table 2. *Speaker demographics and speech event information for are you saying that*

#	Gender	Role	Relative status	Age	Speech event	Discipline
B1	F	professor	+P	31–50	lecture	Biochemistry
B2	M	professor	+P	24–30	seminar	English
B3	M	teaching assistant	+P	24–30	office hours	Engineering
B4	M	professor	+P	51+	lecture	English
B5	M	professor	+P	51+	seminar	Religious Studies
B6	M	unknown	? P*	31–50	colloquium	Womens' Studies

* Other than “audience member,” the institutional role of this speaker was unidentified in MICASE, and therefore, his institutional role as well as his status relative to the guest lecturer is unknown.

3.2. *Frame 2: “are you saying that . . .”*

Six tokens of the second of the two formulation frames, *are you saying that . . .*, were identified in six different MICASE transcripts. As can be seen in Table 2, similar to most of the speakers discussed above, the majority of the speakers (5/6) was once again male, and occupied the role of professor or lecturer (5/6). Thus, once again, there is an observable trend of a more expert, or higher-status, participant producing an explicit formulation following an utterance made by a less-expert (i.e., usually a student) interlocutor.

For the discussion that follows, three examples from three different disciplines and three different types of speech events were selected: the first of these comes from an undergraduate chemistry lecture; the second comes from a small undergraduate English seminar; and the final example comes from a question-and-answer session following an invited presentation given in the Women’s Studies department by a scholar from another university.

The first of these, example (5), comes from a fairly large (i.e., 70 students) undergraduate “Introduction to Biochemistry” lecture. This excerpt occurs right at the beginning of class, at the end of the professor’s first long turn at talk, and it represents a sequence of talk in which a professor (S1) and her students negotiate the terms of a particular assignment.

(5)

S1: [*several lines deleted*] . . . any questions whatsoever on this?

S2: is it okay to have one area of sequence homology or do you not want that at all?

S1: oh that’s fine. Absolutely you mean highlight it?

S2: amino acid homo- homology.

S1: yes but did you me- are you saying that you have one sequence highlighted on your, protein? That is an amino acid, sequence homo- homo- ho- <SOUND EFFECT> homolog?

- S2: yeah. even though it's structurally it's um amino acid also?
 S1: it's not necessarily. It would depend did you do multiple line?
 S2: yeah.

In this example, the professor's first turn includes a number of clarifications about what she expects students to do with respect to a particular assignment.⁹ At the end of this lengthy turn, she asks if students have questions (i.e., "any questions whatsoever on this?"). One student (S2) asks for confirmation about the professor's expectations for the assignment (i.e., "is it okay to [. . .] or do you not want that at all?"). The professor responds to this question, and then asks the student for further clarification (i.e., ". . . you mean highlight it?"). Finding the student's response (i.e., "amino acid homo- homology") to her probe for more specific information to be insufficient, she then draws out even more information from the student by using a formulation (i.e., "are you saying that you have one sequence highlighted on your, protein?"). In this instance, it is the professor—the expert in the interaction—who uses the formulation to derive the correct meaning from the student's preceding utterance, so that she can better address his question. And although the question-and-answer negotiation continues over several turns, it should be noted that the student's immediate response to the professor's formulation is the preferred response of confirmation ("yeah . . .").

This type of exchange—in which participants' talk serves to clarify each other's intended meaning—is to be expected in institutions of higher education, where students seek confirmation that they are addressing an assignment correctly, and where faculty members (in response to students' requests for clarification) have the opportunity to fine-tune previously given instructions and adapt them to address specific students' needs. An overall sense of the negotiation of mutual understanding is evident in this interaction, which is carried out over several turns, with each participant adding to, narrowing down, or otherwise qualifying a preceding utterance. Clearly, the formulation is a useful, multifunctional discursive resource in this type of interaction.

The next example comes from an English composition seminar which is conducted workshop-style, with a young, male professor facilitating the process, and students taking turns critiquing one another's papers. This is a relatively small group, comprised of 11 participants, all of whom speak at some point during this class session. Unlike the previous lectures, this speech activity can be classified as highly interactive, with participants speaking in relatively short turns. Example (6) comes from the middle of the recorded session, at which point the group has been discussing several students' essays about a Margaret Atwood novel.¹⁰ Earlier in the transcript, the professor (S1) demonstrates his skill in using a variety of question types (e.g., *What does that mean? Who lacks the skillfulness? What do you mean that Atwood is doing that?*)

for prompting students to explain what they mean in the texts that they have written.

(6)

S7: well that's what i said and then, seeing as that At- Atwood's, satire is on, Christianity that is, describing her view of how a, like an_ i don't know i don't think i can explain it. <SS: LAUGH> that that since since that's her satire, that portrays her view, as well as, of what

S1: Atwood is satirizing, uh a hypocritical, interpretation of the Bible, right for the purposes of establishing a theocracy that, is really just about power. Okay? So if she's satirizing that, then y- you imagine that she is for the kind of spiritual reading of the Bible that you're, you're saying bl- is missing in Gilead right?

S7: i suppose but, that's what i thought at first but i don't, i'm a little shaky <LAUGH> on this.

S1: yeah it's this paragraph is a little shaky.

S7: ut, but i don't think she is though. I think that her, it could be interpreted that way but i don't think that's the way she uh

S1: are y- are you saying that Offred, are you saying the Atwood is satirizing, spirituality or, an unspiritual hypocritical way of, interpreting the Bible?

S7: um i'm saying kinda both.

S1: both? <SS: LAUGH> how's she doing both? [S7: <LAUGH>] okay um, you lost me a little bit here, i i've lost the vein of things.

S7: (seem) to lose it myself.

In his formulation, the professor restates the student's (S7) earlier utterance (i.e., that the text is "Atwood's satire on Christianity"), and develops it further. Specifically, the formulation here serves as a prompt by the professor to encourage the student to be more precise in expressing his meaning (i.e., "are you saying the Atwood is satirizing, spirituality or, an unspiritual hypocritical way of, interpreting the Bible?"). Building onto the students' (S7) previous utterance (i.e., "Atwood's satire on Christianity"), the formulation concludes with the professor giving the student (S7) a set of alternatives (i.e., *are you saying . . . x or y?*). Interesting in this example is the student's response to the formulation: rather than choosing one of the two alternatives offered by the professor, the student—who may be unclear himself about what he wrote, as suggested by his final turn here (" . . . seem to lose it myself")—opts for an ambivalent response (i.e., "um i'm saying kinda both"). While this response can be considered a type of affirmative response—it is not a rejection of either/both of the professor's alternatives (as would be, for instance, a response such as *I'm actually saying neither . . .*)—it is one that does not commit the student to taking a particular position.

The final example is, in several respects, the most unusual of the explicit formulations identified in MICASE. Example (7) comes from a “Christianity and the Modern Family” colloquium. The lecture takes place in the Women’s Studies department, and it is clear from the beginning of the transcript, from the introduction given by the department chair (S2), that the main speaker (S1) is a guest lecturer, who is a professor at another university. Although the exact status of the remaining participants is listed as “unknown,” because the majority is in the 31–50 or 50+ age range, most of the audience members are likely to be either other faculty members, advanced graduate students, or members of the local community.¹¹ The guest speaker’s lecture about Christianity and women is immediately followed by applause, and a brief discussion of how much time remains for the question-and-answer session. Speaker 5, a male participant (age 31–50) is the first to ask the guest lecturer a question. It is worth pointing out that Speaker 5’s *are you saying*-prefaced formulation is preceded by several other metapragmatic references to the lecturer’s presentation (e.g., *are you suggesting, you said, it appeared to me you that you were saying*).

(7)

- S1: so we actually have plenty of time for discussion although some of you may need to rush off to your, one-fifteen class or something, uh yeah?
- S5: are are are you suggesting that in the in the last few minutes of your talk you you said the church should uh, look at different uh different mo- it appeared to me that you were saying different models of relationships and so forth. Are you saying that uh, that the union of the male and the female should not be something intended uh, until death do do them part?
- S1: uh i w- was not, primarily talking about temporary unions. Uh although i think that there there is, perhaps a place for the church uh to work with young people, who are forming um live-in relations prior to permanent commitment. Uh i think the church has, abandoned young people at this stage of life and basically, said that you know between puberty at twelve and marriage at, thirty you know when you finish your PhD at the uni- vers- <SS: LAUGH> you know you’re you’re just on your own, you know. Uh and uh and i think there may be a way uh of of helping young people uh, uh really celebrate commitments that are that are intentionally short-term um and nonchildbearing. Intentionally short-term and non-childbearing with
- S5: the main focus here is that once you have a child, you have a a child lives a very long time. [S1: right] are are you suggesting the child is, yeah are you suggesting
- S1: right. there certainly is uh now that’s what i just said. Uh i i suggest that people sh- should be trained in birth control as part of their puberty, right.

<LAUGH> which is what African t- uh, traditions did except the missionaries came in and destroyed it. um, but i also take very seriously the idea that that that when a couple decides, that they're gonna, create a child or adopt a child, uh then they have at the very least a permanent responsibility to that child. [S5: now is that perman-] uh and they should covenant together in a way that really uh, is very seriously, uh intending to make that relationship, uh permanent and and e- even if they do not succeed, you know humans are not perfect, uh in making their relationship to each other permanent that the relationship with the child has got to be a permanent commitment. Uh so i i i talk about different uh kinds of states there but obviously we're also talking about, other kind of configurations because many uh, uh lesbian couples are having shall we say a modest baby boom and uh uh and are are are having having children, uh of their own and uh and uh, gay men are adopting children i had a

S5: as a Catholic, yeah i mean you came here as a Catholic

S2: excuse me i think there'll be other_ i think there are other people that have questions that, why don't we go to other people.

Since the exact status of Speaker 5 is unknown, his relationship to the speaker can only be described as “audience member.” It should also be noted that this speech event is different from the others discussed, in that it does not appear to be part of a course.¹² Such “special event” lectures, or lecture series, are, of course, not uncommon at universities; however their purposes, participants, and dynamics tend to be somewhat different from those of ongoing, weekly lectures that comprise a particular course.

Speaker 5's formulation here not only functions to clarify the presenter's meaning, but also prompts the presenter to align herself with a particular ideological position. Unlike the preceding examples, however, the presenter's immediate response to the formulation is nonconfirmatory (i.e., “I was not, primarily talking about temporary unions . . .”). This nonconfirmatory response is followed by several more turns in which Speaker 5 asks the presenter to clarify some of the implications of her talk (*are you suggesting* appears twice in S5's follow up turn), as well as to identify the religious perspective she is speaking from (i.e., “I mean you came here as a Catholic”). At this point, the moderator (S2) intervenes and cuts off Speaker 5's questioning. This example—the only one in which a formulation is followed by a nonconfirmatory response—illustrates well why this type of response is dispreferred. Not having his formulation met with a confirmation indicates to Speaker 5 that either he has not fully grasped the presenter's message or that he has not correctly identified her position, which prompts him to continue posing more questions to the presenter. There is a sense of awkwardness related to Speaker 5's continued questioning, though it is difficult to pinpoint its source more precisely without access to

relevant paralinguistic and nonlinguistic information (intonation, volume, facial expression, the number of other participants in the room with raised hands, etc.). If a confirmatory response to a formulation signals to participants that a sense of intersubjectivity has been achieved, then a nonconfirmatory response sends a message that participants are, for some reason, *not* understanding one another. The satisfactory resolution of such a situation may require negotiation over several turns (as can be seen in this example), as well as perhaps considerable face-work on the part of either one, or both, of the participants.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis has demonstrated how, within one academic context, these two types of explicit formulations can have a range of discourse functions. In some examples, the sense-making function of the formulations was predominant, with participants using them to clarify the meaning of another speaker's prior utterance, to check their own comprehension of their interlocutor's message, or to achieve an overall sense of mutual understanding. In other cases, participants used formulations in an attempt to draw out more precise meaning from another individual, or to prompt an interlocutor to take a particular stand, or as a basis for building on, or expanding on, some earlier utterance. Formulations, like any other discourse feature, can be multifunctional, and yet—as this analysis has shown—some of their functions may be more salient than others, when they are examined closely, in specific interactions.

Considering the findings here with respect to previous research on the topic, there appear to be some immediate differences between the functions of formulations in therapeutic and educational settings. In therapeutic discourse, therapists are prepared to hear their clients' statements as a potential problem (Davis 1986). In contrast, such a strong orientation to troubles-telling is simply not the case in the majority of speech activities found in an educational context. So whereas in therapeutic discourse, the use of formulations to transform a client's problem into a topic for therapy is highlighted, in educational contexts, the overarching function of formulations (i.e., explicit formulations) seems to be one related to negotiating intersubjectivity among speakers. In other words, formulations are a discursive device that helps speakers to arrive at a mutual understanding of a given topic. In this context, arriving at a shared understanding may range from clarifying expectations for a particular assignment, to communicating one's meaning more effectively in order to demonstrate the acquisition of some domain of knowledge.

Furthermore, in the context of higher education, there seem to be some interactions between the predominant function of an explicit formulation and type of larger speech activity within which that formulation is embedded. In

more interactive speech activities (for example, the research presentation in [1] and [2]), or even in more interactive segments within larger monologic speech activities (e.g., the lecture in [5]), there was a tendency for formulations to function as clarifying devices, or for participants to use formulations to arrive at a more precise meaning. That these explicit formulations were often embedded in a stretch of discourse that involved numerous question–answer adjacency pairs highlights this overarching sense-making function of formulations. However, a secondary function of explicit formulations in this context is their use to advance some instructional goal(s). As was seen in (3), (4), and (6), more expert participants (professors, lecturers, discussion leaders) used formulations of students’ utterances as springboards for further elaboration. In other words, in these cases, the formulations incorporated part of a student’s utterance, but then speakers built on, or elaborated on, those utterances in various ways to further develop a line of reasoning. This function of formulations is especially useful in instructional interactions, as it allows the lecturer to validate some of what the student has offered as a response to a question, and to use the student’s utterance to develop a more comprehensive statement about a particular topic.

Regarding the distribution of formulations, just as in other institutional contexts, there do appear to be constraints on which participants can explicitly formulate another speaker’s utterance. Specifically, in the examples discussed there was an observable trend of “formulators” occupying either a role of relative power (e.g., professors, teaching assistants, discussion leaders) or one of equal status with respect to their interlocutors (such as fellow students in the research group meeting). Notably absent were any examples of a lower-status participant formulating a higher-status participant’s utterances; specifically, there were no instances of students using explicit formulations to echo back their professors’ utterances. This is not to say that students never use formulations to clarify a professor’s or lecturer’s meaning; however, the present analysis indicates that they generally do not use *explicit* formulations to do so—at least not using the two frames examined here. As Hübler and Bublitz (2007: 16) explain: “Normally, speakers are at total liberty to direct a metapragmatic act [. . .] at themselves, while targeting other’s behavior in the same way can be face-threatening and thus precarious and risky.” Consequently, it may be the case that in asymmetrical relationships, it is especially “risky” to go on-record by explicitly formulating the talk of a more powerful participant.

A puzzling question raised by the present study relates to gender: Why in all cases but one were *men* the producers of explicit formulations? According to the statistics available on the MICASE website, there are slightly more male than female faculty members represented in the corpus (i.e., 84:76); however these proportions are not dramatic enough to account for this rather unexpected finding. It may be the case that female faculty prefer to use less explicit formu-

lations. However, this remains an empirical question, and one that warrants further research.

Turning now to responses to formulations, the present study found that nearly all of the responses to explicit formulations were confirmatory, which is consistent with findings from previous research (e.g., Hak and de Boer 1996). Moreover, the only exception to this preference for confirmatory responses, example (7), illustrated how, in Thornborrow's (2002: 92) words, disconfirmations may "involve more work on the part of the responding party, and may be a cause of potential trouble." Furthermore, the present study reveals a possible interplay between the type of formulation frame used, and the response to the formulation. More specifically, it appeared that in some cases (examples [3] and [4]), responses to formulations preceded by the frame *what you're saying is* were optional, whereas responses to formulations preceded by the frame *are you saying that* were obligatory. This is consistent with the grammatical structure of each frame: the pseudo-cleft *what you're saying is* is not a question but rather a declarative statement, whereas *are you saying that* is an interrogative structure. Consequently, the latter obliges the interlocutor to respond; it conveys a stronger force; and—as was shown in (6) and (7)—in addition to clarifying meaning, it may also ask the interlocutor to take a particular stand on an issue.

Finally, this study suggests that explicit formulations (i.e., those prefaced by a metapragmatic frame such as *what you're saying is* and *are you saying that*) may have different communicative force in larger, multiparty contexts (e.g., lectures) than in the more intimate, one-on-one participant structures that typify therapeutic encounters. In therapy or counseling sessions, usually it is the therapist, client, and perhaps a family member who are present in the interaction. However, in the public, multi-party speech activities that are characteristic of many university interactions, the same explicit formulations may sound more challenging than they would in a private, dyadic interaction. Explicit formulations compel an interlocutor to go "on record"—and there does appear to be a subtle distinction between those formulations motivated by a desire to better understand a speaker's intended meaning (i.e., *what you're saying is*), and those which send more a message of "what position are you taking on a particular issue?" (i.e., *are you saying that*). Furthermore, with respect to formulation responses, it is possible that the preference for agreement, or confirmation, may be even stronger than normal when other individuals are present. Specifically, a nonconfirmatory response, which calls into question an interlocutor's understanding of a speaker's message, may have context-specific implications in the setting of higher education, where demonstrating and displaying knowledge and understanding are not only highly valorized skills, but are also centrally important institutional goals. In other words, nonconfirmatory responses to speaker formulations in academic settings are potentially more

awkward, unsettling, or threatening than they might be in other, more private, social, or institutional contexts. Of course, these speculations would need to be investigated in other institutional settings before any more conclusive claims can be made about participant structure and responses to explicit formulations.

A major limitation of the present study is the use of only one corpus of academic talk. Clearly, complementing this analysis with investigations of the same phenomena in other corpora of university discourse would not only shed more light on some of the issues and questions raised by the present study, but would also provide more information about explicit formulations in a range of academic contexts. A secondary limitation has been the narrow focus on only two types of explicit formulations. As others have discussed (Mauranen 2001, 2002, 2003), similar types of metapragmatic utterances do occur in spoken academic discourse, and perhaps a closer examination of other types of formulations would yield answers to the question raised about gender discrepancy. Additionally, if and how students use formulations—other than the two explicit types examined here—when addressing their professors remains a question to be addressed by future research. Finally, with respect to the didactic functions of formulations, future research in this area may help clarify the actual pedagogical value of explicit formulations in higher education. It is hoped that this initial look at two types of explicit formulations in university discourse will spark future interest in some of these issues, and in further examining other explicit formulations across a wider variety of educational settings.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

- , A comma indicates a brief (1–2 second) mid-utterance pause with non-phrase-final intonation contour.
- . A period indicates a brief pause accompanied by an utterance final (falling) intonation contour; not used in a syntactic sense to indicate complete sentences.
- . . . Ellipses indicate a pause of 2–3 seconds.
- [] Square brackets indicate a speaker overlap.
- (xx) Two x's in parentheses indicate one or more words that are completely unintelligible (e.g., “i don't (xx) whole (xx) analysis it just struck me . . .”).
- (words) Words surrounded by parentheses indicate the transcription is uncertain (e.g., “. . . (seem) to lose it myself”).
- < > Various contextual (non-speech) events are noted in angle brackets (e.g., <LAUGH> or <WRITING ON BOARD>).
- th- Truncated or cut-off words have a hyphen at the end of the last audible sound/letter (e.g., “sell its output and buy th- all its”).

- word_ An underscore at the end of a word indicates a false start in which a whole word is spoken but then the speaker re-starts the phrase (e.g., “or i don’t_ i mean f- so what you’re saying is for any”).
- S1 Speaker IDs are assigned in the order in which they speak in the recording (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, etc.).
- SU Speaker unknown (SU-m: unidentified male speaker; SU-f: unidentified female speaker)
- SS Two or more speakers, in unison (used mostly for laughter).

More detailed information about the conventions used in the MICASE corpus can be found at: <http://micase.elicorpora.info/micase-statistics-and-transcription-conventions/micase-transcription-and-mark-up-convent>.

Notes

1. The field of psychotherapy has its own label for this phenomenon, which is “reframing” (Buttny 1996; Muntigl 2007).
2. Of course, within any interaction, power is a situated and dynamic phenomenon. However, certain participants (such as professors, therapists, judges, or law enforcement officers) may enter a situation with more institutional power than others, by virtue of their institutional role.
3. Similarly, Thornborrow (2002: 92), in her analysis of formulations in media interviews, also found that “in institutional contexts the distribution of turn types between participants usually results in some speakers occupying the role of ‘formulator’ while others find themselves taking up the role of ‘responder’.”
4. More information about MICASE can be found at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/c/corpus/corpus?page=home;c=micase;cc=micase>.
5. Original MICASE transcription conventions have been retained in all excerpts. See the appendix for an explanation of the conventions used.
6. While it is unknown whether this position of “discussion leader” is based on this individual’s status, knowledge, or some other qualifications, it is clear from the transcript that he controls the flow of talk and manages turn taking, as can be seen in this example, where he nominates S5 to provide a response. Furthermore, in the MICASE headings, the fact that his role is labeled “discussion leader,” while the other participants are designated simply by the label “student,” indicates that he has special status.
7. While this example is perhaps the least prototypical of the formulations examined (in the sense that it falls somewhere in between a formulation and cohesive device, as it is structurally more integrated into the surrounding discourse), it is nevertheless instructive in showing the variability found within this particular phenomenon.
8. However, as one reviewer pointed out, it is possible that some type of nonlinguistic response (e.g., nodding) was produced by S5. Unfortunately, this type of nonverbal information is not available in the transcript.
9. This turn is not reproduced in its entirety due to space constraints.
10. Some off-topic talk has been deleted from this excerpt, for easier processing.
11. Normally all speakers in MICASE transcripts are identified by a number of labels (e.g., gender, age group, first language), one of which is “role” (e.g., senior faculty, junior

undergraduate, senior graduate, etc.). However, this transcript is an exception, in that the roles for all of the participants (other than the presenter and introducer) are coded as “unknown.”

12. This was determined by the department chair’s introduction of the guest speaker at the beginning of the transcript. It was clear that this lecture was a “special event” that formed part of a speaker series organized around a particular topic.

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