

How About It? The Role of Accent and Context in Determining Discourse Function*

Laurel Smith Stvan, Northwestern University

1. Introduction

In 1993, I spent a year in China, teaching at the University of Science and Technology of China. While I was there, students I met would regularly address me with utterances such as those in (1a) and (2a):

- (1) a. #Hi, Laurel! How about your **mother**?¹
b. Hi, Laurel! How's your mother (doing)?
- (2) a. #Hello! How about your **vacation**?
b. Hello! How was your vacation?

This question form caused a great deal of unsuccessful referring, requiring a lot of clarification on the part of both the speaker and hearer. Today, I'd like to examine why that was so.

How about is a construction that is commonly misused by non-native speakers of English. This construction is often mistakenly used to initiate an inquiry, either in phatic conversation or to show real curiosity. Examination of a corpus of 70 naturally occurring examples—found primarily in on-line texts, and from searches on the World Wide Web—shows that when native English speakers use *how about*, it is to indicate one of six distinct discourse functions. None of these functions, however, places *how about* as the first part of the type of adjacency pair shown in (1) and (2). In addition to pointing out their varying discourse functions, examination of the placement of the nuclear accent in the intonation phrase shows that all of the attested uses of *how about* fall into one of two categories, distinct in their signaling of information status: one set is used to introduce a discourse-new topic, and the other to reactivate a discourse-old one.

* I would like to thank Chris Kennedy, Judith Levi, Talke Macfarland, and Gregory Ward for their insightful comments.

¹ In all examples in this paper, boldface indicates the nuclear pitch accent of the *how about XP* construction, while the words *how about* are underlined for easy identification.

The examples in (1a) and (2a) demonstrate typical misuses of *how about*. Each is followed, in (1b) and (2b), by expressions which illustrate the speaker's intended meaning. While *how about* is not used by native speakers to initiate an inquiry, as was attempted in (1) and (2), in the sections below I will illustrate six other attested functions of *how about* in English. To begin, I will detail the four uses which allow a variety of full noun phrases in the position after *how about*: these are bouncing back an inquiry, offering a suggestion (including the indirect use of suggestion as a request or command), setting up a new topic in order to remark on one of its special qualities, and bringing a conversation back to a previous topic.

2. Four uses of *how about* with full NPs

2.1 Bouncing

The first function in which *how about* is shown, is as part of a response to a phatic inquiry—as a way to return a polite question to the first speaker. The examples in (3) illustrate this use:

- (3) a. Fred: How are you today?
Barney: Fine, thanks. How about you?
- b. Betty: How did your test go this morning?
Wilma: Pretty good. How about yours?

In the examples in (3), the pronoun or possessive form following *how about* matches that used in the inquiry. It is not always necessary for the words in the bounced NP to be identical to the first NP, however, as seen in (4):

- (4) a. Joe: How are the boys?
Frank: Fine. And how about yours?
- b. Joe: How are the boys?
Frank: Fine. And how about your kids/Johnny/
#your ashtray collection?

Rather, the bounced NP's referent must reflect a relation to the hearer that is parallel to the term used by the speaker of the first inquiry. In other words, in (4b), a number of terms whose referents have the same relation to Joe as *the boys* has to Frank would be acceptable²—*yours, your kids, Johnny*, but not non-parallel terms like *your ashtray collection, your new car*, etc.

² Gregory Ward (personal communication) notes that the bounced NP must be held in the same relationship, not merely be a member of the same set, so that in (4b), for example, with certain interlocutors *cat* may be more appropriate than *mother* as the bounced object.

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Further, in informal usage it is felicitous while using this bouncing function to delete the *how about*, leaving only the NP, as seen in (5):

- (5) a. Fred: How are you today?
Barney: Fine, thanks. [How about] you?
- b. Joe: How are the boys?
Frank: Fine. And [how about] yours?

2.2 Suggesting

The second use for *how about* is to make a suggestion. In this case, *how about* can occur in either the second or first part of an adjacency pair, as shown in (6) and (7). That is, the suggestion can be grounded by being used in a setting where suggestions have been asked for through the discourse—as in (6), or *how about* itself can suffice to begin the topic of presenting suggestions, as in (7):

- (6) a. Fred: What should we make for dinner tonight?
Wilma: How about hamburgers?
- b. You're darn tootin' its "impossible to link definitively the counter-culture to today's social pathologies." But how about the following as candidates for the causes of the pathologies that afflict us: serious environmental problems and real health risks; no substantive improvement in the dead-end futures of the poor; the moderately dead-end futures for people in our robust service economy ...

(David Mackenzie, Letters to the Editor: Laying a Guilt Trip on Woodstock, *Wall Street Journal*, 9/12/89)

- c. Then why not the juicy booking Hurok had held for us? Well, Dietrich won't budge from McCormick Place. Then how about the Civic Opera house? Well, Allied Arts has booked Lena Horne there for a week starting Dec. 4.

(Brown Corpus, C01)

- (7) a. Hey, how about going to a **show** tonight?
- b. Its 1986 brochure says, "We are gratified by the faith and confidence placed in us . . . and we will always be worthy of that trust." An in-house memo, dated July 19, 1985, reads a little differently. The memo, on the subject of "letters to limited partners," says, "Just add the usual 'BS' paragraphs on how great the places are . . . and how about buying our next deal."

(Roger Lowenstein, "Sand Castle: Tax Shelter Empire Built by Barry Trupin Is Fast Washing Away," *Wall Street Journal*, 10/3/89)

