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

Laurel Smith Svan, 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?\footnote{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.

\footnote{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.}

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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 ashray 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 acceptable—yours, your kids, Johnny, but not non-parallel terms like your ashtray collection, your new car, etc.

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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 counterculture to today's social pathologies." But how about the following as candidates for the causes of the pathologies that afflicting 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."

This suggesting function of how about is well known, though sometimes awkwardly explained. The *American Heritage Dictionary*, for example, under the head word how, lists the idiom how about, giving the meaning in (8a), and offering (8b) as an illustration:

(8) a. What do you think or feel about

b. How about a cup of tea?

Notice that if suggestions are previously asked for, how about as an indicator of suggesting can be omitted in the response, as shown in (9):

(9) Fred: What should we make for dinner tonight?
    Wilma: [How about] hamburgers?

### 2.2.1 Indirect request/command

One variation on the suggestion function of how about is the indirect speech act that appears to be offering a suggestion, but is actually used to make a request or command. This use is illustrated in (10):

(10) a. How about opening the door?

b. How about giving me a hand here?

c. VOICE: Arnie, how about going through that again just quickly? It's a full-scale joint, and then what kind of segments is it on? It's on lightweight segments? [=Go through it again.]

   VOICE: It's a lightweight cylinder joined to a lightweight attach with test domes on either end. (Challenger transcripts e-text)

d. Uncle Bill: Hey Bobbo, how about scaring up a towel for your ol' Uncle Bill? [=Get me a towel.]

   (Fox Kids cartoon, 1998)

The indirect request, of course, is not unique to the how about construction; English speakers use a variety of sentence types besides the obvious imperatives in order to issue commands, as seen in (11) and (12):

(11) a. Why don't you shut up? [= Shut up!]

b. Don't you think it's time you were going to bed? [= Go to bed!]
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(12). a. Can you close the door?  [= Close the door!]
b. Won't you close the door?  [= Close the door!]
c. Would you be willing to close the door?  [= Close the door!]
d. You ought to close the door.  [= Close the door!]
c. It might help to close the door.  [= Close the door!]
f. Did you forget to close the door?  [= Close the door!]

(Levinson 1983: 264–5)

2.3 Remarkable demonstrative topic

The third function of how about is to introduce a conversational topic when the speaker plans to point out some remarkable quality of a new referent. The NP in these cases is preceded by a demonstrative, which is used to bring up a discourse-new topic, but involves a referent which the hearer is expected to readily identify; that is, as described in Prince (1992), it is discourse-new, but hearer-old. This use is illustrated in (13):

(13) a. How about that party last night! Wasn't it great?
b. How about that orange hair, well I liked it!  
   [caption under a photo of a woman with bright hair]  
   (http://trueink.com/user/mgay/kathy.htm)
c. Whoa, how about that El Niño...  
   (http://www.mcmiece.com)
d. How 'bout them Broncos?  
   (Craig Ellway, WBEZ news broadcast, 1/27/98)

This exclaiming use is tied to the evaluative quality often observed to be connected to demonstratives, by which phrases with demonstratives can be used to relate the speaker's emotional stance regarding the referent (see Bowdle & Ward 1995, Fix 1998).

This how about use, an exclamation rather than a question, is commonly used by stand-up comedians as an opening line for jokes, especially if
they are using topical material.\textsuperscript{3} \textit{How about} establishes the topic, then the joke involves pinpointing, and sometimes belittling, the unusual quality:

(14) \textbf{How about} those \textbf{Desert Storm trading cards} they've come out with. They look like baseball cards, except they have pictures of military personnel on them. You can get like Gen. Schwarzkopf, Colin Powell. But here's a tip. If you want Saddam Hussein's card autographed — you'd better do it REAL soon.


Unlike preposed and postposed NPs with demonstratives (as discussed in Prince 1984, Ward 1988, Fix 1998), these \textit{how about} demonstrative forms need no connection to a previously mentioned entity in the discourse. The speaker expects that general knowledge of current events is sufficient for the phrase to trigger recognition. The demonstrative serves to remind the hearer of the familiarity of the discourse-new entity. In fact, in jokes like (14), the demonstrative can even be used to take a brand new referent and present it as a known but unused one.

\textbf{2.4 Returning to an old topic}

The fourth use of \textit{how about} is to return a conversation to a previously discussed topic, as shown in (15):

(15) a. \textbf{How about} your sister, anyway? Did she ever find a job?

b. The point is that procedure matters: it's made in Japan, officially it's okay, so you can buy it. Get the certification if you want to sell in our market.

Well, \textbf{how about} that certification? "The Ministry of Construction tells me in an interview that it's actually VERY easy...to get certified. It doesn't take five years, like you said in Update Two."

(http://www.voicenet.co.jp/~davald/housebuildingthree.html)

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\textsuperscript{3} In his monologues, Jay Leno also uses other devices to bring up discourse-new topics:

a. Here's something interesting...

b. Oh... What else?

c. One other thing...

d. What is it with this...

e. What else did I see today... Oh!...

f. What else happened today... Oh!...Ted Kaczynski...

g. Oh...here you go, here you go...
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Notice that here, accenting about is required to make this a phrase that reactivates a topic, while the other uses discussed so far have had the accent on the phrase that follows how about.

3. Two set expressions involving how about and pronouns

In addition to the four functions of bouncing, suggesting, exclaiming, and reactivating a topic, which all used full NPs or gerunds after how about, there are two related set expressions, consisting of how about followed by pronouns. These are how about it and how about that. I will discuss these two constructions next.

3.1 How about it?

The first set expression, like the example in (15) above, involves a previously mentioned topic. But here, more specifically, the expression how about it is used to press the hearer for an answer to a previously made offer or request—this is shown in (16):

(16)  a. So, how about it? Do you want to go out for pizza tonight or not?

b. A: “Me?” she asked, turning slowly. “What about me?”
   B: “Did you make friends easily?”
   A: “Umm, uhuh.”
   B: “Somehow I imagine that as you grew up you were alone a lot.
      How about it?”
   A: “I guess so,” she said, taking a Kleenex from her purse.
   When she had wiped some of the lipstick from her mouth, she
   stared solemnly at her image in the mirror.

   (Brown Corpus, P12)

As in the resumptive function illustrated in (15), the accent placement in (16) is on the word about.

3.2 How about that?

The second set expression—how about that—similar to the use discussed in section 1.3 above, is an exclamation, but here it is in particular an exclamation of surprise rather than enthusiasm. Another difference is that the NP is not spelled out, but instead a deictic that indicates that something in the context is being exclaimed about. These are illustrated in (17):

(17)  a. Well, how about that! I didn’t even notice that we were out of milk.
b. For about $15, The Gravis PC GamePad can give your action game skills a boost to the next level. (Hey, how about that? A worthwhile computer accessory for less than the cost of a new car?)

(http://www.peakcomputing.com/96/oct/04/home2.html)

c. I live in the Colorado Rockies and own a 96 Coupe, White/Black #6806. Since new it wanted to pull slightly to the left. The dealer let me watch (how about that?) while the front-end tech checked the settings and all were O.K.

(http://crunch.colorado.edu/cobra/topics/net/Ford-SVT-archive-97-1/0508.html)

d. How about that—I always pegged him as a one-woman vampire.

(Buffy the Vampire Slayer, WGN-TV, 6/23/1998)

Notice that in (17), writers chose both exclamation points and question marks to set off these exclamations—perhaps the word how compels some people to consider it a question form. For the how about that scenario, one could imagine a totally situationally evoked referent for the word that, such as people returning home to find their house has burnt down, who then use “How about that!” as their initial utterance. In many of the examples that I found, however, the referent of that is previously stated in the discourse, so the referent is clearly discourse-old, as illustrated in (17b) and (17c). In all the cases, however, introduc-

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4 Notice that some, though not all, of the how about uses can be replaced by the expression what about (another phrase that has the appearance of a question). Although the suggestion function shown in (i) is close in meaning, the other uses of what about show different presuppositions:

(i) A: What should we have for dinner tonight?
   B: What about hamburgers?

(ii) A: How did your test go this morning?
    B: ?Pretty good. What about yours?

(iii) ?What about opening the door?

Example (iii) is grammatical, but serves a different function than how about; rather than commanding, the use of what about presupposes that the hearer was not going to do the task.

(iv) What about my sister, anyway?

In (iv), the implication is more defensive; here the speaker presupposes that someone has suggested that something is wrong with the sister.
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ing the pronoun that with how about indicates that the hearer should look again, or consider the referent through some new perspective (which the speaker often then elaborates on). In (17), like in the bouncing, suggesting, and remarkable exclamating functions, the nuclear accent is in the phrase that follows how about, rather than on the word about.

4. The placement of accent

This brings me to the issue of accent. Pitch accents are realized as intonational prominence on particular syllables in an intonation phrase. A speaker chooses to accent or deaccent based on a number of features of the utterance, such as whether the word’s interpretation can be taken to be already available to the listener (as through prior mention, frequency of mention, or accessibility level of the referent—see Terken 1984, Ariel 1990). Accent can also be based on conversational uses, such as indicating turn-taking or as a contrast device (Chafe 1976). Notice that I am not looking here at where the nuclear accent is placed within the XP object of how about; those would be cases, in particular, that involve a contrast accent. For this paper, I am only interested in whether about carries the nuclear accent or whether some element of the following phrase does.

In the examples, I have marked entire words or phrases as accented—indicated by the boldface—although in fact, the accent is associated with just a single stressed syllable within the word. Because many of the tokens are from written sources, I cannot know the intended pronunciation and intonational reading; what I am interested in here, however, is the possible intonational rendering for a given how about XP token in a given context; in particular, whether or not a given element can be felicitously deaccented. Under consideration here is the placement of the nuclear pitch accent within the phrase consisting of the how about XP string. By looking at this, what we can see is that depending on the position of the main accent within the construction, the six how about functions fall into two categories, distinct in their signaling of information status.

Accenting about serves to reactivate a previous topic; accenting the following NP indicates the introduction of a new topic. Thus (15) and (16), with accentuation of about, both reactivate some previously discussed information. In (3)-(14), on the other hand, some new topic is brought up: specifically, (3)-(5) function to bounce a new (but parallel) topic back to the first speaker; (6)-(8) present a new topic as the suggestion; (13) and (14) exclaim about a new but identifiable demonstrative topic; while in (17), by exclaiming with an accented deictic pronoun, the speaker directs attention to a topic newly identifiable by the context, or highlights a new aspect of a previously discussed referent.

To summarize, accenting about followed by any NP, serves to reactivate a previous topic, and in particular, when followed by it, the expression indicates an insistence on a response to a previous offer.
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On the other hand, placing the main accent within the following phrase indicates the introduction of some kind of new referent. In other words, as seen in the table below, accenting *about* brings up a discourse-old topic, while placing the accent in the following phrase evokes a discourse-new, but generally hearer-old referent:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Information Status</th>
<th>Accent Placement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Courtesy Bouncing</td>
<td>Dis-<em>new</em>, (crucially hearer old)</td>
<td>How About XP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggesting</td>
<td>Dis-<em>new</em>, (brand new/unused/evoked)</td>
<td>How About XP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarkable Demonstrative</td>
<td>Dis-<em>new</em>, (presented as unused)</td>
<td>How About XP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How About That!</td>
<td>Dis-old, (but <em>new</em> aspect highlighted)</td>
<td>How About XP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning to an Old Topic</td>
<td>Dis-old</td>
<td>How About XP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How About It?</td>
<td>Dis-old</td>
<td>How About XP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Conclusion

To conclude, for a speaker, the confusion over the use of *how about* may be a mistaken belief that the expression is interchangeable with *how is/how are*. Or it may come about because of the use shown in (3), where the expression does in fact function as part of an inquiry-response adjacency pair, but the speaker has not noticed the constraint on it being only used within the second half of such a pair.

For the hearer of sentences like (1) and (2), the confusion is caused by the expectation that the accented NPs will be introducing new information, which is most likely to make the whole sentence be interpreted as a suggestion.

Native-like use of *how about*, then, includes not only recognizing that it does not function as a standard WH-word inquiry, but requires noting both the effect of accent placement within the construction, as well as the possible subset of discourse functions for which the expression can be used.
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References


Department of Linguistics
Northwestern University
2016 Sheridan Road
Evanston IL 60208-4090

stvan@nwu.edu