

Multimodality, Units and Action in Mandarin Conversation

Xiaoting Li
University of Alberta

The notions of units and action in interaction have been the genesis of inquiry among conversation analysts and usage-based linguistics such as cognitive linguistics and interactional linguistics. Setting out from the question of *how* units in conversation are produced and interpreted, this paper explores the role of multimodal resources and their significance in the construction of units and the formation of actions through conversational units in Mandarin Chinese face-to-face interaction. Different research approaches have studied the individual role of syntax (Lerner, 1991; Auer, 1996, 2009), prosody (Schegloff, 1982, 1998; Local, Kelly & Wells, 1986 etc.) and gesture (Streeck & Hartge, 1992; Streeck, 2009) in turn and sequence organization in conversation. Research has also shown that the three types of resources converge to a great extent to foreshadow possible turn completion and transition relevance (Fox, 2002; Ford, et al., 1996; Ford & Thompson, 1996). But so far little work has been done on the divergence of different resources in the projection of possible turn completion. In addition, the idea that language consists primarily in an activity and performs certain action is a recurrent focus of attention in the Western philosophical and linguistic tradition (Humboldt, 1836; Firth, 1957; Wittgenstein, 1953; Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975; Sacks, 1963; Levinson, 1979, 1983; Heritage, 2012). However, we have not progressed very far in developing an analysis of action formation—the ways in which talk and visible behavior are designed and recognized as actions of a particular kind.

Adopting the method of conversation analysis, interactional linguistics, and multimodal analysis, this study investigates the divergence of syntax, prosody and body movements in the construction of units and actions in Mandarin face-to-face interaction. The data for this study are 10-hour audio and video recordings of everyday Mandarin face-to-face conversation. It is observed that syntax, prosody and the body both converge and diverge in the construction of turns and the formation of actions. When the three resources are in conflict with one another in turn projection, conversational participants can still manage the local contingencies and collaboratively construct turn transition. It is further argued that the divergence of the multimodal resources (i.e., syntax, prosody, and body movements) may serve as a type of resource itself for participants to negotiate turn-taking and to manage the collaborative completion of a course of actions. This study contributes to our understanding of the interactive and contingent nature of unit construction and action formation in interaction.