Reflections on Units in Talk-in-Interaction – An ICCA10 report

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1. Introduction

Interaction is the "primordial site of language" (Schegloff 1996). The study of talk-in-interaction has been the focus of study for both CA and CA-based linguistics – such as the emerging field of Interactional Linguistics (e.g. Selting/Couper-Kuhlen 2001). One of the primary concerns of CA is the *organization of practices* in interaction, for example, turn-taking, repair mechanisms, sequence organization, and preference structure, etc. (Schegloff 2005:456), whereas interactional linguistics focuses on practices of *linguistic structure* and how they are "shaped by, and themselves shape, interaction" (Couper-Kuhlen/Selting 2001:1). The research question of units in talk-in-interaction might be of interest to both approaches. However, "units" are conceived of differently in conversation analysis and mainstream linguistics. In CA, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) introduce the notions of turns and turn constructional units (TCUs) in their seminal work on turn-taking. TCUs are the building blocks of turns at talk. Unit types in English include "sentential, clausal, phrasal, and lexical constructions" (Sacks/Schegloff/Jefferson 1974:702). On this basis, TCUs have been conceived of primarily as syntactically based. In traditional linguistic terms, units in talk are, syntactically, words, phrases, clauses, and sentences; prosodically/phonetically, they are tone units (Crystal 1969; Cruttenden 1986) or intonation units (Chafe 1987; Du Bois et al. 1993). They are usually considered pre-structured and static parts of speakers' knowledge.

In a discourse-functional linguistic approach, although TCUs are constructed of and organized by linguistic units, they are by nature dynamic interactional units (Ford/Thompson 1996; Thompson/Fox[1]). In this approach, neither syntactic units nor prosodic units (intonation units) will suffice in discussing units in conversation. Rather, contingencies in interaction may shape the linguistic structure of a particular utterance. For example, a sentence may be co-constructed by two participants in interaction (Lerner 1991, 1996), or even by the same speaker in different turns (Hayashi 2004), which demonstrates the existence of an interactionally relevant syntax (Lerner 1991). In addition, along with the development of the audio-visual technology, the formal organization of body movements may add another dimension to the organization of units in talk-in-interaction. Therefore, there may be questions for linguists as well as conversation analysts to ask:

- What spates of talk do participants orient to as units in talk-in-interaction (Szczepek Reed)?

- How do participants use syntax, prosody, the body and sequential position as resources to construct units in interaction, and how do the resources interact with one another?

- How do contingencies in interaction influence the practices of syntax, prosody, the body and sequential position in the construction and organization of units in interaction?

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[1]   References without year refer to the presentations in the panel.

To address these research questions and others related to them, Beatrice Szczepek Reed (Universities of Nottingham and York) organized the panel on units in talk-in-interaction at ICCA 10. The panel included 12 presenters from CA, discourse-functional and interactional-linguistics backgrounds. The presentations were relevant, but not limited to, the previous research questions. The presenters were from different countries, such as the US, Germany, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and China. The diversity of languages studied also contributed to the cross-linguistic perspective on this topic.

In the following sections, the presentations in the panel will be reviewed (section 2), and some relevant theoretical issues will be discussed (section 3).

2. Presentations in the panel on units in talk-in-interaction

There were altogether 11 presentations in the panel. They mainly centered around three aspects:

1. Perspectives on the study of units in talk-in-interaction;

2. Studies on different resources in the construction and organization of units; and

3. Investigations of specific types of units or turns in talk-in-interaction.

2.1. Perspectives on units in talk-in-interaction

In their talk, *Sandra A. Thompson* and *Barbara A. Fox* first summarized the different perspectives on "units" in CA and traditional linguistics. Then, they drew attention to *contingency* and *peculiarity* in interaction, and their significance for unit construction and organization. Contingency in interaction makes it problematic to always search for discrete and prescribed units in interactive conversation (Ford 2004). That is to say, peculiarity is another property of interaction. It refers to the feature of being different to what is *normal* or expected. In responsive turns, noun phrases and clauses, or clause complexes, served different sequential roles, with the former indicating go-ahead in sequences, and the latter signaling trouble. Given contingency and peculiarity in interaction, Thompson and Fox proposed to use more flexible terms like "minimal" and "extended" responses to refer to traditional grammatical units like noun phrase, prepositional phrase, and clause, or clause complex, in second position. At the same time, they underlined the importance of adopting the participant's perspective and considering what participants orient to as "units" in interaction. This then could also be used as a source for categorical terms.

Geoffrey Raymond approached the notion of units in talk-in-interaction from a level of organization different from TCUs. He decomposed the elements in the type-conforming responses to yes/no interrogatives (YNIs) into "pre-expansions", "response to interrogative", and "post-expansions". He argued that these elements are positioned to satisfy the relevancies mobilized by the interrogatives without changing the course of action. He referred to the components of responsive turns designed to manage the relevancies as "slots". The fact that each slot in responsive turns could be filled by one or more than one TCU showed that "slots" and TCUs

are different orders of organization, and "slots" are a distinct type of units of organization. The organization of elements may also shed light on the relationship between turn organization (Sacks/Schegloff/Jefferson 1974) and sequence organization (Schegloff 2007).

Also focusing on responsive turns of questions, *Jakob Steensig*, in a paper co-authored by *Trine Heinemann*, considered units in talk-in-interaction as action-units. Responses in second position were under a set of constraints set up by questions, for example, type-conforming/nonconforming (Raymond 2003) and preferred/dispreferred responses (Pomerantz 1984). Constructed on these constraints, responsive turns could implement a limited number of actions, such as type-conforming confirmation, repair initiations, and elaboration of topic. The constraints on responses and possible actions implemented by responses reflected the intersection of the *design* of turns, and the *actions* they perform.

2.2. Resources in the construction of units

In face-to-face interaction, participants have multimodal resources at their disposal to construct and manage a unit and/or a turn, e.g., verbal resources like syntax, prosody, and visual ones like gaze, gesture, and body movements.

Investigating collaborative turn construction, *Stefanie Krause* explored the display of understanding by co-participants in this process. She focused on "compound TCUs" (Lerner 1996) in German, such as adverbial clauses, across different types of talk-in-interaction. The instances of collaborative incomings in her data might serve as completions or extensions to current incomplete TCUs. They differed in the degrees of predictability at semantic, prosodic, and/or syntactic levels. The display of understanding in the collaborative turn construction could also implement more than one action in interaction.

Per Linell discussed the dynamic nature of on-line syntax (Auer 2009) and its significance in the construction of units in interaction. In particular, through the study of the apokoinou utterances (pivot constructions) in Swedish, he showed that the progressive construction of an utterance is contingent upon the dynamic process of interactive utterance production. Utterance construction was subject to the projectability of a syntactic structure as well as the local contingency.

The focus of *Pia Bergmann's* talk was parenthesis in German talk-in-interaction. In the syntactic analysis centering on isolated sentences, parentheses are syntactically well-defined units. They are conceived of as isolated insertions into a syntactically coherent sentence. Presumably, the initial and final boundaries of parentheticals are distinct as well. However, Bergmann's analysis on prosodic features of parentheses showed that the boundaries marked by prosody may but need not be co-extensive with the syntactic ones. Moreover, the boundaries of parenthetical units in talk seemed to be less distinct than the syntactic ones, when considering other cues, such as prosody and visual signals.

Xiaoting Li addressed the issue of the body as a semiotic resource in unit construction in Mandarin Chinese face-to-face interaction. Specifically, she observed an organizational orderliness of body movements, the "home-away-home" pattern (Sacks/Schegloff 2002 [1975]) of torso movements in her data. This pattern of body movements appeared to reveal some larger units or larger projects, e.g., storytelling and argumentation with the forward and backward movements acting as

entry- and exit-devices. It was argued that the orderliness of body movements and the units it revealed provides us with another perspective on what participants orient to as units in interaction.

Anna Vatanen reported her research on turn transition in Estonian conversation. She observed that there was a significant number of turn transitions at places other than transition-relevance places (TRPs). For example, the incoming of next turns might temporarily overlap with current ones. However, these turn transitions were not treated as problematic by participants, although syntactic, prosodic and pragmatic cues all projected non-completion of current TCUs. She thus proposed to rethink TCU and TRP, as well as the cross-linguistic universality of these notions.

2.3. Specific types of units

Aino Koivisto studied a construction ending with the conjunction *ja* ('and') in Finnish. In mainstream-syntactical terms these would be considered incomplete. However, through the analysis of the utterance-final conjunctions, she showed that they might but need not necessarily project turn continuation. Thus, the utterance-final *ja* ('and') in certain list constructions indicated the possible completion of the current turn. Therefore, she suggested that conjunction-final utterances in certain contexts in Finnish can be treated as a type of unit in interaction themselves.

Harrie Mazeland presented a paper co-authored with *Leendert Plug*, investigating a linguistic unit, the Dutch final particle *hoor*. Their previous study on *hoor* in responsive turns to yes/no questions showed that the final particle indicated possible contingency above the sequence level, and therefore linked the current TCU with multiple levels of interactional organization. In this paper, they examined the same particle in a type of initiative turns. Similar to the situation in responsive turns, *hoor* is used to signal the discursive status of the current turn. For example, the initiative turns, in which *hoor* is used, often proffer a topic shift, and make the shift relevant to the context. Thus, they argued that the linguistic unit *hoor* was a contextualization device for marking the discursive status of the ongoing turn.

Based on her Finnish data, *Auli Hakulinen* studied ingressive speech in response particles as well as ingressive TCUs. First, ingressive response particles occur in second and third position. The actions implemented may differ depending on their sequential position. Second, ingressive speech also occurs in longer responses, ingressive TCUs. These TCUs conveyed affect or served as boundary markers by isolating an action within a turn. She summarized that ingressive speech serves multiple functions depending on the composition of the turn in which it occurs, and its sequential position.

3. Reflections on the study of units in talk-in-interaction

Since the appearance of Sacks et al.'s work on turn-taking in 1974, there has been abundant research on the notion of "units in talk-in-interaction". The presentations in the panel have revealed some new perspectives in approaching the notion of

units, such as interactional units (Thompson/Fox), "slots" (Raymond), and action units (Steensig/Heinemann). There are three issues that have been touched upon by the presentations in the panel:

- the notions of TCU and turn;

- multimodality and units in talk-in-interaction;

- and unit construction and actions in sequences.

3.1. The notions of TCU and turn

After "TCUs" and "turns" have been introduced in the early CA work, the study on "units" has developed considerably. In his lectures on turn-taking in 1967, Sacks (1992) introduces the notion of "utterance completion" in order to demonstrate how speakers achieve the smooth turn-taking of "not more than one party speaking at a time". Specifically, utterances are realized as sentences, and a key property of the use of sentences is that "its completion can be determined on its occurrence" (Sacks 1992:649f.). Therefore, the determinability of the possible completion of a sentence enables conversational participants to manipulate and anticipate the possible completion of a turn. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson basically retain this view in their 1974 work. Introducing units in conversation as syntactic units (e.g. sentences) helped them to clarify the feature of projectability of these units. Therefore, their primary drive in proposing the notion of units is not segmenting conversation, but illustrating the "determinability" or "projectability" of the possible completion of a turn, and ultimately the turn-taking mechanism. In addition, they, though briefly, acknowledge the role of intonation in this process. Later, Schegloff (1996:56) calls for a shift of object of attention from sentences to TCUs. He also elaborates on the function of prosody, e.g. pitch peak, in projecting possible completion of a turn. Interactional linguists, in turn, start deconstructing TCUs and turns by investigating syntactic and prosodic cues (Auer 1992, 1996; Selting 1996; Local/Kelly/Wells 1986; Local/Wells/Sebba 1985; Ford/Thompson 1996; etc.). Auer (1996) and Selting (1996) argue that syntax is the more far-reaching global device, and prosody the more local device in constructing a TCU and/or possible turn. Selting (2000) consolidates this view by showing that TCUs are constructed through the interplay of syntax and prosody in semantic, pragmatic and sequential contexts, which clarifies the notions of TCU and TRP. However, one of the challenges for identifying units is contingency in interaction (Ford 2004). Along this line, Ford, Fox and Thompson (1996) pay more attention to multiple *practices* of prosody, syntax and body movements in turn construction than the discrete units in conversation. The object of attention in their study is "*practice-in-activity*" (Thompson/Fox).

To gain a full understanding of the units of conversation, we researchers may well be advised to be aware of both the pre-structured linguistic units and the dynamic and complex practices involved in interactive turn construction. The investigation of linguistic units in turn construction needs to consider contingencies in activities; and the study of practices (and convergence or divergence of various cues in particular) in turn construction is based on the participants' knowledge of

linguistic structures in the first place. The question for us linguists, as Linell also noted, might be: How can we integrate the two aspects in our own research?

3.2. Multimodality and units in talk-in-interaction

Face-to-face interaction is multimodal by nature. Participants use various multi-modal resources like syntactic constructions, prosodic features and body move-ments in each and every moment in talking. It is most compelling to explore the role of the body and its interrelations with other more traditionally linguistic re-sources like syntax and prosody in conversation. There has been some research on this topic (Schegloff 1984; Heath 1986; Fox 1999, 2001; C. Goodwin 1979, 1981; C. Goodwin/Goodwin 1987; Streeck 1993; Kendon 2004). In consistency with the conference theme, some of the contributions in the panel on units in talk-in-inter-action addressed the role of syntax, prosody, sequential organization, and body movements in the construction of units. In early work on turn-taking, syntactic structures played a central role in projecting possible completion of a turn. How-ever, certain syntactic constructions, such as pivots, reveal the dynamicity of syn-tax-in-conversation (Linell). Prosody also plays an important role in turn organi-zation. Sometimes, prosody and syntax diverge in marking the boundaries of cer-tain units, for instance with parentheses (Bergmann). Sequential organization, as another resource in the vocal modality, may exert constraints on the organization of units (Raymond), as well as influence the type of actions implemented by a turn (Steensig/Heinemann; Hakulinen). Visually, the organizational pattern of body movements also furnishes us with some insights about what spates of talk participants orient to as units (Li).

Although different resources or modalities have been touched upon, there are many questions still to be answered. First, interactions typically involve more than one modality; yet, there seems to be a lack of systematic work on the interaction of syntax, prosody, the body, and sequential position in the construction of units. Second, a principle or mechanism upon which the interaction of syntax, prosody, the body takes place also awaits further study.

4. Conclusion

TCUs and actions appear to be two different levels of inquiry. They are, however, interrelated by practices in sequences. Practices of syntax, prosody, body move-ment and other resources constitute, on the one hand, turns-at-talk and, on the other hand, courses of action. Therefore, the construction of units is in a reflexive relationship with action formation in sequences. The units in interaction are shaped by, and themselves shape, the types of action accomplished and their se-quential position (cf. Schegloff 1996; Fox 2007).

Earlier work on units focused more on the practices of various resources (e.g. syntax, prosody, and pragmatics) in the construction of units themselves. More re-cent research, however, starts to pay more attention to the relationship between unit construction, action and sequential position. The contributions in the panel also reflected this research trend. First, units in talk-in-interaction accomplish ac-tions. For instance, responsive turns may implement different actions depending

on the constraints mobilized by turns in first position (Steensig/Heinemann). Second, the construction of units is shaped by sequence organization. For example, units in responsive turns to YNIs are organized to satisfy the relevancies set up by the form of an interrogative without changing the current course of action (Raymond). Third, units in different sequential positions may (or may not) accomplish different actions. Units like ingressive speech in Finnish, for example, perform different actions in second and third positions in a sequence (Hakulinen). In contrast, the final particle *hoor* in Dutch can occur in first and second positions. In both positions, the token marks the discursive status of the ongoing turn (Mazeland/Plug). The interrelations of units, actions and sequences are complex and dynamic in interaction. The contributions in the panel showed that researchers have become more aware of this interrelatedness and complexity in the study of units in interaction. They have started shifting their attention from "units" to "units in *interaction*". This, one hopes, would also have repercussions onto the treatment of "units" in mainstream linguistics.

5. References

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