Reflections on the Sequential Organization of Social Interaction
An ICCA 2014 report

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to report on three panels that were organized on the occasion of the *4th International Conference on Conversation Analysis* that took place at the University of California, Los Angeles, in June 2014. The report is structured as follows: Section 2 describes and discusses the papers presented in the three panels and section 3 provides some concluding remarks on the general organization of the ICCA-14 conference and on some of its implications for the study of conversation and social interaction.

2. Panels

In the following, I report on ten papers presented within three panels. In doing so, I first resume the presentations of each panel (2.1, 2.2, and 2.3) and then briefly discuss some of their possible implications for the study of the organization of social interaction (2.1.1, 2.2.1 and 2.3.1).

2.1. Studies in action formation – session 1

The panel was composed of three presentations and it was chaired by *Gareth Walker* (University of Sheffield). The papers addressed the issue of action formation from three different standpoints: Starting with the study of a particular practice for implementing a particular action (Irene Koshik), continuing with the examination of the implications of frequency for interpreting action (Donald Carroll), and ending with the investigation of a specific syntactic structure as a vehicle for accomplishing action-in-interaction (Ioana-Maria Stoenica).

   Irene Koshik's paper, *'Wait': Stopping and redirecting a problematic course of action*, focused on the use of "wait" as a practice for stopping an action in progress. Basing her analyses on various sets of English data, including ordinary conversations, emails, institutional face-to-face talk and computer-mediated interactions, the author showed how speakers make use of *wait* to redirect or cancel a course of action treated as problematic as a result of a cognitive shift based on a new realization or understanding of it. This practice was also shown to be similar to *wait a minute*, which can be used to stop a co-participant from interrupting a not-yet-finished telling, and to *hold on*, which is employed to stop a course of action, but without signaling it as problematic. At the end of her presentation and in the discussions that followed it, Koshik argued in favor of a distinction between the action performed by *wait* and the repair initiation (Schegloff 2000), the difference between them being that the first is concerned with the course of an action treated as problematic whilst the latter is focused on problems with the talk.

In his presentation entitled *Recognizable actions: A role for composites and frequent phrases*, *Donald Carroll* problematized the relationship between frequency and action recognizability. Starting from the idea that any possible *turn constructional unit* (TCU) (Sacks/Schegloff/Jefferson 1974) has its own *projectability* (see Auer 2005, 2009 *inter alia*) that is recognized by the participants in the interaction, the author suggested that this recognition of turns-at-talk and of the actions they are implementing could be related to the *frequency* of their use in all kinds of conversations and interactional settings. In other words, Carroll argued that the projectable character of a turn, of what may be expected as relevant next, both at the level of syntax and of action, is oriented to by co-participants because they recognize, based on some earlier instances of use, its format as conveying some particular action. Presenting a list of numerous "habitual chunks" (Donald Carroll)[1] or frequent phrases (such as: *Why are you smiling, Game over, Just be fair, We can do better*), collected from English TV shows, the author showed that they occur as TCU-length *composites*[2], they are idiomatic, and they are associated with specific actions understood in terms of their circumstances of use. It was thus argued that it is the familiar character of these chunks that could account for their recognizability as phrases that are basically redoing what they have done in previous instances of use.

Ioana-Maria Stoenica presented a paper on *Relative clauses as units of action in French talk-in-interaction*. Drawing on a French corpus of eight hours of audio and video recorded data, comprising focus-group discussions, sociological interviews and informal interactions between students, the author examined turn-continuations done by participants other than the speaker of the host-turn and composed of relative clauses (RCs). Using the methodological framework of interactional linguistics (Ochs/Schegloff/Thompson 1996; Selting/Couper-Kuhlen 2001; Ford/Fox/Thompson 2002), Stoenica argued, based on the sequential analysis of several excerpts, that these specific turn-continuations are stand-alone units of action with their own subsequent implications for the organization of the interaction. More precisely, it was shown that this type of turn continuations implements responsive actions through which speakers display shared knowledge, express disagreement or formulate candidate understandings meant to establish intersubjectivity. Furthermore, Stoenica argued that they are sequentially implicative for further talk, as recipients were shown to be doing different relevant next actions, such as: Acknowledging or disagreeing with the actions implemented by such specific turn-continuations.

2.1.1. Note on the panel's presentations

The above reported papers have shown that the issue of action formation, central to the preoccupations of the analysts of social interaction, can be tackled in a variety of ways, both in a conversation analytic (Koshik and Carroll) and in an interactional linguistic (Stoenica) perspective. The findings discussed in these works present several analytical and methodological implications for the study of social action.

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[1] References without year indication refer to the papers in the summarized panel.

[2] For a definition of *composites*, see Sacks (1995).

Irene Koshik's paper brings into discussion the analytical challenges raised by the investigation of the similarities and of the differences between actions that seem to be implemented by somewhat similar practices. More precisely, the author showed how similar terms (like *wait, wait a second* and *hold on*) can be used to accomplish similar or almost similar actions. But this brings about a further issue (to be addressed by future research) of establishing to what extent the semantic relatedness of certain linguistic units can account for their being treated as implementing a similar action? In other words, is this apparent synonymy of language still preserved at the praxeological level of the interaction (by being treated as accomplishing similar actions) or does it offer speakers "slot alternatives" (Lerner 2004:180) from which participants can draw to build different actions with distinct sequential implications?

Donald Carroll's talk ended by raising several methodological questions concerning the study of frequency within a conversation analytic perspective and that could be summarized as follows: What is to be considered a frequent phrase? How do participants display recognition of the familiarity of a frequent phrase? How should conversation analysts set about building collections? These inquiries indicate, on the one hand, that further conversation analytic studies into the issue of frequency are still needed in order to provide empirical answers to these theoretical questions. On the other hand, these questions, which recall to some extent Du Bois' theoretical assumption that "Grammars code best what speakers do most" (2003:49), open the path to new directions in the research on frequency and larger syntactic units, as this notion has been so far most often analyzed in relation to the *grammaticalization* (Hopper 2001; Narrog/Heine 2011) of somewhat short linguistic and prosodically reduced units.

The findings emerging from the paper of *Ioana-Maria Stoenica* are consequential for the way we apprehend the grammatical and interactional patterning of talk-in-interaction. Even if RCs have been formally considered to be TCU-continuations (Auer 2007; Couper-Kuhlen/Ono 2007), Stoenica showed that when used to continue turns belonging to other speakers, RCs are treated by the participants in the interaction as responsive actions, with their own sequential implications and, as such, as new TCUs. This questions the relevancy of the distinction between TCU-continuation and new TCU.[3] Furthermore, it suggests, by joining the conclusions of other conversation analytic works (Auer 2007; Seppänen/Laury 2007; Couper-Kuhlen 2012), that it may be analytically useful, when trying to account for the praxeological import of turn continuations and for how they are being oriented to by the participants in the interaction, to think of a *continuum* of different types of TCU-continuations and new TCUs, depending on their contribution to continuing or starting something (syntactically, semantically, pragmatically or interactionally) new.[4] Last but not least, the findings of this paper are also indicative, on a more general level, of the complex network of *family-resemblance rela-*

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[3] This distinction has been already questioned by Couper-Kuhlen (2012) when applied to causal clausal turn continuations.

[4] I would like to thank Arnulf Deppermann for his suggestion of basing the distinction between turn-continuations not just on their contribution to accomplishing some particular action but also on their backward- vs. forward-looking potential applied to different levels of interactional organization.

tionships (Hopper 1987, 2004) that seem to exist not only *between* and *within* grammatical categories but also *between* and *within* interactional units.

2.2. The management of closings

The panel comprised three presentations and it was chaired by *Elliott Hoey* (Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen). The studies addressed the issue of how participants negotiate the closing of some specific sequences and encounters in three different types of interactional settings.

Mikaela Åberg presented a paper on *Assessments, displays of disalignment and embodied actions: Investigating the practices used to negotiate closure of student-initiated interaction*. Her presentation analyzed video recorded ninth grade class activities in Sweden and it was focused on how interactions between students and teachers are closed. The video excerpts showed students working in groups and soliciting the teacher's support. Once the help provided, participants would bring the sequence to an end. But the closing of this encounter was shown to be negotiated differently, according to the type of resources the two parties had at their disposal. Thus, the teacher would first provide a positive assessment of the students' work, which has been commonly described (in studies on whole class teaching) as a sequence-closing practice. If students would need further support or encouragement, the teacher would provide them with it or would upgrade her first assessment and only then would take a step backward, in an attempt to withdraw from the workbench. This stepwise procedure of initiating closing was thus shown to offer an opportunity space for the students to intervene and re-engage in the interaction, should they not be satisfied with the teacher's instructions or advice. At the same time, analyses showed how students, through their embodied conduct, gaze, intonation and sighs, displayed willingness to close the interaction, despite the fact that the teacher was continuing to give them instructions.

Wyke Stommel's paper, co-authored with *Hedwig Te Molder* who presented it, was entitled *'Have I answered your question?': Problems in the interactional management of openings and closings of chat counselling sessions*. The study was based on 32 chat and 36 telephone conversations between information seekers (ISs) and chat/call takers (CTs) of a Dutch service line for information about alcohol and drugs. The aim of the paper was to address the differences between chat and telephone conversation counselling and to show the interactional problems associated with the openings and especially with the closings of chat sessions. In phone calls, closings usually include contextualization cues, such as possible pre-closings or certain action formulations that could point to some future projects that ISs would do based on the advice they have been offered by the CTs. In chat sessions, on the contrary, the data showed that clients would not initiate closings and counsellors would not treat clients' possible pre-closings as acknowledgement of the counselling. A sequential consequence of this is that the CT would formulate a direct elicitation of advice acknowledgement from the part of the IS, by asking a question like *Have I answered your question?* or *Does that give you something to work with?*. Even if these questions seemed to be used by the CT as a practice for managing the closing of the chat counselling session, the data showed that they would regularly fail as exit devices. They would be followed by silence (more ambiguous in chat than in phone calls) or by simultaneous post-con-

struction by the IS that would not be an answer to the advice acknowledgement elicitation, the latter becoming thus difficult to establish and often treated as insufficient by the counsellors.

The third and last paper of the panel, entitled *Wrapping it up: Closing the talk about emotional concerns in follow-up consultations with adolescent cancer survivors* was presented by *Arnstein Finset* and was co-authored with *Anneli Mellblom*, *Anne Marie Landmark Dalby* and *Hanne Catherine Lie*. The presentation aimed to identify the practices used by physicians to respond to patient's emotional talk in routine follow up consultations with adolescent cancer survivors. These practices were identified based on the analysis of seven emotional cues and concerns present in 32 sequences of interaction between pediatric oncologists and adolescents. Based on a sequential analysis of the form through which the emotion was expressed by the adolescent cancer survivor and of the way it was responded to by the physician, Finset et al. showed that oncologists regularly deal with the patient's emotional talk in four steps. First, they would ask questions of general health concern related to the medical history of the patient; secondly, they would make affiliation remarks that provide the patients with the opportunity to further develop their emotional concern; thirdly, they would give advice and make different comments meant to reassess the patient's concern in a more positive way; fourthly, they would then end the talk about the patient's emotional concern by shifting to another topic. The author problematized the physicians' transition towards the third and the fourth step of their practice, as the data showed them either to occur too abruptly or to succeed one another too soon to adequately contribute to bringing emotional support for the adolescent patient.

2.2.1. Note on the panel's presentations

The works presented in this panel, though focusing on different institutional settings and on different languages, have all thrown into relief the impact of the asymmetrical relationship between participants on the management of the closing of their interactions. *Mikaela Åberg*'s work on student-teacher encounters draws attention to the fact that the asymmetries of closings existing between the two parties are shaped both by their willingness to close a sequence and by the type of resources at their disposal, depending on the entitlement they have to bring the interaction to a close.

Wyke Stommel's and *Hedwig Te Molder*'s findings suggest that some of the difficulties counsellors meet in chat sessions are caused by the fact that the normatively asymmetrical relationship between them and their clients is altered by the medium through which the advice is provided: The chat is perceived by clients as less normative and thus less socially constraining, offering them the possibility of ending the interaction at any time, without providing a proper closing like that existing in phone calls. The way in which the asymmetrical relationship is consequential for the sequential organization of the interaction and especially for the closing of delicate matters or emotional talks is particularly striking in the paper signed by *Arnstein Finset et al.*

The papers have also the merit of showing, on a more general level, the social impact of qualitative conversation analytic research. They constitute the empirical proof that conversation analysis offers complex theoretical and methodological

concepts and tools for cross-culturally investigating various types of practices in a diversity of institutional settings. By studying the practices shaping specific social interactions, the analysts could identify and describe the problems that may occur in such encounters and thus provide solutions for solving these interactional difficulties. A relevant example in this sense is offered by the work of Finset et al., which has several implications, stated as such by the authors themselves, for the communication skills training of the physicians dealing with adolescent cancer survivors, namely: Using minimal responses to elicit emotional concerns, addressing patients' problems with more attention to providing a conclusion before shifting to another topic, and closing the trouble talk less abruptly.

2.3. Practices for affiliating and disaffiliating in social interaction

The panel included four presentations and it was chaired by *Richard Ogden* (University of York). The papers reported on the linguistic, prosodic and embodied resources that speakers mobilize to express practices of affiliation and disaffiliation in various interactional settings and in six different languages: English, German, Mandarin Chinese, Danish, Estonian and Finnish.

The first paper of the panel was presented by *Alexandra Tate* and it was entitled *Solidarity and affiliative disagreement in the focus-group setting: A case study of female cancer survivors*. Drawing on audio data from three young female cancer survivor focus groups, the author was interested in how the *sharedness* of given individual experiences is accomplished in this specific type of social interaction. By analyzing the first TCU of the turns belonging to speakers that reacted to other participants' experiential stories, Tate showed that there was a linguistic and thematic linkage that such next-speakers would systematically build to prior speakers' turns. In the excerpts discussed during the presentation, this linkage appeared to be a practice of interactionally validating the previously reported experiences. Of particular interest was the fact that this practice, recurrent in sequences where affiliation, understood as solidarity, was displayed, was also consistent with cases of disaffiliation, where speakers would have a different perspective on the matters under discussion than that of the prior participants. One could thus generally conclude from this paper that in focus-group discussions the experiential sharedness, oriented to by the interactants as a linguistic and thematic linkage between their turns, is mutually acknowledged by the participants, even when they take different stands on it.

The second paper of the panel, entitled *Prosodic and embodied matching in English, Mandarin and German: Practices for sequential alignment and (dis)affiliation,* was presented by *Beatrice Szczepek Reed* and *Xiaoting Li*. The presentation aimed, in general, to investigate the way speakers display orientation to each other's conduct in interaction and, in particular, to explore orientation deployed as a repetition of the prosodic and multimodal features of a prior speaker's turn. The authors called this form of orientation *prosodic and embodied matching*.[5] Interes-

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[5] It was argued that the difference with Lerner's (2002) use of the term *matching* is that Szczepek Reed and Li employ it to describe prosodic and multimodal conduct in *next* position, whilst Lerner makes use of it when accounting for the *simultaneous* action of co-production of talk-in-interaction.

ted in the roles that this prosodic and embodied matching could have in interaction and whether it can be compared across languages, Szczepek Reed and Li set out to explore this phenomenon with regard to its sequential placement in English, German and Mandarin conversations. The findings emerging from their audio and video recorded data pointed to the fact that participants used prosodic and/or embodied matching to design their turns as sequentially aligning with prior talk (that is when implementing a relevant next action, such as fulfilling a request). It was also shown that this kind of matching regularly occurred in relation to sequential alignment and independently of the affiliative or disaffiliative stance[6] displayed in the respective matched turn.

Ni-Eng Lim was the author of the third presentation called *Prefacing disaffiliative actions: Doing 'authoritative tellings' in Mandarin Chinese*. Lim's work investigated stance-taking (Thompson 2002; Kärkkäinen 2006 *inter alia*) expressed by 1st person pronoun metalinguistic expressions in naturally-occurring (Mandarin) Chinese conversations. Working on a corpus of spoken Chinese (CallFriend), the author first identified three most frequent metalinguistic expressions – *Wo-gen-ni-shuo*, *Wo-gen-ni-jiang* and *Wo-gaosu-ni* (translatable by "I'm telling you"). He then focused on studying their interactional functions. A comparison with a written corpus (Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese - LCMC) revealed that they were practically non-existent in written discourse. The sequential analysis of several excerpts proved that following the use of one of the three frequent clusters, speakers would produce extended multi-unit turns and that these turns would perform some "face-threatening" actions, such as criticizing, giving instructions or prefacing possible disaffiliative responses. Moreover, the use of these expressions was shown to be related to matters of epistemic rights and of hierarchical relationships existing between the participants in the interaction.

The last presentation of the panel was entitled *Uncooperative uses of syntactically dependent utterances* and it was authored by *Marja Etelämäki, Trine Heinemann* and *Anna Vatanen*. The paper was a comparative study of actions expressed by speakers continuing another participant's turn, in Danish, Estonian and Finnish. The authors investigated syntactically dependent turn continuations, occurring both as *collaborative completions* (in the sense of Lerner 1991, 2004) and as *increments* (Schegloff 1996, 2001; Couper-Kuhlen/Ono 2007; Sidnell 2012). The sequential analyses of the excerpts showed that speakers made use of syntactically dependent turn continuations to somewhat pre-emptively intervene in the prior speaker's multi-unit turn. Through this kind of turn continuations, speakers would avoid providing (otherwise expected) affiliative responses or they would display that they were aware of what they were being reported on, uncooperatively breaking the development of their interlocutors' extended turns. The investigation of these actions was thus put in relation to issues concerning the distribution of turns among the participants and certain epistemic rights. They were also examined with respect to their sequential implications, as recipients of these actions were shown either to abandon the syntactic trajectory of their turns in order to deal with this disaffiliative move or to pursue a more affiliative uptake from the part of their interlocutors.

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[6]   The authors use Stivers' (2008) distinction between *alignment* and *affiliation*.

2.3.1. Note on the panel's presentations

The above summarized papers, through their approaching the issue of (dis)affiliation in interaction from different perspectives, present several general implycations for the study of human conduct.

The works of Alexandra Tate and of Beatrice Szczepek Reed and Xiaoting Li are inspiring for the research on interactional universals across different institutional settings (Tate) and across different languages and cultures (Szczepek Reed and Li). The concern for generalizing the observations on interactional phenomena seems to have been responded to through the methodological approach adopted by these authors. From this perspective, Tate's work seems to be centered around the sociological notion of *sharedness*, whose study can be easily transferred to other types of group interactions involving at least two people and a facilitator (according to the author's own definition of focus group). The identification of the linguistic, prosodic and/or embodied resources that participants mobilize to display sharedness could be thus systematically studied across different (group) interactions in an attempt to find a more general pattern of interactional practice. The same observation holds true for Szczepek Reed's paper co-authored with Li. In their work, a prosodically and/or visually salient recurrent behavior was first noticed and then investigated in a comparative study meant to determine its interactional functions and to attest its validity across three different languages and cultures. More precisely, their study has demonstrated that the cross-linguistically identified prosodic and/or embodied matching seems to represent a universal practice for sequential alignment.

The notion of 'frequency', discussed thus far in relation to *Donald Carroll*'s presentation (see section 2.1), was also dealt with in *Ni-Eng Lim*'s paper. If Carroll presented some general methodological problems that conversation analysts face when trying to account for the frequency of use of larger linguistic units, Lim decided to somewhat narrow his approach of frequency, submitting it to a precise linguistic criterion (the presence of the 1st person pronoun) when searching for the most used stance-taking metalinguistic expressions in Chinese conversations. His paper constitutes thus an(other) example of a conversation analytic work combining sequential analysis and frequency of clusters.

The presentation by *Marja Etelämäki et al.* illustrated from a grammatical standpoint that alignment and affiliation are complex and layered interactional phenomena. In their study of uncooperative actions performed by syntactically dependent turn continuations, the authors showed that grammatical alignment can sometimes be disaffiliating in terms of action. The same observation was also made by *Ioana-Maria Stoenica*, in her work on turn continuations composed of relative clauses in French talk-in-interaction (see section 2.1.1). It seems thus that cross-linguistic studies on grammar, from a praxeological perspective, contribute to forging a more complex understanding of syntactical dependency whose discursive functions appear to be influenced by the dynamics of talk-in-interaction, that is to say, by the lexico-syntactic choices voiced by participants in different prosodic contours and in changing sequential positions.

3. Conclusions

The papers presented at the ICCA-14 conference, some of which have been reported on here, confirm once again Sacks' observation that "there is order at all points" (Sacks 1984:22). Tackled from the angle of action or from that of grammar, the issue of order has been shown to represent the speakers' mutual orientation to what is being deployed in interaction. The systematic study of the methods by which participants display or make meaning of certain conducts in interaction has revealed that speakers make use of interactional practices which can sometimes be seen to exist in different languages and cultures (see, for example, the studies of Szczepek Reed and Li and Etelämäki et al. in section 2.3). The conversation analytic study of social practices, more or less context-dependent, has several implications for the way we apprehend the human conduct in interaction.

On the one hand, by placing action at the heart of social interaction, the investigation of the human behavior can be decomposed and depicted in terms of sequences and of temporality of actions. Through fine-grained qualitative analysis of the praxeological level of the interaction, analysts can describe general patterns of action combination (like, for instance, the proposal/acceptance sequence) or of action interpretation (as, for example, the cases of self-repair by the repetition of the trouble-source after the interlocutor's repair initiation) and can detect problems related to them (see the paper of Stommel and Te Molder in section 2.2), offering thus possible solutions for a successful management of the interaction (see the paper of Finset et al. in section 2.2.1).

On the other hand, the study of social actions and of the resources they are expressed by, brings about a reconfiguration of our understanding of language and, more specifically, of grammar. Linguistic units cease to be analyzed as abstract entities with given discursive functions (Deppermann 2011) and are instead investigated as resources that shape and are, in their turn, shaped by interaction (see the collection of papers in Ochs/Schegloff/Thompson 1996). From this praxeological perspective, linguistic units form grammatical patterns that speakers use for all practical purposes (Auer/Pfänder 2011). Relevant examples in this respect are the turn-initial objects studied by Heritage (2013, 2014) which, even if semantically bleached and most often language-dependent (which makes their translation from one language to another unsatisfactory if not problematic), are nevertheless interpretable and understood by their operation at the level of action.

All in all, the papers presented at the ICCA-14 conference, through the diversity of their objects of study, have shown that the conversation analytic study of social interaction has become very active all over the world, constantly discovering new directions of research into the complexity of the "interaction engine" (Levinson 2006), and that the epistemic dialogue with other disciplines could successfully enrich the insight into this intriguingly complex matter.[7]

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[7] The panel on *Hybrids, heretics and converts* addressed this interdisciplinary issue (see Küttner in this volume).

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