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Introduction

Units in responsive turns

Abstract

The focus of much interactional linguistic research to date has been on establishing evidence for classical linguistic units like word, phrase, clause, and even sentence, as units relevant for participants in interaction (see, for example, Ford et al., 2013; Linell, 2013; Szczepek Reed and Raymond, 2013). The central units of language in interaction are turns, and the formulation of a turn is crucially affected by its position in a conversational sequence. Viewing grammar from this perspective is what Schegloff (1996) calls “positionally sensitive” grammar. This special issue aims to describe grammar in positionally sensitive terms, focusing on the question of units in one sequential environment in conversation, namely in responsive turns. The articles in this issue explore the nature of linguistic and interactional units in responsive positions in talk, adopting an interactional linguistic approach and using the methods of conversation analysis and functional linguistics. Responsive turns frequently consist of units smaller than clauses, while turns that initiate sequences, such as questions, are more likely to be formulated as clause-sized units. The articles in this special issue focus on the size, syntactic nature, prosodic delivery and bodily-visual construction of responsive units, and the social actions those units serve to perform.
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Keywords: Grammar-in-interaction; Interactional linguistics; Linguistic units; Turn constructional units; Responding

1. Introduction and aims

The question of units of language, a central issue in linguistics, has been made newly relevant by recent developments in the field. The focus of much interactional linguistic research to date has been on establishing evidence for classical linguistic units like word, phrase, clause, and even sentence as units relevant for participants in interaction, i.e. what their status is as “units” of interaction (see, for example, Ford et al., 2013; Linell, 2013; Szczepek Reed and Raymond, 2013). These investigations are heavily influenced by the basic methodological principle in conversation analysis (CA) that analytical categories, such as turn constructional units (TCUs), should be oriented to by participants and emerge as talk progresses (e.g. Auer, 2005; Ono and Couper-Kuhlen, 2007), and are further contingent on what else is happening in the interaction (Goodwin, 1979; Ford, 2004). Even though it has been assumed that TCUs are constructed of linguistic units, consisting of single particles (such as *oh*, or *yes*), phrases, or whole clauses or clause combinations, or anything in between (Sacks et al., 1974), they are ultimately a participants’ category and concern, and thus resist formal definition in terms of given syntactic features (Schegloff, 1996; for a critique of the notion of TCU, see Ford et al., 1996; Selting, 2000). It is indeed not possible to assume a clear one-to-one relationship between TCUs and linguistic units.

The central units of language in interaction are turns, and the formulation of a turn is crucially affected by its position in a conversational sequence. Viewing grammar from this perspective is what Schegloff (1996) calls “positionally sensitive” grammar. The idea behind positionally sensitive grammar is that “for any one specifiable sequential position, there is a certain set of forms that can be used to perform the action relevant for that slot” (Fox et al., 2013: 739). In other words, what is made relevant is determined by what has happened in the prior turns. Thus, we cannot discuss the question of units without paying close attention to the sequential environment in which these units are produced.

This special issue aims to describe grammar in positionally sensitive terms, focusing on the question of units in one sequential environment in conversation, namely in responsive turns. The articles in this issue explore the nature of linguistic and interactional units in responsive positions in talk, adopting an interactional linguistic approach and using the

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methods of conversation analysis and functional linguistics. Responsive turns frequently consist of units smaller than clauses, while turns that initiate sequences, such as questions, are more likely to be formulated as clause-sized units (Thompson, 2017). In responsive turns, the responsive action may be carried out by particles (see, e.g., Sorjonen, 2001), phrasal or clausal units, or a combination of these (Thompson et al., 2015). To put it differently, some kinds of responsive action may require more than just a (response) particle or token to be interactionally appropriate, while some other kinds of responsive action are generally carried out by a sole particle or token (see, e.g. Hakulinen, 2001). The articles in this special issue focus on the size, syntactic nature, prosodic delivery and bodily-visual construction of responsive units, and the social actions those units serve to perform.

2. Units in responsive turns

2.1. Grammatical features

The responsive units discussed in the articles in this special issue take various grammatical forms: some include particles (Endo; Kärkkäinen & Thompson; Keevallik & Hakulinen; Yokomori et al.), some contain verb repeats (Laury) or verb forms used as response particles (Ono & Suzuki). Some take a clausal form (Keevallik & Hakulinen; Vatanen). Often the responsive unit includes a combination of, for example, a particle and some additional material (Kärkkäinen & Thompson; Keevallik & Hakulinen).

Through careful analyses of the linguistic forms and structures used in responsive turns, the articles of this special issue challenge basic notions in grammatical description. With respect to word order, for example, Finnish and Estonian have been described as exhibiting “free” or “pragmatic” word order (Heinämäki, 1976; Viikuna, 1989; Lindström, 2005). Focusing on the use of the response token *kyllä/küll* in Finnish and Estonian, Keevallik and Hakulinen show that grammatical regularities, such as word order patterns, involving this response token, are in fact systematically dependent on the sequential context they occur in, and are thus positionally sensitive. The article by Laury challenges the notion of ellipsis as an explanation regarding the form of responsive turns, and proposes instead that the syntax of responsive turns is fitted to the particular sequential environment. As Ford et al. (2013: 739) put it, “minimal forms are not ‘elliptical’ versions of fuller forms, but both are context-sensitive alternatives, each with its own interactional task in specifiable sequences and positions”. The grammatical description of the responsive unit can thus be empirically shown to be positionally sensitive.

2.2. Formulaicity

Many of the articles discuss the degree of formulaicity of such units (Keevallik & Hakulinen; Laury; Ono & Suzuki; Vatanen). Functionally oriented linguists working with usage-based frameworks have noted that beyond the classical linguistic units, speakers also rely on different types of formulaic utterances (e.g. Hopper, 1988; Wray, 2002; Corrigan et al., 2009). Such formulaic utterances may either be lexically specific (e.g. *I think, I mean*) and are called ‘prefabs’ (Bybee, 2010), or ‘lexical prefabs’ (Thompson et al., 2015), or more general constructional schemata (Ono and Thompson, 1995), which may be only partially specified in their realization. In either case, contrary to earlier assumptions, speakers do not construct each utterance anew from grammatical building blocks, but actual utterances often consist of ready-made formulas conventionalized from frequent use.

As is common for prefabs, responsive units are often routinized or crystallized into performing certain functions, to the point of being grammaticized as reactive tokens. Endo investigates the Japanese change-of-state tokens *a* and *aa*, which often form lexical prefabs such as *a soo* ‘Oh is it so’ or *aa soo* ‘Oh is it so.’ While both *a* and *aa* are used for these lexical prefabs, she argues that *a* and *aa* differ in the epistemic stance they express. Yokomori, Yasui, and Hajikano discuss a type of responsive unit which is used to display receipt of the prior turn by repeating (parts of) the prior turn and adding a pragmatic particle at the end of the repeated item to modulate the stance of the prior turn. Vatanen deals with *mä tiedän* ‘I know’ in Finnish, arguing that *mä tiedän* speakers point out epistemic incongruence in the ongoing interaction. Ono and Suzuki demonstrate that some verbs in Japanese, such as the existential verb *aru*, are used in a reduplicated form to work as a reactive token.

2.3. Prosody and bodily behaviors

The articles in this issue pay close attention not only to the linguistic structures used but also to their prosodic delivery and the bodily-visual behavior of the participants. Sometimes it is not only the linguistic form of the responsive unit but also its special prosody that has become fixed (Ono & Suzuki). Prosody may be used to convey stance or affiliation (Yokomori et al.). While speakers have been shown to segment their speech into prosodic units that often coincide with words, clauses and sentences (e.g. Iwasaki, 1993 and Matsumoto, 2000 for Japanese; Chafe, 1994 for American English; Helasvuo, 2001 for Finnish; Park, 2002 for Korean), linguists studying conversational interaction have suggested that segmentation or “chunking”

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