

# Turn-opening smiles: Facial expression constructing emotional transition in conversation

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## Abstract

Sometimes in conversation, a participant begins to smile during a silence that occurs between utterances. The purpose of our study was to determine how these smiles contribute to the upcoming turn as well as to the larger conversational context. The results suggest that these smiles can work as a first step in the construction of an emotional transition in conversation. These turn-opening smiles initiate a shift from a neutral or serious emotional stance to a positive or humorous emotional stance. The utterance(s) that follow(s) the smile explicate the grounds for the displayed emotional stance. These utterances also exhibit other (prosodic, lexical or gestural) markers of the emotional stance that the smile initiated. In our data, all the recipients of these stance-introducing smiles reciprocated them. By reciprocating the smile (and other emotional markers), the recipients share the emotional transition that is initiated by the turn-opening smiles. However, the timing of reciprocation varies. For example, sometimes the recipients of the smile reciprocate the emotion display at a point where the smiling participant has explicated the grounds for the transition. In other cases, the reciprocation takes place before such the explication, soon after the first occurrence of the turn-opening smile.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the shifts in the emotional stances that are initiated by the smiles that occur prior to the onset of spoken utterances in mundane dyadic conversations. We will argue that these turn-opening smiles initiate a change in the shared emotional stance in conversations. Our data reveal that the new stance that is introduced by a turn-initial smile becomes consolidated by the following verbal, vocal, or non-vocal expressions by both participants in the dyadic conversations. We will present a sequential and contextual analysis of the conversational moments that contain these shifts and we will describe what kind of contextual factors (such as mutual engagement and epistemic relations) influence the reciprocation of the emotional stance that the turn-opening smiles initiate.

Schegloff (1996) points out that transition spaces are central places for the negotiation of 'what happens next'. A transition space can be defined as the boundary of spoken turns, which are the key elements of talk itself. Schegloff reports that transition spaces may extend from somewhere in the previous turn or turn construction unit (TCU) to somewhere in the next turn or TCU. Even though transition space can include sections of the adjacent turns, we will focus on the overt phases of these spaces – on the silent moment between two spoken utterances. However, elements of conduct

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can occur between turns and these elements anticipate the upcoming turn at talk. Schegloff calls them *pre-beginning elements* (Schegloff, 1996:92–93). He characterizes these elements as ones that project the onset of talk, but are not yet proper recognizable turn beginnings, and do not begin a TCU, which bears the actual contribution of the turn. Facial expressions are one of these pre-beginning elements. Some others are in-breaths, uh(m) tokens, gestures, head movements, and changes in gaze direction (for more on pre-beginning elements and gestures, see Mondada, 2007; Streeck and Hartge, 1992; on talk and gesture more generally, for example, see Streeck, 1993; Kendon, 2004; McNeill, 1992).

In this paper, we will show how one of these pre-beginning elements, a smile, contributes to the interaction in everyday dyadic Finnish conversations. We will argue that the smiles that emerge before the onset of a spoken utterance and that persist during that utterance are all an integral part of the upcoming turn's contribution. We will show how these smiles initiate what we will refer to as an emotional transition, which is a shift in emotional stance from neutral to affective, or from serious to humorous. Furthermore, the new stance becomes subsequently consolidated in the upcoming utterance and is eventually shared by both participants.

Recently, Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori (2006, 2012) and Ruusuvuori and Peräkylä (2009) have examined the use of facial expressions during assessments and different kinds of telling. They have analyzed the facial expressions that anticipate, co-occur with, or follow spoken utterances, arguing that facial expressions stretch the boundaries of (spoken) action. Facial expression can display a speaker's emotional stance before the onset and also after the completion of talk. This paper continues their exploration of anticipatory facial expressions by examining in detail the interactional trajectories pertaining to turn-opening smiles.

Human facial expressions have been understood and examined from two fundamentally different perspectives (cf. Manstead et al., 1999; also Niedenthal et al., 2006). According to one perspective, facial expressions are considered to be indications of inner emotional states and processes (Ekman, 2007; Ekman and Friesen, 2003; Tomkins, 1962; Izard, 1997). From this perspective, a smile is predominantly an indication of an individual's positive emotions, such as joy and amusement, even though a smile can sometimes also index other emotions (Ekman, 1985; Ekman and Friesen, 2003). The other main perspective emphasizes the social dimension of facial expressions. They are considered to be the means used for social purposes and serve particular functions in interpersonal communication (Fridlund, 1991, 1997; Bavelas and Chovil, 1997, 2000; Chovil, 1991, 1997). For example, it is argued that a smile signals an intention to affiliate, while a sad face signals a request for comfort (Niedenthal et al., 2006:131).

This paper will follow the second line of thought and will examine the interpersonal communicative functions of a particular facial expression, the smile. The social context in which we examine these expressions is neither defined by the institutional nor by other attributes of the interaction participants, but is instead determined by the sequential location in which the smile occurs (cf. Goodwin and Goodwin, 2000:239). Our data comes from the moments in dyadic social interaction where the participants are introducing a new topic in conversation, initiating a new aspect of the topic talked about, or are re-opening a topic that has just been brought to a possible closure. The smiles that we will examine initiate a transition from an apparently neutral or serious emotional stance towards a shared positive or humorous emotional stance that is made explicit during the turns of talk that follow the smiles. The aim of this paper is to account for the trajectories of interaction that ensue from these smiles, and to contribute to our understanding of the interpersonal communicative functions of facial expressions.

This analysis focuses on how co-participants respond to turn-opening smiles. In our data, all these smiles were reciprocated by the recipients. This means that the smiles initiated a process that resembles something reported in the previous literature has been referred to as emotional contagion. This is the human tendency to mimic the embodied emotional expressions in others (Hatfield et al., 1993a). In analyzing and discussing our data, however, we also suggest an amendment to the theory of contagion. We will demonstrate that in our data, the process in which one participant 'catches' the other's emotion seems not to be automatic, but rather to involve inferential processes, and to be mediated by the sequential organization of interaction.

## 2. Data and method

Our data consist of five video-recorded dyadic conversations over lunch. The participants were familiar with each other. The data were recorded using three cameras: two cameras recorded the participants' facial expressions and the third camera recorded the overall situation. Our collection contains 30 instances of turn-opening smiles. (There is also a smaller collection of turn-opening frowns, and an analysis of these will be published later.) All the turn-opening smiles in our collection remained on the speaker's face when the talk started, and the smiles therefore became intertwined with the talk.

All the turn-opening smiles that occurred in our data were closely associated with a shift in emotional stance. In a minority of the cases, the emotional transition had already been initiated by the prior speaker when the turn-opening smile occurred. These cases seem to indicate that the intent of a turn-opening smile is to display the upcoming speaker's stance as one that aligns with the co-interactant, who had just proposed the new stance in her prior turn. However, this type of sequential and interactional use of smiles is clearly different from the type of smile that we will focus on in this paper. In our

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