Constructing agreements with assessments in Cantonese conversation: From a comparative perspective

Kang Kwong Luke [a], Hiroko Tanaka [b],*

[a] School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, 14 Nanyang Drive, Singapore 637332
[b] Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, Essex CO7 9AP, United Kingdom

Abstract

As a sequel to Tanaka (this volume), this paper attempts to extend the investigation of the grammatical structures of agreements with assessments to Cantonese conversation. Our point of departure are two prima facie contradictory observations about Cantonese. First, like English, it is known to have a 'canonical' SVO word order where word order may figure as an important ingredient in constructing and parsing utterances. Second, at the same time, Cantonese shares with Japanese an expanded capacity for leaving arguments unexpressed as well as the use of postpositional final particles to contingently mark elements as a predicate, thereby overriding the canonical word order constraints and instead permitting word order variability. Indeed, our corpus of Cantonese conversational data yielded a collection of instances of strong agreements which exhibit structures closely resembling those found in Japanese. Specifically, we focus on two recurrent syntactic formats, namely the 'predicate-only' and the 'predicate-initial' constructions, where the predicate is produced first and other arguments are respectively either unexpressed or placed at the end of the utterance. We examine how these two syntactic formats are deployed in the designs of strongly and unequivocally affiliative agreements by maximizing the early positioning of affiliative elements in the turn.

© 2016 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Conversation analysis; Cantonese; Japanese; English; Agreement; Word order

1. Introduction

A major aim of the present paper is to use conversation analysis to pursue a comparative approach to the study of the grammatical designs of preferred (and dispreferred) responses initially undertaken in Tanaka (2005, 2008), and to apply it to the specific case of agreements with assessments in Cantonese. These studies took as the starting point, a number of early work on various types of adjacency pairs (e.g. Heritage, 1984, Chapter 8; Levinson, 1983, Chapter 6; Pomerantz, 1984), and proceeded to focus on the shapes of preferred and dispreferred responses in Japanese and English in terms of the lexical and grammatical resources available in the respective languages. Among other things, they examined the management of the ordering of grammatical elements within responding turns depending on whether responses are preferred or dispreferred. Similar themes are explored in Tanaka (this volume), which begins by noting that agreements with first assessments in Japanese are typically implemented through the mobilization of word-order variability and the flexibility to leave arguments unexpressed, which combine to allow for an early indexing of agreement, through predicate-initial or predicate-only turn-designs; these observations are used as a point of reference to examine the extent to which similar strategies may likewise be deployed in the construction of agreements with assessments in English. It is reported that operations on word order and the use of unexpressed arguments (or ellipsis) do indeed figure in the designs of agreements in

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1206 873052.
  E-mail addresses: kkluke@ntu.edu.sg (K.K. Luke), htanaka@essex.ac.uk (H. Tanaka).

English, albeit constrained by the lexico-grammatical affordances of conversational English. Readers are invited to turn to the paper for a more in-depth account and a review of the literature which also forms a foundation for the present paper.

In exploring the grammatical structures of agreements with assessments in Cantonese, we aim to deepen our understanding of the potentially universal interactional contingencies surrounding the formation and construction of agreements, and in particular, strongly affiliative ones, while at the same time examining the possible relevance of grammatical resources specific to Cantonese for building these actions. In implicitly comparing Cantonese with Japanese and English in this particular way, we hope to contribute to the growing body of literature in interactional linguistics and pragmatic typology on the close relationship between interactional organization and grammatical structure across different languages (e.g. Dingemanse et al., 2013, 2014; Dingemanse and Floyd, 2014; Schegloff, 1979, 1996; Selting and Couper-Kuhlen, 2001; Sidnell and Enfield, 2012). While the notions of 'preference' and 'affiliation' are closely connected, a distinction is made in this paper between the former as a structural notion relating to the formatting of a response, and the latter pertaining to the degree to which an action is pro-social (see Tanaka, this volume, for a more detailed treatment). Moreover, for the purposes of this paper, we are excluding from consideration cases where there may be cross-cutting preferences, and narrowing the focus on assessment sequences where the first pair part is an assessment and the second pair part is a second assessment that is in agreement with the first, and especially those that display a highly affiliative stance.

2. Grammar and interaction in Cantonese from a comparative perspective

It will be necessary to give a brief account of rudimentary aspects of Cantonese grammar in order to present our analysis of the data. Of particular relevance are issues emanating from descriptions of the so-called 'canonical' subject-predicate word order, which can nevertheless be shown to be subject to transformations and re-configurations due to the flexibility of leaving arguments unexpressed and the use of 'predicative' particles. On one level of abstraction, whereas Japanese is often described as an SOV language (e.g. Shibatani, 1990), the 'canonical' word order in Cantonese is said to be SVO, which is similar to English as well as many other SVO languages (Matthews and Yip, 1994), as exemplified below:

From Excerpt (4):

13	Ken:	ngodei	zau	mou	di	gam	ge	ye
		we	be	not-have	CL	like-that	GEN	thing
		we	don't have	things like that				
		S	V	O				

In this respect, Cantonese is different from Japanese.[1,2]

Against this backdrop, the writing of this paper is partly motivated by the following consideration. Reflecting a long-term interest in Chinese grammar (including Cantonese), Luke (2004a, 2004b, 2012) carried out a series of investigations into a phenomenon known amongst Chinese grammarians as 'dislocation', which is understood roughly as the conspicuous occurrence of utterances in discourse where sentential constituents such as subjects, predicates and adverbials are found occurring in 'untypical positions' in contravention of the 'canonical' word order of the language (e.g. with subjects occurring after predicates). The phenomenon is exemplified from a conversation to be examined herein:

From Excerpt (5):

9	Tan:	kwaaZOENG	wo	ngo	aaMAA
		exaggerated	PP	me	mum
		incredible, my mum (is)			

As Chinese is generally known to be an SVO language (as noted above), the 'dislocation' or 'transposition' of subjects and predicates as in the above example has long been felt to be in need of explanation.[3] And yet, frustratingly for the

---

[1] However, clauses found in discourse and conversation do not always follow this 'canonical' order, as we will see presently.

[2] In a study of 'preferred clause structures' in Mandarin, Tao and Thompson (1994) found that regardless of transitivity (number of arguments associated with the verb), the majority of clauses in Mandarin discourse take the 'XV' form (although X is regularly unexpressed), X being either the subject of an intransitive verb, or the subject/object if the verb is transitive (with the other arguments 'missing' in the clause). When not limiting consideration to specific interactional positions or tasks, this also appears to hold in Cantonese. Another formulation of this generalization, following Chao (1968), is to say that the common word order is Topic-Comment. The prevalence of the 'XV' structure can best be understood in the light of Li and Thompson's (1976) typology, whereby a distinction is made between subject-prominent and topic-prominent languages. Within this typology, Cantonese can be placed closer to the topic end of the scale (see also LaPolla, 1993).

[3] See Tanaka (this volume) for a discussion of 'dislocation' in agreements in English conversation.