

Syntactical constructions and tactile orientations: Procedural utterances and procedures in massage therapy



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Abstract

This study draws on video recordings of 12 massage therapy sessions that took place in Japan. During massage therapy sessions, therapists produce utterances regarding massaging procedures. This study investigates the ways such procedural utterances are syntactically constructed in different sequential contexts and bodily configurations. The procedural utterances take three forms: the request form, the proposal form, and the announcement form. Two observations have been made. First, various movements, including the movements that are mentioned in the procedural utterances, are initiated during the utterances. Second, the placement of the different syntactic forms of procedural utterances varies relative to the stage of the ongoing therapy session and the concurrent body movement. I argue that procedural utterances are constructed normatively sensitively to the tactile orientations that accompany bodily manipulations and that this normative sensitivity can be a resource for the negotiation between the therapist and the client regarding the incipient procedure.

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1. Introduction

It has been known since Austin (1975) initiated a logical analysis of speech acts that various syntactical forms can implement the same action type (see also Searle, 1969, 1985). More recently, conversation analytic studies of various action types have revealed that syntactical forms are chosen in response to various interactional circumstances, such as how the action is sequentially occasioned and what is supposedly known about the speaker's entitlement and the recipient's capacity and/or willingness to respond accordingly (see, for example, Curl, 2006, for offers; Curl and Drew, 2008, for requests; Wootton, 1997, for a child's use of imperatives). In the 1970s, through a detailed analysis of audio-visual recordings of actual interactions, Charles Goodwin began to explore the ways the syntactical construction of an utterance is contingent on embodied conduct, including gaze directions (Goodwin, 1979, 1981). In this study, I investigate the ways in which one particular type of utterance (a procedural utterance) is syntactically constructed in different sequential contexts and bodily configurations.

This study draws on video recordings of 12 massage therapy sessions. Massage therapy is different from physical therapy in that it is based on Oriental medicine. It is incorporated into the Japanese medical system, but the therapists,

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qualified by a state examination, are legally entitled to practice independently. Its purpose is to provide clients who suffer from chronic difficulties, such as a sequela of a stroke, with sustainable comfort (see [Sawanobori, 2011](#)).

One organizational feature of the sessions is that they are frequently organized as “multiactivity” situations ([Haddington et al., 2014](#); see [Nishizaka and Sunaga, 2015](#), for a very similar situation). While the official purpose of each session is to provide massage and physical exercises, the participant converses during the sessions, and a wide range of topics is covered, from the client’s diet to the stock market. The massage therapists also often produce utterances directly related to the procedures of the ongoing massage (e.g., “Please, put down your hand,” “((!)) will continue,” etc.). This study focuses on the production of this particular type of utterance.

Another focus of this study is the participants’ tactile orientations. It has been shown that in an interactional environment that involves bodily contact, tactility plays a crucial role in the organization of a distinct activity within the interaction. Some notes on tactility or tactile orientations are in order. First, in this study, tactility is not limited to perceptions of properties such as shape, size, weight, and surface texture; it also includes perceptions of the movements and positions of one’s own and others’ body parts that are produced by a bodily manipulation, and sensations (such as pain) caused by touch (see [Gibson, 1966](#), for an overview). Second, these perceptions can be communicative in themselves. For example, tactile perceptions can be interactional resources for “pointing to” a body part ([Nishizaka, 2007, 2011a,b, 2014](#)). The kinesthetic and proprioceptive perceptions produced by guiding hands can serve as a resource for instructing the movement of body parts to accomplish a task ([Lindwall and Ekström, 2012](#)) and are also sometimes used by adults to control children’s physical conduct ([Cekaite, 2015](#)). Third, some sensations caused by touch, such as pain, and some perceptions of tactile qualities, such as softness or hardness, can be verbalized and/or visualized with gestures such that they can be turned into a focus of the interaction. For example, [Heath \(1989, 2006\)](#) showed that pain caused by a doctor’s touch could be a focus of, as well as a resource for, interaction in physical examinations. In a massage therapy session, all of these tactile orientations are demonstrably employed by the participants to organize the activity at hand.

In this study, I address the following issues. First, how are procedural utterances syntactically constructed and how are the syntactical constructions sequentially distributed? “Sequentially” means: the sequential construction of an utterance, the sequences of utterances, and how these relate to the concurrent bodily movements. Second, how can subtle differences in syntactical constructions elaborate the meaning of the concurrent bodily manipulations, and how can the current bodily manipulations inform the ongoing construction of instructions?

2. Data and method

My colleagues and I transcribed 12 video recordings of massage therapy sessions. I extracted 84 fragments that contain at least one procedural utterance and analyzed each fragment using conversation analysis ([Sacks, 1992](#); [Schegloff, 2007](#)). Many of the extracted fragments contained consecutive procedural utterances. As a result, I have about 200 procedural utterances in total (the number will be different depending on how they are counted, and this an analytic issue rather than simply a given).

In order to answer the above questions, first, I present an overview of the mutually informing relationship between procedural utterances and their concurrent body movements (section 3). Then, I introduce three syntactical forms that procedural utterances take (i.e., the request, proposal, and announcement forms) and examine their sequential distributions (sections 4 and 5). Then, I examine some apparently deviant cases to demonstrate the mutually informing relationship between syntactical forms and body movements and show how this relationship can be a resource for negotiation regarding how to proceed (section 6).

3. The multimodal construction of procedural utterances

During massage therapy sessions, therapists (MAS) produce procedural utterances, announcing what they are about to do or instructing the client (CLT) to do something. Excerpts 1 and 2 are two examples.¹ (φ is a placeholder for the subject or object of a verb. In Japanese, we basically do not mention the subject.)

¹ In all the excerpts, each line is composed of two or three tiers. There is first a Romanized version of the original Japanese. Below this are phrase-by-phrase glosses, where necessary. Finally, the third tier presents a rough English translation, where words are arranged such that as much as possible of the original word order is maintained. The first tier of the transcript utilizes [Jefferson’s \(2004\)](#) transcription system. In the second-tier glosses, the following abbreviations are used: IG for “Interrogative”; JD for “Judgmental”; MM for “Mimetic”; NG for “Negative”; and P for “Particle.” The letters and Roman numerals in brackets next to the extract numbers indicate the identity of the session in each extract. Some extracts include annotations of the embodied conduct of each participant under the English translation, that is, in the extra tiers designated as “clt” and “mas.” The starting and ending points of the movements are indicated by the sign “|”. Double arrows (“-->”) in these tiers indicate continuation of the described conduct over the line.

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