



Displaying status of reciprocity through reactive tokens in Mandarin task-oriented interaction

Jun Xu *

School of Foreign Languages, Hunan University, Changsha, Hunan 410082, PR China

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Abstract

Reciprocity is an indispensable element in any talk-in-interaction. This paper focuses on Mandarin task-oriented interaction on a moment-by-moment basis in order to study this phenomenon of reciprocity in more detail. The aim is to describe the interrelationships between the orientation towards reciprocity that participants display and their spontaneous choices of reactive tokens. This paper uses a conversation analytic perspective to show that reactive tokens are systematically employed as a negotiating resource to manifest different levels of reciprocity. Moreover, these levels of reciprocity can be represented as a cline: silent → passive → neutral → active → affiliative. This model suggests that recipients employ reactive tokens as a negotiating resource to collaboratively achieve, in the emerging interaction, either disengagement or involvement on this continuum of displayed reciprocity. Recipients negotiate their rights to shape and reshape the trajectory of the ongoing interaction by privileging different reactive tokens. The model of reciprocity suggests that the most proficient listenership is the one that exhibits knowledge of how to react by choosing the best reactive token on the basis of the varying and ongoing interactive circumstances.

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1. Introduction

In broad terms, everyday conversation minimally involves speakers and recipients. The role of recipients has been somewhat neglected in most language studies because most research has been concerned with linguistic production and conduct of speakers (e.g., Gardner, 2001; Goodwin, 1986; McCarthy, 2003). Nevertheless, conversation analysts have implicitly or explicitly always attached great importance to the role of reciprocity in interaction irrespective of the language (e.g., Gardner, 2001; Goodwin, 1986). Stivers and Rossano (2010) propose the model of response relevance that shows how interrogative lexico-morphosyntax, interrogative prosody, recipient directed gaze, and recipient epistemic asymmetry contribute to the mobilization of responses.

Recipients play an equally important role in achieving intersubjectivity and smooth flow throughout the process of a conversation. Without displayed reciprocity, floor-holding speakers remain uncertain as to whether their talk is being understood and their ideas are being accepted. Recipients do not contribute new information or content to an ongoing topic. However, their role is significant in everyday talk-in-interaction. I first noticed in the data analysed in this article a primary speaker employing linguistic resources such as a yes/no question to elicit a response from a recipient. What the speaker expects from the recipient might be to confirm that he is actually listening, by producing such vocalizations as 'uh huh' or 'mm'

* Tel.: +86 073189713186; mobile: +86 15574385100.

E-mail addresses: xujun@hnu.edu.cn, daisyxj@163.com.

to show attention or understanding at the perceptual level. This study is cross-disciplinary and might contribute to such fields as conversation analysis, language studies, interactional linguistics and language education (including linguistic competence).

It can be argued that talk by a floor-holding speaker is an interactional product (Schegloff, 1989:140) in an extended turn, such as story telling (Norrick, 2000), advice giving and direction giving, among many others. In these sequences, a recipient can produce a reactive token¹ at the right moment and precisely place it in the floor-holding speaker's continuing turns. The noticeable absence of such tokens may engender considerable modifications or even disruptions in a floor-holding speaker's subsequent contribution to the ongoing talk, as is seen in Extract (2). In addition, the important role played by recipients can be further clarified by the following observation: if no reactive token is articulated at a recognizable complex transition relevance place (CTRP), a floor-holding speaker attempts to find out whether the other party is listening or not (Sacks, 1992, vol. 2:411–412).

In this paper, my argument is that the ability to listen (i.e. listening comprehension as one of the four conventional paradigms in language education, namely as listening, speaking, reading and writing) is not the same as the competence to display awareness of being a recipient with appropriate responses in conversational sequences. Some recipients may assume that non-occurrence of reactive tokens might mean that there is no problem in understanding of the talk-so-far. However, the study shows that every floor-holding speaker has the tendency to expect a recipient to show alignment, interest, understanding or attention to the talk through the use of reactive tokens rather than by being silent.²

In conversation analytical research, the negotiation of reciprocity and speakership can be ongoing, and it appears that reciprocity can be further divided into different categories. For instance, backchannels such as 'mm hm' can display "passive reciprocity" (Jefferson, 1984a:200) and a collaborative production (i.e. one type of reactive token) can be viewed as an "affiliating utterance" (Lerner, 2004b). The use of "passive" and "affiliative" suggests that reciprocity seems to be a complex concept, which is further explored in the following section. Subsequently, I will introduce reactive tokens and data sets briefly, and propose a conversation analytic perspective on levels of reciprocity, taking as an example the use of map task interactions. Finally, I will present some implications on the application of reactive tokens as an interactional resource to achieve proficient listenership.

2. Background

2.1. Reactive tokens

Clancy et al. (1996), in a very influential paper comparing reactive tokens in speakers of Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and English, defined a reactive token as "a short utterance produced by an interlocutor who is playing a listener's role during the other interlocutor's speakership" (Clancy et al., 1996:355). They distinguished five types of reactive token: (i) backchannels; (ii) reactive expressions; (iii) collaborative finishes; (iv) repetitions; and (v) resumptive openers. Instances of all five types of reactive token can be found in my data.

It is important to note that there are two main constraints in Clancy et al.'s (1996) definition of reactive tokens: (i) a reactive token is produced by recipients; and (ii) a reactive token is articulated in the course of the floor-holding speaker's continued speakership. However, these two constraints are not sufficient to characterize all reactive tokens found in the data used in this study. One obvious reason is that reactive tokens are so variable in terms of their linguistic forms, and so flexible in their conversational functions as well as their sequential placements in the data. My working definition of reactive tokens is as follows.

A reactive token is a short utterance produced by an interlocutor who is playing the role of a recipient during another interlocutor's speaking turn within a longer sequence;

- (i) It stands alone; that is, it does not preface a full turn;
- (ii) It responds directly to the immediately prior speaking turn;
- (iii) It can be an answer to a yes/no question or a tag question in question/answer adjacency pairs;

¹ A number of terms have been used to describe the linguistic phenomenon of recipient responses, such as conventional signals (Fries, 1952), accompaniment signals (Kendon, 1967), back channel communication (Yngve, 1970), continuers (Schegloff, 1982), acknowledgement tokens (Jefferson, 1984a), minimal response (e.g., Coates, 1986; Fellegly, 1995), assessments (Goodwin, 1986), reactive tokens (Clancy et al., 1996), response tokens (Silverman, 1998) and reaction tokens (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006), besides many others. Clancy et al.'s term *reactive token* has been adopted throughout this paper.

² Following Tannen (1985), silence in this study is negatively interpreted as a lack of involvement and engagement in interaction. Also, silence has the revelational function, which shows a lack of information or knowledge on the topic under discussion (Jensen, 1973), especially in classroom interaction. Kurzon (1997) differentiates intentional and unintentional silence: intentional silence is used as a strategy, whereas unintentional silence is caused by extreme anxiety or embarrassment.

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