

Foreshadowing a problem: Turn-opening frowns in conversation



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Abstract

Occasionally in conversation, a participant starts to frown during a silence between utterances, before starting to talk. The purpose of our study was to determine how these frowns contribute both to the upcoming turn and to the larger conversational context. The results suggest that these frowns mark the following utterance as dealing with something problematic in relation to the expectations created in the preceding talk. As pre-beginning elements, these frowns anticipate utterances that involve difficulties associated with negative evaluation, disaffiliation, or epistemic challenge. All three types of problem involve some complication that arises in the expected course of events within the interaction. These frowns seem to foreshadow utterances that somehow deviate from the recipient's routine expectation. As these frowns persist into the utterances they anticipate, they become intertwined with what is being said. Furthermore, the utterance or utterances that follow(s) the turn-opening frown expose(s) the grounds for that problem. Turn-opening frowns are typically produced by the frowning participant gazing downward and away from the recipient. The recipients of these frowns do not typically reciprocate them even though they notice the frown. However, these facial expressions work as an important interactional resource for the interlocutors, hinting beforehand at a problem in the conversation that will be addressed in the upcoming turn of talk.

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1. Introduction

During conversation, participants sometimes frown just before the onset of their spoken utterances and the frown remains on their faces when they start to talk. As the talk and interaction unfold, it becomes clear that this type of frown is connected to the utterance. Our data show that the *turn-opening frown* indicates that something problematic is about to arise in the upcoming turn. What it is that is problematic, and is initially displayed by the frown, relates to a breach in the progression of the conversation. In short, the frown and the subsequent turn mark a discontinuity in the current activity and bring out a problematic aspect in the topic of conversation that the co-interactant has not yet addressed, or has taken for granted.

Turn-opening frowns occur in what is referred to as the *transition space* (Schegloff, 1996), which is a local context "starting somewhere in a prior turn or TCU and lasting until somewhere in the next turn or TCU" (Schegloff, 1996: 96).

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Transition spaces are therefore central places for the negotiation of ‘what happens next’ in a conversation. In addition, even though a transition space may include sections of the adjacent turns, this study focuses on the overt phases of these spaces – on the silent moment between two spoken utterances.

Between turns, certain communicative behaviour can occur, such as facial expressions, which anticipate the upcoming spoken turn. Schegloff refers to these as *pre-beginning elements* (Schegloff, 1996: 92–93), arguing that they project the onset of talk, but they are not yet properly recognizable turn beginnings, and they do not begin a TCU, which bears the actual contribution of the turn. Other pre-beginning elements apart from facial expressions include in-breaths, uh(m) tokens, gestures, head movements, and gaze shifts (for more on pre-beginning elements, see e.g., Mondada, 2007; Streeck and Hartge, 1992).

The authors of this article recently reported (Kaukoma et al., 2013) how another kind of turn-opening facial expression, *smile*, initiates a shift in emotional stance from one that is neutral or serious to one that is positive or humorous. We showed that turn-opening smiles are integrated parts of the turn (action) that they anticipate, initiating a new emotional stance already before the onset of talk. We also discovered that the recipients of these smiles regularly reciprocate them, as well as other emotional stance markers (such as laughter and lexical items) that the speaker expresses after the initial smile. In many cases, the recipients of the turn-opening smiles were the ones to escalate the introduced emotional stance, thereby not only reciprocating the new stance but also carrying it further. This paper reports on our continuing research on turn-opening facial expressions, examining in detail the interactional trajectories of turn-opening frowns.

When a person frowns, the eyebrows are brought together and pulled downward, and as a consequence vertical wrinkles appear on the person’s forehead (see e.g., Ekman, 2007). Frowns and other facial expressions are linked to inner psychological and physiological states and processes, which in turn are related to the regulation of emotions. However, facial expressions are also used in social communication, serving various interpersonal functions. (Manstead et al., 1999; Niedenthal et al., 2006.) The main line of research examines facial expressions as spontaneous manifestations of human emotional processes (e.g., Ekman, 2007; Ekman and Friesen, 2003; Tomkins, 1963; Izard, 1997). From this perspective, frowns are understood to be linked to an individual’s negative emotions, such as anger, disgust, or displeasure. Another, more recent line of research focuses on the social dimension of facial expressions: they are displayed for social purposes and they serve particular interpersonal and communication functions (e.g., Fridlund, 1997; Bavelas and Chovil, 1997, 2000; Chovil, 1997, 1991). Researchers focusing on frowns examine, for instance, how they (and other facial expressions) punctuate talk (Chovil, 1991), and also what information they contribute to the linguistic context of the conversation (e.g., Bavelas and Chovil, 1997, 2000). It is worth mentioning that Ekman (1979, 2004), who is usually considered the major proponent of the individual-centred view of facial expressions – argues that frowns also have their communicative functions in conveying uncertainty, perplexity, doubt and difficulty.

This paper follows the latter line of research, focusing on the interactional trajectories that are initiated by frowns in turn-opening positions. Ruusuvoori and Peräkylä (2009: 381–382) reported recently that a frown displayed during the silence before talk may serve as a hint that the talk that is to come will involve some problematic aspects. The study reported here further examined how frowns that emerge before an utterance, and remain on the face when the speakers starts to talk contribute to the utterance as well as to the larger interactional and sequential context. In other words, our aim is to demonstrate how turn-opening frowns contribute to the construction of both meaning and action in conversation.

Another aspect of frowning that we analyze is the co-participants’ responses to turn-opening frowns. We provide evidence that such responses are different from responses to turn-opening *smiles*. As we have previously reported, recipients regularly reciprocate the smiles that occur in the turn-opening position (Kaukoma et al., 2013). In the process of analysing and discussing our data, we suggest that the interactional trajectories of turn-opening frowns and turn-opening smiles differ substantially: most recipients did *not* reciprocate frowns. This observation is further supported by what has been reported previously in experimental studies: frowns seem not to be directly socially contagious (see e.g., Hinsz and Tomhave, 1991).

2. Data and method

Our data consist of five video-recorded dyadic Finnish conversations that were conducted over lunch. The participants were university students who knew each other. Three cameras were used, two of them recording the participants’ facial expressions, and the third one covering the overall situation. The data contained 12 instances of turn-opening frowns. We included in our collection only frowns that emerged before the onset of an utterance and were maintained to the point of which talk was initiated. By virtue of their overlap with the spoken utterance, these frowns became part of the “gestalt of action” to which the talk also contributed (cf. Kaukoma et al., 2013).

The data were transcribed and analyzed using conversation analytic (CA) methods. CA made it possible for us to examine the interpersonal communicative functions of turn-opening frowns in sequentially organized interaction (e.g., Stivers, 2013; Sacks et al., 1974). In practice, we looked at what happened in the conversations before the onset of the frowns and what happened next, ergo, how the recipients of the frowns responded to them (and to the utterances following them). Our aim in

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