Intonation and sequential organization: Formulations in French talk-in-interaction

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the study of the interactional functions of so-called formulations, while at the same time proposing an account for variability in phonetic design with reference to the observable interactional and sequential structure of talk. Two types of formulations are identified: final rise formulations and rise–fall formulations. The two categories differ in terms of intonational form as well as next-turn treatment and sequential location. While final rise formulations are used to solicit elaborate confirmations, rise–fall confirmations are responded to with mere confirmation. The two types of formulations can be described as projecting expansion relevance and closing relevance, respectively. The categorization is empirically warranted by means of participant orientation in both typical and deviant cases, demonstrating the robustness of the phenomena. The paper argues that linguistic design is inextricably linked to interactional functions, and that the former cannot be fully understood without consideration of the latter.
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1. Introduction

Sufficient mutual understanding in interaction, being a requirement for producing relevant responses to each other's turns, is mostly assumed and implicit. However, on occasion, participants to interaction may overtly treat the management of intersubjectivity as a concern. Thus, they may bring it to the interactional surface through the use of some conversational practice, for instance in other-initiated repair sequences. Another occasion where understanding is overtly dealt with is when participants do what has been termed *formulating*, which may involve ''summarizing, glossing, or developing the gist of an informant's earlier statements'' (Heritage, 1985:100). The formulation is then regularly subject to either confirmation or some form of disconfirmation by the addressee (Heritage and Watson, 1979:151, 1980:253).

This type of conversational conduct has been shown to handle a wide range of interactional tasks. It may for example accomplish such different things as doing a candidate pre-closing (Heritage and Watson, 1980:258) and eliciting further on-topic talk (Heritage, 1985), tasks that virtually form a diametrical opposition. Such multifunctionality of formulations is clearly a challenge to students of conversational interaction who wish to understand the interactional functioning of the phenomenon. It has been suggested that prosody may play a part in the particular import of the formulation. Steensig and Larsen (2008) investigate how the prosodic format of a particular type of formulation in Danish, termed *you say x* questions,[1] differentiates affiliative and disaffiliative formulation turns.

On a more general note, the past few decades have seen a steady growth in the number of studies exploring the interrelatedness of interaction and linguistic design. One strand of this body of research has aimed more specifically to

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[1] Surprisingly, these are not termed formulations by the authors themselves.

understand the interactional functions of various aspects of the phonetic design of talk (e.g. Barth-Weingarten et al., 2010; Couper-Kuhlen, 2001; Couper-Kuhlen and Ford, 2004; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 1996; Curl, 2005; Local and Kelly, 1986; Local et al., 1986; Local, 1992, 2003; Local and Walker, 2004; Ogden, 2001, 2006, 2012a; Walker, 2007; Wells and Macfarlane, 1998). This methodology of combined conversation analysis and phonetic analysis has been explicitly formulated and explained by Local and Walker (2005). The present paper takes an approach along those lines, setting out to show how variability in phonetic design, in particular intonation, can be accounted for with reference to the interactional and sequential dimensions of talk, in the case of formulations in French talk-in-interaction. The purpose of the paper is thus twofold: firstly, to examine how intonation is related to interactional-sequential structure in a particular case, and secondly, to show that the conversation analytic approach to linguistic structure allows a rigorous specification of sequential environments where phonetic events are contrastive, or alternatively non-contrastive.[2] Such a specification is vital in order to achieve an empirically grounded account of the nature of non-lexical phonetic contrasts.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a short description of the data analyzed. Section 3 includes a brief review of previous research on formulations, and a delimitation of the target phenomenon. The results are presented in section 4, and it covers in turn intonational features, co-participant treatment, and sequential environments of formulations. Finally, section 5 draws some conclusions and implications from the results.

2. Data

This paper reports some results from a study of a collection of 134 instances, gathered from several corpora of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction in French and representing a variety of settings. The total duration of the investigated corpora is approximately 25 h. The data include interactions among friends and family members, interactions between customers and employees in various institutions, interactions between colleagues and calls to a radio phone-in show. A majority of the data is from telephone calls, although some face-to-face interactions are included in the examined data. There are no indications of the sequences investigated being constructed differently from one particular setting to another, or of the practice being deployed differently by participants according to their institutional role (in regard to the analytic aspects focused on here).

The extracts have been transcribed and translated by the author, according to the conventions given in the appendix. The corpus, the recording and the timestamp of each extract (minutes:seconds or hours:minutes:seconds) are indicated in square brackets.

While acoustic analyses have been made for all extracts (where the acoustic quality allowed it), only a few pitch traces will be shown here because of space considerations. The results of the analysis of intonation are given as labels in the transcriptions, as an indication. The figures were produced with Praat v. 5.1.43 (retrieved from http://www.praat.org).

3. The target phenomenon: formulations

The concept of formulations in talk-in-interaction as it is understood here builds on studies by Heritage and Watson (e. g. Heritage and Watson, 1979, 1980; Heritage, 1985), the notion having evolved from work by Garfinkel and Sacks (1970).[3] In short, the phenomenon can be described as ''a means for constructing an explicit sense [. . .] of the talk thus far'' (Drew, 2003:296), whereby speakers summarize the gist of the talk or draw out its upshot or implications. It essentially corresponds to what Kurhila (2006:153–173), in analyzing second language interaction, refers to with the arguably more transparent term *paraphrasing candidate understandings*.

Research on formulations has often focused on their use in institutional settings. In psychotherapy for instance, formulations are often used by the therapist to propose versions of the patient's problems (Antaki, 2008; Antaki et al., 2005; Buttny, 1996; Davis, 1986). Drew (2003) explores the use of formulations in an array of institutional settings, and some ways in which formulations prove to be useful in distinct ways according to the setting. Drew (2003) thus illustrates an analytic tack different from the one taken here, in its focus on context-sensitive rather than context-free aspects of formulations.

Some studies have targeted formulations with specific lexical formats, and the interactional work they do. For instance, Bolden (2010) investigates *and*-prefaced formulations, and Raymond (2004:186–189) deals with *so*-prefaced formulations of upshots (see also Steensig and Larsen, 2008; Vásquez, 2010).

Since the extension of the term *formulation* varies somewhat from one author to another, it is appropriate to illustrate and explain precisely what is meant by it in this paper.

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[2] Cf. Kaimaki (2012) on non-contrastivity of falling and rising contours.
[3] The history of the analytic notion is traced by Antaki (2008).