

Units in responsive turns

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Abstract

The focus of much interactional linguistic research is on establishing evidence for classical linguistic units like word, phrase, clause, and even sentence, as units relevant for participants in interaction (see, for example, Ford, Fox & Thompson 2013; Linell 2013; Szczepek Reed & Raymond 2013). The central units of language in interaction are turns, and the formulation of a turn is crucially affected by its position in a conversational sequence. Viewing grammar from this perspective is what Schegloff (1996) calls “positionally sensitive” grammar. This special issue aims to describe grammar in positionally sensitive terms, focusing on the question of units in one sequential environment in conversation, namely in responsive turns. The articles in this issue explore the nature of linguistic and interactional units in responsive positions in talk, adopting an interactional linguistic approach and using the methods of conversation analysis and functional linguistics. Responsive turns frequently consist of units smaller than clauses, while turns that initiate sequences, such as questions, are more likely to be formulated as clause-sized units. The articles in this special issue focus on the size, syntactic nature, prosodic delivery and bodily-visual construction of responsive units, and the social actions those units serve to perform.

Keywords: grammar-in-interaction, interactional linguistics, linguistic units, turn constructional units, responding

1. Introduction and aims

The question of units of language, a central issue in linguistics, has been made newly relevant by recent developments in the field. The focus of much interactional linguistic research is on establishing evidence for classical linguistic units like word, phrase, clause, and even sentence as units relevant for participants in interaction, i.e. what their status is as “units” of interaction (see, for example, Ford, Fox & Thompson 2013; Linell 2013; Szczepek Reed & Raymond 2013). These investigations are heavily influenced by the basic methodological principle in conversation analysis (CA) that analytical categories, such as Turn Constructional Units (TCUs), should be oriented to by participants and emerge online as talk progresses (e.g. Auer 2005; Ono & Couper-Kuhlen 2007), and are further contingent on what else is happening in the interaction (Goodwin 1979; Ford 2004). Even though it has been assumed that TCUs are constructed of linguistic units, consisting of single particles (such as *oh*, or *yes*), phrases, or whole clauses or clause combinations, or anything in between (Sacks et al. 1974), they are ultimately a participants’ category and concern, and thus resist formal definition in terms of given syntactic features (Schegloff 1996; for a critique of the notion of TCU, see Ford et al. 1996; Selting 2000). It is indeed not possible to assume a clear one-to-one relationship between TCUs and linguistic units.

The central units of language in interaction are turns, and the formulation of a turn is crucially affected by its position in a conversational sequence. Viewing grammar from this perspective is what Schegloff (1996) calls “positionally sensitive” grammar. The idea

behind positionally sensitive grammar is that “for any one specifiable sequential position, there is a certain set of forms that can be used to perform the action relevant for that slot” (Fox et al. 2013: 739). In other words, what is made relevant is determined by what has happened in the prior turns. Thus, we cannot discuss the question of units without paying close attention to the sequential environment in which these units are produced.

This special issue aims to describe grammar in positionally sensitive terms, focusing on the question of units in one sequential environment in conversation, namely in responsive turns. The articles in this issue explore the nature of linguistic and interactional units in responsive positions in talk, adopting an interactional linguistic approach and using the methods of conversation analysis and functional linguistics. Responsive turns frequently consist of units smaller than clauses, while turns that initiate sequences, such as questions, are more likely to be formulated as clause-sized units (Thompson forthcoming). In responsive turns, the responsive action may be carried out by particles (see, e.g. Sorjonen 2001), phrasal or clausal units, or a combination of these (Thompson et al. 2015). To put it differently, some kinds of responsive action may require more than just a (response) particle or token to be interactionally appropriate, while some other kinds of responsive action are generally carried out by a sole particle or token (see, e.g. Hakulinen 2001). The articles in this special issue focus on the size, syntactic nature, prosodic delivery and bodily-visual construction of responsive units, and the social actions those units serve to perform.

2. Units in responsive turns

2.1 Grammatical features

The responsive units discussed in the articles in this special issue take various grammatical forms: some include particles (Endo; Kärkkäinen & Thompson; Keevallik & Hakulinen; Yokomori et al.), some contain verb repeats (Laury) or verb forms used as response particles (Ono & Suzuki). Some take a clausal form (Keevallik & Hakulinen; Vatanen). Often the responsive unit includes a combination of, for example, a particle and some additional material (Kärkkäinen & Thompson; Keevallik & Hakulinen).

Through careful analyses of the linguistic forms and structures used in responsive turns, the articles of this special issue challenge basic notions in grammatical description. With respect to word order, for example, Finnish and Estonian have been described as exhibiting “free” or “pragmatic” word order (Heinämäki 1976, Vilkuna 1989, L. Lindström 2005). Focusing on the use of the response token *kyllä/küll* in Finnish and Estonian, Keevallik and Hakulinen show that grammatical regularities, such as word order patterns, involving this response token, are in fact systematically dependent on the sequential context they occur in. The article by Laury challenges the notion of ellipsis as an explanation regarding the form of responsive turns, and proposes instead that the syntax of responsive turns is fitted to the particular sequential environment. As Ford et al. (2013: 739) put it, “minimal forms are not ‘elliptical’ versions of fuller forms, but both are context-sensitive alternatives, each with its own interactional task in specifiable sequences and positions”. The grammatical description of the responsive unit can thus be empirically shown to be positionally sensitive.

2.2 Formulaicity

Many of the articles discuss the degree of formulaicity of such units (Keevallik & Hakulinen; Laury; Ono & Suzuki; Vatanen). Functionally oriented linguists working with usage-based frameworks have noted that beyond the classical linguistic units, speakers also rely on different types of formulaic utterances (e.g. Hopper 1988; Wray 2002; Corrigan et al. (eds.) 2009). Such formulaic utterances may either be lexically specific (e.g. *I think, I mean*) and are called ‘prefabs’ (Bybee 2010), or ‘lexical prefabs’ (Thompson et al. 2015), or more general constructional schemata (Ono & Thompson 1995), which may be only partially specified in their realization. In either case, contrary to earlier assumptions, speakers do not construct each utterance anew from grammatical building blocks, but actual utterances often consist of ready-made formulas conventionalized from frequent use.

As is common for prefabs, responsive units are often routinized or crystallized into performing certain functions, to the point of being grammaticized as reactive tokens. Endo investigates the Japanese change-of-state tokens *a* and *aa*, which often form lexical prefabs such as *a soo* ‘oh is it so’ or *aa soo* ‘Oh is it so.’ While both *a* and *aa* are used for these lexical prefabs, she argues that *a* and *aa* differ in the epistemic stance they express. Yokomori, Yasui, and Hajikano discuss a type of responsive unit which is used to display receipt of the prior turn by repeating (parts of) the prior turn and adding a pragmatic particle at the end of the repeated item to modulate the stance of the prior turn. Vatanen deals with *mä tiedän* ‘I know’ in Finnish, arguing that *mä tiedän* speakers point out the epistemic incongruence in the ongoing interaction. Ono and Suzuki demonstrate that some verbs in Japanese are used in a reduplicated form to work as a reactive token.

2.3 Prosody and bodily behaviors

The articles in this issue pay close attention not only to the linguistic structures used but also to their prosodic delivery. Sometimes it is not only the linguistic form of the responsive unit but also its special prosody that has become fixed (Ono & Suzuki). Prosody may be used to convey stance or affiliation (Yokomori et al.). While speakers have been shown to segment their speech into prosodic units that often coincide with words, clauses and sentences (e.g. Iwasaki 1993 and Matsumoto 2000 for Japanese; Chafe 1994 for American English; Helasvuo 2001 for Finnish; Park 2002 for Korean), linguists studying conversational interaction have suggested that segmentation or “chunking” of speech is an interactional achievement involving several modalities (e.g. Szczepek Reed 2010). Indeed, it has been suggested that the syntactic, prosodic and gestural dimensions should not be viewed as separate modalities but rather as interweaving resources used simultaneously in accomplishing actions in real-time interaction (Kärkkäinen & Thompson; see also Ford & Thompson 1996; Szczepek Reed 2010; Ford, Drake & Thompson 2012; Ford, Fox & Thompson 2013).

Not only linguistic features, but also bodily behaviors are a target of analysis in the paper by Kärkkäinen and Thompson. When the response consists of more than the response token, it is often not clear what constitutes the responsive unit, e.g. when the initial response token signals that a longer (aligning or disaligning) turn is under construction. The article by Kärkkäinen and Thompson explores this further by including not only the language spoken and its prosodic delivery, but also the bodily-visual behavior of the speakers (see, e.g., Rossano 2013, papers in Streeck et al. 2011). Investigating responses to yes/no questions, Kärkkäinen and Thompson argue that the responses tend to occur in sync with bodily-visual movements to form units that they call ‘response packages’. Thus, it is not just the grammatical and prosodic unit but also the bodily-visual behavior accompanying it that form the crystallized unit, the “response package”.

2.4 Social actions

The articles of this special issue analyze the social actions and interactional functions (such as speaker stance) performed by speakers of the responsive turns in specific sequence types. The social actions produced in *prior* turns include *inter alia* assessments (Keevallik & Hakulinen; Laury), informings (Endo; Keevallik & Hakulinen; Laury; Vatanen), tellings, and yes/no questions used to request information (Keevallik & Hakulinen; Kärkkäinen & Thompson; Laury). Endo and Yokomori et al. study responses which appear in third position after an adjacency pair such as a question–answer pair or a repair sequence.

The responsive turn itself may convey e.g. agreement or disagreement with the prior (Laury; Yokomori et al.; Vatanen), alignment or disalignment (Keevallik & Hakulinen; Kärkkäinen & Thompson), or it may receive the prior turn as news (Endo; Laury).

3. Towards a cross-linguistic approach to units in responsive turns

Thompson, Fox & Couper-Kuhlen (2015) focus on how English speakers use grammar to formulate responses in ordinary conversation, including responses to questions, informings, assessments, and requests. In concluding their book, they call for further research on responsive actions in other sequence types and in other languages, building on such research as, e.g., Hakulinen (2001), Golato (2005), Levinson (2010), Sorjonen (2001), Hakulinen and Sorjonen (2009), Englert (2010), Rauniomaa and Keisanen (2012), Sorjonen (2001), Raymond (2015), Hayashi and Kushida (2013). We see this special issue as a contribution to that effort, with articles focusing on responsive turns in a range of sequence types and in several different languages including Estonian, Finnish, Japanese and English.

This collection of articles is also designed to contribute to a recent focus on the dialogic nature of everyday language use (Linell 1998, 2009; Du Bois 2014). The articles here undertake to explore the role of grammar, in the broadest sense, including prosody and bodily resources, in designing responses which enable people to achieve mutual understanding in their everyday interactions.

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