Units of Talk – Units of Action

Edited by
Beatrice Szczepek Reed
and Geoffrey Raymond

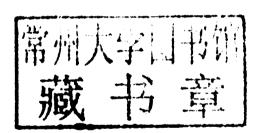# Units of Talk – Units of Action

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The question of units for language, action and interaction

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1. Introduction

This volume addresses two fundamental questions: What units of conduct are relevant for the study of (inter-)action? And are traditional linguistic units relevant for analyses of talk-in-interaction, and if so, how? The first question concerns the way in which human beings compose their conduct in recognizable 'chunks', how this structuring enables the sense recipients make of actions and activities, and how it features in the methods that participants, collectively, use to distribute opportunities for action in interaction. While language furnishes key practices for the formation of actions, it is only one of several resources participants draw on in composing them. As a consequence, it may be useful to distinguish between (traditionally defined) linguistic units on the one hand, and units-of-action on the other, including the elements or resources used to compose them, as well as the range of other units to which such actions contribute – such as a course of action, a "complete-able" project (Lerner 1995), or the overall structural organization of a single conversation (Schegloff 2011).

The second question concerns concepts that have been advanced in Philology and Linguistics, and have resulted in an almost universally accepted terminology of language units, such as 'sentence', and categories, such as 'noun'. However, as research on language-in-interaction is beginning to show, not all of these units and categories adequately capture the empirically observed realities of language use, and many of them need to be modified, at least in part because traditional analyses have focused on their internal organization, at the expense of examining the ways in which their composition reflects various aspects of the social occasions of their use. Take, as an example, the unit to which traditionally defined units are most often compared: turns at talk. While many turns may come to be completed as sentences, such post-hoc analyses overlook the contingent, real-time interaction between speaker and hearer from which the form emerged. A different view of such units is suggested by analyses that focus on the methods speakers use to compose (spoken) contributions to unfolding

interactions in light of the contingencies associated with the local distribution of opportunities to speak next. In this view "turn-constructional units", or TCUs, are basic components of a turn taking system for conversation (Sacks et al. 1974). As with other interactional units, turns, and the TCUs out of which they are composed, have an "overall structural organization" that parties can use to (reflexively) track their "local realization" in occasions of interaction (Schegloff 2011, 367). And just as TCUs can be used to compose turns at talk, turns can be used to compose other units, such as adjacency pairs, "a basic unit of sequence construction" (Schegloff 2007, 9). As a result, analysts interested in language as a resource for conversation "need to hold loosely (their) conceptions of structure, rule, and unit" (Ford 2004, 48), and keep in mind the flexibility of language as a resource for dealing with systematic contingencies associated with local, real time organization of action in interaction (as illustrated early on by Goodwin's (1979) analysis of "the interactive construction of a sentence"). This focus helps guard against the analytical danger identified by Ford (2004), and elaborated on by Ford, Fox and Thompson (this volume) and Linell (this volume), that "the drive to define units may cause us to miss systematic practices that make conversation work for participants in real contexts of use" (Ford 2004, 38).

Adopting such a perspective of participant orientation to units of talk and their relation to actions, the chapters in this volume explore, amongst other things, what types of stretches of talk are treated by conversationalists as holistic entities, and whether there are previously un-described units that are relevant for talk-in-interaction. Some chapters ask how traditionally accepted linguistic units and their boundaries are realized and oriented to in conversation. Many chapters in this volume take into consideration linguistic and non-linguistic modes of interaction, and some show specifically how the analysis of different modes influences how units are perceived and constructed. In the remainder of this chapter the conceptual framework for this volume will be introduced, before the individual contributions are briefly summarised.

2.   Conceptual framework

Before the issues outlined above can be addressed in the following chapters, three fundamental differences need to be acknowledged between the linguistic approaches that postulated the basic language units we use today for language study and language teaching; and the empirical approach of conversation analysis and interactional linguistics adopted by the contributors to this volume. These differences are not problematic in themselves; however, as traditional linguistic concepts and terminology dominate most people's exposure to language study, for example, when they are learning a second language any interactional treatment of 'units' must start with an explicit discussion of how such a treatment differs from existing approaches.

2.1 The 'natural habitat' of language

The first difference between traditional Linguistics and Conversation Analysis concerns what is conceived of as the 'natural habitat' of language. Most linguistic approaches would consider the home environment of language to be either the brain or the mind. For example, Psycholinguistics, Neurolinguistics and Cognitive Linguistics evidently focus on the brain as the primary source of organization for language use, while Generative Grammar, with its interest in mental representations of grammar, treats the mind as the natural home of language structure. In the case of cognitive approaches, language production, perception and learning are studied empirically, primarily via experiments. While the main focus is on psychological, and therefore individual aspects of language processing (see next section), the brain activity of real-life experimental subjects is treated as the basis for investigations of language. By contrast, for generative approaches the natural habitat of language is instead the mind of an imagined, faultless native speaker. This notion has been criticised extensively in World Englishes research, where the 'native speaker' has long been considered an out-dated concept with no basis in reality: "The 'native speaker' of linguists and language teachers is in fact an abstraction based on arbitrarily selected features of pronunciation, grammar and lexicon" (Kramsch 1998, 79). Bhatt (2002), in his discussion of standard and non-standard uses of English, appropriates Anderson's (1991) concept of the "sacred imagined community" to the concept of the native speaker, showing that notions of what is or is not 'correct' language use are socially, and even ideologically accomplished. Without explicitly contributing to this area of research, the conversation analytic endeavour and its findings underpin this argument. As many contributions to this volume show, the language human beings use when they are engaged in what language evolved for – naturally occurring interaction between conspecifics – is often inadequately captured by traditional linguistic concepts, many of which can be shown to be "imagined", however "sacred" they may have become (see Ford, Fox & Thompson this volume).

In contrast to the linguistic approaches mentioned above, Conversation Analysis has argued that conversational interaction constitutes the primary ecological niche within which grammar and other resources for producing spoken language, such as prosody, word selection, and the like, have emerged (see Schegloff 2005, 2006). As a consequence, what we think of as grammar and other aspects of language can be understood as collections of deeply routinized practices (i.e. taken for granted solutions or methods) for managing the systematic contingencies associated with turn taking in conversation, and the use of talk in producing *action*-in-interaction more generally. In this view grammar constitutes a sequentially sensitive resource in that the deployment of units will project, among other things, a turn's course and duration in light of the specific sequential context in which it is used. Thus, although speakers compose utterances out of units that vary in length from a single word to a complete

'sentence' – and regularly build utterances that include more than one such unit, or only parts of them – participants (speakers and recipients) can nevertheless independently coordinate various forms of participation by reference to such units because their in-progress production projects the imminent possible completions they will arrive at (cf. Schegloff 2007; Lerner 1991, 1996) As Raymond and Lerner (forthcoming: 27–28; emphasis in original) observe:

> When one initiates a turn at talk, the unfolding turn-so-far will project roughly what it will take to complete it. Moreover, the continuing moment-by-moment unfolding of a turn will be inspected for the progressive realization (suspension, deflection, or abandonment) of what has been projected so far. The hallmark of this realization is found in such material elements as the pace of the talk, the adjacent placement of syntactically next words and the intonation contour that carries the talk. Moreover there are circumstances in which the forward progress of a speaking turn can be delayed or sped up or even abandoned, and a set of practices by which such disturbances to the normal or normative progress of a speaking turn toward possible completion are implemented; and these practices can furnish the resources for recipient action as well. In this sense the projectability of a speaker's turn at talk constitutes a proximate normative structure within which a range of other organizational contingencies are coordinated and managed – including the timing and design of action by others; *it is precisely this progressively realized structure that makes any deflections in its locally projected course a site of action, a recognizable form of action, and a site of action and interpretation by others.*

The appreciation of such 'units' as socially organized, participant-administered structures has a range of consequences for our understanding of them. These include, most centrally, the questions we ask about them, such as: How do parties to a conversation manage how such units are distributed: who gets to produce units, when, and how many? And what are the basic constituents of such units? This includes both the material elements out of which turns are built (i.e. including words and their arrangement in grammatical forms, and the prosodic packaging used to carry them in talk), as well as the methods by which these resources socially organize their temporally unfolding character as vehicles for the production of action-in-interaction.

We can further ask, how do speakers rely on the overall structural organization of units of talk (e.g. with beginnings, middles and endings) to compose recognizable actions, and what can be accomplished via the reflexive exploitation of such units that these basic structures underwrite (e.g. beginning without a beginning, or ending without an ending, etc. Schegloff 1996). Or how can participants exploit local realizations of these structures to manage action *within* them? For example, analysts have emphasized the internal infrastructure such units can provide for the coordination of a range of actions within its boundaries, as in the case of choral co-production, the collaborative completion of in-progress turns, and other forms of "conditional entry" into a turn space (see Lerner 1991, 1996, 2002, 2004; Szczepek Reed 2006; Iwasaki 2009).

Finally we may ask by reference to what orders of organization (e.g. turn organization, sequence organization, overall structural organization, etc.) are such units produced in conversation, and how are transitions to next speakers (or next units) locally managed by reference to those orders of organization? In prior work, analysts have specified a range of practices that have emerged to handle the various context sensitive contingencies that utterance composition and completion poses for the production and recognition of social action. As these practices suggest, any specific deployment of these units is both *socially* organized – insofar as the places at which an utterance can be recognized as possibly complete are shaped by resources that are partly independent of the participants or occasion, and interactively managed – insofar as a current speaker and a next speaker jointly coordinate when a unit currently-in-progress will be complete and transition to the next speaker commences. By virtue of these same contingencies the internal organization of such units can be understood to be shaped by the relevance of a next speaker – or the absence of one – in light of their sequential context. Analysts considering these matters have demonstrated that such locally managed, participant-administered transitions between one speaker and a next are a key site for action and interaction (cf. Goodwin 1980; Schegloff 1987; Lerner 2013), and it is in the light of this evidence that interaction is considered the 'natural habitat' of language.

2.2 Abstract monologue vs. real-life interaction

The fundamental conceptualisation of interaction as the natural ecological niche for language results in two further differences, which concern what is considered to be language at all. While some linguistic approaches are interested in, firstly, *monologue* and, secondly, *abstract representations*, others analyse instead *conversational* and *empirically observable instances of language use*. If language is conceived of as internalised within either the brain or the mind, the phenomenon of interest is likely to be monologic language, as produced by an (imagined) individual's mind (see above); and it is necessarily abstracted from naturally occurring instances of language-in-interaction. Interestingly, both conversation analysts and linguists have referred to each other's object of study as 'epiphenomena': Chomsky (1986, 25) famously called any form of externalised (as opposed to internalised) language an 'epiphenomenon at best'. In this volume, Ford, Fox and Thompson refer to "the social life that gives rise to the epiphenomena that linguists call grammatical units" (p. 40).

Many students of linguistics are used to conceiving of language as a theoretical system with a life of its own, where constituents 'move' from here to there, and so-called 'surface' structures can be traced back to their true, 'underlying' form. Traditional approaches to linguistic units have also tended to view sentence structure as a property of language, rather than of social action, and thus as a matter best defined by the scholars who study it. Indeed, it is precisely this approach that

makes individual deployments of such units by speakers and writers answerable to the structures these scholars view as 'underlying' reality – rather than vice versa. While this approach has proven useful in specifying many basic elements of grammar (i.e. sentences and their constituents), it has also been criticized for reifying the sentence as a unit in those cases where analysts have treated it as a given, virtually platonic unit type (and thereby adopted a thoroughgoing 'structuralist' orientation to its explication). By treating the sentence as a unit of language per se, analysts adopting this approach have tended to ignore as anomalous defects the various ways in which the actual production of sentence-like-units in speech are often characterized by phenomena such as restarts, repetition, bits of silence, uhs, uhms and other disfluencies (cf. Schegloff 1979; Goodwin 1980). As Schegloff notes (1979, 1996), by disattending what are thereby treated as "mere disfluencies" in speech production, these analysts miss out on many of the ways that language users orient to and exploit such "regular" units of conduct as resources for the production and coordination of action (see especially Schegloff 1996).

By contrast, conversation analysts, interactional linguists and linguistic anthropologists, and other like-minded scholars, have viewed such units as resources that *members* use – and thus as forms to be *understood* by analysts, rather than defined by them. In pursuing these matters, then, conversation analytic research has revealed that some units that have been taken for granted in traditional studies of language (in both linguistics and sociology), may have to be re-specified, and/or re-defined in light of findings from studies of interaction. For example, the sentence has been shown to be 'semi-permeable' (Lerner 1991, 1996) from a participant perspective; that is, it is a matter of interactional co-construction, and sentence structures are under continuous negotiation. This different approach does not argue that sentences are not, to some degree, pre-structured syntactic units; rather, it places the structuring such units provide in the hands of the participants who use them. More generally, the claim made by Schegloff (1996) for TCUs holds for many, if not all units of interaction:

> What sorts of entities (described in grammatical or other terms) will be used and treated as turn-constructional units is determined by those who *use* the language (broadly understood – that is, to include gesture, facial expression, when/where relevant), not those who study it academically. Calls for formal definitions of a TCU – beyond their status as units which can constitute possibly complete turns as above – are therefore bound to be disappointed, but empirical inquiries to explore such issues should be expected to yield interesting results.
> (Schegloff 1996, 115, emphasis in the original)

The chapters in this volume pursue empirical inquiries of this kind, treating real-life social interactions and the dialogic behavior of those who participate in them as

their primary object of interest. All discussions of 'units' that occur in the following chapters, whether their starting points are units of language or of social action, reflect this approach.

3.   The chapters

The subsequent ten chapters are divided into two parts. **Part One** contains four chapters each of which makes radical suggestions regarding the relevance, form and conceptualisation of linguistic units for interaction and its analysis.

In Chapter 2, **Cecilia Ford, Barbara Fox and Sandra Thompson** put forward the argument that the terminology and concepts developed for the theoretical study of language are neither adequate nor appropriate for the study of naturally occurring interaction. The authors first show that early conversation analytic work was based on traditional linguistic concepts, and suggest that the CA approach itself demands that concepts be grounded in action, rather than theory. They go on to analyse sequences of actions without reference to linguistic units and categories, focussing instead on the particular actions as they emerge, advancing a "descriptive meta-language" for the study of social interaction. The chapter presents a radical "experiment" in basing an understanding of social meaning-making entirely on the observable behaviour of those who construct their own and others' conduct as locally meaningful.

Per Linell applies a similarly radical re-orientation to the linguistic study of talk-in-interaction in Chapter 3. Linell suggests that naturally occurring language is "internally dialogical", via a continuous process of "incrementation". He argues that spontaneous talk can only be captured by a theory of "languaging", which is able to handle the processes and resources that constitute talk, rather than the units and rules that constitute theoretical linguistic concepts. With specific reference to a number of grammatical phenomena, such as pivot constructions, non-agreement with noun phrases and slips of the tongue Linell, too, suggests "a partly new meta-language" (p. 72) and a framework that can incorporate utterance building as a succession of "decision points and continuation types" (p. 72).

In Chapter 4, **Dagmar Barth-Weingarten** presents a newly-developed, original approach to the analysis of the phonological structure of naturally occurring language. While previous linguistic studies of the 'intonation unit' have primarily been concerned with defining the de-contextualised characteristics of the unit and its boundaries, Barth-Weingarten suggests that talk-in-interaction makes necessary the recognition of boundaries as gradient and "fuzzy". She presents an analysis of naturally occurring phonetic-prosodic boundaries of chunks of talk, and shows that they vary in strength, which explains prior researchers' difficulties in identifying intonation units

in spontaneous speech. She puts forward a theory of "cesuring", which allows analysts to take seriously the complexity of the phonetic-prosodic structure of talk.

Brendan Barnwell's Chapter 5 presents an experimental study of naïve listeners' perceptions of prosodic boundaries. Like Barth-Weingarten, he argues that boundaries rather than internal unit structure should be the focus of intonation analysis. Barnwell's overarching argument is that experimental research can complement a conversation analytic pursuit of participant orientation, by showing how ordinary listeners categorise specified phenomena when explicitly asked to do so. His findings show that in the case of prosodic boundaries, there is above-chance agreement on many boundaries, but listeners are far from being in total agreement. The results suggest a gradual transition from more to less clear boundaries, with the parameters and boundaries by which intonation units are identified showing varying degrees of distinctness, a finding that is consistent with Barth-Weingarten's analysis.

Part Two contains six chapters, each of which addresses units drawn from the analysis of interaction. While some of the chapters make reference to linguistic units, their focus is the composition of actions and sequences.

In Chapter 6, **Geoffrey Raymond** draws on previous research on Yes/No Type Interrogatives (YNIs) to establish the relevance of "slots" as an analytic concept that captures the intersecting relevance of two orders of organization: turn organization and sequence organization. Specifically, Raymond shows that type-conforming responses to polar interrogatives can be internally structured into two "slots", which satisfy – at times separately – the different constraints imposed by sequence organization on the one hand, and turn construction on the other.

Chapter 7 is also concerned with yes/no questions. In their analysis of Danish talk-in-interaction **Jakob Steensig and Trine Heinemann** show that after three specific interactionally-defined question types, yes or no are not satisfactory answers, but more interactional work is required ('yes'/'no'+). In cases where expansions are not provided, questioners elicit them via other means. Thus, a unit ('yes', 'no') that in some contexts might constitute a full TCU does not do so in these instances. The expansion slot is a clearly identifiable intra-turn location; however, the authors do not find specific actions or linguistic unit types that correspond to expansions of the three question types.

In her analysis of Japanese interactions in Chapter 8, **Shimako Iwasaki** shows that participants may halt their production of an ongoing turn in order to create "interactive turn spaces", i.e. locations for others to co-participate. Iwasaki's analysis presents a deliberate move away from a focus on turn/TCU completion and transition relevance places, and towards an understanding of TCUs as, firstly, collaboratively constructed spaces for action, and, secondly, constructed of sub-components. Sub-components are locally projected, which allows interactants to negotiate participation on a moment-by-moment basis.

In Chapter 9, **Richard Ogden and Traci Walker** present an analysis of offers and their phonetic exponents. Drawing on a previous analysis of three offer types in different sequential environments, the authors ask whether actions such as offers are systematically designed with recurring phonetic features. Their findings suggest that there are no offer-specific phonetic properties. Instead the phonetic features are employed to handle turn management and sequence organization issues, such as continuing talk, designing a turn as transition relevant, or showing affiliation with prior talk.

Chapter 10 by **Darren Reed and Beatrice Szczepek Reed** presents an analysis of larger interactional projects, specifically instruction sequences in music masterclasses. By detailing the action structure of masterclass instructions and their opening and closing boundaries, the authors argue that local actions and interactions are employed by participants to construct such larger projects. It is suggested that a primarily action-based analysis is more appropriate for an investigation into naturally occurring social conduct than a linguistically grounded one.

In Chapter 11, **Li Xiaoting** reports on her findings concerning multi-modal turn construction in Mandarin talk-in-interaction. Her analyses show how turns and TCUs are achieved through participants' orientation to body movements. In particular, Li shows how the "home-away-home" movement of the torso is employed for the construction of larger interactional projects, such as story telling, non-acceptance of a previous claim and subsequent account, and counter-argument in an argumentation sequence. The chapter presents Li's discovery of a systematic interrelation between the organization of body movements and the organization of the turn-at-talk as an interactional unit.

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PART I

Units of language revisited