Language and the body in the construction of units in Mandarin face-to-face interaction

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This article explores the interrelatedness between language and the body in the delimitation of multi-TCU turns in Mandarin face-to-face interaction. Based on video recordings of Mandarin conversation, this study describes a recurrent pattern of body movements: forward lean and return of the body. This type of body movements is relevant to the initiation and possible completion of multi-TCU turns and actions implemented through them. People deploy multiple resources, including language and the body, to indicate and recognize the boundaries of larger projects in interaction. The body may converge or diverge with other resources in the projection of their possible completion. It also provides participants with a resource to deal with contingencies in the construction of extended turns in interaction.

1. Introduction

As conversational participants, we may have the experience of intuitively conceiving of certain chunks of talk as a unit in interaction, as for example, when we enter into and exit from a focused conversational encounter, when we finish a speaking turn and others begin theirs, when we finish telling a story, when we greet others and they greet us back, etc. It appears that conversational participants have a sense of what is real for them as units in interaction. The construction and treatment of these units by partici-pants are based on the actions performed, rather than prescribed linguistic categories (Ford, Fox, and Thompson this volume). Conversation analysts and linguists have described and examined different types of units in interaction, such as intonation units (Chafe 1987; Du Bois et al. 1993), gesture units (Kendon 2004), turn-constructional units (TCUs), turns (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974), larger projects (or Discourse Units) (Houtkoop & Mazeland 1985), sequences of action (and sequence organization) (Schegloff 2007), and overall structural organization of conversations and encounters (Schegloff & Sacks 1973). However, all these researchers have maintained that these units in interaction should be shown to be oriented to by conversational participants themselves as such (cf. Wald 1978; Houtkoop & Mazeland 1985).