RELATEDNESS AND TIMING IN TALK-IN-INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between the timing of adjacent units in talk-in-interaction and the relatedness they can be said to have with respect to one another. The methodological framework is conversation-analytic; the timing of turns, turn-constructional units and words/sounds in conversation is viewed in relation to the rhythm and pacing of prior talk. Based on prior conversation-analytic work describing the timing of transitions to next turn, next turn-constructional unit and next word/sound in English conversation, an iconic relation is first identified to the effect that next units which are produced on time are those understood to belong together, e.g. in a sequence, as a preferred pair or as part of a larger project, whereas units which are produced, e.g., with delay are seen to lack this kind of relatedness. Then, however, two phenomena are identified where there is a mismatch of timeliness and relatedness: abrupt joins and displays of surprise in response to informings. Because of these, it is concluded that the relation between timing and relatedness in conversation is not iconic in a straightforward and across-the-board fashion but must instead be viewed context-sensitively. This is a conceptual contribution whose value lies in furthering a deeper understanding of timing, one central prosodic dimension of talk-in-interaction, which is revealed to be governed by eminently pragmatic principles.

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This chapter builds on a number of conversation-analytic findings concerning the timing of units in talk-in-interaction – be they turns, turn-constructional units, words or sounds – and explores whether there might be some relation between the degree of temporal proximity between two such adjacent units and the amount of relatedness they can be said to have with respect to one another. For the moment, relatedness can be thought of as roughly equivalent to ‘coherence’ in a lay understanding, i.e. whether the units in question belong together in some sense and form a larger whole. I am interested in exploring whether the placing of conversational units in time, i.e. how closely together or how far apart they are produced temporally, might in some way be indicative of their belonging together, where ‘belonging together’ can be assumed to be relevant to the participants, i.e. to have some impact on their behaviour.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 introduces the notion of nextness, or adjacency, two terms which are used here in their temporal sense. It reviews a rhythm-based approach to the timing of next units in English conversation and describes the categories of unmarked and marked timing as found in (i) transitions to next turns-at-talk, (ii) transitions to next turn-constructional units within turns and (iii) transitions to next words, syllables and sounds, using examples from a naturally occurring telephone conversation to illustrate. Section 2 draws together findings on the timing of conversational units and considers whether they might instantiate an iconicity principle, according to which units which are temporally close together are also related to one another, i.e. belong together in some sense. Section 3 reviews two conversational phenomena whose timing, however, appears to contravene the iconicity principle: so-called abrupt joins and displays of surprise in response to informings. Section 4 concludes by arguing that the timing of conversational units is not iconic across the board but is instead sensitive to contextual considerations, specifically the actions and stances which participants are accomplishing through talk. The upshot of the argument here is that timing in conversation is on some occasions iconic, but on others realizes its specific meaning potential precisely through a contravention of the iconic principle.

1. Nextness and Timing

1.1. Next turns-at-talk

As Sacks has pointed out, ‘the adjacency relationship between utterances is the most powerful device for relating utterances’ (1995: 554). And with respect to utterances: ‘where a next intends to relate to a last, no other means than positioning is necessary’ (1995: 559). This is a clear formulation of the hypothesis that adjacency or nextness, here with respect to sequential position, relates utterances or turns-at-talk to one another. But it does not address an important underlying