

Making Units

Comments on Beatrice Szczepek Reed " Intonation phrases in natural conversation: A participants' category

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1 Strange chunks?

In Beatrice Szczepek Reed's stimulating paper, she convincingly demonstrates that conversationalists chunk their turns into smaller units, and that such units are typically designed as intonation phrases. Let me start this comment on her paper, though, by taking issue with her analysis of her example (4), the first 18 lines of which are reproduced below.

(4) SBC011 This retirement bit

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1      Angela:      I STILL haven't found Anybody that wAnts
                        to -
2      (1.41)
3                        lEt me pay a little FEE and then;
4      (1.87)
5                        CALL them Every mOrning -
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6 (0.99)
7 that i'm
8 (0.25)
9 UP and aROUND.
10 (0.54)
11 Doris: <<all> what what what - >
12 (0.42)
13 bAck UP a minute.
14 (.)
15 DO WHAT,
16 (0.35)
17 Sam: hh.
18 (0.67)

Szczepek Reed locates the source of Doris's trouble in lines 11-15 in the way Angela articulates her turn in lines 1-9 in smaller chunks. However, Doris's trouble seems rather to have to do with the unusualness of what Angela is saying: that she wants to pay some people so that she can call them every morning and tell them that she is fine. Normally, if you pay people, you want them to do something. This reading is strengthened by the fact that Doris is still confused in the very last lines (54 - 56) of Szczepek Reed's example (4), even though Angela produces a couple of syntactically impeccable chunks, in lines 50 and 52, just before that turn (cf. the following excerpt):

(4) SBC011 This retirement bit (ctd.)

47 (0.78)
48 Doris: (Angela) does thAt-
49 (0.2)
50 does it really BOTHER you,
51 (0.91)
52 Angela: .h I'D like to have somebody i can call
into EVerY MORning.
53 (0.55)
54 Doris: YOU cAll In -
55 (.)
56 or I cAll In.

2 Open and closed units

In contrast to the contents of Angela's first turn in (4) (lines 1-9) , there is in fact nothing unusual in the syntactic chunking of that turn. Angela constructs the turn from five consecutive units. The first four of these units are prosodically non-final units, ending on a level or mid pitch. Three of them are also syntactically open, i.e. projecting, units. The fifth and final unit provides both a prosodic and a syntactic closure: a low pitch, and no further projections.

This is a common enough turn pattern in conversation - at least in

Swedish conversations, I should perhaps add (see Anward 2003) - where a combination of continuing prosody and syntactic non-closure serves as an effective turn-holding device. Notice that this turn-holding function is eminently evident in Szczepk Reed's examples (2), (3), and (4), where all feedback items are produced only after units that are both prosodically and syntactically closed. It is mostly in monologic sequences, such as Szczepk Reed's example (1), that a speaker can afford to use both prosodically and syntactically closed units in mid-turn.

There is thus nothing 'wrong' with syntactically open and prosodically demarcated units. On the contrary, Szczepk Reed's paper provides excellent evidence that such units are one of the chunking options available to conversationalists.

And in any reasonable syntactic framework, such as Steedman's online version of Categorical Grammar (Steedman 2000; see also O'Grady 2005 and Auer 2009), syntactically open units are easily characterized. For example, the fourth unit in Angela's first turn in example (4), *that i'm*, is an S\ \backslash (S/AP), a unit which combined with a preceding sentence (S) makes up a unit which combined with a following adjective phrase (AP) makes up a sentence. All in all, and simplifying somewhat, Angela can be heard to use the following syntactic units in constructing her first turn in example (4): S/S, S/S, S, S\ \backslash (S/AP), AP.

3 Whither chunking

From the evidence mustered by Szczepek Reed and from the discussion above, I think it is fair to conclude that conversationalists indeed chunk their turns into smaller units, that such units are typically designed as intonation phrases, and that conversationalists can choose whether to design such units as turn-holding, often syntactically open, units or as turn-yielding units.

Whether we generalize the notion of TCU to both kinds of units or use turn-constructive phrase (TCP) as a general category, as suggested by Szczepek Reed, is another matter, which I will take no stand on here.

Instead, I would like to end this comment by pointing to something which is in need of further investigation. Chafe (e.g. 1998) has argued that an intonation phrase typically corresponds to one idea. Thus, he holds that the rhythm of conversation is basically an informational rhythm.

Alternatively, one could conjecture that chunk size in conversation is basically determined by constraints on efficient processing (see e.g. Hawkins 2004). However, such things need to be studied empirically.

For example, look at the beginning of Szczepek Reed's example (2):

(2) SBC044 He Knows

1 Lajuan: i lIstened to my sIster when my nEphew;
2 (0.3)
3 .h started COLLege how she was sAY:ing;
4 .hh SHE filled out all o' his
applicAtions for where he was gO:ing:
an';
5 .hh SHE did All of these THINGS when hE
applied for a SCHolarship or whatEver -
6 .hh SHE filled out Everything and I'm
lI:ke;
7 (0.39)
8 hh. I did it by my↑SE:LF;
9 (0.34)
10 .hh you READ the fOrm;
11 (0.14)
12 And you fIll it OUT.
13 (0.41)

Lajuan constructs his first turn in several steps. In line 1, he presents the actors involved, and then in line 4, he constructs a format which is then recycled in lines 5, 6, 8, and 12 (for this method of turn construction, see Anward 2004).

This observation makes a couple of further observations relevant. First, there can indeed be said to be an informational rhythm in Lajuan's turn, but

it does not rest on any a priori foundation. Instead, it is one crucially constructed by Lajuan himself, through the recycling of the format of line 4. Secondly, while there may well be an upper bound for how complex a chunk may be, in this example, complexity can be seen to interact with the emergent informational rhythm and thus be context-dependent. Note that the most complex chunk in Lajuan's turn (line 5), in terms of number of words or phrases, is a rather close repeat of line 4, and that complexity is reduced in lines 8, 10, and 12, when Lajuan uses the recycled format to introduce his own values, as opposed to those of his sister and nephew.

As Szczepek Reed shows in her stimulating paper, chunking is an achievement. What is achieved, though, above and beyond the chunks themselves, remains to a large extent to be investigated.

References

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