

Units of interaction: ‘Intonation phrases’ or ‘turn constructional phrases’?

Beatrice Szczeppek Reed

Centre for English Language Education
University of Nottingham, UK

Research on natural conversation has traditionally used the turn constructional unit (TCU) as its minimal interactional unit. An accepted definition of the TCU is: a stretch of talk which is potentially a turn, and after whose completion co-participants have the legitimate option to come in to speak. However, data from spontaneous interaction show that participants produce some TCUs as successions of short chunks of talk (Szczeppek Reed, *forthcoming*), which suggests the possibility of units below the TCU.

While some TCUs are delivered as short individual phrases, that is, under one breath and intonation contour, and comprising a simple and completed syntactic construction, an individual semantico-pragmatic concept, and a single social action; others are designed with more complexity. A close analysis of conversational talk reveals that participants in spontaneous discourse orient in their construction of turns and TCUs to series of short chunks of talk, separated primarily by prosodic features such as pauses, lengthening of the final syllable, and change in pitch from one chunk to the next; but also by nonlinguistic practices such as in-breaths. These chunks of talk overlap to some extent with the definition of the ‘tone unit’, or ‘intonation phrase’ that has been prevalent in research on intonation in theoretical linguistic approaches to phonology (Palmer 1922; Armstrong and Ward 1926; Schubiger 1935, 1958; Kingdon 1958; O’Connor and Arnold 1961/1973; Halliday 1963, 1967, 1970; Crystal 1969; Couper-Kuhlen 1986; Cruttenden 1997; Wells 2006). However, an analysis of these stretches of talk as intonational, or prosodic units does not do justice to the way participants produce and receive them. In their production of such chunks speakers employ not only prosodic structuring devices, but also orientation to certain syntactic and semantico-pragmatic boundaries.

This presentation explores questions surrounding this issue, such as: Is there an interactional unit below the TCU? If so, how can it be defined? Should it be analysed purely in terms of prosody, given its most obvious boundary signals are often prosodic in nature? In this case, the terms ‘tone unit’ or ‘intonation phrase’ would be appropriate. Or should we treat it as a unit for the sequencing of language in turns-at-talk? In that case, we might suggest using the term ‘turn constructional phrase’. Furthermore we will ask how this unit is oriented to by participants – both in terms of speech production, that is, current turn-holders’ use of the unit; and in terms of reception, that is, co-participants’ treatment of the unit as a unit. Finally, if we were to find evidence for this unit as an interactional, rather than a purely prosodic unit, what should our future approach be to the category of the ‘tone unit’, both in phonology and in interactional linguistics? The presentation will address these questions by analysing prosodic and interactional features of samples of naturally-occurring talk.

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