The actions of peripheral linguistic objects: clicks

Richard Ogden
Department of Language & Linguistic Science
Centre for Advanced Studies in Language & Communication
University of York, YORK YO10 5DD, England
richard.ogden@york.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper is a conversation analytic study of the linguistic, phonetic, sequential and multimodal resources participants in conversation have to make sense of clicks in spoken English.

1 Introduction

Non-verbal vocalisations in spoken interaction are often assumed to play an important role in displaying affective stances. This paper will focus on clicks ('tut tut' or 'tsk' sounds), a vocal but not verbal practice common in English and many other European languages. Clicks have been studied from a conversation analytic perspective, but much is still unknown about the affective work they do, their visual characteristics, and how participants in interaction themselves interpret their contribution to an ongoing conversation. This paper takes a conversation analytic approach to the analysis of clicks in naturally-occurring interactions, and shows what semiotic resources are available to participants to make sense of clicks in one another's talk.

Clicks make an interesting case for non-verbal vocalisations. Unlike particles like 'wow' or 'aw', they are not amenable to prosodic manipulation such as duration, or F0 adjustments. Some of them arise from preparations for speaking, and have an iconic interpretation: 'I am about to speak' (Ogden 2013). Others, such as those which are the topic of this paper, have a more complex semiosis, and exhibit more linguistic properties.

An important task for participants in conversation is to establish what *action* a co-interactant has implemented in a prior turn. This is known as action ascription (Levinson 2013). In Example 1, D identifies a problem in his arrowed turn 'I don't know…'. M at her arrowed turn displays her understanding of this as a request, which she declines. Thus M has *ascribed* to D's turn the *action* of requesting.

Ex.1 MDE stalled

```
D:   ˙hh My ca:r is sta::lled.
     (0.2)
D:   ('n) I'm up here in the Glen?
M:   Oh::.
     (0.4)
D:   ˙hhh A:nd.hh
     (0.2)
D:→  I don' know if it's po:ssible, but˙hhh see I
     haveta open up the ba:nk.hh
     (0.3)
D:   a:t uh: (·) in Brentwood?hh=
M:→   =Yeah:- en I know you want- (·) en I whoa-
     (·) en I would,
```

The wider research question is: what is the relation between linguistic design of turns at talk and the actions participants may ascribe to those turns? and how should they respond? More specifically for this paper: how do participants interpret clicks, a family of sounds whose linguistic status is marginal, whose semantic content is vague, and whose phonetic form is not amenable to prosodic manipulation? Our focus is on how actions are recognised, rather than which actions are implemented, which is the subject of Ogden (2013).

2 Data

The data for this paper is a collection of 168 clicks extracted from the CallHome corpus. The data are presented in summary in Fig. 1. This data is supplemented with material from other data sets.

The coding combines phonetic and conversation analytic categories, including:

- **Phonetic** features: central vs. lateral airflow; oral vs. nasal airflow; single vs. multiple productions
- **Location in the turn**: standalone, pre- or post-positioned, or mid-turn (Schegloff, 1996)
- **Action**: indexing a new sequence, displaying an affective stance, self-repair, etc.

According to native speaker intuition (and dictionary entries), clicks display disapproval or annoyance (Wright, 2007); but as we will see, an interactional analysis provides a more nuanced view of how standalone clicks function. We will focus on multiple and post-positioned clicks, which have complex meanings.

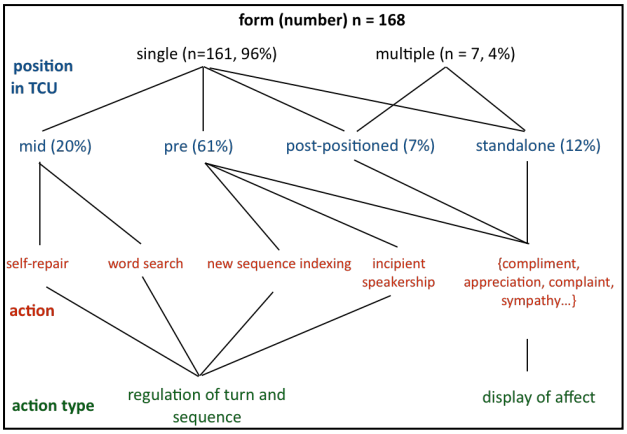


Fig. 1: Distribution of clicks in the data

3 Standalone Clicks

In response to complaints and troubles telling, clicks (!) can occur alongside response particles and/or verbal material in the same turn, as in Ex. 2 below, a complaint about a new manager at a factory.

Ex. 2: CH en_5278.165-186 the factory

```
14 B   also he's Also cOsting a FORtune.
15 A    `Oh gee:. !
16 B    this <<cr> guy.>
17 A    hh° god
```

The verbal material in such turns provides evidence of one of two relevant response types to troubles or complaints: 'displaying sympathy with the teller', or (as here) 'displaying disapproval of the source of the trouble'. Without response tokens or verbal material, the ascription of a particular action in such cases is not trivial; but a standalone click may ambiguously project 'sympathy' or 'disapproval', which are both affiliative and aligning responses. The next two sections illustrate.

3.2 Clicks treated as continuers

One of the commonest sequential environments for standalone clicks is:

1. A speaker produces a turn in which troubles are told or a complaint about a third party is made
2. A recipient produces a click (!) shortly after a Transition Relevance Place in the prior turn
3. The troubles-teller or complainant continues their turn, and in doing so does not treat the click as disruptive, nor as a turn by itself. Rather, the click is treated more like a continuer.

Ex 3-4 illustrate with complaints which are receipted with a click but no verbal material.

Ex. 3: CH en_5254.484-500.dreadful and cold

A is complaining about how her parents in law treated her over Christmas.

```
09 A    =they were really (.) ↓`drEAdful.=
10      =and thE[:n-] and `↑vEry very `cOld.=
11 B            [ ! ]
12 A    =.h [?and you know ?I have just been
13 B        [hm.
14 A    SO devoted and SO loving=
```

Ex. 4: CH en_4822.1078-1093 cancelling

A is complaining about a private student.

```
02 A    [°h] so Anyway i went out and bought
03      all these books and like threw myself
04 A    into it heart and soul and then she
05 A    nEver shows Up.
06 B    ! (-)°h[h ]
06 A           [sh]e's always cAlling and
07      cAncelling or nOt calling and nOt
08      showing an-
```

In such cases, the click does not disrupt the trajectory of the complaint or troubles telling, but is treated by the teller as allowing them to progress with their telling. Another option from the recipient would be a continuer, such as 'uh-huh' or 'mhm', registering continued recipiency without taking an affective stance towards the ongoing talk. This sequence shows that standalone clicks demonstrate an orientation to the *relevance* of a response, and perhaps specifically to an *affect-laden* response, but there is no evidence from the talk itself what kind of affective stance the click delivers.

3.2 Clicks treated as insufficient

Sometimes, a complainant or troubles teller orients to a click as an insufficient response. In these cases, the sequence is a little more complex. The click is immediately followed by an insert from the teller which is an overt request for a display of understanding: 'you know?' or 'you know what I mean?', thus treating the click as too minimal to count as adequate. Interestingly, these cases show that the continuer which follows this request, 'mhm' (lines 10 and 11 respectively), minimal as it is, *is* treated as sufficient for the teller to continue with their telling.

Ex. 5: CH en_5254.932 waitress

```
05 R    .h now if I go back to (Newark)
06      what am I gonna do=be a waitress
07      do [book-keepi[ng
08 L       [!          [{ₚ mm}
09 R    y'know?
10 L    mhm
```

```
11 R    I have NO skills really=
```

In both sequences, clicks are treated as a minimal object. Participants orient to the *minimality* of the response provided by the click, and as it is treated as allowing the talk in progress to continue, it is *aligning* and *affiliative* (Stivers, 2008).

4 Multiple Clicks

Multiple clicks are a deliberate vocalisation. Their rarity makes any conclusive statement about their form or function difficult. Nonetheless, features of their position in a turn, and features of their co-production (such as the time interval between them or accompanying lip rounding) can be recruited meaningfully. The cases here occur post-positioned after a turn, thus serving as a 'post completion stance marker' (Schegloff, 1996, 92-3). In both cases, the rhythmical pulse established by the clicks is recruited by the incoming speaker to time their turn (cf. Ogden & Hawkins, 2015).

4.1 Mirroring

In Example 6, A and B have been discussing a record by Michael Jackson that allegedly contained anti-Semitic lyrics and was withdrawn from sale. B produces multiple clicks in response to A's laughter particles in the service of affiliation with A's stance.

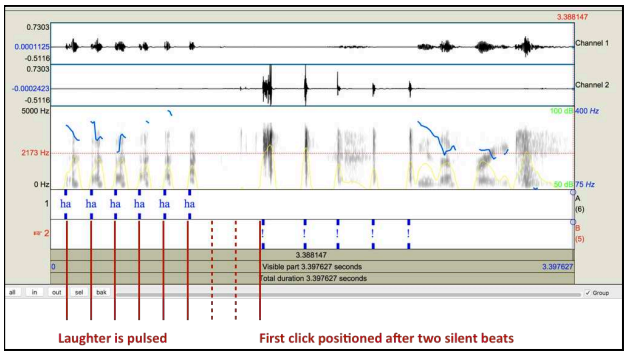
Ex. 6: CH en_4092.1497-1597 michael jackson

```
18 A    would yOU belIEve it,
19      "oh I didn't know it was of'FENsive?"
20      ha ha ha ha ha ha
21 B    ! ! [ ! ]! !=
22 A        [°h ]
23      =hE's a ↓`FREAK.((laugh))
24 B    <<p l> yeah he IS.>
```

At lines 18-19, A doubts his claim to innocence, and at 1.20 she produces six post-completion laughter particles, taking a mocking stance to his claim. These are followed at 1.21 by five clicks from B (Fig. 2), and then a negative assessment of Jackson from A, which B agrees with at 1.24. The clicks thus display affiliation with A's stance towards Jackson.

F0 rises through the laughter particles. The clicks have a falling Centre of Gravity (CoG), produced by progressively increasing the lip rounding. The falling 'pitch' of the clicks symmetrically mirrors the rising pitch of the laughter. The laughter pulses are isochronous. The first click of B's response falls on beat (after two silent beats) with the pulse projected by A's laughter particles. The phonetic design of the multiple clicks matches that of the laughter rhythmically and prosodically, despite the fact that clicks are not easily manipulated in the prosodic domain. As Couper-Kuhlen (2012) has suggested, reciprocating the prosody of another is a very basic iconic method for displaying affiliation. While there are plenty of examples of this in verbal material, this example shows that it can also work in non-verbal material, or events which are affiliated with speech.

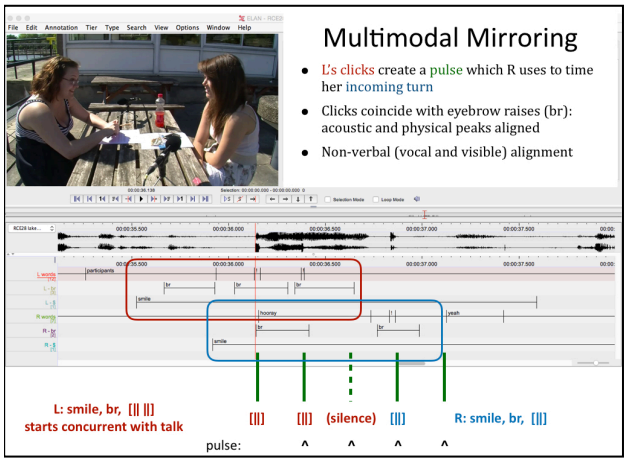
Fig. 2: Pulsed laughter, on-beat clicks; rising F0, falling CoG



4.2 Clicks and other modalities

In face-to-face data, clicks are frequently associated with winks, eyebrow flashes, nods or the apex of gestures, i.e. with peaks of physical activity. (Loehr, 2007). Here we consider an example of lateral clicks accompanied by visible behaviours across the turn space.

Fig. 3: Ex. 7. Coordination of clicks, eyebrow flashes (br) and smiles across the turn space.



L(eft) produces an apparent compliment to R(ight): 'you have the best participants', followed

by two lateral clicks [‖ ‖] as a post-completion stance marker. While L produces 'participants', she smiles and does an eyebrow flash. These clicks are accompanied by eyebrow flashes. L's smile, the eyebrow flashes and [‖ ‖] are reciprocated by R. R's response to L's turn is to reciprocate the lateral click with an eyebrow flash; she thus seems to accept L's comment on her own turn, and to ratify it by mirroring L's own vocal (not verbal) and visible behaviours. Note also that R's click comes in on beat, after a beat of silence, and thereby displays alignment with L.

L's two lateral clicks, along with the other visible behaviours, seem to modify the understanding of 'you have the best participants': they invite R to collude in an understanding that they share but do not verbalise. The implication is that L is one of R's participants, and so her turn is retrospectively self-congratulatory, rather than an 'innocent' compliment. The same affective stance is found with [‖ ‖] in other cases, such as (obscene) jokes.

Alongside the clicks, speakers can recruit rhythm, inter-speaker temporal coordination, and facial expression to express something that is not verbalised.

5. Conclusions

I have focused on the ascription of action to standalone and multiple clicks in conversation. Standalone clicks frequently occur in a sequential position where a display of sympathy or disapproval is relevant. The temporal placement of a click soon after a Transition Relevance Place in another speaker's talk displays an orientation to the relevance of a response. Other such displays can involve responses particles and verbal material. They contrast with affectively neutral continuers like 'mhm' in the same position. Standalone clicks, without verbal material in the same Turn Constructional Unit, are ambiguous between displaying sympathy or disapproval, and convey broad affiliation with the complainant or troubles-teller. This minimality makes standalone clicks useful as a resource for displaying affiliation without committing to a particular affective stance.

When post-positioned, clicks are used to adopt an affective stance towards the prior TCU; but the precise interpretation depends on features of the click, such as the whether the click is released centrally or laterally. Multiple clicks provide a metronome-like device for co-participants to coordinate their incoming talk. On-beat talk is commonly an iconic means of displaying alignment and affiliation with another speaker. In addition, other embodied behaviours such as smiles and eyebrow flashes are an important part of the design of the click construction; these co-occurring bodily behaviours provide participants with a multimodal set of semiotic resources.

REFERENCES

Couper-Kuhlen, E. (2012). Exploring affiliation in the reception of conversational complaint stories. In A. Peräkylä & M.-L. Sorjonen (Eds.), *Emotion in Interaction*. (pp. 113–146). Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Levinson, S. C. (2013). Action Formation and Ascription. In J. Sidnell & T. Stivers (Eds.), *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis* (pp. 103–130). Chichester: Blackwell.

Loehr, D. (2007). Aspects of rhythm in gesture and speech. *Gesture*, 7(2), 179–214. http://doi.org/10.1075/gest.7.2.04loe

Ogden, R. (2013). Clicks and percussives in English conversation. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 43(3), 299–320. http://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100313000224

Ogden, R., & Hawkins, S. (2015). Entrainment As a Basis for Co-Ordinated Actions in Speech. In *Proceedings of ICPhS XXVIII*. Glasgow. Retrieved from https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/icphs-proceedings/ICPhS2015/proceedings.html

Schegloff, E. A. (1996). Turn Organization: One Intersection of Grammar and Interaction. In E. Ochs, E. A. Schegloff, & S. A. Thompson (Eds.), *Interaction and Grammar* (pp. 52–133). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stivers, T. (2008). Stance, Alignment, and Affiliation During Storytelling: When Nodding Is a Token of Affiliation. *Research on Language & Social Interaction*, 41(1), 31–57. http://doi.org/10.1080/08351810701691123

Wright, M. (2007). Clicks as markers of new sequences in English conversation. In *International Congress of the Phonetic Sciences XVI* (pp. 1069–1072). Saarbrücken. Retrieved from www.ichps2007.de