

A Conversation Analytic Study on Clicks in Mandarin Chinese

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doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2024.02.11

Abstract

From the perspective of Conversation Analysis, this paper analyzes clicks in daily Chinese communication. Data analysis shows that clicks generally appear in negative contexts and play an important role in conveying the speaker's negative attitudes or feelings. This article first discusses the main ways that the linguistic resource of clicks helps the speaker convey his/her negative attitudes: presupposing the click-producer's disdain, presupposing the speaker's dissatisfaction, presupposing the speaker's impatience, and strengthening the speaker's negative attitude. On this basis, the author explores the main two functions of clicks in Chinese conversation, that is serving as a signal of topic transition and maintaining harmonious social relations.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, clicks, negative attitude

1. Introduction

Clicks are a very common phenomenon in daily Chinese verbal communication, but the research on clicks in Mandarin Chinese is very few at present. The author took "clicks" as the theme, and selected Chinese language in the subject column of the screening box, and then searched on the website of China National Knowledge Infrastructure. The author found only three articles related to clicks. The first one is about the pragmatic function of "clicks", the second one is about clicks in Spoken Chinese, written by Zhou Jisheng (1989), and the last one talks about the meaning of an idiom with clicks involved, which has little to do with click itself. Zhou Jisheng pointed out that several clicks together can be used to express admiration, sympathy

and love, and clicks, when used alone, usually indicate dissatisfaction and impatience. In general, although clicks are a very common and important language resource in Chinese verbal communication, there are few studies on clicks in Chinese at present. It is no exaggeration to say that studies on this can be said to be extremely scarce. Therefore, this paper will explore this commonly used language resource from the perspective of Conversation Analysis, in the hope of enriching the research on clicks home and abroad.

2. The Research Method and Data Source

This paper adopts Conversation Analysis, abbreviated as CA, as its research method. Conversation Analysis is a sociological research method developed by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel

Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson in the 1960s and 1970s. It is a qualitative, empirical, and inductive approach to social interaction. The main purpose of Conversation Analysis research is to identify, describe, and explain the orderly and recurring ways or normative patterns used by participants to accomplish social actions (Margutti, Tainio, Drew & Traverso, 2011, p. 53; Yu Guodong & Wu Yaxin, 2018, p. 7). CA emphasizes the authenticity of data, which requires that the data, be it recorded or videotaped, is naturally occurring in the real social interaction. In other words, the naturalness of the conversation in the data must be ensured, and one should not make up data themselves just for the sake of analysis. Through meticulous analysis of the collected data, social norms that communicators follow are able to be revealed.

All the data in this paper are transcribed according to the transcription system proposed by Gail Jefferson in 1984, and most of them were collectively discussed in the data analysis classes at Ocean University of China, which ensures the authenticity and accuracy of the research data.

3. Data Analysis

Through analyzing the collected data, the author finds that clicks may appear at the beginning, in the middle, or end of a turn. The current data shows that most of them appear at the beginning or in the middle of a turn, and few appear at the end of a turn. Further analysis of the data demonstrates that clicks usually occur in negative context, that is to say, usually associated with bad things and related to the speaker's negative attitude towards the content of the discussion. Based on this finding, the author will explore how clicks help its producers to convey their negative attitudes.

3.1 The Relationship Between Clicks and Negative Attitudes

Most of the time, negative attitudes are not what participants want to hear and the majority of them are not preferred. However, it is not uncommon for speakers to express their negative attitudes in daily communication. Initial analysis indicates that clicks are related to negative context, so in this part, the author will analyze how clicks help communicators to convey their negative attitudes or feelings.

3.1.1 Presupposing the Speaker's Disdain

Example 1

- 10 刘: =你干 °啥 °呢:
- 11 (.)
- 12 蒲: .h 在家:
- 13 (.)
- 14 刘: >你们<回家:啦,<已经>.
- 15 (.)
- 16 蒲: ang:
- 17 刘: 作业写完啦.
- 18 蒲: ang:
- 19 刘: 都写完啦.
- 20 (0.3)
- 21 蒲: ((嘴喷一声)) 写个作文儿:多简单.

In this example, Liu and Pu are husband and wife. Pu calls his wife Liu at home to ask if she is coming home, and the wife asks about their daughter, who is preparing for a speech contest. In line 10, Liu asks her husband what he is doing, and upon hearing her husband's answer that he is at home, Liu performs a confirmation-seeking action in line 14 in the form of a question, which shows her surprise with the increment of "already". After confirming that her husband and daughter have gone home, Liu asks if her daughter finishes her homework in line 17, which is based on the premise that her daughter is at home. If her husband and daughter are still outside, Liu would not ask this question, since according to common sense, children usually do their homework at home. After Pu's answer of yes, Liu again seeks confirmation in line 19 by emphasizing all homework. The 0.3-second pause in the next turn and the click at the beginning of line 21 indicate that what Pu is going to say is not something positive. The turn constructional unit after the click clearly conveys that Pu thinks the homework is very easy to do, is just to write a composition, and will not take long. Therefore, the click here suggests the current speaker Pu's disdain—writing a composition is particularly simple, not as difficult as Liu thinks. Before actually expressing their negative feelings with words, speakers employ clicks to presuppose or premonitor these kinds of feelings or attitudes, which will mitigate the negative communicative effects of conveying these feelings to a certain degree.

3.1.2 Presupposing the Speaker's Dissatisfaction

Example 2

- 71 考生 >哦哦哦哦<哦.

- 72 .hh>那个-那个<纯透明的那个:hh(0.2)软垫真的不能带吗?
 73 >我我-<因为>我-我-我-<我(好像)
 74 接线员 :
 [不能带不能带.哈.
 75 (0.3)
 76 考生: 哦.
 77 接线员: 嗯嗯.
 78 考生: [(嘴喷一声))(0.5)]^{ang},行吧。
 79 [((喷嚏声))]

The examinee in line 72 seeks confirmation about if he really can not take the small cushion, and in the next line he plans to give his reasons for initiating the confirmation-seeking action. However, the examinee is interrupted by the telephone operator before fully giving his reason for asking again. The telephone operator says twice “can not take”, which indicates that the candidates for that entrance examination are not allowed to take the cushion. The “oh” in line 76 shows that the examinee knows the information told by the operator, and then launched a click in line 78, suggesting that he is not satisfied with the answer given by the operator. What is more, “OK” after the click reflects the candidate’s frustration that he can do nothing but accept such regulations.

Example 3

- 13 柳: =问问我,呃:进口的:nei 个化疗使用的药物和:国产的到底差别有多大;(0.5)
 14 ((笑)哼,我说这玩意儿-((笑))=
 15 宋: =((嘴喷一声))这我也不知道呀,我得给你问呀.我也不知道呀.

In the dialogue, Song is Liu’s aunt. Liu’s friend’s mother got breast cancer, and Song is a doctor. So Liu calls her aunt to help her friend find out which is better, domestic medicine or imported medicine. Here it should be noted that in line 13 Liu is telling her aunt about the fact that her friend asked her which drug is better for breast cancer chemotherapy, but Song’s response in line 15 shows that Song regards it not as a simple statement of fact but as an indirect inquiry about the difference between the two kinds of drugs. The click at the beginning of line 15 indicates Song’s difficulty in answering the question. By uttering “I don’t know. I have to ask for you”, Song clearly tells Liu that she is not a doctor in this area and cannot answer the question

accurately. Moreover, the choice of “I have to ask for you” with two verbs together in Chinese enhances the speaker’s effort to do this. Song does not think Liu should ask her this question because she is not professional in terms of breast cancer, so she presupposes that it is inappropriate to ask her such a question and she is not satisfied with this kind of asking by that click.

Example 4

- 49 客户: 昂:明白了..h 那-那:-就是平常:<就是:>工作日的时候人多吗;
 50 就可以<同[时::]>%()进吗;
 51 接线员: [↓^{eng} ↑]
 52 (.)
 53 接线员: 工作日<人不多:>,但是也同时¥不了¥hh.=
 54 客户: =[也同时]不了;
 55 接线员: =[.hh基本上-]
 56 (.)
 57 接线员: 对:;>基本上<都约得挺满,你要不就是下:::°.hhh 哎呀 hh.找不到-
 58 太同时的时间 °((嘴喷一声)).hh 你要不然就::呃:<下下周>.

The client plans to order a dental cleaning service from Meituan, a popular online shopping platform in China, but she could not make an appointment on this platform, so she calls the front desk. In line 49, the client asks the online receptionist if two or three people could enjoy this service at the same time, and then the receptionist gives the answer in line 53: when there are not many people on weekdays, customers also need to go in one by one to clean their teeth. In line 57, the receptionist gives a description of the general reservation situation. That is, there are usually reservations at all times. Then the receptionist begins to perform a proposing action of suggesting the customer clean their teeth the week after next. It can be inferred here that the receptionist is looking at the back-end dental cleaning appointment, while talking to the client. The receptionist is likely to advise the client to come next week, but when it is found that there are no appropriate time slots next week, she abandons the original suggestion. Then she makes a click to indicate that it is still difficult to find three consecutive time slots, but she could not lose potential clients. In such a difficult situation, the

receptionist finally makes a less satisfactory suggestion of letting the client make an appointment the week after next. Different from the click-producer's dissatisfaction with the other party, it should be pointed out that the dissatisfaction presupposed here is not the receptionist's dissatisfaction with the client, but with not making an appropriate appointment since there are not three consecutive time slots and the client is likely to go somewhere else if they have to wait for two weeks.

3.1.3 Presupposing the Speaker's Impatience

Example 5

45 刘: .hh ↑ 哪,<她又>怎么玩儿,她 na-她根本 °就 °<没动地:方>.

46 (0.3)

47 蒲: eng::,hhh.

48 .hhh,((嘴喷一声))>好了,好了,好了<(.)不-不[要,不要.

49 刘 :
[°一 °听:就是得了嗖的,没干啥.

50 (0.3)

51 蒲: 胡说八道 °的 °,不愿 °意 °听你说话.=

52 刘: =eng:你在家<呆着>,你>中午<喝酒啦:

53 蒲: ((嘴喷一声)) °哎呀 °hhhh.

This extract and the first one are from the same phone-call recording. After hearing her daughter can not recite the speech draft very fluently due to some changes in the script, Liu in line 45 shows her puzzlement by resorting to "again", "didn't change at all" and other turn design, which indicates that for Liu, things should not be like this. After hearing Liu's complaint, Pu makes a click in line 48, presupposing that Pu disagrees with Liu and is not satisfied with Liu's point of view. This can be backed by the utterance after the click. The language resources, like "OK" and "no" after the click in line 48, obviously show that Pu is impatient with Liu above and does not want to continue talking about the current topic. Similarly, when Liu asks Pu in line 52 if he has been drinking at noon, Pu immediately utters a click at the beginning of the next turn, indicating that he has indeed been drinking and is not happy with Liu's question. The soft "aiya" after the click also confirms Pu's impatience and that Pu wants to end the topic of drinking.

3.1.4 Reinforcing the Speaker's Previous Negative Attitude

Example 6

66 郭: 这个太难闻了,我感觉真的不能吃((嘴喷一声)).

67 林: 那<可能>.(.)(环境杂音))是可能就(.)真过期了呗.

Guo and Lin are classmates, and they bought the same kind of noodles. After unwrapping the noodles, Guo feels the noodles smell strange, so she calls Lin to ask what her noodles smell like. Guo's click at the end of line 66, plus the utterance before the click that the noodles are too smelly and can not be eaten, shows that Guo is very dissatisfied with the noodles bought this time, since there may be quality problems and the shopping experience is very bad. The click reinforces its speaker's previous negative assessment of the noodles.

3.2 Communicative Function of Clicks

3.2.1 As a Signal of Topic Transition

Through analysis, it is found that the clicks at the beginning of a turn can be used as a signal of the transition of the topic. According to the classification of Yu Guodong (2022), topic transition can be divided into two categories: topic shift and topic change. The former refers to the shift of the subject or core of a conversation, while the latter refers to a complete change of the topic of a conversation. In other words, the topic shift is the shift of the focus of a conversation, and the theme of the whole conversation does not change. Topic change moves one step further than the topic shift because the theme of the conversation has changed. According to this classification standard, this part will analyze the function of clicks when it comes to the transition of the topic. It should be noted that the author finds that the relevant function is generally available when the clicks appear at the beginning of a turn.

3.2.1.1 As a Signal to Topic Shift

Example 7

75 尹: .hh 学习<太:忙了.>

76 洪: 嗯.

77 尹: 毕竟期末了.

78 洪: (嘴喷一声)

79 尹: 有[考]试:吧,

80 洪: [对],

81 (0.8)

82 洪: 考试::倒是:没有就是论文多.

79 (0.8)

In this extract, before line 78, the two friends Yin and Hong are talking about their busy studying life, especially at the end of a semester. In line 78, Hong makes a click followed by the word of “yes” in line 80 which is not a response to line 79 though they are close since Hong utters “yes” before the question in line 79. After saying “yes”, Hong may plan to give more information about her studies at the end of that term, but she abandons it due to Yin’s asking in line 79. Chances are that Hong may continue to give more details about how busy she is at that time after the click, and since the topic of studying life is unchanged, the click here may be a signal to topic shift. It is just possible that the click here helps to achieve topic shift, but the next extract will clearly demonstrate how clicks help to realize topic change.

3.2.1.2 As a Signal to Topic Change

Example 8

- 30 范同学: >°现在学不进°<(0.9)学不进去。
 31 >现在<英语得->单词<单词我都.hh 嗯
 ((笑声))>背<-背-背了::背了:几十页吧。
 32 背了十-几十页(0.6)恋恋有词的(1.1)
 33 >然后现在<.hh 回去一背-回去一背,一
 个也记不得了(0.6) 哼哈哈哈哈哈;
 34 张同学: .hhh 呢 en[hh].h 得(.).hh 得常看..h
 35 范同学: [°挺好的°<]
 36 (2.8)((挠痒痒))
 37 范同学: >°哎呀妈呀这°<-这谁不知道啊?
 38 °得(.)-常-常°看.hhh 太打击了。
 39 背了几十页,回去一看,一个也记不得
 hhheng;
 40 (0.9)
 41 张同学: ((嘴喷一声)).hh 在:::-呢:-在家里面儿待
 的怎么样呢?
 42 (2.4)
 43 范同学: ((嘴喷一声))就 nei 样:吧。

In this example, Fan and Zhang are college roommates. Zhang has been admitted to graduate school, and Fan is preparing for the entrance examination again. From this data, it can be seen that before line 41, Fan is talking about his difficulties in English learning. “Unable to learn” indicates that Fan is not subjectively unwilling to learn, but implies that Fan has tried to learn English before but the objective conditions make him unable to

concentrate on learning this language. In addition, the self-repair from “ten” to “dozens of pages” in line 32 and the extreme expression in line 33 “can not remember a signal one word” all show that Fan has made efforts to learn English. After Fan tells the trouble he is encountering, Zhang gives a suggestion in line 34, that is, frequently reviewing English words. In the next several lines, however, Fan does not accept this suggestion by employing such language resources as “Who doesn’t know it?” Subsequently, Zhang makes a click at the beginning of line 41, and after the click Zhang asks a question that is completely unrelated to what they are talking about before. That is, the topic of the conversation has been changed completely from English learning to daily life. It can be seen that in Mandarin Chinese, clicks can be regarded as a transitional signal of topic, reducing the communicative pressure brought by sudden change of topic to some extent.

3.2.2 Maintain Harmonious Social Relations

Data analysis shows that the clicks in the middle of a turn play a role in strengthening the tone. As mentioned earlier, clicks generally appear in negative context, and through closer observation, the author finds that the content after clicks is often a further interpretation or explanation of the content before clicks, usually more negative. It also shows that the speaker is actually reluctant to express the more negative content after the clicks directly, but only has to say it. In normal verbal communication, social members generally follow various social norms. In most cases, negative language is not conducive to the formation and development of harmonious social relations, so participants usually do not express some negative words directly, but convey them indirectly through some language resources. The author finds that clicks are such a language resource, through which participants can convey negative information to the other party without severely damaging the harmonious relationship between the two parties.

Example 9

- 04 家长: 诶,nei 个,我想问一下就是:,近期孩子,
 >就是这个<英语课状态怎么样,
 05 °孩子°学习的时候.

 12 老师: eng,后半节的时候吧,就是前半节还挺好的。

- 13 (1.2)
- 14 家长: 对:,咱:看((xing::))孩子学了也有一年了,一年多点儿了现在,
- 15 eng::((嘴喷一声)),反正之前也有<这个问题吧>,然后最近:做作业,
- 16 就是做这个作业的话这个问题(0.4)
- 17 做这个问题:,发现了,就是((嘴喷一声))更明显了吧.是不是觉得(0.2)
- 18 孩子觉得这个课程:,有点难¥度::好像¥(0.2), 并且留的作业很多时候让跟读,
- 19 或者是去:跟唱(0.3)对于孩子来说的话是有点难:.
- 20 (0.3)
- 21 老师: .h 其实:,怎么说

In this phone conversation, an English teacher receives a call from a parent asking about her daughter's recent learning difficulties. In line 4 the mother asks the teacher what her daughter's learning status looks like, and the teacher in lines 07, 08, 10, 12 gives an answer. That is, the child in the first half of a class is very concentrated, but for the rest of a class, she can not focus on learning. After that, the parent says "yes" first in line 14, which implies that the mother actually has found that her daughter has not done very well in learning recently. The mother only realizes that the child is not too concentrated while doing homework after class, but she does not know the child's performance in the classroom, so she would like to ask the teacher. After saying "yes", the parent first states the fact that by now, the child has been taking their tutorial English classes for a long time through self-repair from one year to more than one year. The elongation "eng::" and the click sound indicate that what the parent is going to say should be something bad and negative. "There was this problem before anyway" in line 15 is a direct explanation of the indirect expression that although the child has taken English tutorial classes for a long time, her study is still not good, further strengthening the tone of the discourse. Line 17 is more obvious. Before the click, the mother says that the child appeared not concentrated sometimes in the past, but after the click, she clearly states that her daughter performs worse than before, and that the situation is more serious than before. Besides, the mother gives her own reason for this situation: the English class is difficult for the child. Because a child's learning state can not be completely separated from the teacher's

teaching method, teaching content, etc., if the parent says the class is too difficult directly, it can be seen that she is questioning the teacher's teaching ability. By employing clicks, the parent shows that she is reluctant to directly speak out about this bad situation, and leaves more time for the other side by suggesting that what she is going to express is more negative. Moreover, it also weakens the tone of the negative words, which helps to maintain the harmonious relationship between the two sides to a large extent even when one participant says something unpleasant or negative.

Example 10

- 004 师: 诶,你好.是泽明妈妈哦?
- 005 家: 啊,怎么了老师?
- 006 师: 啊::heh heh heh
- 007 .hhh ¥那泽明这一段时间<在家里:>表现怎么样啊? ¥
- 008 (1.5)
- 009 家: 额:: ↑ 还:: ↑ 行吧.=怎么了?
- 010 师: ↑ 吼:: ↑ 那我:我看他这两个::礼拜的状态不是很好.
- 011 师: 今天早上:上课的时候,我看到他在<走神>,趴在那个::桌子上,
- 012 [他-]眼睛是看着桌子底下的.
- 013 [((鸣笛声))]
- 014 师: 我把他叫起来回答问题,他都>不知道<我在讲评讲到哪里(.)
- 015 然后:站起来之后::比较::就被我提问到之后比较有收敛了,后面状态还行.
- 016 >想不到<第二节课语文老师上课的时候((嘴喷一声))
- 017 他仍然是这样子.=
-
- 049 师: =他是:他是:: ((嘴喷一声))
- 050 他是上面看-上面放着一本小说,其实底下是游戏机.
- 051 家: ((叹气声))我真的是:我要被他气死啊:

This dialogue is also between a parent and a teacher. Different from the last one, the teacher calls the parent to ask about her child's learning at home. The teacher asks the child's performance at home in line 007 by slowing down the speed of the phrase, "at home". After the parent replies that it is OK and asks the teacher what is wrong with the kid, the teacher specifically describes the child's wandering and

inattentive state in class in the long turn from lines 010 to 017. The child becomes restrained only after being questioned by the teacher, and the content before the click is about the child's poor performance in class. The word of "unexpected" and the click suggest to the parent that it is not better or even worse in the next class. Line 017 shows that it is indeed the case. Literally, "He is still like this" in line 017 shows that the child's performance in the second class is as bad as in the first one, but in fact it becomes worse because as a student, after the teacher catches him/her distracted in class, he or she should be more serious and more motivated. Therefore, in this sense, the situation is actually more serious than before. If the click is removed and the teacher directly states "I can't believe that he is still like this in the next class", the strong tone is likely to make the parent feel bad or even angry, because the poor performance of the child in the classroom has a lot to do with the teacher and the school, and the school should also give the parent an explanation for this problem. Add the click indicates that the teacher is reluctant to directly say to the parent that her child's classroom performance is not good, and that she has to have a talk with the parent about this because the child has recently performed too badly so that there is a need for the parent and the teacher to work together to improve this situation. By using the language resource of click, the teacher can convey negative information about the child's learning to the parent and maintain a friendly relationship with the parent at the same time. Lines 049 and 050 also demonstrate the teacher's helplessness when telling about the child's poor performance. Repetition, elongation, and self-repair could indicate the teacher's caution in her wording. A click here shows that the teacher herself is also very upset about the problem and is sort of forced to convey the negative performance of the child to seek help from the parent by telling the fact. In this extract, clicks help its producer to tell the unpleasant situation to seek home-school cooperation for one thing, and maintain a good social relationship between the teacher and the parent for another thing.

4. Conclusion

This paper makes a somewhat detailed analysis of clicks in Mandarin Chinese by adopting the research method of Conversation Analysis. First, the article probes into how clicks help speakers to convey their negative attitudes or feelings in

social interaction. The analysis reveals that clicks are related to negative context, and they can presuppose the speaker's disdain, dissatisfaction and impatience, as well as reinforce the speaker's negative feelings. In addition, the paper then analyzes the two major functions of clicks in daily conversation: as a signal of topic transition and to maintain harmonious social relations. Clicks are a very common linguistic phenomenon in Chinese communication, but the relevant research is scarce. It is hoped that this paper can provide some inspiration for future studies of clicks in Chinese.

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