

COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIES IN CHINESE TELEPHONE CONVERSATION CLOSINGS: BALANCING PROCEDURAL NEEDS AND INTERPERSONAL MEANING MAKING

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Abstract

This study is focused on Chinese telephone conversation closings in non-institutional settings. The purpose is to provide a descriptive account of characteristics of Chinese telephone conversation closings. This article reports findings of differences between Chinese and English calls regarding initiation of closing, length and structure of leave-taking, and interactional styles such as repetition and overlaps.

Keywords: Closing, Telephone conversation, Chinese language, Conversation style, Discourse, Interaction, Involvement.

1. Introduction

Conversation routines such as greeting and leave-taking may often be perceived as mechanical, but they are certainly not meaningless, as Laver (1981: 304) rightly observes: “These verbal behaviors can be understood as important strategies for the negotiation and social relationship between participants in conversation.” Although scholarly attention on discourse and communication research has shifted to institutional settings (Martinez 2003), this is not to suggest that we can leave aside studies of casual conversation, which constitutes a major part of our daily experience.

Inspired by the late 60s and early 70s seminal work of Schegloff and Sacks, studies of English telephone conversations have witnessed growing interest, resulting in research on telephone communication in different languages and speech communities besides English, for example, Dutch (Houtkoop-Steenstra 1991), Greek (Sifianou 1989), German and Greek (Pavlidou 1994), and Swedish (Lindstrom 1994). However, most studies in other languages have been focused on telephone conversation openings. Even in the case of telephone communication in English for business purposes, current research is limited, as evidenced partly by studies lacking a focus on proper ways of closing (Pan, Scollon, and Scollon 2002). The relative paucity of study in this area derives in part from the complexity involved in analysis of

closings, as it is often difficult to trace the initializations of closings (Pavlidou 1997).

My interest in this area was inspired by studies in cross-cultural communication, but it was also kindled in no small measure by my personal experience of telephone use in English. I noticed some important cross-cultural differences in telephone use between Chinese and English, but pragmatic and pedagogical materials available for language learners of English for general daily communication purposes are limited in spite of scholarly work available on this topic. There is currently a sizable body of textbooks and materials available on telephone communication in English, but most of these books are written for business communication. It is my belief that cross-cultural studies of telephone conversations will contribute to theory building with regard to cultural specificity as well as shared features among different languages. Such findings will enhance our general understanding of how each language works in its particular context and improve our pragmatic knowledge and skills for practical communication and foreign language instruction.

In my previous research, I examined telephone conversation openings in Chinese and discussed important linguistic and cultural differences as exhibited in “invited guessing”¹ (Sun 2002) and opening moves (Sun 2004a). Based on an extended analysis of part of the data collected for a larger comparative study I conducted earlier², the current study is focused on closings of Chinese telephone calls in non-institutional settings³.

The research questions for the current analysis are as follows: How do Chinese speakers achieve telephone conversation closings in non-institutional settings? Specifically, what particular linguistic forms are used to indicate one’s intention to close? What are the structural patterns of closing? What, if any, are observed characteristics of the interactional styles of the participants? What factors may motivate the use of different linguistic forms and interactional strategies?

Primarily interested in organizational aspects of social behavior, the Conversation Analysis approach examines social interaction from a structural perspective, which has led to important insights and findings about mechanisms of social interaction. A structural perspective alone, however, may not be adequate for providing a full contextualized account of how speakers employ linguistic resources and interactional strategies to accomplish their goals; we also need linguistic descriptions, functional analyses, and relevant information of the context of language use for studies in linguistics, pragmatics, and language learning. These aspects are what the current study attempts to achieve: A descriptive account of how native speakers of Chinese bring telephone calls to an end linguistically, structurally, and interactively, and to uncover the cultural norms constitutive of such verbal and interactional behavior.

Ordinary as they may seem to be, closings are a delicate matter both technically and socially, as pointed out by Levinson (1983). They are a delicate matter technically in the sense

¹ Invited guessing refers to a pattern of inviting the recipient of the call to guess at the identity of the caller rather than the caller identifying herself, a phenomenon (as well as an interpersonal strategy) observed in the opening phase of some telephone calls between Chinese women.

² As one of the best ways to examine interactional patterns in different speech communities is to conduct comparative studies (Saville-Troike 1989), I conducted a study of Chinese and English telephone conversations.

³ Patterns of closings for institutional calls are discussed in Sun (2004b).

that no party is compelled to exit while still having topics to discuss and socially in the sense that either overly-hasty or overly-slow terminations may bring forth unwelcome inferences. Schegloff and Sacks (1973: 291) point out that “conversational closings converge from a diverse range of conversations-in-their-course to a regular common closure with ‘bye bye’ or its variants.” The authors state that two components are crucial regardless of how other aspects may differ in telephone conversation closings - an initiation of closing and a terminal component.

Schegloff and Sacks (1973) identify several categories of linguistic tokens in English as possible pre-closing: “well” or “all right” produced with downward intonation contour, closing down a topic, and overt announcements, for example. Button (1987) identifies the archetype closing as consisting of four turns, suggesting that “[a] pervasive way in which a closing is organized spans four turns at talk” (1987: 101) organized in two adjacency pairs. The first and second turns (constituting the first adjacent pair) are realized with items such as “okay” and “all right,” terms which indicate for both parties that no new topic will be introduced, while the next two turns (constituting the second adjacent pair) often consist of an exchange of “goodbye” (or its equivalent) from both parties.

Analysis of my Chinese data suggests both similarities and differences between the Chinese and English patterns. Similarities are manifested in the following aspects: First, initiation of closing is preceded by the closing down of previous topics. Secondly, either the caller or recipient may initiate closing. Thirdly, pre-closing signals are observed. Lastly, leave-taking⁴ constitutes (but does not necessarily constitute only) the final component in closing sequences.

Several differences from English patterns were observed, with regard to Chinese forms of expression used for initiation of closing, typical structural patterns of closing, length and structure of leave-taking, and interactional styles. Specifically, first, closings in Chinese are often marked with distinct linguistic expressions that clearly indicate one’s intention to close while pre-closing signals (in the form of ‘Okay’) alone may not be adequate for such a discursive function. Secondly, the archetype of closings as proposed by Button (1987) does not form a pervasive pattern in Chinese telephone conversations between acquainted parties⁵, as the data suggest. Thirdly, leave-taking is not accomplished in the form of an adjacency pair most of the time, thus exhibiting significant degrees of variability with regard to length and complexity. Lastly, overlap and repetition is the norm rather than the exception in Chinese. It is these differences that form the focus of this article. Preceded by a section on data and its collection procedures, the following analysis is divided into two major parts: While Section 3 is focused on initiation of closing, Section 4 examines the component of leave-taking.

⁴ I am using the term by Clark & French (1981) and the reasons are explained in detail in Section 4.

⁵ The term “acquainted parties” is used here to include family, friends, and acquaintances in contrast with calls to businesses, services or institutions, which involve unacquainted parties. Calls to the latter category do not manifest the same pattern (Sun 2004b). It is necessary, therefore, to identify such a category for the current discussion. In addition, there is also a strong linguistic and cultural basis for such categorization due to the existence and common use of the phrase 认识的人 ‘acquainted person’ in Chinese. This issue is addressed as well in Scollon and Scollon (1991) and Pan (2000).

2. Data and collection procedures

The data base of the current analysis consists of thirty-nine⁶ audio-taped naturalistic⁷ telephone calls recorded by six Chinese women at their residences in Shanghai, China. Results from follow-up interviews with participants are also incorporated in relevant discussions. The choice of female participants was intentional to reduce potential variables as much as possible. All the recording was made with prior consent of the callers. Only out-going calls intended for female recipients were used in my analysis; therefore, all the calls in the data were initiated by my female participants. The language form spoken in the Chinese data is the Shanghai dialect with the exception of four calls made in Mandarin due to dialectal varieties spoken by the recipients. Since the difference between Mandarin and the Shanghai dialect is primarily phonetic, written forms as reflected in the transcripts remain similar for the most part, and observed variations are explained.

These recorded telephone conversations were initially classified as either calls made for specific purposes, or calls made to family, friends, and relatives to “keep in touch”⁸ (Drew and Chilton 2000) in order to examine possible variations in interactions due to different purposes of calls. In this article, the two types of calls will be discussed under the same category since analysis with regard to closing patterns has not led to major observed differences that warrant such distinction.

I am aware of the limitations of the data under discussion due to the limited number of participants and the fact that only female participants took part in this study. The discussions presented in this article are based on observed patterns of the data collected; I do not intend to suggest that the findings represent discursive behavior of all Chinese speakers, nor are the patterns to be perceived or interpreted as true of telephone communication behavior in all Chinese settings. In fact, calls to businesses, services, or institutions exhibit very different characteristics⁹.

3. Initiation of closing

The data suggest that closing in Chinese telephone conversation is accomplished in a number of

⁶ There are actually forty-two calls in this category. Due to the fact that three of the calls don't have complete closings recorded, these three calls are excluded from the current analysis.

⁷ These calls are naturalistic in the sense that the callers were instructed to only make and record calls as communication needs arose. Each participant had the recording device at her residence available for approximately two weeks for data recording.

⁸ I am borrowing the term from Drew and Chilton (2000).

⁹ Sun (2004b) discusses in detail closing patterns for telephone calls to businesses and services.

ways, including pre-closing signals¹⁰, matter-of-fact announcements, “caller techniques” and “called techniques” (terms introduced by Schegloff and Sacks 1973), and other expressions. Pre-closing signals are observed in Chinese calls, but an overall majority of the telephone calls examined also feature distinct expressions to indicate one’s intention to close in addition to the use of pre-closings signals. In fact, only four (approximately 10%) out of the thirty-nine total number of calls closed without some form of expression to explicitly suggest one’s intention to end the call.

In this section, I first discuss linguistic expressions in Chinese that feature similarities in form with those in English yet exhibit different rules of use. Next, a discussion of the matter-of-fact announcement category follows, providing detailed descriptions and analysis of its distinct form, function, and context of use.

3.1. *Similar categories, different uses*

Various linguistic expressions to indicate one’s intent to close can be divided into a number of categories, and most of the expressions observed in the Chinese data are similar to categories in English as presented in Schegloff and Sacks (1973) and Button (1987)¹¹, including appreciations, future contact, regards to family, well-wishes, and sum-ups. These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive; in many cases more than one category is addressed in closing.

Although these Chinese expressions appear similar to their counterparts in English, what makes them different is that some expressions are appropriate only for certain addressees, depending on the social status difference and/or social distance between the speaker and the addressee. For example, one of the well-wishing expressions 你自己身体当心哦 ‘You take care of yourself (your health)¹² is usually addressed to someone who is an elder or a senior to the speaker. If it is addressed to someone of similar age (or even younger), the addressee is likely to have experienced some illness or physical problems. Since conveying respect and concern to one’s elder is expected and appropriate, this expression is to be addressed to one’s senior conversational partner but is not appropriate for everyone in general.

In a similar vein, it is more appropriate for the junior party, or a person wishing to show respect to a person with perceived higher social status, to end the call by saying 我下次来看你哦 ‘I will pay you a visit next time,’ which indicates the speaker’s respect for the addressee and the higher social status of the party to be visited unless there are special circumstances such as an illness, which might warrant the reverse situation with regard to who will visit whom)¹³. This is exemplified in the ending of a call from a mother calling her daughter’s teacher. In this case, the

10 In the current analysis, short utterances involving 好 ‘good/fine’ or other similar equivalents in Chinese are identified and classified as pre-closing signals. There is no equivalent in Chinese for the word “well.”

11 As the different systems of classification proposed are not always compatible, I use a modified system of classification based on proposed categories, not necessarily following one model in particular.

12 It may be phrased as ‘Big Auntie take care of yourself’ since addressing terms are specific for different relations (See Blum 1997 for a detailed discussion).

13 The issue of power is addressed in, for example, Pan (2000).

mother's verbal offer to pay a visit to the addressee, her daughter's teacher, conveys her respect for the teacher.

In contrast, while ending her talk over the phone with her colleague's daughter, who belongs to a younger generation, the same woman ended the call by saying 你下次来玩呀 'Come and visit us next time.' Literally, the expression means 'You next time come and play'¹⁴. Being an elder, the speaker demonstrates courtesy and rapport through verbal invitation, which is appropriate for her status vis-à-vis her younger conversational partner. This expression 'You come and visit us next time' is different from the expression discussed in the preceding paragraph 'I'll pay you a visit next time' in that respect is implied and encoded in the promise of visiting. The promise thus indexes to some degree an indication of the social status difference¹⁵. The role of visiting versus being visited is therefore differently assumed in its cultural context, a convention shared by conversational participants, depending on relevant social factors such as age, position, power or other aspects, all of which have bearings on interaction norms in Chinese culture.

3.2. *Matter-of-fact announcements*

Although general categories of expressions used in Chinese closings are similar to some extent to those in English categorically as discussed earlier, a unique type of expression is observed in the Chinese data, identified in the current analysis as a matter-of-fact announcement, which makes explicit one's intention to end the call without reference to any particular interlocutor's interest. This matter-of-fact announcement (MFA henceforth) category consists of two core expressions (along with their various forms) for explicitly announcing closing: (1) 就这样 'That's all for now' and (2) 别的没什么 'That's about it.' Literally, the first expression means 'Then this way' while the second expression means 'Nothing else.' These remarks make a statement to the effect that the speaker is ending the conversation, thus presenting the intent to close the conversation in a fairly straightforward, matter-of-fact, and bold-on-record manner. One excerpt is included below to illustrate the matter-of-fact announcement of a closing:

C: Caller

R: Recipient

(1)

- 1 R: 那没 办法 , 碰到 这种 事 没办法。
 Na mei banfa peng dao zhe zhong shi mei banfa
 That no method encounter this type thing no method
 There is nothing you can do, when you run into this type of situation

¹⁴ The word 'play' here also includes the meaning of visiting and having fun.

¹⁵ I am aware that elders do in fact pay visits to younger people sometimes in Chinese society. However, it is the linguistic choices as well as what factors may impact our choices that I focus on in the current analysis, not the actual practice or frequency of such visits.

- 2 C: 噯:
ai
yeah
Yeah:
- 3 R: 好 好 好.
hao hao hao
good good good
Ok, all right,
- 4→ R //就这 样 哦
jiu zhe yang o
just this SFP
//That's all for now then, OK?
- 5→ C: //就这 样 哦.
jiu zhe yang
just this SFP
//That's all for now then, OK?
- 6 R: //好
hao
Ok.
- 7 C: //好
hao
OK.
- 8 R: //再 会.
zai hui
again meet
[Bye.
- 9 C: //再 会, 谢 谢 你 啊.
zai hui xie xie ni a
again meet thank you SFP
[Bye. Thanks a lot.
- 10 R: 不 要 紧 不 要 紧.
bu yao jin bu yao jin
not matter not matter

No problem. No problem.

- 11 C: 哦, 再 会.
 o zai hui
 o again meet
 Ok. Bye.

Before we move onto the discussion of this excerpt, a brief discussion about the notion of “pre-closing” is in order. In the current analysis, the occurrence of the Chinese equivalent of ‘OK’ or ‘All right’ at the end of the last topic in a conversation is identified as pre-closing (based on modification of Schegloff and Sacks’ model) in light of particular linguistic features of the Chinese language. In addition, some specific criteria have been developed to distinguish pre-closing from closing.

In this analysis, pre-closing signals only become closing if they meet the following three conditions: First, pre-closing may convert into the actual initiation of closing if a pre-closing signal is reciprocated by the addressee in turn, thus producing an exchange of agreements. Secondly, no new topics are raised following its occurrence, and only then may a pre-closing signal become the actual initiation of a closing. Thirdly, as the ensuing discussion will illustrate, a pre-closing may constitute the actual initiation of a closing if there are no other explicit linguistic markers following up to indicate more clearly one’s intention to close.

In cases when all three conditions are satisfied, we might have the archetype of a closing as suggested by Button (1987), which consists of four turns with only the first two involving an exchange of pre-closing signals (or an initiation of a closing when no new topic is initiated)¹⁶ and two turns for leave-taking¹⁷, but this strategy is not common in the Chinese data. In fact, only ten percent of the Chinese calls in the data ended with only pre-closing signals and leave-taking sequences (without other overt linguistic forms of closing). More often, speakers in Chinese calls use other linguistic expressions such as matter-of-fact announcements (MFAs) and other forms, in addition to pre-closing signals.

Two observations can be made about excerpt number 1. First, a pre-closing signal ‘OK’ is observed in Line 3, following the end of the discussion of the previous topic. This ‘OK’ in Line 3 indicates that the speaker (recipient) is ready to close as she passes an opportunity of bringing up a new topic in her turn. Secondly, pre-closing signals such as ‘OK’ often do not function as the sole indicator for closing purposes. As we can see, within the same turn, the same speaker follows up with the MFA in Line 4¹⁸, which happens to overlap with the caller’s utterance in Line 5. The observed co-occurrence of the ‘OK’ (a pre-closing signal) and the MFA suggests that the speaker relies not only on the pre-closing signal but also the MFA. As we can see, the

¹⁶ Schegloff and Sacks (1973) point out that if a pre-closing leads to successful closing, then it constitutes the actual initiation of closing.

¹⁷ More discussion will follow with regard to the sequence and length of closings in Section 4.

¹⁸ The number here only indicates the sequence of lines, not actual turns. Therefore, although Line 3 and Line 4 are from the same speaker and constitute the same turn, it is presented on a separate line so that reference to each utterance in my discussion can be clearly indicated.

initiation of a closing in this case is explicitly indicated through the MFA in Line 4 and Line 5 by both parties¹⁹, not through the pre-closing signal in Line 3 alone. As can be observed in the transcript, the MFA then leads to reciprocated responses (and agreements) from both parties in Line 6 and 7 (again in overlapping speech).

The MFA constitutes, in fact, one of the most common ways of closing telephone conversations in Chinese between familiar parties, an observation based on analyses of the Chinese data. Of the total thirty-nine calls examined, the MFA is observed in seventeen calls (44%) out of the thirty-nine calls, which suggests a strong preference of its use. None of the other linguistic expressions obtains as high a percentage as the MFA for initiation of a closing.

MFAs are both similar to and different from the “overt announcement” in English discussed by Schegloff and Sacks (1973). There are two categories of overt announcements in English: “caller’s techniques” and “called’s techniques”; both categories make reference to the interest of the other party. Caller techniques include comments such as “I’ll let you go,” for example, while called’s techniques refer to expressions such as “This is costing you a lot of money.” The MFA category in Chinese bears similarity to overt announcements in that it announces one’s intention to close the call explicitly; on the other hand, while overt announcements refer to the addressee’s needs in some way, MFAs are neutral, making no reference to the interest of either the recipient or the caller herself, thus demonstrating differences from overt announcements in English. Caller techniques are observed in six calls (15%) while the occurrence of called-techniques appears to be rare in the Chinese data.²⁰

Not only does this unique category of closing differ from expressions in English, it manifests distinct features from other typical ways of closing in Chinese as well with regard to its function, propositional content, interactional orientation, and pragmatic context. First, this category of markers performs a distinct, discursive function of closing for a telephone conversation, since it is not commonly used in other interactions such as face-to-face encounters. We might designate for it the role of a closing signature²¹ in Chinese telephone conversations.

Secondly, in terms of its propositional content, unlike phrases such as ‘I’ll call you later’ or ‘You take care,’ such an announcement is bereft of any new topics (for example, future contact or concern for the addressee’s health), which either party might build on to move out of closing, thus the propositional content difference from other possible markers of closing.

Thirdly, addressing neither consolidation (such as appreciations, well-wishes, and regards to families) nor mitigation (such as caller techniques)²², this category is not oriented towards

¹⁹ It is not necessary that both parties make such an announcement. In this case, however, utterances from both parties overlap. What is more interesting is that both utterances also happen to be exactly the same – the matter-of-fact announcement, rendering an interactional style similar to an unrehearsed, synchronized verbal duet.

²⁰ There is only one case of recipient techniques observed, and it is implicit: ‘We’ve talked quite long now,’ which is an indirect reference to the cost of the call. However, this technique does not suggest that cost was not a major concern for participants. The reason that the issue of cost was not mentioned explicitly in the data examined is partly due to the fact that since all these calls were local, there was no specific charge for each individual call; in this case a flat rate applied to each individual household’s telephone account.

²¹ I am borrowing the term from Schegloff and Sacks (1973).

²² Laver (1975) discusses these two functions of phatic communion in parting.

rapport building as other categories are, a fact which constitutes the difference in interactional orientation compared to other possible closing markers. Lastly, with regard to its context of use, the occurrence of an MFA typically indexes less or little social distance between the two parties, as its use is observed only between people such as sisters, colleagues frequently contacted, familiar friends, or mothers and daughters. However, such use may not be a typical way to close between, for example, relatives with limited contact.

I suggest that several factors warrant the necessity of such an explicit marker for the discourse function of closing in Chinese. First, whereas phrases such as “All right,” “OK,” and “Well” in English may all serve as pre-closing signals, there is no equivalent in Chinese that performs the same pragmatic function for words such as “Well.” Therefore, only the Chinese equivalent of “OK” or “All right”²³ was observed as pre-closing signals. Secondly, while the downward intonation contour of the tokens for pre-closings in English makes their occurrence as well as function relatively easy to identify, intonation is irrelevant in Chinese, as it is a tonal language. Thirdly, since repetition is common in Chinese (as will become more evident in the ensuing discussions), the frequency of repetition in Chinese discourse renders it difficult to distinguish between the function of a reply to an utterance and a pre-closing signal. All three factors discussed make it difficult for the Chinese version of ‘OK’ to function adequately and distinctively as a marker of pre-closing²⁴. The category of MFAs, on the other hand, seems to have fulfilled such a discourse function in a much more transparent and effective manner pragmatically.

Analysis of linguistic forms used in closings indicates that MFAs in Chinese perform a distinct, context specific, discourse function. In particular, such linguistic markers do not seem to occur between topic shifts in ordinary conversations, nor are they used in non-closing-related topic-end boundaries. Rather, their use is mostly reserved and limited to closing boundary marking in telephone conversations, a distinct discursive function for particular discourse contexts.

4. Leave-takings

A brief explanation about the semantic meaning of the expression ‘goodbye’ in Chinese is needed before our discussion can proceed further. The expression “Goodbye” in Chinese is 再见 *zaijian* ‘again see’ in Mandarin or 再会 *zaihui* ‘again meet’ in the Shanghai dialect; both expressions function as a routine for leave-taking. In this discussion, I use the term “leave-taking” proposed by Clark and French (1981)²⁵ instead of the original term “terminal change” (Schegloff and Sacks 1973) because the use of the latter seems inadequate, in fact, problematic, for the Chinese data for two reasons. First, a leave-taking may not involve just one

²³ Both expressions share the Chinese equivalent 好 ‘good/fine/OK’.

²⁴ I am certainly not suggesting that the use of 好 ‘good/fine/OK’ in Chinese is useless, however.

²⁵ Clark and French argue that the goodbye exchange is optional rather than required, based on their study of telephone switch board interactions as such an exchange doesn’t terminate the call per se; it is used, the authors propose, to implement and complete the reaffirmation process for interlocutors already acquainted with each other.

exchange; secondly, it does not always end up taking the terminal position only. It is for these reasons that the term “terminal exchange” cannot be used to appropriately account for the patterns manifested in the data. I will illustrate both points in detail shortly.

Chinese leave-taking patterns exhibit major differences from English leave-taking patterns in length, structure, and interaction styles: In general, a leave-taking in Chinese often consists of more than a single exchange of goodbyes; in fact, the structure of a leave-taking often goes beyond an adjacency pair. More than two-thirds of the calls in the data completed leave-taking with three or more turns. Furthermore, repetition and overlaps are extremely common in the data, suggesting an interactional style of involvement.

4.1. Beyond-adjacency-pair patterns

An adjacency pair, a two-turn exchange, is proposed as a basic structural unit of conversation, as realized in, for example, a request and a reply, an invitation and an acceptance (or rejection), or a "terminal exchange" of "good-byes" in English conversation closings (Schegloff & Sacks 1973). One of the most salient characteristics of Chinese closings is that the majority of the calls do not end with a single adjacency pair of leave-taking as is the case in English. As leave-taking extends beyond an adjacency pair in these cases, I use the term beyond-adjacency-pair patterns in this article to refer to a leave-taking that is accomplished with more than two turns. Of the total thirty-nine calls, the majority (69%) of them actually end with leave-taking involving three or more turns, as Table 1 below illustrates.

Table 1
Structural patterns of Chinese leave-taking

| | Total Number of calls | Percentage |
|---|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Adjacency pair pattern (two turns) | 12 | 31% |
| Beyond-adjacency-pair patterns (two plus turns) | 27 | 69% |
| Total number of calls | 39 | 100% |

Breakdown of Beyond-adjacency-pair patterns

| | | |
|------------------------------------|----|-----|
| Three-turns (tripartite structure) | 12 | 31% |
| Four-turns | 8 | 20% |
| Five or more turns | 7 | 18% |
| Subtotal | 27 | 69% |

Three aspects of difference render the beyond-adjacency-pair saliently different from the adjacency pair pattern: First, the number of turns contributed by each party does not necessarily manifest an equal share between the two parties, thus rendering it unbalanced, if balance (or equal turns of contribution) is crucial in an adjacency pair. In cases of leave-taking involving three, five, or seven turns, apparently one party contributes one more turn regardless of who initiates leave-taking. Secondly, the assumed convention of having one exchange of leave-taking as in English leave-taking may not be as important, and may in fact be atypical for

some relations in some contexts in Chinese culture. Specifically, repetition may in fact be common, an issue to be explored in detail in Section 4.2. Thirdly, as “two-utterance length” is a characteristic of an adjacency pair, most of the calls in the data do not fit into this category; thus problems arise as to how to account for the patterns observed. Lastly, the way that the initiation of leave-taking is produced may also have an impact on why Chinese leave-taking tends to be non-adjacency-pair oriented, a phenomenon to be discussed shortly after we examine the following example of a tripartite structure (i.e. one type of a beyond-adjacency-pair pattern) of leave-taking.

(2)

1 → C: 再 见 啊.
 zai jian a
 again see SFP
 By::e²⁶

2 → R: 再 见.
 zai jian
 again see
 Bye.

3 → C: 哎, 再 见.
 ei zai jian
 yes again see
 OK,²⁷ bye.

Excerpt 2 provides an example of a caller initiating leave-taking, the recipient offering a reply, and finally the caller confirming the closure. This triplet of leave-taking featuring initiation, reply, and affirmation demonstrates a similarity to the three-move structure proposed by Coulthard (1977), which is comprised of initiation, response, and follow-up²⁸. In the example discussed here and in similar cases in the data, the first leave-taking turn is often realized with a particle 啊 *ah* (or 哦 *o* in the Shanghai dialect) attached to the word ‘good-bye’ (as in Line 1), which is also called Sentence Final Particle (Li & Thompson 1981). Such articles often have no lexical import yet serve attitudinal or interpersonal meanings, and in this case, reduce the forcefulness (RF) of an utterance.

Linguistically, the particle transforms the leave-taking utterance (in Line 1 of Excerpt 2 above) into an interactively oriented form, awaiting and requiring a response from the addressee.

²⁶ The colons indicate a stretched sound.

²⁷ The ‘OK’ in the last utterance (Line 3) is optional, and may not occur in other calls. Its presence in this call, however, highlights the caller’s interaction with the recipient in that it serves as a token of response to the recipient’s leave-taking.

²⁸ Coulthard’s discussion is focused on the structure of classroom interactional talk in which it is typical for a teacher to follow up elicited student response with evaluative comments in a third turn.

Pragmatically, instead of enacting parting in a straightforward fashion, this particle softens the tone of the utterance, rendering it in a tentative manner and calling for mutual agreement in leave-taking²⁹. In turn, the response in line 2 from the addressee offers acceptance and approval, which is then confirmed by the speaker in the third turn of leave-taking (Line 3). As a matter of fact, the tripartite structure is a common pattern as can be seen in Table 1 above, constituting thirty-one percent of the structural patterns of leave-taking in the data. It is therefore not an idiosyncratic phenomenon unique to one or two individuals.

If we examine the beyond-adjacency-pair pattern across the group of participants, each of the six callers features a minimum of one call in the beyond-adjacency-pair pattern category as shown in Table 2 below, although one individual (caller number 1) shows a much lower percentage (25%) compared to the group average (69%). However, if we examine all the individuals, four out of the six callers (callers #3, 4, 5 & 6) exhibit a dominant pattern of beyond-adjacency-pair leave-taking, which suggests that this is a pattern common to the group. The fact that Chinese leave-taking tends to be collaboratively lengthy is also corroborated in interviews I conducted with the participants following data collection.

Table 2
Breakdown of individual caller patterns:

| | <i>Two-turn leave-taking</i> | <i>Beyond two-turn leave-taking</i> | <i>Total number of relevant calls</i> |
|-----------|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Caller #1 | 3 (75%) | 1 (25%) | 4 |
| Caller #2 | 4 (50%) | 4 (50%) | 8 |
| Caller #3 | 2 (33%) | 4 (67%) | 6 |
| Caller #4 | 2 (20%) | 8 (80%) | 10 |
| Caller #5 | 1 (20%) | 4 (80%) | 5 |
| Caller #6 | / | 6 (100%) | 6 |
| Total | 12 (31%) | 27 (69%) | 39 (100%) |

4.2. Repetition and overlaps

In Chinese, repetition³⁰ is a common feature of discourse and occurs in different forms. In the current analysis, three different uses of repetition will be discussed: The within-same-turn repetition, leave-taking repetition, and the echo-repetition.

The first type of repetition exhibited in the data refers to repetition of the same token by the same speaker within the same turn, as we have seen in example (1) Line 1 & 7 previously. This

²⁹ Other examples of the use of such force reducing particle include meal time situations, for example. Instead of saying ‘Eat meal’ (which sounds like an order), one might say 吃饭了啊 ‘eat meal + aspect particle + reduction force particle,’ which softens its directive force, making the utterance more of an announcement.

³⁰ I use the term repetition and reiteration interchangeably without suggesting difference in meaning in the current analysis.

is similar to self-repetition discussed in Tannen (1989) and Pavlidou (2002) except that in Chinese, the same word is repeated once or more times in the same turn by the same speaker for emphasis, especially with one or two-syllable words. The following list provides some examples of such expressions and further illustrates the use of such repetition in other interactions.

| | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 谢谢 谢谢 | Thank you. | Thank you. |
| 你好 你好 | How do you do./Hello. | |
| 请坐 请坐 | Please sit down. | Please sit down. |
| 慢走 慢走 | Walk slowly. | Walk slowly. |
| 恭喜 恭喜/祝贺 祝贺 | Congratulations. | Congratulations. |
| 没关系 没关系 | No problem. | No problem. |
| 不要紧 不要紧 | It doesn't matter. | It doesn't matter. |

As we can see, there is a fairly large number of expressions, which are repeated in the form of ABAB, ABCABC, or even AAAA to reinforce meaning. What these expressions have in common is that although each expression can be used on its own just as leave-taking is, in reality, very often, each phrase is repeated at least once, lending more force (or insistence as in offering) on the part of the speaker. Of special relevance here are the formulaic expressions used for social interactions such as greeting, thanking, and congratulating, all of which resemble the reiteration of leave-taking in telephone conversations. These examples reflect the commonality and prevalence of repetition.

The second form of repetition is exhibited in the reiteration of leave-taking in different turns by the same speaker, another prevalent feature in the data, as shown in Line 5 and 6 of Example (3) below.

(3)

- 1 C: 哦 // ³¹ 哦 哦 好, 别 的 没 // 什 么
 o o o hao bie de mei shen me
 OK OK OK all right other PT not what
 Ok, all right. That's about it.
- 2 R: ///好 的 //好,
 hao de hao
 good PT good
 All right, Ok.
- 3 再 会 哦::
 zai hui o
 again meet SFP
 By::
 e.

³¹ The “///” marker is distinguished from the “//” marker for the purpose of differentiating instances of overlapped speech within the same turn here.

4 C: 再 会.
zai hui
again meet
Bye.

5 → R: 再 会.
zai hui
again meet
Bye.

6 → C: 再 会.
zai hui
again meet
Bye.

Similar to the case in excerpt (2), the initial leave-taking is produced with a softening particle in Line 3. While example (2) involves a tripartite structure for leave-taking, there are four turns in example (3), with both parties performing leave-taking more than once (Lines 3 and 5 by the recipient and Lines 4 and 6 by the caller). Many other examples in the data present a similar pattern, showing that repetition of a leave-taking by either or both parties is the norm rather than the exception. In fact, the number of turns for a leave-taking vary; the closing with the highest number of turns for leave-taking features an eight-turn-leave-taking³².

Although repeated leave-takings may seem superfluous to non-Chinese speakers, reiteration conveys interpersonal meaning. Tannen (1989) states that repetition in bounding episodes are common, serving to set the theme at the beginning and to form a coda at the end. It is a “fundamental, pervasive, and infinitely useful linguistic strategy” (1989: 87). It also performs the functions of participation, ratifying, savoring, expanding, and bonding³³, strengthening interpersonal involvement. In Chinese, reiteration of leave-taking, for example, seems to enhance bonding, emphasize the speaker’s attitudinal and emotional alignment toward the addressee, and may even imply one’s unwillingness to part as well as one’s eagerness for future contact, thus contributing to solidarity and relationship strengthening. Pavlidou (1998) reports that Greeks use repetition to express agreement and elicit confirmation while Germans use tag questions to seek confirmation. Chinese strategies seem to utilize both repetition and particles: Particles are used to seek confirmation; repetition in the leave-taking formula is also a common feature for involvement and bonding.

The third type of repetition, the “echo-repetition,” is observed in the case of matter-of-fact announcements for initiation of a closing, when the party responding to the initiation of the closing also makes an echo as a token of agreement or acceptance (“other repetition” in

³² The number of turns for closing analyzed here has excluded those calls in which the first leave-taking turn is followed by the introduction of new topics.

³³ Other functions discussed by Tannen are not relevant in the data under examination.

Tannen's category) of the same utterance produced by the speaker who initiates the closing.

It is no incident, in my view, that the patterns of repetition observed in this study share features with the findings by Gu (1990) with regard to offering in Chinese. Gu proposes that the structure of an invitation in Chinese constitutes a minimum of a three-exchange structure. Granted, leave-taking is different from offering. While the former is constitutive of a leave-taking routine required of both parties, the latter necessarily designates different participant roles - the one who offers versus the one who receives. In spite of the different communicative acts involved, repetition serves a similar function of enhancement, of hospitality and sincerity in the case of offering or inviting and an enactment of bonding and attachment in the case of leave-taking.

4.3. *Overlaps and simultaneous speech*

Overlaps and simultaneous speech are also common features of Chinese discourse between participants who are familiar to each other. As we see in Example (1) below, the caller and the recipient again exhibited overlaps in three consecutive turns: Their overlapped initiation of closing as in Line 4 and 5, their overlapped replies in Lines 6 and 7, as well as their overlapped leave-taking in Lines 8 and 9. If either party were not comfortable with such an interaction style, one of them would have paused, or slowed down, because of feeling awkward, or waiting for her proper turn for fear of "cutting in", which is not the case, based on the interactional pattern we observe here. Both participants carried on the interaction without any modification of pace or style, it seems, indicating a sense of harmony and ease.

(1)

4→ R //就这 样 哦
 jiu zhe yang o
 just this SFP
 //That's all for now then, OK?

5→ C: //就这 样 哦.
 jiu zhe yang
 just this SFP
 //That's all for now then, OK?

6 R: //好
 hao
 Ok.

7 C: //好
 hao
 OK.

- 8 R: //再 会.
 zai hui
 again meet
 [Bye.
- 9 C: //再 会, 谢 谢 你 啊.
 zai hui xie xie ni a
 again meet thank you SFP
 [Bye. Thanks a lot.
- 10 R: 不 要 紧 不 要 紧.
 bu yao jin bu yao jin
 not matter not matter
 No problem at all.
- 11 C: 哦, 再 会.
 o zai hui
 o again meet
 Ok. Bye.

Furthermore, in each case, they produced almost the same utterances, thus presenting a harmonious collaborative exit out of the conversation, which is similar to a craftily executed duet of closing.

Examination of the data shows that of the total thirty-nine calls, twenty-two calls (56%) exhibit some overlaps or simultaneous speech in the closing phase, presenting overlaps and simultaneous speech as common patterns of interaction between familiar parties in casual conversations.

Whether it is overlapped speech or simultaneous speech, such interactional styles suggest high involvement strategies: The encoding of rapport, closeness, and enthusiasm. These phenomena are in accordance with descriptions of a business meeting by Li, Zhu & Li (2001) with regard to the interactional feature of overlaps and simultaneous speech. Similar findings are discussed in Pavlidou (1997) about the less dyadic order of speech in Greek and the commonality of overlaps and latching: "The speakers give the impression that they want to reach the end of the conversation in concert" (1997: 152).

5. Conclusion

Analysis of the Chinese data suggests that ways of closing telephone conversations may not be the same across languages and cultures. It was observed that a unique matter-of-fact category constitutes a common way for the initiation of closings. Compared to other expressions for closings, the matter-of-fact announcements exhibit salient differences in discursive function, propositional content, interactional orientation, and pragmatic context. It is also shown that the

archetype pattern of closings as suggested by Button does not constitute a dominant pattern in the Chinese data.

This study also found that leave-taking completed in an adjacency pair is not the dominant pattern although it may occur in Chinese interaction. Observed leave-taking patterns indicate that leave-taking involving more than one exchange of goodbye is more typical in Chinese calls between acquainted parties, and that brevity is often not the primary concern nor the norm for such interactions. Instead, the “adjacency pair” principle of organization may frequently be overridden by interactional needs and interpersonal meaning making. As Pavlidou (2002) observes, the canonical or archetype closing assumes an “interactionally economical solution, which pays minimal attention to the relationship aspect of communication” (224). While the canonical or archetype closing is “the marked case” in Greek, findings of this study suggest a similar pattern in Chinese. Furthermore, repetition and overlaps are common discursive features for Chinese participants, suggesting a high involvement style as the norm.

Although telephone conversation closings have been examined mostly for their procedural functions, the examination of Chinese closing exemplified in the current analysis demonstrates how the structural aspect of interaction intersects with interpersonal meaning making, and how interactional styles affect the interactional outcome. Furthermore, the current study presents descriptions of linguistic forms for closing and their context of use, which provides us with insights into how native speakers of Chinese in given cultural contexts attend to both procedural needs and interpersonal meaning making collaboratively in accomplishing closings successfully.

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