



Response cries and syntax

Leelo Keevallik ^{a,*}, Emily Hofstetter ^a, Agnes Löfgren ^b, Sally Wiggins ^c

^a Department of Culture and Society, Linköping University, Sweden

^b Centre de linguistique appliquée, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland

^c Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Sweden



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ABSTRACT

Response cries have been described as ritualized acts in human communication that come off as visceral reactions to local events (Goffman, 1978). Despite evidence that they are implemented at specific interactional moments, such as pain expressions in response to doctor's elicitation (Heath 1989) or surprise tokens after news or stories (Wilkinson & Kitzinger 2006), research has yet to explore how they are organized in relation to syntax and incorporated into turn design. This study addresses this omission and targets the relationship between syntactic constructions and response cries. Based on data from a variety of contexts, such as family meals, sports training, and performance rehearsals, we demonstrate how response cries are produced in ways that reflexively elaborate co-occurring stance-taking constructions and embodied displays to make a syntactic whole. We argue that syntactic theories should include such structures in their scope, lest they fail to account for the way syntax emerges in response to interactional requirements.

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1. Introduction

The term *response cry* was coined by Goffman (1978) to describe a word or sound produced in response to an event (such as stumbling, winning at a slot machine, suddenly experiencing heat, etc.). Goffman treated these vocal events as self-talk, i.e., produced by people not currently involved in a social encounter, although they can be overheard by co-present others.

A response cry is (if anything is) a ritualized act in something like the ethological sense of that term. Unable to shape the world the way we want to, we display our manipulation of it to the verbal channel, displaying evidence of the alignment to the on-going events; the display takes the condensed, truncated form of a discretely-articulated, non-lexicalized expression (Goffman 1978: 801).

Response cries that are temporally anchored in the local scene include threat startles, transition displays, revulsion sounds, pain cries, strain grunts, and others. Goffman (1978: 801) was the first to argue that these sounds are not necessarily “natural emotional expressions”, but that they are produced to provide information to others as ritualized acts. In this paper, we will study marginally conventionalized, i.e., not clearly lexicalized response cries that are uttered in the co-presence of others, and thus treated as meaningful contributions to interaction, among other things through their co-organization with syntax.

* Corresponding author. Department of Culture and Society, Linköping University, 583 81 Linköping, Sweden.

E-mail address: leelo.keevallik@liu.se (L. Keevallik).

1.1. The spontaneity of response cries

The essence of response cries is that their sequential placement in the immediate aftermath of an event performs them as visceral reactions to that event. Thus, as elements of speaker turns, they often occur turn-initially, as shown for the cognitive realization token 'oh' (Heritage 1984: 325) as well as in the case of gustatory *mmms*, which typically precede assessment terms (Wiggins 2002: 321); their placement is central to producing these as authentic displays. Perhaps due to their frequency across languages at turn-initial positions, or due to this link between genuineness of response cry and turn-initial design, response cries have primarily been studied in this turn position. A turn-initial response cry can invite verbal comments on whatever is being topicalized, such as bodily discomfort in relation to the Finnish vocalization *huh huh* (Pehkonen 2020). Displays of affiliation with complaint stories, often produced as response cries, also occur in turn-initial position and can then be expanded by “verbal reinforcement”, a syntactic element that possibly disambiguates their meaning (see Couper-Kuhlen 2012, under the term “sound objects”). The temporal urgency of response cries can, however, require that they occur at a variety of junctures. Many features of language in interaction must be arranged in order to produce the response cry at the optimal moment so that a new turn may be started at the relevant trigger, and the emergent syntax and prosody arranged to incorporate ongoing events. Response cries are typically characterized by extreme prosodies and the use of sounds not included in the standard phonotactics of a specific language (Goffman 1978: 810), which we see in analyses especially of non-lexical displays of strain, pain, and disgust (Keevallik 2023; Keevallik and Ogden 2020: 5; Weatherall et al., 2021; Wiggins and Keevallik, 2023). Put simply, a lot of interactional work lies behind the production of response cries as immediate and spontaneous.

This paper thus investigates how participants in interaction accommodate the ‘disruptions’ in unfolding (verbal) interaction that occur with the timely production of response cries. In other words, how do participants provide for an immediate response to an apparently embodied event while not disrupting the flow of the rest of the conversation? At this point of balance between the “natural overflowing”, i.e., achieved event, of the body and the social organization of (verbal) interaction, there are opportunities for qualitatively different meaning-making, where perceptual and embodied resources (ongoing experience of the world) and conceptual (linguistic and conventionalized) resources are combined. In this paper, we focus on non-lexical response cries, excluding imprecations (such as swear words) and other verbal constructions that Goffman classifies as response cries (e.g. *Wow! Goodness!*), however we use the term ‘response cries’ so as to focus on their positioning relative to an event. Our aim is to explore the deployment of non-lexical response cries, as arguably the least likely candidates to be participating in regular syntax, within ongoing turn-constructural units and thus the grammar of interaction.

1.2. The temporal organization of bodies, response cries, and syntax

When producing response cries, participants in interaction often balance between organizing the ongoing interaction smoothly *and* achieving sufficient viscosity: it cannot be so smooth that it appears disingenuous nor so extreme that it ruptures the social order. Low levels of conventionalization, marked prosody, and immediacy must occur (to make the response cry recognizable as such), but also be integrated in turns with more conventionalized organization and turn-oriented timing. This tension provides opportunities for meaning making, whereby participants play on the ways that the response cry is integrated into the emerging syntax and turns, with impact on progressivity. Progressivity of talk was classically discussed by Schegloff (2007: 14–16), where he argued that “the default relationship between the components of most kinds of organization is that each should come next after the prior.” (p.16), including next words, syllables and sounds. On the one hand, Goffman (1978) described how many response cries involved actively minimizing digression, for example with ‘spill cries’ such as *oops* downplaying the disruptiveness of the event so that it does not intervene with the general progressivity of action (and, more fundamentally, the speaker's control of their body). On the other hand, many cases have since been described with lengthier digressions from the ongoing action sequence, initiated by an event together with a response cry. For example, Weatherall et al. (2021) have demonstrated how unanticipated pain displays at primary care visits, such as a sharp inbreath combined with a bodily recoil, immediately change the sequence of action to focus on the pain. Similarly, Ben Moshe (2023) has shown how a gasp (ingressive voiceless sound) upon spilling tea dramatically changes the trajectory of talk to address the urgent need to clean up the sofa. In these instances, the triggering events and the response cries occasion the reorientation of the interactional trajectory to a different topical matter. There is also evidence that a strain grunt during rock climbing may effectively provide an account that the speaker is incapable of continuing with the ongoing syntactic unit (Hofstetter et al., 2021). However, research has yet to synthesize how turn design and syntax emergently organize the immediate vicinity of response cries.

Of particular relevance for the current paper, response cries provide a perspicuous opportunity to examine how bodies and syntax interlace in turns at talk, since so many response cries deal with emergent bodily, including cognitive, events (strain, pain, change-of-cognitive-state, affect etc.). Syntactic patterns are connected to the body and multimodal sense-making in a variety of ways. First, syntax is deployed contingently on other participants' behavior, such as gaze availability (Goodwin 1980) or body movements (Mondada 2007). Second, the body can complete syntax, such as clause-beginnings combined with embodied demonstrations to complete an interactionally meaningful syntactic-bodily unit (Keevallik 2013; Li 2016; Olsher 2004). It can also impact ongoing syntax, such as when relative clauses are retrospectively added to an already complete sentence due to a recipient's puzzled gaze after a person reference (Stoënica and Pekarek Doehler 2020). Third,

literature on interaction in mobile contexts (Haddington et al., 2013; McIlvenny et al., 2014) has discussed how speaking is coordinated with different ways of moving, including cycling and driving, and refocusing groups together (Broth and Mondada 2013, 2019; vom Lehn 2013; Löfgren 2023; Mondada 2018a). Last but not least, reference to objects is achieved through both linguistic and embodied practices (Goodwin 1994; Eriksson 2009). The embodied aspects of achieving intersubjectivity are especially notable in instruction, where multimodal contingencies can affect the type of syntax used (Deppermann 2018), and where syllables are accentuated to achieve, maintain, and underline joint embodied behavior (Keevallik 2015). Thus, although the body has previously been excluded from consideration concerning the structure or patterns of syntax, we have begun to understand how syntactic productions are deeply embedded in embodied sense making. It is surprising, then, that literature to date has barely investigated how response cries are organized with respect to syntax, given that they are a frequent co-occurring phenomenon with embodied events and intimately connected to unfolding multimodal circumstances.

Response cries manage the public display of emergent bodily events, and must therefore interface with ongoing activities as well as syntax, making them a useful starting place to examine how syntax and the sensing, living, and moving body are organized together (Streeck 2013; see also Di Paolo et al., 2018). An explosion of work in multisensoriality, the way in which senses are invoked and publicly organized, has arisen in the last several years, particularly within the study of interaction (e.g. Fele and Liberman 2021; Mondada 2018b, 2020, 2023; Wiggins and Osvaldsson Cromdal 2021), however the connection to either syntax or response cries has been limited (also unlike interjections more broadly, which have seen some connection to syntax, e.g. Dingemanse 2024). It has been shown that bodily effort can affect the temporal organization of conversational sequences (Keevallik 2018) and can also shape the use of language, such as when a speaker is out of breath due to physical strain or when tasting a drink (Hofstetter et al., 2021; Mondada 2021). Given the evidence that movement and environment are so impactful on emergent syntax, it is critical to investigate how the senses of the body also play a role. The present paper aims to further this inquiry through the examination of how bodily motivated response cries affect the unfolding of grammar, thus targeting the interface of embodied expression and syntax.

2. Method and data

To achieve an emic perspective and capture non-verbal aspects of social interaction, we deploy the principles of multimodal interaction analysis (Broth and Keevallik 2020; Goodwin 2013; Mondada, 2012; Robinson et al., 2024) and our work is rooted in the ethnomethodological conversation analysis (EMCA) framework. The method involves analyzing video-recorded interactions on a millisecond-by-millisecond basis, tracking precise details of the participants' behaviors using transcriptions. This enables scrutiny of otherwise fleeting real-time practices and their coordination across interactants. The analysis uses the participants' displayed sense-making of each other's actions as evidence of their meaning, which is especially valuable when discovering hitherto unanalyzed embodied practices, as it avoids solely analyst-motivated categories. It is important not to 'take apart' the various sections of the interacting body, such as to study vocal words and manual gestures separately, but to scrutinize how those aspects are unified in interactional moments to create meaning. In other words, the analyst should maintain the same holistic situated perspective as participants (see e.g. Goodwin and Goodwin 1996; McNeill 2005). The analysis must not make claims about the ontological status of (parts of) the body but rather examine how and when these parts become formulated for particular purposes in interaction (Wiggins and Osvaldsson Cromdal 2021), in order to understand how the body becomes relevant.

The method of multimodal interaction analysis builds from in-depth single-case analyses, then testing for systematicity of practices across events and domains. As the analysis takes its starting point with the actual interacting bodies of participants, regularities and patterns often emerge as qualitatively different from what is usually abstracted into grammars. The living temporality of the body and (inter)action may, for example, provide evidence of unexpected paradigmatic relations between grammatical items (e.g. the parallel use of the contrastive conjunction 'but' and the contrastive preposition 'instead of' between the correct and incorrect demonstration of a dance move; Keevallik 2017).

The data for this study are taken from diverse settings and three different languages (Estonian, Swedish and various varieties of English) to evidence the robustness of the syntactic patterns identified. Data comprise video recordings of:

- Rock climbing – non-professional climbers of different experience levels, both indoor and outdoor climbing, in Canada and the United States (20.5 h) and Sweden (1.5 h).
- Family mealtimes – 77 mealtimes (20 h) in Scotland and Sweden, from 6 families having meals with their 5- to 9-month-old infants. Data are in English.
- Opera rehearsals – rehearsing for a professional opera production (20 h), during the phase of staging the scenic movements, that is, what performers will do onstage to portray their characters. Data are in Swedish and English, with occasional Italian occurring as it is the language of the libretto.
- Dance classes – group instruction (38 h) from 17 teachers, in Estonian (9 h), English (15 h), and Swedish (13 h).
- Pilates classes – one instructor's classes in Estonian (4 h).

All participants gave informed consent for their recordings to be used in research and had the opportunity to withdraw at any point. Permission for the infants to be recorded was granted by their parents. The ethical approval for rock climbing and


```

05 CLI    =det var verkligen för*[skönt
           that was really too comfortable
           cli          -->*
06 CAM          [aw:[hh
07 PER          [#åh nej,
                 oh no
           fig          #Fig1.2

08 CLI    dra: åt helvete.
           go to hell ((not addressed to anyone))
    
```



Fig. 1.1. Bent over.



Fig. 1.2. Oh no.

Extract 2 features 9-year-old Joseph eating a sandwich during a family lunch and producing a gustatory *mmm* with an expansion. He gazes toward his father as he produces the non-lexical vocalization (Figure 2.1).

Extract 2. Gustatory vocalization (in English)

```

01          + (2.0)          +# (0.2)
jos         +food into mouth  +gz to Dad
fig                                     #Fig.2.1

02 JOS     mmm:: this is +lovely
jos         +gz to plate
    
```



Fig. 2.1. Gaze to dad.

In the two initial cases, the response cry is prosodically latched to the ensuing talk. This does not characterize every turn-initial case in our collection, but it does clearly mark the connection between the response cry and talk, as well as enabling the speaker to emphasize the incompleteness of the response cry on its own. With respect to how the subsequent talk connects to the response cry, these cases show different designs. In Extract 1, the climber uses an anaphoric referent term in Swedish, *det* 'it/that', with a description of the problematic hold. Given that no one else among the group has touched the hold, and that the others withhold any comment until the explanation of the response cry, it seems that it was unexpected that the hold would cause any problems, and that there was a mystery about what could have caused the pain (it could have been a sudden internal injury rather than the hold). In contrast, in Extract 2, Joseph's gustatory *mmm* is produced while he is visibly chewing, and it is the same food that the other family members are also consuming. They might arguably make similar assessments of the food (that it is lovely, for instance), but the *mmm* situates the assessment within Joseph's own immediate sensory experience. In other words, it makes available his bodily response for the recipient (in this case, his father, to whom he gazes as he produces the sound). The object-side assessment ('this is lovely') then retrospectively constructs the vocalization as based on properties of the food rather than his particular food preferences (Wiggins and Potter, 2003). The *mmm*-plus-assessment turn thus not only further specifies the focus of the vocalization but also anchors the latter in the former.

The pattern of response cry in turn-initial position is so recognizable to speakers across settings that it can even be deployed in a context where the triggering event occurs in the imagined world of an opera libretto. The following Extract (3) is taken from Swedish scenic opera rehearsals, and the opera director (DIR) is instructing the baritone (BAR) how to hug the soprano's character. In particular, he should be moving his arms during the hug, which the DIR at first characterizes as *klamrande* 'clinging' (L5). She then moves on to provide a response cry *hah::*, an affective display that perhaps comes closest to the threat startle (Goffman 1978: 802), and a further assessment of the hug, and possibly of the entire situation in which the characters of the opera find themselves (L8).

Extract 3. It's so horrible (in Swedish; opera data)

```

01 DIR    de behöver inte va ett grepp asså=
          it does not have to be one hold like
02 ASD    =nej nej exakt=
          no no exactly
03 DIR    =pågå
          keep going on
04        (.)
05 DIR    å fly- hå- men asså de e så:: de e så klamrande=
          and mo- ho- but like it's so it's so clinging
06 ASD    =ja
          yeah
07        (.)
08 DIR    #*hah:: det e så hemskt
          hah it's so horrible
          dir    *hand to chest--->
          fig    #Fig3.1

09        (.)
10 BAR    de* där e ju väldit (.)
          that's like very
          dir    -->*
11 DIR    despe[ra::t ] ja älskar de asså
          desperate I just love it
12 BAR    [(kraft)]
          power

```

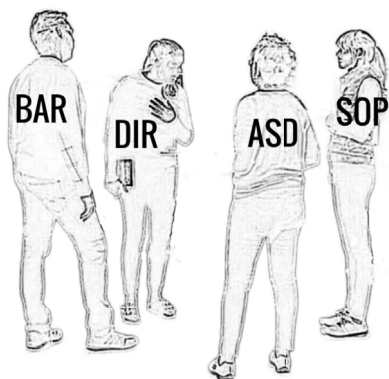


Fig. 3.1. *Hah it's so horrible.*

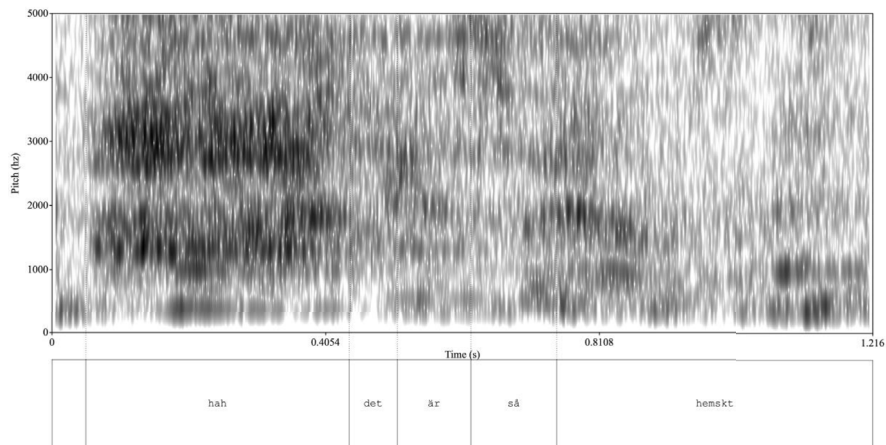


Fig. 3.2. Response cry continuing into the assessment.

The focal turn emerges in the context of discussions on how to represent the horror of a father (BAR) who finds that his daughter has lost her honor, which is why he mourns her innocent childhood; they discuss how it may manifest during a hug. The director and the associate director (ASD) agree that it does not have to be one hold (L1-2). Instead, the director suggests *klamrande* ‘clinging’ (L5), as a visual characterization of the hug, before embodying the horror through both her bodily shape (Figure 3.1) and the affective *hah::* (L8-10). This comes off as both the director’s reaction to the emotional load of the scene that they are staging, as well as an instruction to the baritone for how to perform his character. The trigger event in this case is semi-fictional – since the affect expressed is that of the baritone’s character, as much as the director’s reaction – and so the response cry serves to produce the emotion as suddenly overwhelming the director, ‘pouring out’ as Goffman had it. As in cases 1–2 above, the response cry is followed by, and characterized more precisely by, the verbal assessment that follows, as well as prosodically part of the same turn’s contour (see the spectrogram in Figure 3.2). This illustrates the conventionalization of the syntactic pattern and turn-organization – response cry + elaboration – as it can be produced in the absence of a physical trigger in the real world, and performed as a proposal of a display for the character. The ambiguity between visceral and performed uses is an overall characteristic of response cries, reflecting their ritualized nature (Goffman 1978; Keevallik 2023).

The above evidence demonstrates that turns are designed to *make* response cries occur and function at turn-initial positions. Response cries are here projected and designed into specific locations appropriate to the context. In Extract 2, for example, Joseph produced the vocalization at the point at which it was possible to make a sound while still chewing and to then immediately launch the talk. Much as Heath (1989) demonstrated that pain cries are organized according to the social interaction of physical examinations, not solely according to the presence or absence of internal feelings, so are we arguing that specifically syntax is sensitive to, and a resource for organizing, the occurrence of response cries.² Weatherall et al., 2021 (2021: 63–64) also show a case where a doctor palpating a patient’s elbow results in a response cry from the patient (a sharp inbreath of pain), and immediately after a response cry (*uuuw*) from the doctor as well. Both the patient and doctor produce a verbal elaboration immediately after, in overlap, but the patient’s cry and description slightly precede the doctor’s, producing the patient as the primary “feeler” and person with rights to express the details of the response cry, and the doctor as observing and drawing inference. While the patient utters the assessment *that is very painful* after the response cry, the doctor continues after his response cry with the question *it is very tender is it*, which elicits a confirmation by the patient, thereby maintaining the patient’s right to her sensations.

In all the above instances, we showed how response cries can be designed to appear in turn-initial position, with co-participants making space for the occurrence of the cry and sometimes initiation of a turn, and with the speakers often latching or through-producing a verbal elaboration so it occurs in the same turn as the response cry. However, there are many cases where the response cry is treated as sufficient, without verbal elaboration. They can easily constitute turns on their own (Schegloff 1996), as is also the case with conversational particles such as news receipts (*oh* in English (Heritage 1984) or *ahaa* in Estonian (Keevallik 1999)), showing cognitive (i.e. embodied) work, which further underlines the deliberate work that goes into designing them as turn-initial items. A response cry can stand alone when all parties are already attending to the ongoing triggering events. They then emerge as stand-alone items, both initiating and completing the turn, as co-participants respond immediately with fitted second pair parts, treating the response cry as a turn on its own. For example, a strain grunt during heavy physical work may occasion teasing

² We are not aiming to suggest that Heath’s argument was lacking, simply that it oriented to a different concern, namely that of how experiences are embedded in participating in an interaction. Heath focuses on how the pain cries are elicited by procedures at specific times—and the pain is expressed largely only *at those times, not whenever it might happen to be felt*. The paper also focuses on gaze, responses of the physician, and the design of the cry, but not much on the turn design and not at all on syntax.

comments by co-workers, such as *You're getting tired* (Keevallik 2023) or a surprise *uoo* by someone turning around a pancake may be followed by another person uttering a noticing that the pancake is already burned (Keevallik and Amon 2023). In any case, the participants' elaborations involve various degrees of work to re-situate the response cry as connected to a feeling or bodily event that is then semantically clarified. The connection to the embodied circumstances is variably available to co-participants; in Extract 1, the onlookers do not yet know how problematic the rock hold is, and respond with displays of being informed and of empathy once it is clear. In Extract 2, the other family members are eating the same food but do not necessarily experience it in the same way as Joseph. In Extract 3, the baritone and director both continue to specify the feelings involved in the hug, demonstrating their ongoing efforts to come to agreement about how it should be produced onstage.

In summary, turn-initial response cries demonstrate how participants mutually organize the unfolding sensory experience alongside the unfolding syntax and turn-design. Those response cries that are accomplished as turn-initial occur at that point because co-participants open space for the sound by not talking, and sometimes further withhold responding comments until an elaboration is produced. It is not happenstance temporality that response cries end up initiating turns; it is a byproduct of participants projecting the possibility of triggering events and attending to possible contingencies. However, the triggering events may also be obvious in the context, and thus interpretable by co-participants who are invited to immediately act on them.

3.2. Response cries later in the turn

A response cry can furthermore be used in a later position in a turn, such as after the explanation has already been uttered, or even by deliberately bringing about the triggering event. Speakers may display extended engagement with the event, as lagging beyond its momentaneous initiation. Extract 4 is from a family meal where Mum has just swallowed a spoonful of coconut oil for health benefits, and as she is appearing in the kitchen door (Figure 4.1), Dad is teasing her for her disgusted reactions (Wiggins and Keevallik 2023). This is followed by Mum's disagreement and a disgust sound (L5).

Extract 4. Coconut oil (in English).

```

01 DAD      €oh you've had a lovely- (.) [%&#mmm:::]
      mum   €walks back into dining area-->
      dad           %smiles
      inf           &gaze down
      fig           #Fig4.1

02 MUM
      that was: disgustin,%           [OH my g:]od
      dad           %gaze to inf

03 (0.2)
04 INF      .mts mt (0.6) .mpt .pt .pt

05 MUM      .h [gah::€ ]
06 DAD      [>yum yum] yum.<
      mum   --> €starts to sit down->
07 (0.7)

```



Fig. 4.1 . Dad smiling at mum who is entering the room with gaze down.

Dad phrases his tease in a jocular way, with *lovely* (L1), possibly headed towards something close to *lovely experience*, but instead terminates the launched syntactic unit with a gustatory *mmm* with a rise-fall intonation (Wiggins 2002) and a smile (Figure 4.2). The use of the response cry presents a non-serious depiction of Mum's reaction, its opposite (see Cantarutti 2022). The disgust sound *gahh::* (L5) is produced significantly after the ingestion has occurred; Mum has already reported on it and described it, as well as expressed disgusted response cries. Not only is the sound delayed in terms of sequential organization, but it is also positioned after, rather than preceding, the verbal characterization. In L2, Mum proceeds to further react to the taste of the coconut oil, continuing to describe it as disgusting. Dad does not respond, looking at the co-present infant instead, and Mum then produces a disgust sound that emerges as a turn-extension (L5).

Mum's *gah::* (L5) is organized very differently from the turn-initial response cries we have shown to date. It extends the prior description and earlier (not shown) reactions to the coconut oil, and renews the display of Mum's bodily engagement. In the absence of any response to line 2, the disgust display acts as a pursuit of further response to Mum's suffering, thus functioning as a turn-continuation. Dad's reaction of *yum yum yum* (L6) is oriented to the infant and timed with the infant's chewing. Mum's description and response cry resists moving to an alternative trajectory of action, both the teasing by Dad and the change of focus to the infant. The move from a description to a turn-extending response cry also reinforces both the seriousness of the experience (resisting its tease-ability) and the viscerality of her taste experience. In fact, the silence from Mum between the verbal description (L2) and the response cry (L5) can also be a means of demonstrating such intense engagement with the taste that speech is hindered or impossible (see also how such interruptions in syntax occur with other tasting incidents in Mondada 2021, and with breath holds in Hofstetter et al., 2021). Mum here restricts her participation to that which is related to the ongoing bodily experience; she does not organize her continued reactions with respect to Dad, as seen in the overlapping turn (L5-6). Turn-extensions are regularly used to add a stance to what has already been said (Kärkkäinen 2003; Wang and Tao 2020), and in this case the disgust sound seems to provide visceral evidence of the taste experience, thus taking a negative stance on it.

A response cry can furthermore be placed in mid-syntactic position, as has been shown in activity settings where bodies are instructed, and the instructors perform strain or other bodily engagements in strategic positions in relation to ongoing talk (Keevallik 2013, 2023). Extracts 5 and 6 show instances when the instructor performs a spill cry (Goffman 1978: 801–802) or a strain grunt (Goffman 1978: 803) as part of ongoing turn-constructive units. The response cries as well as their occasioning events are precision-timed with ongoing explanations to the students. In Extract 5, a teacher couple is instructing a move in Lindy Hop. The lead teacher (TEAL) is explaining how to counterbalance the follow, accompanying his tipping over with a response cry *uuuuuu*.

Extract 5. Tipping over (in Swedish).

- 01 TEAL SIT å fånga å ta tillbaka. pum.
sit and catch and bring back pum
- 02 **men när jag är häruppe så kan jag då**
but when I am here.up then can I PRT
but when I am up here I can
- 03 **^uuuuu#u**
teal ^demonstrates tipping over
fig #Fig5.1
- 04 TEAF mmm ((points appreciatively at teal))
- 05 TEAL **tas ur balans.**
take: PAS out.of balance
be taken out of balance

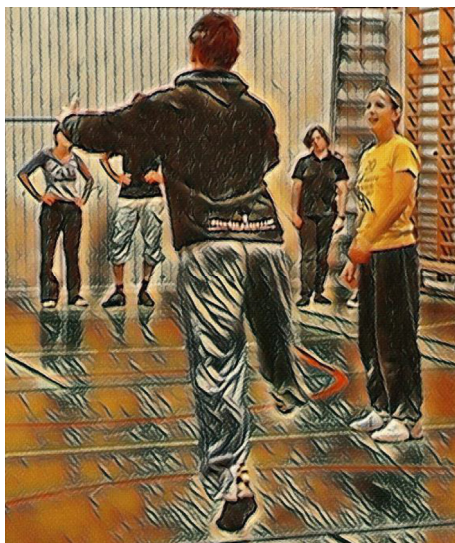


Fig. 5.1. Tipping over.

In line 1 the lead teacher shows the correct version, and in line 3 there is the incorrect version where he is on his toes and falls out of balance (Figure 5.1), with the fall accompanied by an extended spill cry *uuuuuu* (L3; no conventional translation possible). The follow teacher (TEAF) is standing by and at the completion of the demonstration, she points at TEAL, utters an appreciative *mmm* while gazing at the students (L4), in support of the instructed action. TEAL then also re-completes the unit by finishing the syntax (L5). The response cry thus emerges in the middle of an ongoing syntactic unit, carefully placed to fit the discontinuation of syntax after a first part of the verb phrase *kan jag då* ‘then I can’ (L2). After the recompletion of the unit *tas ur balans* ‘be taken out of balance’ (Keevallik 2015), the response cry emerges in mid-syntactic position, between the initiation and the completion of a verb phrase.

Extract 6 shows a similar instance of strain being performed in mid phrase, this time a noun phrase. The follow teacher is explaining that no strain is needed in the holding hands by the lead and follow dancers. She demonstrates the incorrect version by putting her own hands together and creating unnecessary strain between them (L2, Figure 6.1). This strain performance is accompanied by a strain grunt, impressionistically transcribed as *kghkghgee*.

Extract 6. No strain in connected hands (in Swedish).

```

01 TEA    för det finns inget (.)
          because there is no

02        det finns inget +långt .h +kgh#kghgee+
          there is no long
          tea    +>>>>>>> +-----+ ((strained connection))
          fig    #Fig6.1

03        utan det finns ba +MM tjaka BUM tjaka BUM
          but there is only
          tea    +circular gestures -->>

```

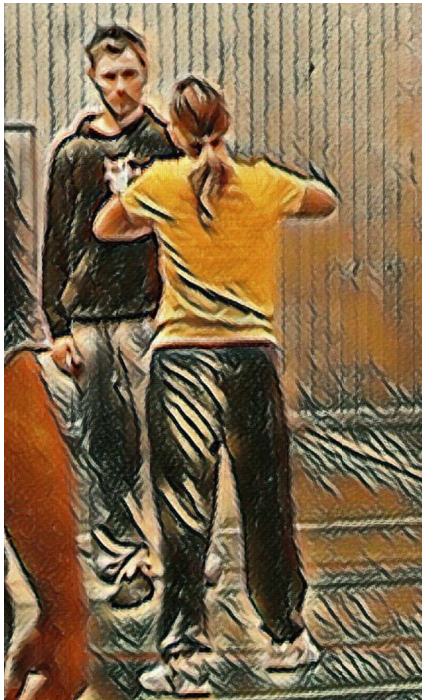


Fig. 6.1. Straining arms.

As in Extract 5, in this case the phrase is discontinued at a moment when a word is clearly projected but never forthcoming. An adjective, such as *långt* 'long' projects a noun but instead a demonstration and a strain grunt are produced before the speaker continues the syntax with a contrastive conjunction *utan* 'but' (L3). The response cries in Extracts 5 and 6 are occasioned by performed events by current speakers and strategically placed in mid-syntactic positions, where the syntax can also be smoothly continued after the demonstrations that are not overwhelming, as they are clearly performed.

In this section we have seen that it is not necessary to perform a visceral response in turn-initial position. First, the triggering events may be ostensibly extended, such as taste lingering in the mouth, though there may also be social-organizational reasons for redoing or reinforcing the bodily basis of the conveyed experience. Second, the triggering events may be performed for instructional purposes as parts of longer turns in institutional settings. We would thus like to suggest that response cries are more complex than simple reactions to an immediate event. They can, for example, be produced alongside the event, such as an extended unpleasant taste (Wiggins and Keevallik 2023) or a pleasurable hug (Katila et al., 2023). This results in different turn-organizational and syntactic patterns, including extended temporal turn space claimed in body-focused activities, among other things through embodied demonstrations performed for pedagogical aims. In the next section, we consider how syntax and turn-taking can be interrupted by the occurrence of response cries, and how this compares to the work shown above by participants to maintain coherent clausal and sentential turn-constructive units.

3.3. Response cries intervening in speech and syntax

In the final section, we turn to when response cries intervene with emerging syntax. One of the taken-for-granted facts of speaking a language is that it takes a capable and attentive body to produce fluent syntax, even though we face impediments in continuing speech in everyday activities all the time, from being out of breath to distractions and multiactivity (Haddington et al., 2014). The suspension of syntax can be employed to display a body being currently so preoccupied with something it becomes unable to produce talk (Hofstetter et al., 2021; Mondada 2021). The body is bound up in speech production, from speech organs to sensations, and response cries are yet another way that the body imprints on and co-organizes with syntax. Unlike the above cases, where participants manage to organize the response cry to occur at turn boundaries or at strategic moments in ongoing activity trajectories, here the response cry has different pragmatic functions, as well as syntactic design constraints. Our argument here remains that response cries are better understood as organized with syntax and turn-design, rather than emerging randomly. For example, while response cries can claim a bodily priority that inhibits capacity to speak, they can nevertheless fill the auditory realm and thereby reduce risks of interlocutor intrusions. The following extracts show that when response cries occur in mid-syntax positions beyond accompanying demonstrations, participants are orienting to their accountability for deviating from the ongoing syntax, marking the response cry as a claim that the event was overwhelming and truly immediate.

Extract 7 is from a pilates class where the teacher is describing how to get into the position of a side plank. In line 1, her hips start lifting from the floor and in line 2 they arrive at the top. At the same time she is uttering an explanatory phrase *et tõsta ennast siia püs-* ‘to raise myself to this up-’. At that point in time, however, she has started to tip over and utters a spill cry (Goffman 1978: 801–802) *uoo* (no conventional translation possible) instead of continuing with the syntax and the word *püsti* ‘upright’.

Extract 7. Plank instruction (in Estonian).

01 TEA .h ja nüüd ma lükkan ^puusad ette
and now I push (my) hips forward
^hips leave the floor

02 et tõsta ennast siia# ^püs-
to raise:INF self:PAR here:ILL up(right)
to raise myself to this up-
tea ^hips up ^begins to tip over
fig #Fig7.1

03 ↑u^oo, ^
^foot behind^

04 otse^ planku täpselt onju.
straight plank:ILL precisely PRT
straight into the plank y'see.
ft back^



Fig. 7.1. Side plank position.

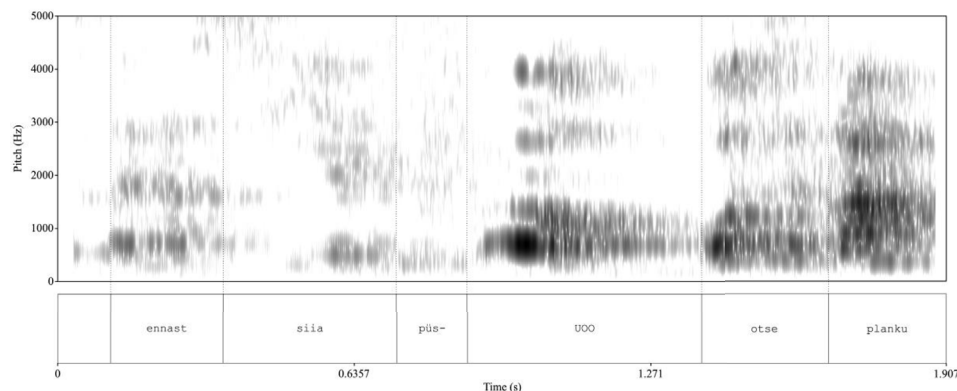


Fig. 7.2. Response cry in the middle of a clause.

During the response cry the teacher regains her balance with a supporting foot on the floor behind and re-launches the talk while moving the foot back on top of the other, resulting in a correct plank position. The clause, however, does not continue what was abandoned in mid-word. She accomplishes a replacement repair by producing an alternative adverbial phrase *otse planku täpselt* ‘straight into the plank’, which also fits the already uttered syntactic initiation in lines 1–2. By immediately continuing the syntax, a speaker can marginalize the bodily intervention and present themselves as in control of it. Returning to continuous syntax is treated as a priority – no verbal explanation or account occurs, though the students have visual access to the embodied “account” – the visible loss of balance. According to Goffman (1978), a response cry is a claim that the person resumes control of their vocal channel, by marking and reacting to the triggering event as deviant. However, the multimodal work of returning to prior activities is also key to establishing the event as both deviant and completed. For instance, the pitch and volume of the response cry are considerably higher than the surrounding talk (see the spectrogram in Figure 7.2 that shows the continuous production as well as loudness), and these features are returned to their prior states when resuming the syntax (much as the body position and syntax are resumed). The instructor is perhaps especially accountable for undertaking a “correct” resumption of activities, both because a pilates instructor is ostensibly skilled at their discipline and thus not supposed to lose balance, as well as because, during a demonstration of a movement, it is critical to indicate what the students themselves should do, as opposed to making mistakes that should not be imitated. The response cry is a very efficient way to mark that the loss of balance is deviant, and to then demonstrate a resumption of the correct and controlled state of the body.

The return to control can be useful for demonstrating when one is back in a safe position. In Extract 8, Pat (PAT) is rock climbing and reaches a point where he cannot continue. He utters *no* in a breathy voice (L2), not as a response to any prior talk but seemingly in response to the challenges of the climb and his body (Figure 8.1). He first moves into a safer position from which to fall (L3), and then lets go (L3). As he falls, he starts to account for his change of plan (he had been keen to really push at this one last attempt), starting with another *no* in a strained voice, marked with Σ (L4), but cuts off, seemingly holding his breath as he falls (Figure 8.2). Once he reaches the bottom of the fall where the rope and harness catch him (Figure 8.3), he releases this breath with a glottalized sound (L6) and completes his statement, claiming to be *done*, that is, out of energy.

Extract 8. Quitting the climb (KY Torrent Falls Pat 2_10.00).

```

01 pat      +(2.3)      +(0.9)  +(1.5)  +(0.5)
      +pulls up & in+gaze up+gaze down+adjust feet-->

02 PAT      nohh.
03 pat      (.)#+(.)^(0.3)  +(0.2)^
em          -->+stepping down+fall-->
fig          ^take in slack--^tug-->
            #Fig8.1

04 PAT       $\Sigma$ #no $\wedge$ - $\Sigma$ 
em          -->^pulled up-->
fig          #Fig8.2

05 (0.4)
06 PAT      nge#^hhh+=I'm doneh.
em          -->^
pat          -->+swinging-->
fig          #Fig8.3

07 EM      ahlrighthh

```



Fig. 8.1. Climbing.

Fig.8.2. Falling

Fig.8.3. Bottom of the fall.

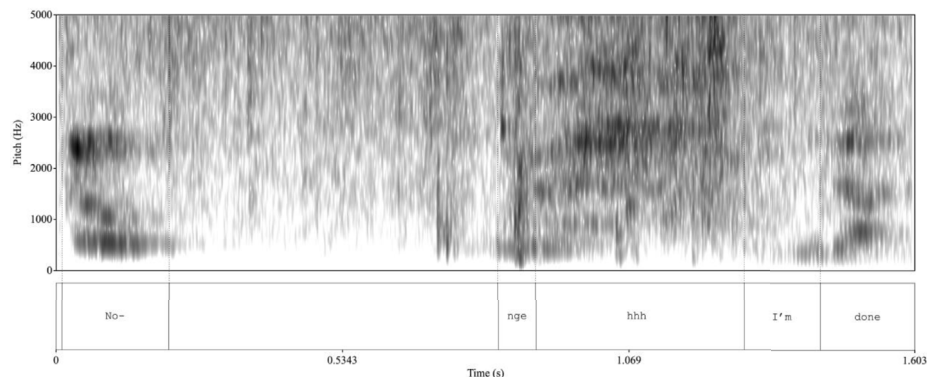


Fig. 8.4. Response cry followed by an explanation.

The strained release of breath, with a vocalized sound (a breathy [ɛ]), is the response cry here, impressionistically transcribed as *ngehhh*. The suspension of sound just prior displayed that the body was temporarily incapable of sounding (Hofstetter et al., 2021); Pat's body was most likely tensing in order to fall properly, which involves tensing the muscles to receive the strain of impact into the harness and rope, but moreover preparing to be swung into the rock face and land against that vertical surface gently. The *ngehhh* response cry and outbreath starts the moment Pat's feet flatten against the wall, that is, the moment he can release the tension in his torso because he has oriented himself properly to prevent an uncomfortable smack against the rock. The release in torso muscles enables those muscles to be engaged with vocalizing again. Pat thereafter completes the turn with a verbal elaboration (similar to Extracts 1–3) that explains his quitting. The explanation is latched to the outbreath (see the spectrogram in Figure 8.4). The *ngehhh* before *I'm done* (L6), however, has already alerted Pat's belayer and the onlookers that he has landed safely. This is important to convey, since a change of heart about finishing the climb might imply a serious problem. The response cry thus helps transition from the problematic and interruptive triggering event (falling), to a demonstration that all is well and returned to control. The latter is also displayed through the continuation of speech.

A response cry that displays bodily involvement can, however, also be used for accounting for why a launched syntactic unit is abandoned. Extract 9 shows an episode of rock climbing where the climber (Pat) is in a difficult position while attempting to find a safety bolt (Figure 9.1). He launches a syntactic unit, perhaps a complaint (*why would they not put*, L3; heading likely towards 'a bolt here' or 'something here'). The clause gets progressively more hindered as Pat becomes increasingly breathless, with longer and longer syntactic suspensions (Hofstetter et al., 2021). He then utters a strain grunt (L2), and after that point the clause is abandoned.

Extract 9. Why not put.

01 pat +#(2.2) + (1.1) + (1.8) + (1.8)
 +LH up, searching+LH adjust+gaze searching+LH searching-->
 fig #Fig9.1

02 PAT Σ why: would they not Σ (0.2) Σ puth Σ (2.0)+(.) Σ enh Σ
 pat -->+

03 * (0.4)
 em *take in rope

04 PAT the*re we Σ goh+nhh Σ +
 em -->*
 pat +...+ clipping -->>

05 EM nice job.



Fig 9.1. Searching for a safety bolt.

While the increasing strain is already hearable with the delays in completing the syntax after *not* (L2), Pat manages to continue the clause in some fashion, making this a suspension, where the syntax is smoothly continued after the temporary inability to vocalize. Once the strain grunt occurs, showing potentially even greater strain, the belayer (Em) takes in the rope, that is, removes excess slack in the rope. This indicates that the belayer anticipates a fall. As it happens, Pat then finds the safety bolt in the ensuing silence. His turn on line 4 acts as both self-talk as well as an alert that he's likely able to continue climbing now. The response cry in this instance highlights the peak of strain while running out of energy, but by the time Pat would be able to continue the clause, the circumstances have changed. It would no longer be sensible to complete the clause, as *they* (the people responsible for putting in safety bolts) clearly *have* put in a bolt roughly where he expected, and so he starts a fresh clause. The response cry served as an account for the body's inability to continue, but as the context changed, he launched a new clause. Marking preoccupation with the body offers an elegant way out of the social obligation to complete syntactic units, among other things to provide turn-transition opportunities to others and guarantee the progressivity of talk.

4. Discussion

In this paper we examined how response cries are organized in relation to speech and syntactic units by looking at diverse materials in three different languages. We showed the logic of the turn-initial position for response cries, as this position helps produce their visceral quality while also affording or introducing opportunities for further talk on the events that triggered them (see also Pehkonen 2020). The involvement of all participants is necessary to achieve turn-initial position and the verbal extensions; the participants not producing the response cry must also be oriented to its production to help ensure its occurrence turn-initially by withholding their contributions – as and when appropriate – in order for verbal elaborations

by the producer of the response cry to have space to occur. Turn-initial position is sufficiently canonical that it can be used for response cries to introduce quotations or representations of imaginary characters (Extract 3, see also [Cantarutti 2022](#)). However, we also demonstrated the use of response cries for interrupting the emerging syntax, to manage delay or abandonment (such as in temporary loss of composure), as well as their use in post-completion positions for stance-taking and response pursuit (Extract 4). Their organization depends on the ways in which the bodily events are temporally and physically unfolding.

Even though response cries have long been recognized as meaningful ([Goffman 1978, 1981](#)), and more recently as especially critical practices for displaying cognitive or sensory participation ([Hofstetter 2020](#); [Keevallik 2023](#); [Weatherall et al., 2021](#)), they are not usually treated as elements of syntax. Their more conventionalized forms, such as *ouch* or *oops* may be treated as part of language, and be represented in dictionaries, while other more ephemeral and locally occasioned forms can be either impossible to represent with the phonetic inventory of the language (e.g., the disgust sound in Extract 4) or do not correspond to any recognizable sound patterns in the language (the *uuuuuu* in Extract 5, or *uoo* in Extract 7). Nevertheless, together with their embodiment, they are equally understandable in the context. The syntax of a turn both forms part of the context making response cries recognizable and adapts to the emergent needs of response cries; they are integrated together.

Although the turn-initial position is recognizable as a prototypical turn-organization, response cries seem to have great flexibility with respect to their syntactic placement, as long as the syntax is arranged to accommodate their occurrence in some fashion. In contrast to particles (see [Heritage and Sorjonen 2018](#)), they do not project a specific action type. They make continuing topic talk possible but not strongly projected, as it is also possible to utter them outside ongoing talk ([Goffman 1978](#)) or have them responded to immediately as the sole component of a turn constructional unit. Response cries provide an account for the potential disruption in syntax, acting similarly to repair initiations; only repair initiation can act in the same syntactic locations, and we can thus add bodily concerns to the list of mostly cognitive and interactional reasons for repair to take place. However, response cries also *require* an account, in that they cannot occur without reason, hence the verbal explanations that elaborate their purpose when it is not sufficiently clear from other circumstances. The account for response cries is the body and environment, and the events that inspired the response cry. When those are not entirely mutually available (for instance, when describing an emotion, or a taste that only one party is experiencing), explanation is necessary to some degree. But when the physical ramifications of the response cry are clear (as when all parties are attending to the event as it occurs), then the response cry's accountability is already embedded in its production and further explanation may not be necessary. This allows it to be placed into syntactic positions that are otherwise restricted or disruptive.

In asking whether response cries have syntactic organization, we need to use a definition of syntax that respects the real-time, interactional, social, environmental, and other contingencies that participants actually face when producing real utterances. Schegloff (1996: 54) provides such a description of language: “general contingencies of talking in interaction ... that in a recurrent, orderly way seem to shape the organization of a turn-at-talk and the units of which it is built”. Furthermore, [Goodwin \(e.g. 1979\)](#) has long argued that syntactic organization is contingent on the bodily participation of all co-present parties. We have shown how this organization extends to the bodily and environmental events that co-occur with response cries, given the work involved in integrating their occurrence in the syntax of same-speaker turns and surrounding turns.

In conclusion, response cries are a method of prioritizing the body in achieving visceral expression, including over conversational progressivity and nextness of components (cf. [Schegloff 2007:14](#)) as required. Interaction in real-time often entails different activities progressing in parallel, such as eating and chatting or working out and talking. These different embodied temporalities and the logics of those activities converge in the organization of response cries in relation to syntax, to the extent that they may either be incorporated into turns-at-talk or substantially intervene with those, as the body and co-participant action (or attention) requires. Response cries highlight the situational and bodily basis of interactional engagement. In order to have a full appreciation of the syntactic work that occurs in interaction, we need to include consideration of how syntax makes space for and incorporates such event-triggered, bodily-grounded vocal/auditory tokens. Only then will we have a truly situated understanding of syntax that accounts for the diversity of human actions in actual language use.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Leelo Keevallik: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Emily Hofstetter:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Agnes Löfgren:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Sally Wiggins:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation.

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Declaration of competing interest

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Leelo Keevallik is a professor in language and culture at Linköping University. Her research interests are in the field of interactional linguistics with a focus on pragmatic particles, grammar, clause combining, projection, and prosody. She has recently published on the interplay between language and the body in everyday settings as well as dance instruction.

Emily Hofstetter (PhD) is a research fellow in Interactional linguistics at Linköping University. She uses multimodal interaction analysis to study micro-level details of social interaction, particularly with recordings of sports and play. Her previous work has examined several institutional settings, such as neonatal clinics, visiting a local politician, and helping colleagues work in safer environments. She has also worked to apply this research in communication training, using the CARM methodology for presenting and discussing interactional research results.

Agnes Löfgren is a Postdoctoral researcher in applied and interactional linguistics at the University of Neuchâtel, with a background in Speech and Language Pathology. She has worked on interaction in artistic contexts, focusing on the relationship between aesthetic and linguistic expression, and is currently targeting the use of causal clauses in conversational French.

Sally Wiggins is Professor of Discursive Psychology at Linköping University, Sweden. Her research interests focus on the social management of eating practices and psychological concepts, such as food preferences, disgust, and satiety. She has published a methods textbook on Discursive Psychology, co-edited three compilations, and written numerous book chapters and empirical papers in the field.