



Research Article

Xiaoting Li*

Multimodal practices for negative assessments as delicate matters: Incomplete syntax, facial expressions, and head movements

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Abstract: This paper contributes to the discussion of fuzzy boundaries by investigating negative assessments of the recipient and non-present parties that are syntactically incomplete. Particularly, it explores how the speaker uses syntax and bodily visual conduct to accomplish the delicate action of negatively assessing others and to solicit the recipient to collaboratively complete negative assessments. Based on an examination of approximately 5 h of everyday Mandarin face-to-face conversations, the study shows that incomplete syntax, facial expressions, and head shakes constitute multimodal practices in making negative assessments of the recipient and a non-present third party. Leaving assessments syntactically incomplete and displaying negative evaluative stance through facial expressions such as lip-pursing and eyebrow furrows and head shakes show the speaker's orientation to the negative assessments as a delicate action. The facial expressions after incomplete syntax demonstrate that participants orient to the hesitation in the delivery of a TCU/turn-in-progress not as *production* problem, but rather an *interactional* problem. This study shows that the boundaries of assessment turns may be blurry, and that one assessment may be collaboratively produced by two participants, which exemplifies a specific aspect of weak cesuras and fuzzy boundaries of units and actions in interaction.

Keywords: incomplete syntax, facial expressions, head shakes, negative assessments, delicate action

1 Introduction

When making an assessment, the speaker may visualize their stance toward the referent being assessed. Making a negative assessment of the copresent recipient and other non-present parties may engender social-interactional consequences and is socially and interactionally improper. Thus, accomplishing the delicate actions of negative assessments while managing their implications to the relation between the speaker and the recipient is no easy task. In this paper, I examine how participants use incomplete syntax, facial expressions, and head movements as multimodal practices to perform negative assessments of others and to seek the recipient's completion of the negative assessment. This study shows that the boundaries of assessment turns may be blurry, and that one assessment may be collaboratively produced by two participants, which exemplifies weak cesuras and fuzzy boundaries (Barth-Weingarten 2016) of units and actions in interaction.

* Corresponding author: Xiaoting Li, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton T6R2A5, Canada,
e-mail: xml@ualberta.ca
ORCID: Xiaoting Li 0000-0002-7231-8064

In what follows, I first situate the present study in three relevant bodies of research: research on (negative) assessments and (im)propriety, incomplete syntax in Mandarin, and syntactically incomplete turns. After describing the data and method, I provide a detailed account of how participants employ the multimodal practices of incomplete syntax followed by facial expressions and head shakes to perform negative assessments of the recipient and non-present parties and to solicit the recipient's completion of negative assessments. Finally, I discuss the relevance of the findings to the research on units and fuzzy boundaries, interaction within a TCU (Turn-Constructional Unit) (see Sacks et al. 1974 for the notion of Turn-Constructional Unit) and turn at talk, and grammar in interaction.

2 Background

2.1 (Negative) assessments and (im)propriety in interaction

In interaction, people display evaluative stance toward a person, an object, an event, etc. through making assessments. According to Goodwin and Goodwin (1987: 6–10), the term “assessment” may refer to four types of phenomena. First, it may refer to “assessment segment”, such as an adjective, that occurs in the stream of speech (Goodwin and Goodwin 1987: 6–7). Second, assessment refers to intonation features of an utterance that are used as a resource to display evaluation (Goodwin and Goodwin 1987: 8). Third, assessment may be a type of action. It is performed by an assessor to describe the experience of the reported event and express their affective/evaluative stance over the assessable (Goodwin and Goodwin 1987: 8–9). Fourth, assessment can refer to an activity. An assessment activity may involve more than one assessment turn, engendering larger sequences of assessments. When participating in an assessment activity, speakers not only produce their own assessment, but also monitor the response made relevant by the assessment, such as (dis)agreeing with other's assessments (Goodwin 1980; Goodwin and Goodwin 1987: 9–10). The focus of the current study is on the third type of phenomena in Goodwin and Goodwin's (1987) conceptualization of assessments, namely, assessment as a social action. Specifically, adopting Sidnell's (2014: 138) definition, assessment in this study refers to a social action performed through “an utterance that expresses its speaker's positively or negatively valenced stance towards some person or object talked about.”

The last four decades have seen a robust body of research on assessments in interaction. Particularly relevant to the present study are the interactive production of assessments (Goodwin and Goodwin 1987, 1992, Ruusuvuori and Peräkylä 2009) and how negative assessments are accomplished (Li 2016, Park and Klin 2020) as a type of improprieties and delicacies in interaction (Jefferson 1985, 1987, Lerner 2013, Schegloff 2003). Earlier research has also investigated how an assessment is produced through the use of multimodal resources and the cooperative participation of interactants. For example, building on Pike's (1945) observation of the relevance of intonation to displaying the speaker's attitude, Goodwin and Goodwin (1987: 14) argue that intonation may display evaluative stance (see also Couper-Kuhlen 2007, 2009 for the role of prosody in displaying disappointment, assessing, and accounting). Research also shows that participants use lexical resources such as adjectives and adverbial intensifiers (e.g., “so”, “really”) to display their affective orientations towards an assessable (Ochs and Schieffelin 1989: 14–5, Goodwin and Goodwin 1987). Bodily visual behaviors, such as head shakes and facial expressions, are also documented to be used in assessments as “nonvocal assessment markers” (Goodwin and Goodwin 1987) and to display the recipient's stance toward what is being reported and assessed in tellings (Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori 2006, Ruusuvuori and Peräkylä 2009).

More recently, Park and Kline (2020) show that volunteer coaches in intramural basketball programs use syntactically incomplete utterances as a means to perform critical assessment of a non-present third party in a joint evaluation of players. By avoiding verbalizing the critical assessment term of others, participants display their orientation to its delivery as delicate. Li (2016) also documents that in Mandarin conversation, participants use syntactically incomplete turns to perform socially and interactionally inappropriate actions such as negatively assessing a copresent party. Leaving one's TCU/turn syntactically

incomplete is one way of “doing hesitating”. Delaying or hesitating in the course of TCU production such as turn-delaying and turn-abandonment is employed as a method to deliver a delicate matter (Lerner 2013). Other turn-delaying practices such as laughter, sound stretches, and self-repairs such as “*thee-uh*” (Jefferson 1974) in the delivery of a TCU and an action may also be used to display one’s “loyalty to the proprieties” (Jefferson 1983: 7, Schegloff 2003).

Building on the previous research, the current study focuses on negative assessments of others as a delicate action or a type of social impropriety. This type of *delicate negative assessment* of others constitutes a “breach in conversational standards” in courtesy, propriety, ethics, etc. (see Jefferson et al. 1987: 160). It may threaten other participants’ face and social solidarity and be potentially offensive to other participants. For example, making a negative assessment of a friend’s gift, negatively assessing a co-participant’s appearance immediately after a self-praise, and negatively assessing a non-present third party’s character behind their back are “breaches in conversational standards” in courtesy, propriety, and ethics and are potentially offensive to other participants.

The conceptualization of the target phenomenon, delicate negative assessment, is discussed here, because negative assessments are not the only type of delicate matters and not all negative assessments are delicate. For example, there is a wide variety of delicate matters in interaction, such as vulgarities and obscenities (Lerner 2013: 97), embarrassments (Heath 1988, Wilkinson 2007), and transgressions such as patient’s rejection of a doctor’s candidate answer with a more problematic description (Haakana 2001). Also, some negative evaluations may be affiliative and promote solidarity if they are produced after others’ displayed negative stance towards a referent assessable. Thus, this paper focuses on delicate negative assessments of others and particularly how they are accomplished through the use of incomplete syntax, facial expressions, and head movements.

2.2 Incomplete syntax in Mandarin

Two typological features of Mandarin grammar are particularly relevant to the consideration of incomplete syntax in Mandarin: Topic-comment structure and a lack of developed inflectional morphemes as an isolating language (see Li and Thompson 1981: 11–3, 15–6). One important typological feature of Mandarin grammar is that Mandarin is a topic-prominent language (Li and Thompson 1976, 1981), in contrast to subject-prominent languages such as English. The topic is the “subject matter” (Chao 1948) of a sentence or “what the sentence is about” (Li and Thompson 1981: 85). The topic-comment structure is exemplified through my data as follows:

(a)	Taken from Excerpt 4			
	<i>Wang Ming</i>	<i>zhei-ge ren</i>	<i>yi ban</i>	<i>bu zenme yang.</i>
	<u>Wang Ming</u>	<u>this-CL person</u>	<u>so so</u>	<u>not so good</u>
	TOPIC		COMMENT	
“Wang Ming this person (is) so so, not so good.”				
(b)	Taken and adapted from Excerpt 2			
	<i>Women</i>	<i>xiande</i>	<i>hen</i>	<i>chengshu.</i>
	<u>we</u>	<u>seem</u>	<u>very</u>	<u>mature</u>
	TOPIC		COMMENT	
“We seem very mature.”				

In Example (a), the topic of the sentence is the sentence initial NP *Wang Ming zhei-ge ren* “Wang Ming this person”, and the comment of the sentence is *yi ban bu zenme yang* “so so, not so good”. In Example (b), the topic of the sentence is *women* “we”, and the comment is *xiande hen chengshu* “seem very mature”. The

comment is further composed of the copula verb *xiande* “seem”, the degree adverb *hen* “very”, and the adjective *chengshu* “mature”. The topic-comment structure of Mandarin has implications to the syntactically incompleteness and particularly syntactically incomplete assessments in Mandarin conversation. Specifically, two types of syntactic incompleteness in negative assessments are observed in the data.

First, within a topic-comment structure, the entire comment is unverbalized with only the topic of the sentence. For example,

(c)	Fragment of line 12 in Excerpt 4		
	<i>Wang</i>	<i>Ming</i>	<i>zhei-ge ren</i>
	<u>Wang</u>	<u>Ming</u>	<u>this-CL person</u>
	TOPIC		(COMMENT)
	“Wang Ming this person...”		

Second, in a topic-comment structure, part of the comment is produced but the terminal adjective is not produced. For example,

(d)	Line 51 in Excerpt 2			
	<i>Ta</i>	<i>xiande</i>	<i>bijiao</i>	[ADJ]
	<u>3SG</u>	<u>seem</u>	<u>relatively</u>	[ADJ]
		<u>COP</u>	<u>ADV</u>	<u>(ADJ)</u>
	TOPIC		COMMENT	
	“He seems relatively...”			

The two types of syntactic incompleteness exemplified above have different affordances for other-completion of the syntactic structure and TCU due to their different syntactic projective forces. That is, without considering them in situated interactional and sequential contexts, the unverbalized terminal adjective in (d) is more projectable than the entire unverbalized comment in (c).

The other typological feature of Mandarin grammar that is potentially relevant to the projection and recognition of syntactic (in)completeness in Mandarin interaction is that Mandarin is an isolating language with limited inflectional morphemes. In contrast to languages with developed inflectional morphemes such as German, Mandarin has no case markers, agreement marker, or tense marker (Li and Thompson 1981: 11–3). Such functions are generally expressed by means of word order, prepositions, and separate words of time (such as *zuotian* “yesterday” and *mingtian* “tomorrow”). Thus, there is no inflectional morpheme indicating the completion of a sentence. In assessments, the main word order in Mandarin is SVO, as is exemplified in Examples (a)–(d). Thus, the topic-comment structure, the lack of inflectional morphemes, and the SVO word order are particularly relevant to the projection and recognition of possible turn completion and the accomplishment of assessment. For example, leaving the comment or the terminal adjectives in the comment unproduced are common forms of syntactic incompleteness in my Mandarin data.

2.3 Syntactically incomplete turns at talk

Since Sacks et al.'s (1974) seminal paper on turn-taking in conversation, there is a substantial body of research on the roles of morphosyntax, prosody/phonetics, bodily visual behaviors, and pragmatics in the projection and anticipation of possible turn completion (e.g., Auer 2005, Duncan 1972, 1974, Duncan and Niederehe 1974, Duncan and Fiske 1977, Ford and Thompson 1996, Ford et al. 1996, Li 2014, Local et al. 1985, 1986, Selting 2000, Streeck 2009, Stukenbrock 2018, Wells and Peppé 1996, Wells and Macfarlane 1998). However, some turns at talk are not brought to their syntactic completion, which creates syntactically incomplete TCUs/turns at talk (SIT). Lerner (1991, 1996a, 1996b) first describes that a speaker's turn at talk can be syntactically incomplete and collaboratively completed by the recipient. The "two-part formats"

such as the “if... then...” structure furnish the participants with grammatical resources to collaboratively construct one single TCU/turn at talk. In second language classroom interaction, Olsher (2004) documents that speakers of English as a foreign language may perform “embodied completion” of their syntactically incomplete turn. That is, they may stop talking in the middle of a TCU at talk and complete the “partial turn” through gesture or embodied display. Mori and Hayashi (2006) report that “embodied completion” is also a practice used by Japanese L1 speakers in their interaction with L2 speakers to achieve intersubjectivity. Koshik (2002) describes that SITs or “designedly incomplete utterances” are a practice used by second language teachers to elicit self-correction of students’ spoken language errors. In telephone conversations, Chevalier (2008) shows that unfinished turns are used to accomplish a variety of interactional tasks fitted to the talk in progress, and they are to be understood by reference to their sequential position. Chevalier and Clift (2008) argue that syntactic projection and action projection (in particular sequential positions) are resources that enable the recipient to provide appropriate response to the “unfinished turns at talk”. Keevallik (2013) shows how incomplete syntax such as “I see guys go” projects bodily demonstrations in dance classes. She argues that bodily demonstrations may complete syntactic units, and the incomplete syntax and embodied movements constitute an interactional unit.

Previous research thus demonstrates the significance of the type of interactional settings (e.g., language classroom interaction, everyday interaction) and sequential position of an SIT, and the action accomplished by an SIT to the understanding of, and response to, the SIT. Also, it can be concluded from the previous research that the completion and recognition of the action accomplished through an SIT is distinct from the completion of the syntactic form of the SIT. That is, an SIT may be oriented to by participants as accomplishing a complete recognizable action. Further, the divergence of multimodal resources, such as incomplete syntax, completion-implicative prosody, and bodily visual behaviors (e.g., facial expression, head movement, and postural shift), may be mobilized as a resource to implement other interactional tasks, such as to manage the recipient’s participation in collaboratively constructing and/or responding to the action performed by the speaker’s SIT. In this paper, I show how incomplete syntax, facial expressions, and head shakes are utilized by the speaker to accomplish delicate negative assessments of others and to solicit other-completion of the negative assessment.

This study contributes to the relevant research in at least three ways. First, it contributes to the research on boundaries in interaction and particularly boundaries of interactional units such as turn-constructional unit and actions in interaction (see Barth-Weingarten 2016, Szczepek Reed and Raymond 2013) by showing that boundaries of interactional units may not only be indicated verbally through the completion of a syntactic structure (or not), but also bodily visually through facial expressions and head movements. Second, it describes undocumented multimodal practices in accomplishing socially delicate negative assessments of others and in soliciting other-completion of such assessments. The role of incomplete syntax and other *verbal-vocal* obstructions (such as disfluencies and repeats) in the progressivity of a TCU production in implementing delicate actions has been well-documented (Jefferson 1974, Lerner 2013, Schegloff 2003). However, the functions of bodily visual conduct such as facial expressions and their working together with incomplete syntax are not well-researched. Third, the findings of the study contribute to the distinction between *interactional* problem and *production* problem (see the distinction of “production errors” and “interactional errors” in Jefferson 1974), as is displayed through participant’s orientation. That is, the uses of facial expressions displaying negative affective and evaluative stance in addition to incomplete syntax demonstrate that participants orient to the hesitation in the delivery of a TCU/turn-in-progress not as a cognitive *production* problem as in searching for a word (see bodily visual behaviors and participation in searching for a word in Goodwin and Goodwin 1986) but as an *interactional* (im)propriety problem (i.e., whether it is interactionally proper or improper). This distinction also has implications to the intersection of intersubjectivity and (im)proprieties in syntactically incomplete negative assessments. That is, participants do not exhibit distinct treatments of the syntactically incomplete negative assessments as relevant to mutual understanding (“I don’t need to say this”) or (im)proprieties (“I shouldn’t say this”)¹. The contributions of the paper in these three areas will be discussed in greater detail in the concluding discussions.

3 Data and methods

The study adopts the methods of conversation analysis (CA), interactional linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018), and multimodal analysis (Stivers and Sidnell 2005, Streeck et al. 2011) to study how incomplete syntax, prosody, and bodily visual behavior are used to perform negative assessments of others in their sequential and situational contexts in Mandarin face-to-face conversation. I used CA to analyze the sequential position of a syntactically incomplete negative assessment (Drew 2004, Schegloff 2007). CA is a qualitative method that focuses on the vocal and visual resources and interlocutor's orientation to them in talk-in-interaction (see Heritage 1984). Interactional linguistics is employed to explore how the participants use linguistic structure (e.g., morphosyntax and prosody) to signal the possible completion of a turn at talk (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018). Multimodal analysis provides a perspective to the study of multimodal resources including linguistic and bodily visual conduct in accomplishing actions and organizing participation without prioritizing any modalities (Stivers and Sidnell 2005, Streeck et al. 2011). This study is based on approximately 5 h of 5 unscripted everyday face-to-face conversations among adult native Mandarin speakers. The participants are friends and acquaintances who have known each other for 6 months to 5 years. Based on the definition of assessment adopted in this study provided in Section 2.1 “(Negative) assessment in interaction”, a *negative assessment token* was identified in the data when *an utterance expresses its speaker's negatively valenced stance towards some person or object talked about*. Further, speaker's expressions of negatively valenced stance were operationally identified through a set of verbal and visual behaviors, including negatively valenced adjectives and adjective phrases (e.g., *tebie cha* “very bad”, *bu zenmeyang* “not so good”), noun phrases (e.g., *xiaoren* “unethical person”, lit. meaning “little person”), morphosyntactic constructions (e.g., comparative structure *X buru Y* “X not as good as Y”), idiomatic expressions (e.g., *xiaodujichang* “narrow-minded”), and linguistic + bodily structures (e.g., Subject NP + frowning + headshaking). Based on these features, 64 negative assessment instances were identified in the data. In the initial examination of the multimodal features involved in the production of these instances of negative assessments, all prosodic (such as pitch range, pitch register, pitch contour, loudness, length, pause, voice quality, etc.) and bodily visual features (such as facial expression including eyebrow movement and lip movement, head movement, eye gaze, gesture, torso movement, postural shift, bodily orientation, etc.) were considered, following the CA methodology that no multimodal feature should be treated as more or less relevant *a priori* (Stivers and Sidnell 2005: 2). Bodily visual behaviors were analyzed using the video annotation software program ELAN (<https://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/>). Still images captured from the video recordings are used in the data transcripts in this paper to illustrate relevant bodily visual movements. The data were transcribed using the GAT-2 transcription system (Couper-Kuhlen and Barth-Weingarten 2011) with modifications for Mandarin (Li 2014) (see the Appendices A and B for the transcription conventions). The results of the analysis are reported in Section 4.

4 Incomplete syntax, facial expression, and head movement in accomplishing delicate negative assessments

In this section, I examine the participants' uses of facial expressions and head movements while they are withholding the completion of a syntactic structure in a turn at talk. This forms a multimodal practice to accomplish the delicate action of negatively assessing others and to solicit the recipient's completion of the syntax-in-progress by producing the negative assessment term. Specifically, participants use incomplete syntax, lip-pursing or lip pouts (Excerpts 1–3), and eyebrow furrows (Excerpt 3) to perform the negative assessments of others and in indicating the delicateness of the action-in-progress and use incomplete syntax, lip-pursing,

1 This discussion about the interaction of intersubjectivity and (im)proprieties is provided here in response to a reviewer's question about the possible distinction between “I don't need to say this” and “I shouldn't say this” as reasons for withholding the completion of a TCU/turn.

eyebrow furrows, and head shakes (Excerpt 4) to accomplish negative assessments and in prompting the recipient to complete the syntax-in-progress by delivering the negative assessment term.

Before proceeding, I should note that in limiting the focus of this paper to particular multimodal practices of incomplete syntax followed by particular facial expressions and head shakes, I do not imply that these practices are isolated from sound features, the rest of the body, or the interactional and sequential environment in which they occur. The focus on these practices is for analytical clarity for the current paper. Also, the facial expressions and head shakes displaying negative stance such as lip-pursing, lip pouts, and eyebrow furrows may or may not co-occur after incomplete syntax in the data.

4.1 Incomplete syntax and facial expressions in accomplishing delicate negative assessments

Excerpt 1 demonstrates the uses of facial expressions immediately after suspended syntax in accomplishing a delicate action of negatively assessing an object related to the recipient. In the interaction, Tia (woman), Qun (woman), and Hui (woman) are friends. Qun is also Tia's neighbor. Tia holds a house-warming party and shows Hui and her husband Tia's newly finished bedroom. Touched off by Hui's remembrance at line 1, Tia topicalizes the four-piece bed sheet set Hui has given Tia (see the turn-initial attention-getting particle *ei* (Wu 1997) and the topicalization discourse marker *dui le* "right" (Liu 2007) at line 3), projecting her comment on the bed sheet set. Note that Hui's polar interrogative "Isn't it very comfortable" at line 7 strongly invites Tia's agreement (see Heritage 2002 for the use of negative interrogative to strongly invite agreement). Tia's joint laughter with Qun (lines 9–10) after Qun's less-than-favorable assessment of the bed sheet set (line 8) indexes Tia's orientation to her incipient response to Tia's question as potentially delicate or "face-threatening" (see Goffman 1956, 1972: 324 for laughter as a resource for managing "events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face" and Haakana 2001 for the role of laughter in delicate activities), namely, a disagreement with Tia. Not being appreciative of a gift given by a friend, especially when that friend solicits explicit expressions of appreciation of the gift from the recipient (just like what Tia's friend Hui does here at line 7), is a breach in conventional standards of courtesy, and thus a delicate action. Her orientation to the delicacy of her response is also displayed through her aborting her responsive TCU/turn-in-progress after *jude de* "(we) feel (it's)..." immediately before the projectable negative lexical item assessing the bed sheet set Hui has given her, which is the target phenomenon at line 11.

Note that immediately after the experiential marker *jude de* "feel/think" and before the negative assessment term is due at line 11, Tia halts the TCU/turn-in-progress and purses her lips (Figures 1 and 2) and then smiles (Figure 3). Tia's lip-pursing displays her negative evaluative stance towards the assessable, the bed sheet set Hui has given her (see Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori 2006 for lip-pursing as a display of negative affect). The smile displays Tia's awareness of her action-so-far as delicate. Here, the abandonment of the TCU/turn-in-progress before the negative term is due and the immediately subsequent facial expression of lip-pursing displaying the negative stance constitutes a multimodal practice for accomplishing negative assessments in the sequential environment. That Hui proffers the missing negative assessment term *bu shufu* "not comfortable" at line 12 immediately after Tia's syntactically incomplete turn, lip-pursing, and smile provides evidence that Hui treats Tia's verbal-bodily practice at line 11 as performing such an assessment. That the syntactic structure of Tia's turn at talk is incomplete while its interactional meaning is completed through both verbal and bodily visual means makes the boundary of this interactional unit blurry and demonstrates weak cesuras (Barth-Weingarten 2016).

(1) RAW_WH_R28_V_Z001_03:55

01 Hui: XIANG dangchu wo hai song ni yige ne.
 think before 1SG still give 2SG one-CL PRT
 'Remember I also gave you (Qun) one (four-piece bed sheet set).'

02 huan wo yige.
 return 1SG one-CL
 'Give me one back.'

03 Tia: ei(--) dui le ni nage sijiantao.
 PRT right PRT 2SG that-CL four-piece.bed.sheet.set
 'Ei, right, that four-piece bed sheet set,'

04 Qun: ((touching and feeling Tia's bed sheet))

05 Tia: bu shi.=
 NEG be
 'No.'

06 Hui: =zenme la-
 how PRT
 'How about it?'

07 [shi bu shi hen SHUfu.]
 [be NEG be very comfortable]
 'Isn't it very comfortable?'

08 Qun: [ta mei zheige shufu.]
 [3SG NEG this-CL comfortable]
 'It's not as comfortable as this one.'

09 he[hehehehehehe]

10 Tia: [h.((covering mouth and laughing))

Figure 1. Tia's body at *juede* at line 11

Figure 2. Tia's lip pursing at line 11



Figure 3. Tia's smile at line 11

Face
 11 → <<all>bu shi> women shuile zhihou juede- (0.7) ((click))
 NEG be 1PL sleep-PFV after feel
 'No. After using it, we feel ...'

12 → Hui: bu [shufu.
 NEG [comfortable
 'uncomfortable.'

13 Tia: [yong yongli de ganjuele yixia.
 [use strength COMP feel-PFV once
 '(We) tried it carefully.'

14 Hui: en.
 Umm.

15 Tia: mei[you ni shuo de name shufu ya.
 NEG 2SG say NOM that comfortable PRT
 '(It wasn't) as comfortable as you said.'

16 Qun: [bing bu juede hen shufu.
 [also NEG feel very comfortable
 '(We) didn't feel it was very comfortable.'

The use of abandoned syntax followed by lip-pursing in performing negative assessments is also observed in Excerpt 2. In the interaction, Hai (man), Lei (man), Yin (woman), and Qin (man) are friends. Hai, Qin, and Lei have a common acquaintance, Jessica (referred to in line 01), whom Yin does not know. The three tell Yin about Jessica's negative comments on Hai's appearance (lines 1–5, lines 34–36). After hearing Lei's recount of Jessica's negative comment on Hai's glasses (lines 34–36), Yin inquires why Jessica

has not criticized Lei and Qin's glasses (line 45). Lei and Qin respond with a report of Jessica's positive comments on their appearances (lines 46–47) and a self-praise of Qin and his own mature look (line 49). After Qin's agreement token (line 50), Lei produces a contrastive assessment of Hai with projected negative valence (line 51). But Lei's assessment is syntactically incomplete with the projected final adjective unverbalized. However, despite its incomplete syntax, Lei's assessment is treated as interactionally complete by other participants, which is evidenced by Qin's agreement token *dui* "right" (line 52) and Hai's agreement with Lei's assessment in lines 53–54.

(2) HLQY_mature men 00:04:20-00:04:25

01 Hai: ei wo juede Jessica jiu shi xiang jiu shi xihuan chengshu nanren;
PRT 1SG feel (NAME) just be want just be like mature men
'Ei, I think Jessica likes mature men.'

02 Hai: ta bu xihuan wo zhe yi xing;
3SG NEG like 1SG this one type
'She doesn't like men of my type.'

03 Lei: bu shi.
NEG be
'No.'

04 ta juede keneng shi tai xiaohair le.
3SG feel likely be too childish PRT
'She might feel you are too much like a boy,'

05 tai xuesheng le.
too student CRS
'too much like a student.'

(28 lines omitted regarding Hai's hairstyle and Jessica's comments on his hairstyle.)

34 Lei: haiyou nide yanjing.
also your glasses
'Also, your (Hai's) glasses,'

35 ta mei ci dou hui dou hui cong tou dao wei gei ni pipan yibian.
3SG every time all will all will from head to tail to you criticize once.through
'every time she will criticize you (Hai) through and through.'

(9 lines omitted regarding Jessica's comments on Hai's appearance)

45 Yin: ta weishenme bu pipan nide yanjing ne.
3SG why NEG criticize your glasses PRT
'Why didn't she criticize your (Lei's) glasses?'

46 Lei: ta shuo women dou [(xxxx)]
3SG say 1PL all [(xxxx)]
'She said we (Lei and Qin) are both...'

47 Qin: [ta renwei women dou hen hao.
[3SG think 1PL all very good.
'She thinks we (Lei and Qin) are very good.'

48 Yin: ((laughter))

49 Lei: women bijiao chengshu xiande.
1PL relatively mature seem
'We (Lei and Qin) seem relatively mature.'

50 Qin: dui.
right

Figure 4. Lei's body and Hai's body at *jiao* at line 51

Figure 5. Lei's body at the end of line 51

51- Lei: ta xiande bi<<creaky>jiao::>; (0.4) ((click)) | raising |
3SG seem relatively | pursing |
'He (Hai) seems relatively...'

52 Qin: dui.
right

53 Hai: wo xiande bijiao.
1SG seem relatively
'I seem relatively.'

54 wo xiede zhege timu jiu shi zheyang de.
1SG write this-CL topic just be like.this PRT
'The topic of my dissertation is just like this.'

The syntactic structure of Lei's TCU/turn-in-progress at line 51: Subjective NP *ta* “he” + copula verb *xiande* “seem” + adverb *bijiao* “relatively”, projects the next syntactic element of an adjective characterizing the subject NP (Hai). At the end of the lengthened degree adverb *bijiao* “relatively”, Lei halts the TCU/turn-in-progress, purses his lips, and raises his eyebrows (Figures 4 and 5). In the sequential environment after the prior reported contrasting assessments of Lei, Qin, and Hai (lines 4–5, and 46–47) and Lei's self-praise (line 49), the hesitancy in the production of Lei's TCU- and comment (on Hai)-in-progress at line 51 shows Lei's orientation to the potential impropriety of the next assessment term due. Lei's lip-pursing displays his negative evaluative stance towards the assessable *ta* “he”, i.e., Hai. In its sequential environment, the incomplete syntax and the immediately ensuing lip-pursing work together to perform the delicate action of negatively assessing Hai immediately after positively assessing Qin and Lei himself.

Eyebrow raises as “conversational facial signals” (Ekman 1979) are described to occur in request for information from the recipient (Darwin 1872, Ekman 1979, Wierzbicka 1999: 189). Here, Lei's eyebrow raise together with his “turn-offering” Open Hand Palm Up gesture (Figure 5, see also Müller 2004, Streeck 2009) is employed to request Hai's response to Lei's syntactically incomplete turn and assessment of Hai. Qin and Hai's agreements with Lei (lines 52–54) immediately after Lei's abandoned syntax and lip-pursing at line 51 show that Qin and Hai treat Lei's linguistic and bodily behaviors in the sequential context as relevant to their recognition of the negative assessment accomplished at line 51.

Movements of the lips and eyebrows are two main types of facial expressions involved in displaying emotions and achieving communicative functions (Ekman 2004). Lowering of the eyebrows or eyebrow furrows are documented to display negative affect such as anger (Ekman 1979) and to indicate negation (Darwin 1872: 274). In the data, in addition to lip-pursing, eyebrow furrows are also observed to appear immediately after the aborted syntax-in-progress to perform a negative assessment. Excerpt 3 is a case in point. In this interaction, Fen (female), Bai (female), and Lan (male) are doctoral students in the same program at the same university. In the excerpt, they comment on the different standards and requirements of the significance of PhD dissertations at their university and at other universities. Specifically, their university has much higher requirements on the contribution of PhD dissertations than other universities. Immediately prior to the excerpt, Fen refers to a presentation given by a PhD student on her dissertation (referred to as “her dissertation” at line 1) from another university that Fen, Bai, and Lan have all attended. At lines 8–9, Fen critically assesses the requirements of PhD dissertations at the guest PhD student's university by contrasting them with those at Fen, Lan, and Bai's own university. Lan halts her turn at the end of *neige* “that”, a disfluency marker (Yue 2020) indicating hesitation about what is to be said, lowers her eyebrows, and pouts her lips (line 9, Figures 6 and 7).

(3) Dissertation requirement_00:28:00

01 Fen: ni kan ta neige lunwen zuode neizhong ganjue
2SG see 3SG that-CL dissertation do-COM that kind feeling
'Look at how her dissertation is like,'

02 jiaoshi tebie xiang jiaoshi shuo fanzheng
just be very like just be say anyway

03 ni hui zuo yanju jiu xing;
you can do research just OK
'(it's) very much like, say, as long as (it shows) you know
how to do research.'

04 Lan: EN en [en.
En en [en.

05 Fen: [zhiyu shuo ni zuo zheige dongxi duiyu (sh)
[as for say 2SG do this-CL thing to
'As for your dissertation research,'

06 you mei you shenme hen da de yiyi ya;
have not have what very big ASSCO significance PRT
'whether (it) is significant or not,'

07 you mei you shenme hen da de chuangxin <>p wo juede>=
have NEG have what very big NOM innovation 1SG think
'whether it is very innovative, I think...'

08 - =yao gen zanmen bi ta jiu jianzhi shi
if with 1PL compare 3SG just simply be
'If compared with us, their (requirements) are just simply'



Figure 6. Fen's body at *qiu* at line 9



Figure 7. Fen's facial expressions at the end of line 9

Lip			pouting	
Eyebrow			lower	
09 -	yaoqiu	TAI neige;		
	requirement	too that-CL		
	'too that...'			
10	Lan:	di le ha.		
		low CRS PRT		
		'low, right?'		
11	Fen:	en.		
		'En.'		

Fen’s comment on the guest PhD student’s dissertation at lines 1–3 and her conclusion regarding the low expectations of the significance and innovativeness of PhD dissertations at that student’s university (lines 5–7) have conveyed her evaluative stance on the matter at hand: the requirements of PhD dissertations at that referent university are much lower than at Fen’s own university (lines 8–9). Note that Fen uses two emphatic degree adverbs *jianzhi* “simply” (line 8) and *tai* “too” with *tai* stressed (line 9) in her assessment, conveying her strong evaluative stance. Delivering such an explicit denigrating assessment of another university in such an emphatic manner is potentially inappropriate. Accordingly, Fen abandons the TCU-in-progress before the negative assessment term is due immediately followed by her facial expressions of lowered eyebrows and

pouted lower lip displaying negation and disapproval (Figure 7). After the syntactic initiation of the assessment, Fen completes the delicate action through her facial expressions. That Lan proffers the negative assessment term in his candidate understanding, *di* “low” (line 10) immediately after Fen’s syntactically incomplete TCU/turn and her eyebrow furrow and lower lip pout at line 9 demonstrates that he treats Fen’s incomplete syntax and facial expressions as relevant to accomplishing the negative assessment.

The preceding three excerpts have demonstrated that speakers employ incomplete syntax accompanied by facial expressions that display negative affective and evaluative stance such as lip-pursing, lip pouts, and eyebrow furrows, to perform the delicate action of negatively assessing a co-participant (or an object related to her) (Excerpts 1, 2) and a non-present party (Excerpt 3). In Section 4.2, I show that after incomplete syntax, in addition to aforementioned facial expressions, head shakes are also produced by the speaker to perform a negative assessment but also to solicit the recipient’s completion of the delicate action by delivering the negative assessment term.

4.2 Incomplete syntax, facial expressions, and head shakes in accomplishing negative assessments and soliciting other-completion

Excerpt 4 shows that the speaker employs the incomplete syntax, facial expressions, and head shakes to prompt a more entitled participant to produce a delicate negative assessment term of a non-present common acquaintance.

The two participants in the interaction in Excerpt 4, Pei and Bin, are close friends. The sequence begins with Bin’s question about whether Pei knows a non-present third party, Wang Ming (line 01). After receiving Pei’s affirmative response with elaboration (lines 02–03), Bin solicits Pei’s assessment of Wang Ming using a question-word interrogative (line 06). Bin’s directly asking about Pei’s the character of Wang Ming without making her purpose of asking or her own stance inferable or available is highly accountable (Pomerantz 2021: 223). The problem with Bin’s request for information/assessment is shown through Pei’s “open class repair initiator” (Drew 1997) *a* “ah” with rising pitch movement (line 07). Bin reveals the purpose of her asking and her evaluative stance towards Wang Ming by quoting another common acquaintance Guo Limin’s projectably negative assessment of Wang Ming at lines 11–12. That Bin makes a negative assessment of a non-present person Wang Ming whom Pei knows better than Bin is delicate and potentially problematic.

(4) Wang this person_BP_VL_00:07:23

01 Bin: *ni renshi Wang Ming ma.*
 2SG know (NAME) Q
 'Do you know Wang Ming?'

02 Pei: *Wang Ming dangran renshi women yuanlai zhzai yiqi.*
 (NAME) of course know 1PL used.to live together
 'Wang Ming, of course I know her. We used to live together.'

03 *women zhuguo linju de.*
 1PL live neighbor PRT
 'We used to be neighbors.'

04 Bin: Oh[::

05 Pei: *[wo gang lai de shihou jiu gen ta zhu [linju.*
 [1SG just come NOM time just with 3SG live [neighbor
 'When I just moved here, she was my neighbor.'

06 Bin: *[ei ta ren zenmeyang.*
 [ei 3SG person how
 'Ei how is she as a person?'

07 Pei: a?
 ah?
 Ah?'

08 Bin: *wo [hai meiyou QU ne.*
 1SG[yet NEG go PRT
 'Before I went there,'

09 Pei: *[yiban;*
 [so.so
 'So so.'

10 Bin: *ranhou neige jiao shenme?*
 then that-CL call what
 'Then, that, what's his name,'

11 <<creaky>e> *Guo Limin jiu gen wo shuo-*
 (NAME) just with 1SG say
 'Guo Limin told me,'

12-> *Guo Limin shuo aiya Wang Ming zhege ren,*
 (NAME) say INT (NAME) this-CL person
 'Guo Limin said, aiya, Wang Ming this person,'

13-> Pei: *yiban(.) bu zenmeyang.*
 so.so NEG what
 'So so, not so good.'

14 Bin: Mm.

15 (click) *houlai*
 (click) then
 'then...'

16 *ranhou shi TA jiao wo cuichang de ni zhidao ba.*
 Later be 3SG ask 1SG get.performers.ready PRT 2SG know PRT
 'Later, it was she who asked me to get the performers ready, you know?'

A close examination of the linguistic structure and bodily visual behaviors produced by Bin and Pei at lines 12–13 (which are schematically shown in Figure 11) shows that they orient to Bin's incomplete syntactic structure, facial expressions, and headshakes as not only performing the negative assessment of Wang Ming, but also soliciting Pei's formulation of the negative term to complete the assessment.

Figure 8. Bin's gaze at *shuo* at line 12Figure 9. Bin's facial expressions at *ren* (9a) and during the 0.5-second pause (9b) at line 12

	Head		
	Eyebrow		
	Lip		
	Gaze	forwardat Pei
12	Bin:	Luo limin shuo eiya Wang ming zhege ren;; (0.5)	Mm.
		(NAME) say INT (NAME) this-CL person	
		Luo Limin said, eiya, Mang Ming this person,	
13	Head	<---> <----->	
	Pei:	yiban(.)bu zenmeyang.	
		so so NEG what	
		so so, not so good.	



Figure 10a

Figure 10b

Figure 10. Pei's facial expressions at *ren* (10a), during the 0.5-second pause in line 12, and during *zenmeyang* (10b) at line 13

Figure 11. A multimodal presentation of lines 12-13 in Excerpt 4

While Bin lengthens the syllable *ren* “person” and halts her syntax-in-progress (line 12), she produces two head shakes, lowers her eyebrows, and stretches her lips (line 12, Figure 9a and b). The head shakes are used as a negative expression (Kendon 2002: 151), indicating a negative evaluation of the assessable, Wang Ming. The eyebrow furrow and the pursed lips (Figure 9b), similar to their uses in previous excerpts, display a negative evaluative stance towards the person being assessed. Bin also directs her gaze at Pei at the beginning of the assessment (Figures 8 and 9a). Bin’s halting the syntax-in-progress just before the assessment term is due, while intensely looking at Pei and visually publicly displaying her evaluative stance through head shakes, eyebrow furrow, and pursed lips show that she engages and prompts Pei to produce the assessment term. Immediately after Bin aborts her syntax-in-progress and the onset of Bin’s first head shake, Pei also starts shaking her head while verbalizing the first negative assessment term *yiban* “so so” (line 13). Immediately after Bin’s second head shake and a full display of Bin’s stance through her facial expressions, Pei upgrades her negative assessment from *yiban* “so so” to *bu zenmeyang* “not so good” (line 13) while producing another prolonged head shake (line 13, Figure 10a and b). That Pei produces her affiliative head shake and completion of Bin’s negative assessment immediately after the onset of Bin’s head shake at the end of the incomplete syntax and upgrades her negative assessment immediately after

Bin's second head shake, pursed lips, and eyebrow furrow provide evidence that Pei treats Bin's incomplete syntax, head shakes, pursed lips, and eyebrow furrow as relevant to soliciting her production of the delicate negative term(s) and completion of Bin's syntactically incomplete assessment.

In this excerpt, Bin's incomplete syntax followed by head shakes and facial expressions are practices to perform the delicate negative assessment and to prompt the more entitled participant Pei to deliver the delicate assessment term.

The preceding four excerpts have shown that Mandarin speakers use abandoned syntax followed by facial expressions (such as lip-pursing and eyebrow furrow) and head shakes to perform negative assessments of the recipient (Excerpt 2), objects related to the recipient (Excerpt 1), and non-present parties (Excerpts 3 and 4) and to solicit the recipient to deliver the delicate negative term to complete the negative assessment (Excerpt 4).

5 Concluding discussions

In this paper, I have shown that incomplete syntax, facial expressions such as lip-pursing and eyebrow lowering (or eyebrow furrows), and head shakes are multimodal practices used by speakers when making negative assessments of others, an action that is socially and interactionally improper. Leaving the assessments syntactically incomplete seems to display the speaker's orientation to the social-interactional improprieties of the assessments. In addition to the incomplete syntax, the speaker produces lip-pursing (Excerpts 1–4), eyebrow furrows (Excerpts 3, 4), and head shakes (Excerpt 4) to display their negative stance and to solicit the recipient's completion of the negative assessment (Excerpt 4).

The findings in the paper contribute to four bodies of research: units and fuzzy boundaries in interaction, improprieties, and social relations. First, the uses of incomplete syntax together with facial expressions and head shakes reported in this paper contribute to the research on units in interaction (Szczepek Reed and Raymond 2013) and fuzzy boundaries between units in interaction (Li 2014, also Barth-Weingarten 2016). I showed how morphosyntax, prosody, and bodily visual behaviors systematically diverge at/toward the possible end of an interactional unit: a TCU. In particular, the incomplete syntactic structure projects a *continuation* of the current TCU. But pauses after incomplete syntactic structures, clicks, and PUOH (Palm Up Open Hand) gestures (Excerpt 1) seem to indicate possible *completion* of the current talk and to solicit the recipient's response. Furthermore, the speaker's facial expressions and head movements displaying their stance seem to occur during the pauses. This shows that particular vocal and bodily visual behaviors may occupy a slot in syntactic structures, which blurs the boundaries of clauses (see Keevallik 2013) and creates weak cesuras (Barth-Weingarten 2016).

Second, the findings about the recurrent uses of incomplete syntax, lip-pursing, and eyebrow furrows in accomplishing negative assessments and in soliciting other-completion of the delicate assessments add to our knowledge of the range of practices in dealing with delicate matters. Through describing the recurrent uses of facial expressions and head movements immediately after incomplete syntax in delivering negative assessments of others, I show that in addition to *verbal-vocal* disfluencies, hesitations in TCU production, and laughter documented in previous research (Lerner 2013, Jefferson 1983, Schegloff 2003), *bodily visual behaviors* such as facial expression and head shakes also play important roles in displaying the participants' orientation to the improprieties of the unfolding assessment. It demonstrates the importance and necessity of shifting our focus of study from verbal features exclusively to multimodal practices including but not restricted to what participants say. Furthermore, implementing a socially delicate action is consequential for social relations between participants. This study shows that in addition to the structural affordances provided through suspending a TCU/turn at talk for other-completion, publicly visible facial expressions and head shakes establish affordances for displaying/recognizing the speaker's affective and evaluative stance and for accomplishing delicate actions in interaction.

Third, this study contributes to the study of the distinction between *interactional* problem and *production* problem (see also Jefferson 1974), as well as the intersection of intersubjectivity and (im)propriety. The uses of facial expressions displaying negative affective and evaluative stance immediately after incomplete syntax demonstrate that participants orient to the hesitation in the delivery of a TCU/turn at talk not as a *production*

problem as in searching for a word (see Goodwin and Goodwin 1986), but as an *interactional* (im)propriety problem. Specifically, the bodily visual behaviors involved in word searches and in delicate actions such as negatively assessing others documented here are distinct. Gaze aversion, “thinking face”, and hand gestures concurrent with hesitations in TCU/turn production are documented to indicate searching for a word (Goodwin and Goodwin 1986), whereas lip-pursing, eyebrows, head shakes while *looking at* the recipient immediately after incomplete syntax index the current talk and action as delicate and possibly solicit the recipient’s completion of the delicate formulation (Excerpt 4). The lip-pursing, eyebrow furrows, head shakes during mutual gaze displaying the speaker’s negative affective and evaluative stance immediately after suspending a TCU/turn-in-progress provide evidence that participants treat syntactically incomplete negative assessments documented here as distinct from searching for a word. In addition, participants do not exhibit distinct treatments of the syntactically incomplete negative assessments as relevant to intersubjectivity (“I don’t need to say this”) or (im)proprieties (“I shouldn’t say this”). The design and position of the syntactically incomplete negative assessments in their sequential environment make the assessment term highly projectable and recognizable, as is shown through the recipient’s immediate response (Excerpt 2), completion of the negative assessments (Excerpt 4), and immediate proffering of the candidate’s understanding of the unverbalized negative assessment terms (Excerpts 1, 3). The incomplete syntax, negative-stance-implicated facial expressions, and head shakes indicate the speaker’s orientation to the impropriety of the negative assessments. Thus, the phenomenon examined in the study reflects participants’ orientation to both mutual understanding (“I don’t need to say this”) and (im)proprieties (“I shouldn’t say this”).

Finally, this paper also contributes to our knowledge of the affordances of grammar in interaction from a cross-linguistic perspective. That is, what resources and consequences does grammatical/morphosyntactic structure have in different languages for the organization of action within a TCU/turn at talk? As is discussed in the background, Mandarin is a topic-prominent language (Li and Thompson 1981). Topic-comment structure has been shown to be relevant to the construction of a TCU/turn at talk in Mandarin conversation (Li 2014: 36–44). Here we can see that the speaker exploits the structural juncture between the topic and the comment in the topic-comment structure as a systematic opportunity space to manage engagement of the recipient. The speaker’s orientation to this structural juncture can be observed from their pausing after the topic in the topic-comment structure and displaying their evaluative stance bodily visually at this locus (Excerpt 4). The recipient orients to the juncture by proffering the comment, i.e., the assessment term, after the topic. This shows that the disjunctive properties of the grammatical structure in Mandarin may be used by participants as a resource for the organization of their interaction with one another. How the grammatical structure of different languages affords their speakers with distinctive resources to accomplish such tasks remains an interesting area for future cross-linguistic research.

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Appendix A

The transcription conventions for vocal (GAT-2, Gesprächsanalytisches Transkriptionssystem 2, Selting et al. 2011, modified) and visual behaviors used in this article:

?	cut-off by glottal closure
(.)	micro-pause
(-), (-), (—)	short, middle or long pauses
(1.0)	measured pause of appr. 0.5/2.0 s duration
ACcent	primary or main accent
::	prolongation or stretching of the sound just preceding them
<<creaky>>	changes in voice quality, glottalized
<<laughing>>	speech produced with laughing voice
<<f>>	forte, loud
<<p>>	piano, soft
((head nods))	description of an action
,	rising to mid-final pitch movement
-	level final pitch movement
;	falling to mid-final pitch movement
.	falling to low final pitch movement
	for a TCU separated in two lines, the final pitch movement is not notated at the end of the first line.
=	latching (fast, immediate continuation with a new turn or segment)
hehe	syllabic laughter
(you)	assumed wording
(XXX)	unintelligible syllables
~	preparation of gesticulation
*	stroke of gesticulation
-.	recovery of gesticulation
	boundary of gesture unit and boundary of a bodily visual movement
...	movement of gaze

Appendix B

1SG	first person singular
1PL	first person plural
2SG	second person singular
3SG	third person singular
ASSC	associative
CL	classifier
COMP	complementizer
CRS	currently relevant state
INT	interjection
NEG	negatives
NOM	nominalizer
PFV	perfective aspect
PRT	particle
Q	question marker