Response Tokens in MSN Conversations[*]

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This paper explores the functions of the Mandarin Chinese response tokens (RT) *shi-o* and *o* in MSN on-line talk. Both are produced in response to an informing and betoken a change of cognitive state. Furthermore, the sequential environment of these two RTs is highly correlated with one's intended meanings. First, both *shi-o* and *o* occur with a statement in response to an informing. However, *shi-o* invariably responds to new information, whereas *o* responds to both new and given information. Second, both occur as a free-standing item and suggest disaffiliation or topic curtailment. Third, both act as a marker of transition to a new topic. Fourth, both RTs introduce a question to probe for more information. Additionally, *shi-o* may be used before a dispreferred response to mitigate the dispreferred second. Whereas the free-standing and transition-marking RTs signal topic disalignment, the conversational moves of statement and question attached to these two RTs are also frequently associated with a negative prosody. In general, *o* figures in MSN as a strongly dissociative response particle, whereas *shi-o*, with a mitigating final particle, is a moderately dispreferred RT in MSN for indexing of "small surprise".

Keywords: MSN conversations, Mandarin Chinese, *shi-o*, *o,* response token, sequential environment, change-of-state token

1. Introduction

Language use is one kind of joint activity and is essentially social. In a conversation, when a speaker projects a turn, the recipient usually responds by virtue of a variety of tokens based on different sequential locations and their goals. Response tokens (henceforth RTs) can be defined as "conversational objects that indicate that a piece of talk has been registered by the recipient of that talk" (Gardner 2001:13). In light of their sequential contexts, different response tokens are produced to fulfill diversified conversational goals (Fishman 1983, Jefferson 1984, Drummond and Hopper 1993, Clancy et al. 1996, Reid 1995, Stubbe 1998, and Gardner 2001). In Mandarin Chinese, the RT *shi-o* (Y. Lin 2002 and S. Lin 2004) seems to have gained widespread popularity in on-line talk via MSN Messenger, which is a computer-mediated form of communication (CMC) widely used by young people in the last decade.[1] This paper aims to explore the functions of the RT *shi-o* in MSN

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[1] The fact that *shi-o* has gained widespread popularity recently is consistent with its less frequent occurrence in an earlier databank, when MSN messenger was not available. In a Chinese corpus comprising spontaneous talk collected during 1995-1997 (26,419 morphemes), we found only one token of *shi-o* among 585 RTs of various types. By contrast, in part of our MSN database of an

conversations and compare its functions with its synonymous RT *o*. The discussion centers on the sequential relevance of *shi-o* and *o* in turn exchanges and how they signal various intended meanings of the chatters.

2. Previous studies

This section reviews previous studies on response tokens. We will focus on Mandarin Chinese *o* as an RT, final *o* and *shi-o*. Comparison with their corresponding term in English, *oh*, will be made where necessary.   In Section 2.1, we first review studies on *o*.

2.1 *O* in Mandarin Chinese

O may occur utterance-initially and utterance-finally to fulfill interactional functions. Initial *o* serves as a response token to an informing. When taking a falling tone, it indicates that the speaker knows something, whereas *o* with a rising tone can denote surprise and sudden realization of a certain fact (Chao 1968, C. Wang 1998, and L. Wang 1987):

(1) A: Wanger na   xiaozi, suiran   nianqing, zai wai   chi jiu   du
        PN   that fellow   although young   at outside eat liquor gamble
        qian.
        money
        'Although Wanger is young, he drinks outside and gambles a lot.'
    (8 lines by A omitted here)
→ B: **O!** Ta   xiaozi jing   hui   he   jiu   bu cheng   ren   ma?
        RT 3SG   fellow   should   will   drink liquor   not become person PAR
        'Oh! Will this guy overdrink?'

(L. Wang 1987:329)

The use of initial *o* reviewed above is in accord with that of English *oh*, which is generally analyzed as a change-of-state token (Heritage 1984, 2005, Schiffrin 1987, and Aijmer 1987) in response to an informing or to a situational context which evokes the speaker's memory. As a response to previous speaker's informing, in particular, *oh* assures the alignment between speakers and listeners. The change of speaker's cognitive state may be effected by an informing which is surprising (Heritage 1984,

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approximate size (26,039 morphemes) collected during 2004-2005, 30 tokens of *shi-o* were identified among 560 tokens of different RTs.

2005 and Aijmer 1987), hence its "newsworthiness". This is similar to Chinese *o* with a rising tone. When the informing is unsurprising, *oh* may introduce utterances which, together with *oh*, assert "epistemic superiority" (Heritage 2005:198).

In utterance-final position, *o* is used to express friendly warning, to turn a statement into a confirmation seeking question, or to mitigate an assertion (Li and Thompson 1981:311-12 and Shie 1991:170-86). Based on prior researches of final *o* and English *oh*, Wu (2004) provides a more systematic analysis of final *o*[2] and argues that it is an "epistemic alert" to signal to the recipients what merits attention in the current talk (p.120).[3] The functions of *o* can be interpreted in terms of two sequential contexts. In the first position, *o* marks a news delivery. In the responsive position, when responding to an informing, *o* marks receipt of news and seeks confirmation of the informing. It may also occur as a turn of informing in this sequential position.[4] While the confirmation seeking function is consistent with previous analysis, the "newsworthiness" of *o* is in line with Heritage's (Heritage 1984:340, citing Jefferson 1981:62-66) observation on the "newsmarking" function of *oh* in English. Since of particular relevance to the present research is final *o* in the responsive position for confirmation seeking, an example extracted from Wu (2004:55) is given in the following:

(2) W: ta   keyi xianzai zou   a.
     3SG can   now   leave PAR
     'He can leave now.'

  L: hui   taiwan **o**.
     return Taiwan PAR
     'Go back to Taiwan **O**?'

The concurrence of the Mandarin Chinese copula *shi* with final *o* yields the response token *shi-o* that is used frequently in MSN conversations. In the following, we review previous studies on *shi-o*.

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[2] In Wu's (2004) work, *o* is referred to as *ou*. For consistency, *o* is used throughout our discussion and all the examples cited.

[3] Wu (2004) only focuses on *o* in utterance final position. *O* as a sole response item is only mentioned in passing, as a preface to display understanding without seeking the recipient's "endorsement" (p.65).

[4] According to Wu (2004), the informing may take place at a "dispreferred second turn" (Wu 2004:103). However, it is not intended to be confrontational but to mark the "newsworthiness" of the utterance. This analysis corresponds to the mitigating function of *o* discussed in Shie (1991). Since final *o* for informing is not the focus of the study, the reader is referred to Shie and Wu for details.

2.2 *Shi-o* in Mandarin Chinese

Shi is a copular verb which establishes a link between a referential subject noun phrase and a non-referential noun phrase (Chao 1968, Li and Thompson 1981, Liu et al. 1983, C. Wang 1998, and L. Wang 1987). In a response, it is an affirmation marker asserting the value of a previous speaker's statement (Li and Thompson 1981). Accordingly, when tagged with a final *o*, *shi-o* in a responsive position seeks confirmation of the truth value of a previous statement. As exploratory studies on the conversational imports of *shi-o*, Y. Lin (2002) and S. Lin (2004) note that *shi-o* serves as a minimal response token to signal the current speaker's attention to the topic of talk, e.g. (3). Furthermore, *shi-o* may elicit further question, as in (4), to show disagreement (Y. Lin 2002) or surprise (S. Lin 2004), as in (5), or to signal transition of topic, as in (6):

(3) A: Women ban   lian shixi de   shiqing dou mei you   ren   PO.
　　　1PL   class even intern AC thing   all not have people post
　　　'In our class, we don't even have articles about internship.'
→ B: **Shi o!**
　　　RT
　　　'Is that so?'

(4) A: Wo   gen   ni   shuo o!   Mojie hao   nankan.
　　　1SG   with 2SG say   PAR PN   very bad.look
　　　'Tell you what. "Lord of the Ring" was very boring.'
→ B: **Shi o!** Weishemo?
　　　RT   why
　　　'Really! Why?'

(5) A: Wo   tongxue   kan le   Zhuluoji   san.
　　　1SG classmate see PAR Jurassic.Park three
　　　Tingshuo bi   dier   ji   hao kan ye.
　　　hear.say COMP second episode good see PAR
　　　'My classmate went to see Jurassic Park III. (He) said that it is better than the second.'
→ B: **Shi o**? Ting juping   shuo man lan de.
　　　RT   hear film.critic say rater bad AC
　　　'Is that so? Some film film critics said it sucks.'

(6) A: Ni   qu shenqing free.for.14.days jiu   ke   yong le.

       2SG go apply   free.for.14.days then can use   PAR

       'You could apply for a 14-day free use, and then you can have access to it.'

→ B: **Shi o**! Ni   you xxx de email ma?

       RT   2SG have PN   AC email PAR

       'Yeah. Do you have xxx's email?'

From the examples presented above, it can be seen that the functions of *shi-o* correspond to previous analysis of final *o* as a confirmation seeking marker (Li and Thompson 1981, Shie 1991, and Wu 2004) and as a marker of news receipt (Heritage 1984, 2005 and Wu 2004). However, S. Lin's and Y. Lin's studies suffer from several limitations. First, it is unclear what effects the sequential context has on the meanings of *shi-o*. In addition, neither study provides an adequate account of the association of *shi-o* with negative evaluations, which, as we will show in the following, accounts for a great majority of the use of *shi-o*. Furthermore, how *shi-o* differs from its synonym *o* as a response token is left unexplored. Given these limitations, the current research aims to provide a systematic investigation of *shi-o* and *o* in MSN talk. The focus will be on how the contingent nature and distribution of *shi-o* and *o* contribute to their interactional functions.

3. Method

This section begins with a review of the characteristics of MSN talk by comparing it with natural conversations to illuminate the interactional pattern in MSN. Then in section 3.2, we provide a description of background information of the database and the framework adopted for the analysis of *shi-o* and *o*.

3.1 Characteristics of MSN talk

MSN Messenger is an instant messaging program that allows one to have an instant on-line conversation with a group of friends simultaneously (Crystal 2001, Greenfield and Subrahmanyam 2003). Introduced in 1999, [5] it differs from face-to-face natural talk in several dimensions. First, MSN talk takes a text-based form, whereas face-to-face conversations take place orally. Thus, more than one topic can proceed simultaneously in MSN while this rarely happens in natural talk due to the limitations of the human memory. Second, although MSN is an instant messaging

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[5] See http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/2002/nov02/11-08MSN8GlobalTimeLine.mspx for details.

system, users can have more time to plan and construct their ideas before sending messages to others compared with speakers' verbalization in natural talk. Third, unlike natural conversations, few audio or visual clues are involved in MSN talk, with the exception of the symbols of a variety of conventionalized facial expressions such as those of "smiley"[6] (cf. Mey 1993). Besides, many words with unfamiliar look (e.g. ㄛ for 喔 and 降子 for 這樣子), which are derived from abbreviations and colloquial elisions, are frequently used in MSN talk. Fourth, the language used in MSN appears in text form and at least within the time when one is still on line, is kept as history, whereas natural talk is ephemeral. Last, the limitation of computer-mediated communication and participants' different typing rates may sometimes lead to delays in message transmission and thus sometimes result in the violation of turn-taking rules (Herring 1999).

The above discussion suggests that MSN talk is a means of communication which is "an amalgam of spoken and written language" (Greenfield and Subrahmanyam 2003). Given the characteristics described above, it is worth investigating how *shi-o* works within this new communicative environment and how a chatter understands the other participant(s)' intended meanings in such an emerging communication system.

3.2 Data and analysis

The data used in this study were drawn from MSN conversations among friends or family members during the year of 2004 and 2005. The subject-matter in the conversation centers on various topics happening in daily life. The total number of participants was 42, including 24 females and 18 males ranging from 15 to 39 years of age, and with different occupations.[7] A total of 126,462 morphemes were included in this data and each conversation was measured on the basis of "turn-constructional units" (Sacks et al. 1974:702). Different from face-to-face interaction, in the chat register, a default full stop is made by pressing "enter" on the keyboard (Greenfield and Subrahmanyam 2003), and thus one "enter" constitutes one turn. The total number of turn units in our databank is 11,258.

Since the functions of RTs are mainly interpretable in conversations, the main approach we take to analyze our data is conversation analysis, a "rigorously empirical approach" searching for recurrent patterns by examining natural conversation (Levinson 1983:286-87). Two criteria were used for identifying *shi-o* for analysis. First, only *shi-o* and *o* that were used as a response token in the turn-initial position was coded. Second, on account of the fact that MSN chatters often use various

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[6] Common smiley includes ☺, ☹, ☺, and so on.
[7] As MSN is mainly used by young people, data from contributors older than 39 were only fragmentary and were thus excluded from the analysis.

homophones for a rapid and effective conversation, the various orthographic representations such as 是喔, 事喔, 是乙, 是歐, 是噢, and 是哦 were identified as the same token *shi-o*. The same principle applies to our search of RT *o*. As a result, the database yields a total of 330 tokens of *shi-o* and 574 tokens of *o*.

4. Functions of the response token *shi-o* and *o* in MSN

A general analysis of *shi-o* shows that all tokens of *shi-o* and *o* respond to news or informing. However, *shi-o* and *o* differ in terms of the information status of the statement to which they respond to. That is, *shi-o* represents a typical usage of "newsmarkers" (Heritage 1984, 2005 and Wu 2004) as it responds to an informing which is new or unexpected. On the other hand, *o* may indicate receipt of either news announcement or information which is known to the *o*-speaker. As will be shown below, the difference contributes to their varying interactional and evaluative functions. In the following, we discuss the interactional functions of *shi-o* and *o* in terms of their sequential environments: With an assessment, with a question, with a dispreferred response, transition marking, and as a free-standing item. The first three environments account for *shi-o* and *o* with additional moves oriented toward the topic of talk. The last two characterize *shi-o* and *o* that are strongly topic curtailing. Among these five sequential environments, an explicit negative response is only observed to collocate with *shi-o*. In the following, we discuss *shi-o* with an assessment first.

4.1 With an assessment

A major sequential environment of *shi-o* (29.4%) and *o* (39.9%) is for them to preface a turn component whereby the chatter makes a statement or assessment of the topic of talk in the preceding exchanges. As "products of participation" (Pomerantz 1984:57), assessments show the chatter's involvement in the talk (Pomerantz 1984:57). It may encourage the other speaker to continue the talk. In (7), *shi-o* acknowledges the receipt of new information. It expresses "concern" and characterizes "another's news as troubling" (Pudlinski 2005:284):

(7) (The speakers just came back from playing basketball together.)
    JJ1:   Jintian da   qiu hao lei o.
           today play ball very tired PAR
           'I felt tired after playing (basket)ball today.'

LH1: Dui   a.
     right   PAR
     'Yeah.'

LH2: Bei zhuang yixia xianzai hai hui tong.
     BEI hit   once   now   still will hurt
     'It still hurts after being hit.'

→ JJ2: **Shi o**?
     RT
     'Really?'

JJ3: Name kelian.
     so   poor
     'Poor fellow.'

LH3: Gen saipao yiyang.
     with race   same
     '(The person who bumped into me) was like running in a race.'

(JJ and LH continue the discussion about the collision in the ball game.)

Shi-o may be used after a series of contrastive messages where the speakers are negotiating about a problematic part of a topic of talk due to an information gap in their knowledge. After the problematic part is resolved, *shi-o* is frequently used to indicate that an understanding has been achieved. Besides, an assessment usually follows *shi-o* to describe the recipient's prior misunderstanding, e.g. *Wo yiwei* 'I thought…':

(8) RY1: Ni   yinggai hen hui   youyong ba? Haibian zhangda de.
     2SG should very skilled swim   PAR seaside   grow.up NOM
     'You must be good at swimming since you grew up by the sea.'

OS1: Wo bu   shi   haibian zhangda de.
     1SG NEG COP seaside grow.up NOM
     'I did not grow up by the sea.'

RY2: Wandan bu   kao   hai a?
     PN   NEG next.to sea PAR
     'Isn't Wandanby the sea?'

OS3: Bu   kao.
     NEG next.to
     'No.'

→ RY3: **Shi o**.

      RT

      'Oh.'

  RY4: Wo yiwei Pingdong dou shi   hai ne.

      1SG think PN   all   COP sea PAR

      'I just thought (every place in) Pingdong was close to the sea.'

Additionally, *shi-o* may be used to respond to a rejection to an invitation or request, as in (9).

(9) CH1: Ni   yao   bu   yao gen wo   chuqu a?

        2SG want NEG want with 1SG go.out PAR

        'Do you wanna go out with me?'

  CW1: Ha ha! Wo   you   shi   nei.

        ha   ha   1SG have thing PAR

        'Ha ha! But I have scheduled an appointment.'

→ CH2: **Shi o** mei guanxi!! na   xiaci.[8]

        RT   NEG relation then next.time

        'Oh, that's all right. Maybe some other time.'

  CW2: ^^[9]

As a "socially determined structural pattern" (Yule 1996:79) rather than from an individual's preference (Levinson 1983 and Yule 1996), an invitation is primarily "made in the expectation that the second part will be an acceptance" (Yule 1996). A rejection to the invitation constitutes surprise to the inviter. In (9), CW does not comply with the request but refuses with an excuse. This runs counter to CH's expectation, and she uses *shi-o* to index the receipt of the news along with an utterance suggestive of disappointment.

As for *o* with an assessment, it also designates the receipt of informing and a change of cognitive state. However, compared with *shi-o*, the assessment following *o* is predominantly a brief talk, e.g. *Liaojie* 'I see.', *Hao* 'okay', *Na hen hao* 'That's good.', which does not contain substantial proposition for topical development. (10) typifies this use, where after the message is received, the speaker reveals no interest to pursue the topic:

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[8] The punctuations used for each example follow those used in the original MSN text. To reflect the authenticity of the MSN lines cited, if there is no punctuation appearing in the original text, e.g. between clauses, no punctuation is used in the cited example either. However, the Chinese full stop " 。 " and comma " ， " are converted to the English full stop and comma, respectively.

[9] The symbol ^^ , same as that of :) and :-), represents a smiling face.

(10) (MN asked GG how to active "chatroom" function in the computer. Before GG1, GG has been explaining to MN about how to do this)

  GG2: Jiu   an   zuo shang jiao   de yaoqing,
        just click left top   corner AC invitation
        'Just click the "invitation" button on the top left,'

  GG3: Jiu   keyi.
        then can
        'It will do.'

  MN4: Zhijie an   zuqun ma?
        direct click group PAR
        'Just click the "group discussion" button, right?'

  GG4: Fanzheng ni   an   xuanze ni   yao yaoqing de.
        anyway   2SG click choose 2SG want invite   NOM
        'Anyway, you just click on..click on (the name of the person) you want to invite.'

→ MN5: **O** liaojie.
        RT understand
        'Oh, I see.'

  (The end of the current topic.)

In addition to being essentially topic curtailing, what distinguishes *o* from *shi-o* is that *o* responds to an informing which is given or unsurprising to the *o*-speaker. At the same time, *o* may be involved in the cognitive event of remembering and concurrently implies an "epistemic superiority" (cf. *oh* discussed in Heritage 1984, 2005). (11) illustrates the multi-functional quality of *o*:

(11) (CW and FQ are discussing about a website where they can do on-line shopping.)

  CW1: Wo hui mai ze ge.
        1SG   will buy this CL
        'I'll buy this one (from this website).'

→ FQ1: **O o**, ni   gei wo   kan guo.
        RT RT 2SG give 1SG   see ASP
        'Oh, you showed me this (website) before.'

  CW2: Dui ya.
        yes PAR
        'Yes, I did.'

CW3: Women   na   shi   mai erjiujiu zhilei   de   ba.

1PL   that moment buy 299   and.the.like NOM PAR

'I suppose we spent 299 dollars buying things of that sort.'

FQ2: En   en.

RT   RT

'You bet.'

(FQ then describes the type of mirror that she wants to buy and this is not sold in the website that CW introduces.)

In (11), as can be inferred from the turns subsequent to *o*, FQ is not interested in the website introduced by CW. Instead, FQ directs the talk to the mirror in other websites.

The foregoing discussion shows that both *shi-o* and *o* respond to an informing as an indication of a change of the recipient's cognitive state. The ensuing assessment expresses the chatter's view toward the message received. Although it seems to promote topical development, our closer examination shows that over half (51, 52.6%) of *shi-o*-assessment tokens are implicative of topic curtailment or the recipients' negative evaluation/attitude, and over eighty percent (188, 82.1%) of *o*-assessment tokens are topic-curtailing and produce a distancing effect since *o* regularly precedes a brief assessment containing little propositional content. Furthermore, unlike *shi-o* which unanimously receives new information, *o* responds to both new and given information. In turn, the non-newness of the announcement gives rise to a less interested attitude toward the topic of the talk.

4.2 With a question

Questions also occur after *shi-o* and *o* to develop the talk topically. The question addresses the propositional content of the preceding informing. It invites or requests the informative party to proffer more details. Among their uses in the MSN talk, the *shi-o*-question sequence makes up a third major category (28.2%), whereas *o*-question constitutes a minor part (10.3%). Consider excerpt (12) with *shi-o*-question:

(12) (MI and CW, formerly high school classmates, are chatting about a former classmate, Crystal, who was beautiful and attractive.)

CW1: Banhua…

class.flower

'The most beautiful girl in the class…'

MI1: Kan   de   chulai.

look   AC   out

'It's obvious.'

MI2: Kending yi dui ren   zhui ba.

certainly one CL   person chase PAR

'I am sure lots of people are chasing her.'

CW2: @@[10] ta   shi   gongguan de   shuo.

3SG COP publicist AC COMP

'She is the PR in the class.'

MI3: Ta   ye zhi   neng dang gongguan.

3SG   too only can   serve publicist

'Anyway, she can only be a PR.'

(There are 17 lines omitted here. CW and MI think that Crystal as a PR will have lots of chances to know more men and will be easily distracted from her studies.)

CW3: Nansheng dou zhao   ta   chuqu   wan.

boy   all find 3SG go.out play

'Many boys asked her for a date.'

CW4: Danshi ta   dou gen Duncan chuqu.

but   3SG all with PN   go.out

'But she only chose to go out with Duncan.'

→ MI4: **Shi o**… ta   du   nali?

RT   3SG study where

'Really? Where is he studying?'

CW5: Nian   Beikeda ya.

study   PN   PAR

'He is studying at National Taipei University of Technology.'

CW6: Dou xiaqu   zhao ta.

all go.down find 3SG

'He always goes southward to visit her.'

MI5: Qu Xinzhu o?

go PN   PAR

'To Xinzhu?'

CW7: En.

RT

'Right.'

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[10] This symbol does not indicate laughter as used commonly in linguistics. Rather it shows the interactant who feels dizzy and perplexed by the information.

MI6: Fengzi.

    madman

    'Maniac.'

In (12), CW and MI are conversing about the recent life of Crystal. MI contemptuously remarks that it is obvious that Crystal is popular among boys now and may be going out with them. Beyond MI's expectation, however, Crystal only dates Duncan. The newsworthiness of the announcement is marked by *shi-o*. Curious and interested in knowing more about Duncan, MI asks a question after *shi-o* to encourage CW to continue the topic while at the same time sounding sarcastic.

The following is another extract of the *shi-o-Q* sequence, which depicts a chatter GG telling her classmate EW about their former classmate, Judy, who GG met by chance the other day:

(13) GG1: Ni   jide   Judy ma?

             2SG remember Judy PAR

             'Do you remember Judy?'

    EW1: En.

             RT

             'Yeah.'

    GG2: Na   tian wo zai Shida de kafei   dian yudao ta   ye.

             that day 1SG at PN   AC coffee shop meet 3SG   PAR

             'I bumped into her in a coffee shop near Shida.'

→   EW2: **Shi o** ta   zai   ganma?

             RT   3SG DUR   do.what

             'Really? What was she doing there?'

    GG3: Ni zhidao   ta   zai kafei   dian gongzuo ma?

             2SG know   3SG at coffee shop work   PAR

             'Do you know she is working at a coffee shop?'

  (The conversation continues for five turns about the location of the coffee shop.)

    GG4: Ta   zai Shida de dagong.

             3SG   at PN   AC work.part.time

             'She is doing apart-time job at Shida's division.'

    EW3: (smiley):|

    GG5: Yinggai ye   shi   zhunbei chong kao.

             should   too COP   prepare again take.exam

             'I guess she is preparing to take the (entrance) exam again.'

EW4: Ta   shi   daxue   sheng   o?
       3SG   COP university student PAR
       'Is she a college student?'

EW5: Chong kao   ganma dagong?
       again take.exam what   work
       'Why is she doing a part-time job if she is preparing to retake the exam?'

EW6: Zhen di   ji.
       very   low class
       'So thoughtless.'

In the above extract, GG1 is projected to check the viability of a news announcement. Through EW1's validation, GG gets the ratified entrance to an extended course of conversation. The headline news emerges in GG2 following a topicalizing response in EW2. That is, the recipient EW shows the informed cognitive state with *shi-o* and makes an inquiry to provide a sequential opportunity for the speaker to elaborate on the news. By taking a closer look at the concurring exchanges, however, we find that *shi-o* frequently implies a negatively evaluated attitude with respect to the topic or protagonist under discussion, e.g. the contempt for the former classmate in both (12) and (13). Such a use, in fact, accounts for approximately 44.1% (41 tokens) of all *shi-o*-Q sequences. This suggests a strong association between *shi-o* and the speaker's negative attitude. The evaluative connotation is also found with an *o*-question, as we discuss in the following.

The occurrence of *o* with a question is the only use where *o* shows less detachment from the conversational topic at issue. (14) exemplifies this use:

(14) (BL likes cats and is talking about cat raising with OS, who just broke up with her boyfriend.)
   BL1: Wo   ye   keyi ai   wu   ji   wu.
        1SG   also can love house extend crow
        'If I love a girl, I can also love her pet.'
   BL2: Dan jia   li   bixu shi   ganjing de.
        but   home inside must COP   clean   AC
        'But the house must be clean.'

OS1: Buguo xianzai ta   bu   ai   wo, suoyi hui ba qing bian
      but   now   3SG NEG love 1SG so   will use love change
      guei   jiu   yu wo yang mao.
      attribute fault to 1SG keep cat
      'But he doesn't love me anymore, so he blames our separation on the fact
      that I kept cats.'

→ BL3: **O**.. ta   bu   xihuan ni   yang mao?
        RT 3SG NEG like   2SG   keep cat
        'Oh. He didn't like you to keep cats?'

OS2: Zhe hen nan   jie.
      this very hard solve
      'It is hard to explain.'

(The topic continues about why OS's boyfriend started to hate OS's keeping
cats.)

Compared with *shi-o*, as we have noted above, *o* seems to look less sincere
perhaps due to monosyllabic form and its associated brief prosodic value. Among the
59 tokens of *o*-Q sequence, in fact, we observe eleven occurrences (18.6%) where the
topic is discontinued one to two turns after *o*-question sequence is given.

The connotations implied in the use of *o* may also account for its lower incidence
to be followed by a question, as when one displays lack of enthusiasm for the topic, a
less likely situation is for him/her to probe into the topic with a question. The pursuit
of a given topic with a question following *shi-o*, by contrast, sounds more natural as
shi-o, with final *o* asking for confirmation (Li and Thompson 1981, Shie 1991, and
Wu 2004), suggests the chatter's uncertainty, and thereby the greater likelihood for a
question to follow.

4.3 With a dispreferred response

A next environment where *shi-o* is enlisted is for it to prefigure a dispreferred
response (6.1%). This is the context where *o* does not participate. When the news
announced constitutes an unexpected and dispreferred informing to the recipient, the
recipient may reply with *shi-o* first and proposes a disagreement immediately
afterwards.[11] This type of *shi-o* is distinguished from *shi-o* with an assessment since
the response is characterized by one with an explicitly expressed dispreferred speech
act which shows the speaker's counteractive stance.

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[11] Here the disagreement excludes the type that is performed after self-deprecation since disagreements
are the preferred response units after self-deprecation (Pomerantz 1984:83).

In the following excerpt, two participants are arguing about which type of school to choose after JA took the high school entrance exam held recently.

(15) CK1: Ni   you   xiang shang   Taibeishangzhuan   ma?
            2SG   have   want attend   PN   PAR
            'Do you want to get into National Taipei College of Business?'

    JA1: Bu   hui   ba   Wo   zhishao   yingkai you   Yongchun.
            NEG   will PAR   1SG   at.least   should have PN
            'I don't think so. I should be able to get into Yongchun High School at least.'

    CK2: Gaosu ni   bu   hui   bi   Yongchun   cha.
            tell   2SG   NEG   will compare   PN   bad
            'Tell you what. NTCB is at least as good as Yongchun.'

    JA2: Wo   jiu   bu   hui xiang shang   gaozhi   or
            1SG   just   NEG   will want   attend   vocational.school   or
            wuzhuan   ba.
            five.year.junior.college   PAR
            'I guess I don't want to go to a vocational school or a five-year junior college.'

    CK3: Wo   jie   ye   shi   du   dao   xianzai cai   houhui.
            1SG   elder.sister too   COP   study   reach   now   just regret
            'My elder sister regrets studying in a senior high school now.'

→ JA3: **Shi o~** wo   bu   zhidao la   buguo benneng fanying jiu   shi   bu
            RT   1SG   NEG   know PAR   but   intuition reaction just COP   NEG
            xiangyao nian   gaozhi   or wuzhuan.
            wang   study   vocational.school   or five.year.junior.college
            'Really? I don't know. My first intuition is not to go to vocational schools or five-year junior colleges.'

The two chatters in (15) hold two different positions. CK tries to persuade JA to choose a junior college, such as *Taibeishangzhuan* 'National Taipei College of Business', whereas JA is constantly in a position of noncompliance. As a disagreement characterizes a dispreferred second/response (Levinson 1983, Pomerantz 1984, and Yule 1996), *shi-o* and *wo bu zhidao* (JA3) here function like English *yeah* and *I don't know* (Pomerantz 1984) as mitigating delay devices to tone down the actual disagreement that follows so that the potential face threat to the addressee is reduced.

A similar case can be found in (16), where S disagrees with G's statement with a

counter-argument. Prefatory to the counter-argument, *shi-o* is again used as an agreement preface to downplay a negative response:

(16) (GL and SL are chatting about G's visit to G's boyfriend's house.)

GL1: Wo   hai man ai   gou de.

1SG   still very love dog AC

'I love dogs very much.'

GL2: Zhende shi weile wan gou cai qu de.

really   be for   play dog then go AC

'It's true that I visited (him) because I loved dogs.'

→   SL1: **Shi o**? wo jide   ni pa gou.

RT   1SG remember you fear dog

'Was that so? I remember you were afraid of dogs.'

The excerpts discussed in this section illustrate *shi-o* housed in a dispreferred second part to qualify an upcoming disagreeing action. With its tone of uncertainty (cf. 4.2), *shi-o* serves to render the whole conversational act less offensive. On the other hand, one might wonder why *o* is absent in such a sequential location. Although this could be a result of our limited databank which may not contain all typical uses of RT, an equally plausible explanation is that the overall *o*-dispreferred response sequence may sound too impolite because of the strongly topic curtailing connotation and the indifferent tone carried by *o*. An additional move with *o* that performs an explicit disaffiliating illocutionary act would thus pose even greater face threat (Brown and Levinson 1987) to the addressee. Therefore, it is avoided by the MSN chatters.

4.4 Transition marking

Shi-o and *o* may also be used to mark the juncture of a talk (7.0% and 10.1%, respectively), terminating the current agenda and proposing another new topic (cf. Y. Lin 2002). An exemplification of *shi-o* is given in (17), where WL is asking CB about his life during winter vacation:

(17) WL1: Ni   hai you   zai dagong   ma?

2SG still have ASP work.part.time PAR

'Are you still working part time?'

CB1: Wo   zai Taizhong   jiali.

1SG   at   PN   home

'I'm at home, in Taichung.'

CB2: You   ya.
     have   PAR
     'Yes, I am.'

CB3: Wo   yao   da   dao   shier   ri.
     1SG   need work until twelve day
     'I will work until the 12th.'

→ WL2: **Shi o**.
        RT
        'I see.'

WL3: Wen ni   o   ni   you yao mai NB   ma?
     ask 2SG   PAR 2SG have want buy notebook.computer PAR
     'Let me ask you a question. Do you want to buy a notebook computer?'

(The NB topic continues for 73 lines in the following.)

At the beginning of (17), WL's inquiry about CB's recent life seems to be a warm-up activity for the main topic about notebook computer. After CB's answer, WL replies with *shi-o* to close the opening greeting and directly shifts to an extended talk about computer. The short-lived opening shows that what truly interests WL is not CB's job, despite the newness of CB's answer (CB1-2), but the NB purchase.

The RT *o* also occasions a topic shift. However, the transition sequence sounds more blunt and offensive. (18) is a case in point:

(18) LS1: Ni   hanjia   jiajiao you ting ke   ma?
          2SG   winter.break tutor   have stop class PAR
          'Do you have a break in your tutoring job during the winter vacation?'

   GG1: Jiajiao?
        tutor
        'Tutoring?'

   GG2: Wo   hai bu   zhidao.
        1SG   yet NEG know
        'I haven't been informed (by the student's parents) yet.'

   GG3: Yinwei   tamen xueqi   mo   hai mei dao.
        because   3PL   semester end still NEG arrive
        'Because their semester hasn't ended yet.'

GG4: Buguo wo   cai   yiding hui ting yizhenzi, zhishao guonian yi
     but   1SG guess must   will stop a.while   at.least New.Year one
     liang ge   libai.
     two   CL week
     'But I guess we will have a break of some sort. At least I won't have
     classes for one or two weeks during the (Chinese) New Year.'

→ LS2: **O~** wo xiao san   na ge mama zhende hen ai   qing jiajiao ye!
     RT   1SG little three that CL mother really very love hire tutor PAR
     Wo hanjia   bu zai hai yao   wo bangmang zhao daike   de.
     1SG winter.break NEGat still want 1SG help   search substitute NOM
     'You know, the mother of my third grade student really loves to hire tutors.
     During the winter break when I am not available, she even wants me to
     help find someone to do the job.'

LS3: Dagai   yao shang   ge liang san   ge libai ta   ye   shuang.
     probably need have.class CL two   three CL week 3SG   also happy
     'She feels happier for her children to continue working for two or three
     weeks (during the winter break).'

(The talk continues about parents' fondness in hiring tutors even during short
vacations.)

In LS1, the chatter demonstrates her seeming interest in GG's job. This prompts
GG to report her situation for four turns without any response from LS. Then, with a
minimal receipt of *o*, LS directly shifts to her own tutoring experience, which seems
to be her real intention to start the conversation. The whole turn of LS2 embodies a
marked contrast between a brief, perfunctory response and an extended, enthusiastic
account of LS's own experience.

(19) is an even more obvious exchange demonstrating a chatter's extreme
disinterest:

(19) (43 lines are omitted here. FQ is holding the floor to describe how she celebrated
    Valentine's Day with her boyfriend. Then CW continues with her own story.)
  CW1: Na tian qingrenjie   lingchen   a   Ricky da   lai
     that day Valentine's.Day early.morning PAR PN   call come
     shuo ta   canting   ding   hao le jiao wo gen ta   chifan.
     say 3SG   restaurant reserve ok   CRS ask   1SG with 3SG eat.meal
     'On the early morning of Valentine's Day, Ricky called me and said that
     he had reserved a seat in a restaurant and invited me to have a meal with
     him.'

→ FQ1: **O o**.
    RT RT
    'Oh. Oh.'

FQ2: Ei!
    VOC
    'Hey!'

FQ3: Ni   qu   kan   Liangdai.
    2SG   go   watch   two.generation
    'Go watch the (TV program), Super Generation.'

(FQ continues to tell CW about the TV program and asks CW to watch it.)

The above extract is an interesting manifestation of a strategic reply employed by a speaker who is taking the main floor. While CW tries to direct the talk to her romance, FQ successfully fulfills a recipient role in a disaffiliative fashion and attains the floor again with a new focus of talk.

So far, we have shown that by using *shi-o* or *o*, a chatter may become an even more aggressive interactant veering the trajectory of talk to a part in which the chatter is more interested. What distinguishes the two RTs is the degree of directness conveyed in the response sequence. The *o*-response prefatory to the transition sounds abrupt and insincere perhaps due to the brevity of its form. The *shi-o*-transition sequence, again due to final *o*, takes on a softener tone and acts as a "weak bridge" to facilitate the transition to a new focus of talk so that the otherwise sharp transition is rendered smoother.

In the preceding discussion, *shi-o* and *o* with additional moves have been shown to denote different degrees of a news recipient's involvement and attitude toward the topic of talk. The dissociative attitude is manifested most noticeably when *shi-o* and *o* occur as a free-standing item, as we discuss in the following.

4.5 As a free-standing item

A free-standing *shi-o* or *o* is defined as one occurring as a sole item in a response turn following which the chatter immediately relinquishes the turn to the previous chatter. Both free-standing *shi-o* (29.4%) and *o* (39.4%) account for another major category as do those with an assessment. They both exhibit the speaker's disinterestedness in the informing and the intention to curtail the topic. In (20), BM enthusiastically tells CW of a friend's birthday, tagging the announcement with *ye* to reinforce the announcement as "new and impressive" (Shie 1991:155). However, CW only acknowledges the news with a bare *shi-o*:

(20) BM1: Xiaozhu 813　　　　　shengri ye.

　　　　　PN　　　August 13th birthday PAR

　　　　　'Do you know that August 13th was Xiaozhu's birthday?'

→ 　　CW1: **Shi o**.

　　　　　RT

　　　　　'Is that so?'

　　BM2: Ta　qu　chonglang.

　　　　　3SG go surf

　　　　　'He went surfing.'

　　BM3: Xia　dao　wo　le.

　　　　　scare reach 1SG CRS

　　　　　'What he did scared me.'

　　CW2: Hai bian ba.

　　　　　sea side PAR

　　　　　'I guess it was ocean surf.'

　　BM4: Buran　　qu he　shang chonglang o?

　　　　　otherwise go river up　　surf　　　PAR

　　　　　'Where else? Can you surf on a river?'

According to Button and Casey (1985), after headline news, a news announcer prefers to be asked a question by the recipient so that the topic can be continued. Instead of making a request-to-tell, however, CW responds minimally. Such lack of interest can be further evidenced in CW2, which sounds dispassionate and redundant, in that surfing obviously takes place at the sea. Consequently, the current topic does not last too long.

A radical example can be seen in (21), where the speaker's repeated use of bare *shi-o* demonstrates the chatter's detachment and absent-mindedness:

(21) KU1: Tamen you　zenyang　　ma?

　　　　　3PL　　have do.anything PAR

　　　　　'Did anything happen to them?'

　　JA 1: Hai　hao　la.

　　　　　just　good PAR

　　　　　'They were OK.'

　　J A2: Jin　nian,

　　　　　this year

　　　　　'This year,'

　　KU2: (smiley)

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JA 3:   Keneng   shi   wo yeye   shengbing gang huilai.
        maybe   COP   1SG grandfather   get.sick   just   back
        'Maybe they were visiting my grandfather, who just came just back (from
        the hospital).'

→   KU3:   **Shi o**.
            RT
            'Is that so?'

JA 3:   Jiu   hen   gaoxing a.
        then   very   happy   PAR
        'They were happy.'

→   KU4:   **Shi o!**
            RT
            'Oh!'

JA4:   Suoyi dajia   ye   gaoxing.
        so   everyone also   happy
        'So everyone was happy, too.'

(Five turns are omitted here, where JA continues a soliloquy of the family gathering.)

JA5:   A   bu   gai   jian   de.
        PAR   NEG   should   scurrilous NOM
        'Yet the one who used not to be so scurrilous'

JA6:   Faner   bian   jian   le.
        but   change scurrilous ASP
        'became mean instead at that time.'

→   KU5:   **Shi o.**
            RT
            'Mm huh.'

JA7:   Aya! wo   zuotian   chi wan   nianyefan   jiu   qu   guang,
        EX   1SG yesterday eat finish   New.Year's.Eve.dinner then go   stroll
        Wufenpu jia   Raohe jie.
        PN   plus PN   street
        'Ah! After the dinner on Chinese New Year's Eve yesterday, I went
        shopping at Wufenpu and Raohe Street.'

At the beginning of the talk, as a polite entry to the chat, KU1 asks about JA's
parents, who often fought with each other, which worries JA a lot. While the enquiry
prompts JA to engage herself in an extended talk, KU actually shows little interest in
the details. This is clearly demonstrated in three consecutive, lone *shi-o*s, which
display KU's minimal involvement and a continuous relinquishment of the main floor.

An even clearer illustration is the second half of the conversation in (21), where JA seems to be talking to herself. The implication of KU's nonchalance and failure to align herself finally raises JA's awareness, and JA abandons the family topic by moving to a new one in JA7.

The disinterestedness revealed by a free-standing RT is as prominent in the use of *o*. Compared with *shi-o*, however, the topic involving *o* is even shorter-lived. The minimal form of *o* yields a detached attitude and implies that the chatter is not surprised at or interested in the previous informing. (22) is a typical case, where the topic expires immediately after the *o* receipt:

(22) (A message pops up on FQ's screen when she is surfing the net.)

    CW1: Wo   yao   chi   Mosi.

          1SG   want   eat   PN

          'I want to eat at MOS restaurant.'

    FQ1: Zeme   turan?

          so   sudden

          'So sudden!'

    FQ2: Zaijian.

          goodbye

          'Bye, then.'

    CW2: orz[12] tumaluo.

                tomorrow

          '(I mean I will eat MOS fast food) tomorrow.'

→   FQ3: **O**.

          RT

          'Oh.'

    (The end of the current topic.)

In brief, as free-standing RTs, both *shi-o* and *o* appear frequently to show a conversant's minimal involvement. The brevity of the response is commensurate with a tone of detachment. If the other participant does not pursue the topic further, the topic is usually curtailed and a new one ensues. The indifferent tone is particularly evident when a chatter responds with *o* than with *shi-o*.

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[12] This is a popular sequence of English letters symbolizing a person who kneels down on the ground. It usually indicates that the chatter cannot believe the information s/he just received.

5. Summary and discussion

In the preceding discussion, we have illustrated the use of response tokens *shi-o* and *o* in MSN conversations in terms of their sequential environments and the conversational functions they perform. To recapitulate, a summarizing table of their distribution is given in the following:

Table 1. Distribution of *shi-o* and *o* in the MSN talk

Sequential context	*Shi-o*		*O*	
With an assessment	Neg.[*]	Other	Neg.[*]	Other
	51 (15.5%)	46 (13.9%)	**188 (32.8%)**	41 (7.1%)
	97 (29.4%)		229 (39.9%)	
With a question	93 (28.2%)		59 (10.3%)	
With a dispreferred response	**20 (6.1%)**		0%	
Transition marking	**23 (7.0%)**		**58 (10.1%)**	
Free-standing	**97 (29.4%)**		**228 (39.7%)**	
Total	330 (100%)		574 (100%)	

[*]With negatively evaluative prosody.

Several points can be highlighted from the preceding discussion and from Table 1. First, both *shi-o* and *o* emerge as "response cries" (Goffman 1981) to the situation of talk and betoken a change of the speaker's cognitive state to signal that an informing has been received (Heritage 1984, 2005, Schiffrin 1987, and Wu 2004). They may facilitate a subsequent storytelling or the alignment of speakers in their specific conversational roles.

However, the news which *shi-o* and *o* respond to differs with regard to their information state. Whereas *shi-o* unanimously acknowledges the announcement of fully new information, *o* responds to both new and given information. The receipt of given information sometimes gives rise to a cognitive state of remembering or a sense of "epistemic superiority" which is also observed in the use of English *oh* (Heritage 2005).

Another major distinction between the *shi-o* and *o* concerns the degree of topic alignment/disalignment conveyed by different sequential components. Although both *shi-o* and *o* occur with additional moves that seemingly promote topical development, *shi-o* conveys a softer tone toward the news received compared with the abrupt and less friendly tone of *o*. Furthermore, the topic accompanying the *o* response is usually curtailed soon, as manifested by the lack of substantial propositional content in the

additional moves following *o* (188 among 229 tokens). These varying emotive functions may well arise from the forms these two RTs take. That is, *shi-o* is tagged with a final *o* with a confirmation seeking and mitigating function (cf. Section 2), whereas *o* as a lone item in the response sounds brief and abrupt and thus creates a stronger distancing effect.

Despite the different tones conveyed by the use of *shi-o* or *o* alone, as shown throughout the preceding discussion, the two RTs carry a strong negative prosody and dissociative attitude concerning topical development. Specifically, if we sum up the occurrences of *shi-o* and *o* with additional moves pertaining to negative evaluation, together with free-standing, transition marking *shi-o* and *o*, and those with a dispreferred response, we find seventy percent of *shi-o* uses and eighty-two percent of *o* uses that either point to a chatter's negative attitude or that effect a termination of the topic in focus. In a nutshell, we believe that *o* figures in MSN conversations as a strongly dissociative response particle, whereas *shi-o* is a moderately dispreferred response token recruited in MSN for indexing of "small surprise" or "unexpectedness".

The functional distributions of the RTs *shi-o* and *o* shed light on their preponderance in MSN conversations. The motivation for using a topic curtailing RT or for expressing "small surprise" may stem from the nature of the conversation in MSN. That is, at work or after work/school, some young people have made it a habit to use MSN to chat with friends or family about studies, friends, family, life, etc. while being engaged in more important activities such as studying, working, or processing documents with the computer. As the chat does not take place face-to-face, the chatter may exit anytime (e.g. to take a shower) and come back on line later. These facts contribute to an on-line chat environment which mostly involves light, casual topics or short problem-solving sequences (e.g. asking for a file). The news announced or an informing made, therefore, tends to be short-lived and less serious in nature. Furthermore, when a new message is sent in, the window icon (beeps and) keeps blinking, which seems to urge the recipient to respond. In order to show participation, the receiver thus frequently resorts to *shi-o* or *o* to signal that the message is received. When it is intended as a more polite reply, *shi-o* is used for mitigation. This may in turn account for the predominance of *shi-o* and *o* to be topic curtailing on the one hand and the implication of the chatter's dissociative or detached attitude on the other.

6. Conclusion

Since its debut in 1999, MSN instant messaging has become popular among

young people (cf. Footnote 5). Drawing on data from MSN conversations, this paper explores the sequentiality and interactive functions of *shi-o* and *o*. This study is significant in several ways. First, we have shown that *shi-o* is used recurrently in this new speech genre as an emblem of information receipt. Second, we have provided a unified account of *shi-o* and *o* in terms of the turn components surrounding them and their affective values. Third, we have made a systematic comparison among the nuances of these two response particles and their synonyms in spoken Chinese and English.

There are, however, several issues that call for future research. For example, we do not examine the functions of *shi-o* and *o* as RTs in spoken Chinese conversations. A related study concerns how the prosodic realizations of *shi-o* and *o* interact with their discourse functions. If a study on RTs in oral conversations is to be undertaken, these factors need to be taken into consideration.

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國語即時通對話的回應標記

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　　本文研究國語回應標記「是哦」及「哦」在即時通上的言談功能。兩者均用來回應訊息告知，並且反映談話者認知狀態的改變。另一方面，談話者所要表達的語意，與上下語境息息相關。兩個回應標記的主要功能如下：第一、兩者都引出敘述句。不同的是，「是哦」所回應的是新訊息，而「哦」則可回應新舊兩種訊息。第二、兩者都可被使用成爲所在話輪的唯一成份，暗示談話者有意結束進行中的話題。第三、兩者都可直接在其後引出新話題。第四、兩者都可引出問句，以詢問與目前話題相關的訊息。此外，「是哦」可出現在隱含負面語意的語句之前，以緩和談話語氣。雖上述功能的語境類似，總體而言，「是哦」語氣較「哦」緩和而禮貌。另外，除了第二、三類的用法表示談話者有意結束進行中的話題之外，第一、四類的語境也時常暗示談話者對話題的負面態度。兩者各類功能的分佈情形顯示，「哦」是即時通上常出現的暗示疏離態度的回應標詞；而「是哦」則是一個較緩和的回應標記，用來表達「小驚訝」，並經常用來暗示談話者疏離的態度。

關鍵詞：MSN 會話、國語、是哦、哦、回應標記、上下語境、狀態改變標記