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# Tongue clicks in L1 and L2: sequential and embodied practices

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## Abstract

The present study looks into the multimodal uses of tongue clicks in the productions of American and French speakers in tandem interactions (L1-L2 context) across different turn positions. It provides an overview of the total distribution of clicks in the whole dataset, as well as more in-depth micro-analyses of participants' sequential and embodied practices in data fragments. Analyses shed light on the use of clicks in L2 in particular, an area of study which remains underexplored, and accounts for their multifunctional and multimodal nature.

**Index Terms:** tongue clicks, L2 acquisition, gesture, multimodality, turn-taking, stance

## 1. Introduction

Tongue clicks (*tsk*, *ttut*) can be described phonetically as “a click articulated with the tongue tip, with central release which is generally slow and affricated” [1]. Clicks, which have often been assigned to the margins of language, belong to a larger class of vocalizations, also known as sound objects [2], peripheral linguistic objects [3], or liminal signs [4]. A number of researchers in EMCA and socio-interactive research (to name but a few, [5-7]) has demonstrated the orderly and sequential distribution of clicks within turn-at-talks, which can serve different functions: while they are often used to display stance or affect (e.g., disapproval, annoyance, irritation, impatience, sympathy, see [7]) they can handle aspects of sequence management, such as indexing a new sequence of talk [6], closing down a topic or a turn [1], marking incipient speakership [1], or displaying a word search [8-9].

Less is known about the emergence of clicks in second language interaction (L2). While many studies have targeted different languages (in various African languages, but also in English, Spanish, Chilean Spanish, German, French, etc., [1] [6] [8-12]) they have not looked at the differences between L1 and L2 specifically. In addition, while a lot of attention has been paid to the phonetic and acoustic properties of clicks (see [1] [6] [8] [9-10]) recent studies have highlighted their multimodal features. Clicks are in fact very often accompanied by a variety of kinetic and embodied behaviors, such as eyebrow flashes, parted lips, swallowing [3] [12], and co-occurring manual gestures [7] [11], which should not be overlooked.

The aim of the present study is thus to compare the uses of clicks in L1 and L2 by taking into account their sequential position, their function, as well as their accompanying visible kinetic behavior in situated interaction.

## 2. Data and Method

Analyses are based on the SITAF Corpus [13] which includes tandem interactions in French and English between French and American speakers switching from their respective L1 and L2 in a debating task. The selected sample includes a total 22 speakers (11 FR speakers and 11 AM speakers) who produced 97 clicks. Clicks were analyzed with regards to their position in the TCU (initial, medial, final, standalone) and their functions, which include:

- New Sequence Indexing [6] (NSI): when they project a new sequence of talk/discourse topic.
- Stance: when they display stance or affect.
- Turn-open / Turn-close: when they open/close a turn.
- Word search: when they signal trouble in finding a word/phrase.

The analyses are based on a previous study conducted on fluency more generally [14] so references to other fluency markers (mm, inbreaths, uhms, repairs etc.) will be made in the paper. Given the limited number of occurrences (N=99) raw numbers will mostly be provided, as well as rates per hundred words (phw henceforth).

## 3. Analyses

### 3.1. Overview of the distributions

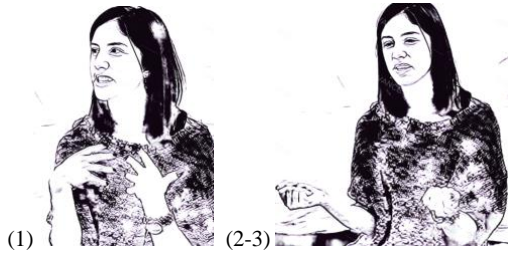
A total of 25 clicks were produced in the L1 and 72 in the L2, amounting to 13 in L1 English (0.4 phw) versus 28 in L2 English (1.16 phw), and 12 in L1 French (0.4 phw) versus 44 in L2 French (1.7 phw). Results also point towards differences in TCU positions: while we find a higher proportion in initial position in the L1 (N=15) more clicks are found in medial and final positions (N=48) in the L2 (Fig. 1, end of the paper). These sequential differences are also illustrated in the distribution of functions (Fig. 2, end of the paper). While an overwhelming proportion of clicks serve word searching functions in the L2 (N=54) they seem to be associated with a higher variety of interactive functions in the L1. These differences are illustrated in the following analyses of data fragments.

### 3.2. Illustrative cases: sequential and embodied practices associated with clicks

#### Excerpt 1. Clicks within complex word searches in the L2

This first example, in French, showcases two clicks within the same TCU in medial position while the L2 speaker (American) is engaged in a complex word search. Here she is talking about the differences between tourists and travelers, and claims that travelers need to better adjust in a country (as opposed to tourists who just come by for a visit), and she is having trouble producing the word “adapt” in French.

L2: il il doit il doit:it (.640) [!] (1) hh. je sais pas si on dit s'ajuster  
 he he has to he ha:as (.640) [! (1)] hh. I don't know if we say to  
 adjust



il doi:t m:m [!] (2) (3) il [doit  
 he ha:s m:m [! (2) (3)] he [has to  
 L1: [il doit s'adapter?  
 L1: [he has to adapt?  
 L2: oui il doit s'adapter c'est exactement ça.  
 L2: yes he has to adapt that's exactly it.

The clicks are also surrounded by other paraverbal phenomena (breathing, pausing, lengthening) which enable the L2 speaker to maintain her turn while proceeding with her word search. The L2 speaker's difficulties are also embodied in her visible behavior, as she winces (1), shifts her gaze with parted lips (2), and maintains her hands in the same 'gripping' position (3).

### Excerpt 2. Turn-initial clicks in L1: re-launching the topic

In this second example, in English, the clicks are used at turn-initial position by the native speaker (American) to re-launch a topic. For the debating tasks, all the participants had to read a topic written on a piece of paper beforehand, and sometimes the L1 speakers assisted the L2 speakers whenever they had difficulties grasping the topic.

1 L1: ((reads from the piece of paper)) [!] raising tuition fees at a university will guarantee a better quality of teaching.  
 2 L1: does that make sense?  
 3 L2: can you repeat?  
 4 L1: yes.  
 5 L1 ((in more careful, slow speech)): raising tuition fees at university will guarantee a better quality of [teaching.  
 6 L2: [oh!  
 7 L2: I thought I just had that at the (.950) the French [speaker.  
 8 L1: [oh did you?  
 9 L2: yeah.  
 10 L1: interesting.  
 11 L2: ((reads the topic herself)) yeah.  
 12 L1: [!] so does more money mean a better education?

Two occurrences of clicks are found in this fragment, both produced by the native speaker in initial position (l. 1 and 12). Both seem to serve turn-opening and NSI functions. The L2 speaker explains that she has had the exact same topic in French so she knows about it already (l.7), even though she did not understand it the first time around (l.3). The L1 speaker produces a positive assessment (l. 11), waits for the L2 speaker to glance at the piece of paper (l.11) before re-launching the topic through means of reformulation with a TCU-initial click combined with the discourse marker "so", also used to relaunch abandoned topics (see [16]).

### Excerpt 3. Turn-initial click in L1: projecting mitigated agreement

This last example, also in French, illustrates another instance of a turn-initial click produced by the L1 speaker, but with a different function.

L2: ((reads the topic)) un vrai ami doit prendre notre défense quoiqu'il arrive.

((reads the topic)) a real friend has to stand up for ourselves whatever what happens.  
 (.825)

L1: ((nods)) [!] (0.750) eum hh. (1.575) je suis pas eu:uh  
 ((nods)) [!] (0.750) eum hh. (1.575) I don't eu:h



(1) je suis pas d'accord [enfin] (0.405) si.  
 I don't agree [well] (0.405) yeah.  
 L2: [oh!]

The L1 speaker first nods to acknowledge the topic, then immediately opens her turn with a click, followed by a pause, a filler particle, a noisy inhalation, and another long pause, before expressing her disagreement towards the topic. Here the click seems to project her upcoming stance, visibly displayed in her wincing expression (1) which does not directly accompany the click, but later co-occurs with the noisy inhalation. However, her stance does express a firm disagreement, but rather a mitigated agreement, as she redirects the trajectory of her turn upon the L2's speaker subsequent reaction ("oh").

Overall, the analyses illustrated in this paper have highlighted the multifunctional nature of tongue clicks (i.e., word search, topic introduction, mitigated agreement) across different turn positions. Clicks may differ depending on the language spoken more generally, as suggested by the quantitative results, but they are also deeply shaped by local contingencies of interaction itself (sequence organization, turn allocation, repair and stance-taking practices), which can only be explored through detailed and situated analyses of the data.

## 4. Conclusion

These preliminary results suggest differences in the distribution of clicks in L1 and L2, with an overall higher proportion of clicks in the L2 compared to the L1, as well as more word-searching functions in the L2. This result may be explained by the fact that word searches tend to be more frequent in L2 than in L1 (as confirmed in a previous study on the same data, [14]). However, due to the limited size of the sample (N=99) more work needs to be done on a larger dataset to confirm these findings. It should further be noted that the categories adopted for the quantitative analyses are purposefully quite rigid, and hence do not account for the local contingencies of tongue clicks in situated interaction, which highlights the importance of providing qualitative analyses. Indeed, the data fragments have illustrated that clicks serve a variety of functions at different TCU positions, and at different levels (i.e., sequential, cognitive, and affective). Additionally, clicks rarely occur in isolation and are often coupled with other paraverbal phenomena (breathing, pausing, lengthening), or discourse markers (e.g. "so"). Clicks have kinetic components, with accompanying embodied and visible behavior (facial expressions and manual gestures). These recurrent combination and sequential patterns further shed light on the multifunctional uses of these phenomena in talk-in-interaction. The mixed-methods approach adopted in the present study, combining quantitative treatments with qualitative analyses, provide other means of doing analysis in EMCA which can still be valuable, as argued by [15].

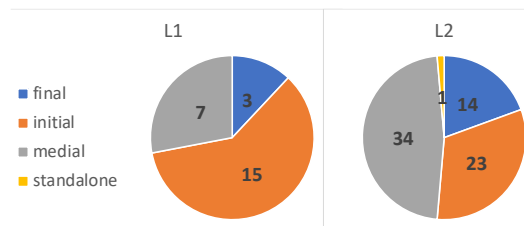


Figure 1. TCU positions of clicks in L1 and L2

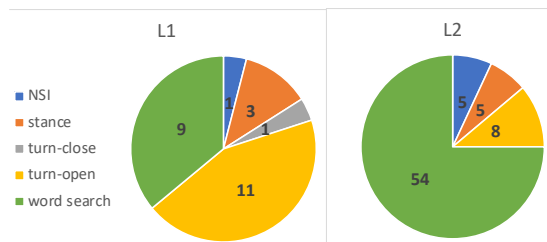


Figure 2. Functions of clicks in L1 and L2

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