The Interactional Function of *"Hǎo Lei"* in the Sequence Organization of WeChat Interactions

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Abstract

As a common conversational practice in Mandarin Chinese, *"hǎo lei"* is often employed to express the speaker's acceptance or agreement with its prior turn. Based on data of WeChat interactions and using Conversation Analysis as the research methodology, this study analyzes the sequence organization and interactional function of *"hǎo lei"* in WeChat interaction. Observation reveals that *"hǎo lei"* typically occurs in the responding position and the sequence-closing position, which express the speaker's positive attitude or commitment to the action implemented by the previous turn. *"Hǎo lei"* performs a range of interactional functions, depending on different sequential situations and contexts, including expressing acceptance, giving receipt tokens, and granting the request.

Keywords: *"hǎo lei"*, WeChat interaction, interactional function, sequence organization, Conversation Analysis

1. Introduction

With the widespread use of smartphones and high-speed internet connections, applications that afford synchronous text-mediated online interaction, such as WeChat and WhatsApp, have become increasingly prevalent. As a result, synchronous text-mediated online interaction has emerged as a prominent topic in the fields of Conversation Analysis (CA), sociolinguistics, and other social interaction studies. The rising use of CA for online data analysis provides researchers with new insights into the dynamics of online interactions (Meredith, 2019) and supports the analysis of multimodal practices in synchronous text-mediated online interactions, particularly in WeChat.

"Hǎo lei", a commonly used linguistic practice in Chinese interactions, is widely examined in sociological and linguistic studies. Although previous research has mainly focused on the discourse and pragmatic functions of *"hǎo lei,"* its interactional role in synchronous text-based online interactions remains primarily understudied. A few studies have briefly addressed its discourse function; for instance, Guo (2000) compared its function as a positive response in Chinese and Korean imperative sentences, while Gong (2018) explored its active answering function in online interactions. However, the interactional function of *"hǎo lei"* is largely unexplored.

Drawing on data from naturally occurring WeChat interactions and applying CA as the research methodology, this thesis seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the sequence

organization and interactional function of "*hǎo lei*" in online contexts. The research aims to address the following questions:

(1) What are the characteristics of the position and composition of "*hǎo lei*" in WeChat interactions?

(2) What are the interactional functions of "*hǎo lei*" in WeChat interactions?

2. Research Methodology and Data Collection

Emerging from the ethnomethodological tradition in sociology, CA is an action-oriented approach dedicated to describing human behavior through the meticulous observation of everyday interactional practices (Drew, 2013). By the late 1960s, CA had been established as an independent field focused on understanding the organization of interaction. It was initially applied to analyze technologically-mediated interactions through pioneering research on telephone calls by Schegloff and Sacks. In the early 2000s, this approach was extended to the analysis of synchronous text-mediated online interactions (Giles *et al.*, 2015). Online interactions, which are neither random nor unstructured, are sequentially organized and are considered quintessential forms of naturally occurring data (Meredith, 2019).

Guided by CA, this study employs micro-analytic qualitative methods to analyze the underlying mechanics of "*hǎo lei*" in WeChat interactions, aiming to elucidate its general properties in specific contexts. Therefore, this study will annotate and catalog the characteristics of "*hǎo lei*", including its composition and position in WeChat interactions. Furthermore, by conducting a case-by-case examination of each instance at its specific moment of production, the study will explore the relationship between the particularities of turn design and their sequential positions.

The dataset for this research comprises 200 screenshots, representing 207 instances of "*hǎo lei*" occurring naturally within WeChat interactions among classmates, friends, family, and colleagues communicating in Mandarin Chinese. Utilizing this self-built corpus, the study will qualitatively analyze the 207 instances to identify the generic, context-independent properties of its sequence organization and interactional function. To protect the providers' privacy, names, phone numbers, and other personal information in examples have been carefully altered.

3. The Characteristics of "*Hǎo Lei*" in WeChat Interactions

Humans form and maintain social relationships through interactions with others. They tend to cooperate and support each other to build harmonious relationships. In the context of constructing and maintaining social relationships, "*hǎo lei*" can express agreement with the previous turn, but at times it may also express token acceptance or disagreement. The study of the normative relationships and practices in conversation is a key objective of conversation analysis. Observation reveals that the interactional functions of "*hǎo lei*" is highly dependent on its position within the conversation sequence.

3.1 Turn Design Characteristics

In Mandarin Chinese, "*hǎo lei*" is a combination of the functional character "*hǎo*" and the modal particle "*lei*". The functional character "*hǎo*" literally means "*okay*" and is often used as a responding token to express agreement, recognition, evaluation, and suggestion in interaction (Shao & Zhu, 2005). The addition of the modal particle "*lei*" imbues "*hǎo lei*" with the speaker's emotion and attitude, differentiating it from the simple functional character "*hǎo*".

According to the concept of affordances, the particular technological platform WeChat, may "have an impact on how a user interacts with it" (Meredith, 2019: 243). Compared with face-to-face interaction, online interaction could not provide us with the speaker's intonation and emotion, but the analysis of the punctuations, emojis, and other transactional practices employed in synchronous text-mediated online interaction, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the WeChat interaction.

3.1.1 Configuring with Punctuations and Modal Particles to Express the Speaker's Positive Attitude or Commitment

In WeChat interactions, the contextual arrangement of "*hǎo lei*" alongside various conversational practices can result in different interactional functions. Analysis of the data indicates that "*hǎo lei*" frequently appears with punctuations, emojis, and modal particles. These elements enhance interactional success by expressing the speaker's positive attitude or commitment to the action suggested by the preceding turn. In WeChat interactions, punctuations and emojis effectively substitute for the intonation and facial expressions present in

face-to-face interactions. These multimodal practices are crucial for conveying emotion and tone, features uniquely adapted to online communication scenarios.

Out of the 207 instances in the data, six include tildes (~) and ten include exclamation marks (!), which convey an intimate stance toward the recipient and express willingness and strong commitment to the action anticipated by the previous speaker. In Excerpt 1, speaker Li uses a tilde after "*hǎo lei*" rather than a comma or another punctuation mark to create a less formal and more relaxed tone. The tilde adds a lighthearted, lively element to the conversation, contributing to a positive and cheerful atmosphere that the recipient perceives as comforting and agreeable.

Excerpt 1:

01 孙：（〈文件〉2023 孙晓晓.docx）

02 　　班长，这是俺的国际法论文

03 　　[玫瑰]

04 李：好嘞~

Emojis or kaomojis are also frequently employed after "*hǎo lei*" to enhance the expressiveness and maintain a relaxed interaction between speakers. Common emojis like "rose", "grin", and "heart" effectively convey the speaker's emotional stance, extending presence within the interaction. Emojis thereby help recipients discern stances and attitudes, enhance understanding, and occasionally indicate a reluctance to continue the interaction. The quantitative analysis of the data shows 17 instances of "*hǎo lei*" accompanied by modal particles, such as "*óhǒu* (哦吼)", "*áoáo* (嗷嗷)", "*hahaha* (哈哈哈)", "*òò* (哦哦)", "*ngng* (嗯嗯)", and "*āihei* (哎嘿)".

Excerpt 2:

01 晓：嗨~咱这节课论文有啥要求嘛 (是中文 5000 英文 3000 还是必须用英文写 5000 来着) [可怜]

02 丽：我记得是最好用英文 3000 词来着，中文多少字我没记住[囧]不知道记得准不准[捂脸]

03 晓：哈哈哈好嘞(就是说可以用中文的写是吧 [让我看看]

04 丽：应该是吧哈哈我有些不确定

05 晓：哈哈哈啊哈好嘞好嘞

06 丽：嗯嗯

07 晓：[谢谢]

In Excerpt 2, "*hǎo lei*" is used twice with the modal particle "*hahaha*". Xiao initiates the

exchange with a greeting, followed by a question and two possible answers in brackets, simplifying Li's task to choose one. However, Li expresses uncertainty and uses two emojis to mitigate the awkwardness, while Xiao subsequently adjusts her question, seeking less detailed information. Li still fails to give a definitive answer, leading Xiao to use "*hahaha*" before "*hǎo lei*". This strategy alleviates any discomfort and signals Li that Xiao intends to seek additional information elsewhere, which aligns with Li's expectation.

3.1.2 Configuring with Supplementary Information to Facilitate Successful Interactions

In WeChat interactions, "*hǎo lei*" is typically accompanied by supplementary elements such as expressions of gratitude, information receipt signs, and additional accounts, all of which contribute to reinforcing agreement and communication clarity. Among the 89 instances where "*hǎo lei*" is used with supplementary messages, three distinct contexts are identified.

a. Followed by Expressions of Gratitude

"*Hǎo lei*" frequently serves as a receipt token in the sequence-closing position of question-answer exchanges. When used this way, it is often accompanied by practices like emojis, gratitude expressions, or additional explanations to convey enhanced appreciation. In these interactions, the questioner initiates the sequence with a query, the responder provides an answer, and "*hǎo lei*" followed by gratitude completes the sequence. An illustrative example is shown below, where "*hǎo lei*" in line 03 acknowledges the answer, subsequently followed by gratitude.

Excerpt 3:

01 威：内个，你知道校医院什么时候开门吗，我眼睛有点不舒服想拿眼药水

02 浩：这个我不太清楚呀，但我室友说那边应该一直有值班的

03 威：好嘞谢谢

According to Levinson's concept of conversational economy, information exchange inherently involves a sense of indebtedness (Li, F. & Li, Z., 2022). This social expectation explains the frequent use of gratitude expressions following "*hǎo lei*".

b. Used with Information Receipt Signs

"*Hǎo lei*" commonly precedes information receipt tokens, such as "*shōu dào* (收到)", in WeChat interactions. In this Excerpt 4, Ping and Qian are

members of the same group for a class presentation, with Ping responsible for collecting presentation materials. After reminding Qian to revise their contribution in the first two lines, Qian responds by sending the corrected document. Upon receipt, Ping uses "*hǎo lei*" followed by "*shōu dào*" to acknowledge receipt, reinforcing the acknowledgment function of "*hǎo lei*".

Excerpt 4:

01　萍：@倩

02　　　uu 你的部分记得更正一下哈

03　倩：（（文件）文本分析.docx）

04　萍：好嘞收到

05　　　辛苦[玫瑰]

06　倩：[玫瑰]

c. Followed by Accounts to Prior Questions

When "*hǎo lei*" is used in the sequence-closing position, it often serves to acknowledge a prior answer while providing an explanation for the initial query. In Excerpt 5, Zhang poses a question in lines 01-02. Following Liu's response, Zhang replies with "*hǎo lei*" and offers an explanation in line 05, clarifying the rationale behind her inquiry. The conversation suggests that Zhang was inquiring about an order, possibly for flowers, thus engaging with "*hǎo lei*" as a transition between receiving an answer and expressing her reasoning.

Excerpt 5:

01　张：什么时候会发货呀？

02　　　今天能嘛

03　刘：嗯 都是今天发货

04　张：好嘞

05　　　坐等

3.2 The Position of "Hǎo Lei" in WeChat Interactions

Based on the fact that conversation is organized sequentially, CA posits that the positioning of an utterance within ongoing interaction is crucial for understanding its meaning and significance as an action (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013). The foundational sequence structure of conversation is the adjacency pair (Sacks *et al.*, 1974), consisting of the initiating turn and the responding turn, referred to as the first pair part (FPP) and the second pair part (SPP) (Schegloff, 2007; Yu, 2022). Following the adjacency pair, a post-expansion may occur, which can be minimal or non-expansive. The minimal post-expansion typically adds a turn after the adjacency pair to conclude the sequence, known as the sequence-closing third (Schegloff, 2007).

Adjacency pairs are regarded as social norms in conversation (Yu & Guo, 2020). Once the interaction context is set, the FPP and SPP establish themselves, illustrating the conditional relevance of the sequence (Wu, 2022). In this study, "*hǎo lei*" is identified as occurring either in a responding position, addressing the preceding turn, or in the sequence-closing position, providing a response to a turn where the recipient has been addressing the prior participant's turn.

Specially speaking, the practice "*hǎo lei*" may appear in the responding position as a reply to an act of informing, reminding, offering, inviting, encouraging, suggesting, or requesting. There is a total of 88 instances of "*hǎo lei*" occurring in the responding position, which constitutes nearly half of the instances. Additionally, "*hǎo lei*" also frequently appears in the sequence-third or sequence-closing position within question-answer sequences, request-acceptance/refusal sequences, suggestion-accordance/discordance sequences, and reminder-response sequences. There is a total of 119 instances of "*hǎo lei*" in the sequence-closing position, representing more than half of the observed occurrences.

4. The Interactional Functions of "*Hǎo Lei*" in WeChat Interactions

In online interactions, the expression "*hǎo lei*" is often used to signal agreement with a preceding turn, analogous to the function of the character "*hǎo*". However, its interactional function is affected by the addition of the modal particle "*lei*". To fully comprehend the function of "*hǎo lei*", it is necessary to consider the situational context and contextual factors. This section explores the interactional functions of "*hǎo lei*" across various contexts.

4.1 Expressing Acceptance

As a common conversational practice in online interactions, the primary interactional function of "*hǎo lei*" is to express the speaker's alignment with the stance conveyed by another participant, akin to the active affirmation function of "*hǎo*" (Shao & Zhu, 2005). As a direct acceptance of the preceding turn, "*hǎo lei*" is often employed to indicate concordance between the action suggested by the previous speaker and the expectations of the recipient. This acceptance may manifest in the responding position in

response to a suggestion, proposal, invitation, offer, or encouragement.

Firstly, when responding to a suggestion or proposal, "*hǎo lei*" may be used to accept and express agreement with the initial participant. In Excerpt 6, colleagues Ping and Qing are exchanging contact details. Ping requests details from Qing in line 01, and Qing complies, offering a suggestion for efficiency in line 05. Ping's "*hǎo lei*" signifies acceptance and closes the sequence.

Excerpt 6:

01　萍：晴姐，名扬王蕾的微信或者 qq 发我下吧，我加上她

02　晴：好

03　　　（（个人名片王蕾））

04　　　QQ 123456789

05　　　都加一下吧，跟他们业务往来频繁，QQ 传文件方便

06　萍：好嘞

Secondly, "*hǎo lei*" can also express acceptance of invitations or offers, embodying agreement between the recipient's expectations and the offer made by another participant, which can be illustrated in Excerpt 7. Initially, Yao requests to borrow Mei's book, which is agreed upon. Then, Yao gives an account for the request and expresses gratitude to Mei, which incurs Mei's invitation to sit together with Yao while sharing the book. The offer demonstrates that while granting Yao's request, Mei has understood the presupposition and would like to sit next to Yao. What's more, it could be predicted that if Mei doesn't offer the invitation, Yao would make another request in the following interaction to achieve her final goal. Finally, Yao accepts this offer with "*hǎo lei*", ensuring alignment with her initial request motives.

Excerpt 7:

01　瑶：姐妹，你买了实用英语写作的书吗

02　美：买了

03　瑶：我这周能先和你看一本嘛

04　美：可以的

05　瑶：我想着买电子版，结果没有[苦涩][苦涩][苦涩]我刚下单实体书

06　　　[谢谢]

07　美：嗷嗷，那今天我们坐一起吧

08　瑶：好嘞，我去找你

09　　　谢谢！！！！

10　美：不客气！

11　瑶：[爱心]

Thirdly, acknowledging encouragement is crucial, and "*hǎo lei*" is a common way to express appreciation and commitment to meeting expectations. This response conveys that the recipient appreciates the encouragement and will do their best to meet the expectations that come with it, making the encourager feel valued and supported. In this exchange, Wang and Liu are colleagues. When Liu receives encouragement from Wang, he replies with "*hǎo lei*", emphasizing readiness to meet expectations, bolstered by a "strong" emoji.

Excerpt 8:

01　王：刘老师好，因为明天调试人比较多，创新团队尽量 10:40 以后过来哈。我让突出贡献那边尽量 10:00-10:40 完成调试哈

02　刘：好的，谢谢[玫瑰]

03　王：客气啦，明天加油

04　刘：好嘞！[强壮]PPT 明天 9:00 前发给你哈[抱拳][爱心]

05　王：好哒

4.2 Giving Receipt Tokens

Another significant function of "*hǎo lei*" is to signal receipt of information or assistance, akin to the function of "*okay*" (Beach, 2020). When used as a receipt token, "*hǎo lei*" serves as an informing reply. In simpler terms, when "*hǎo lei*" is used in a responding position, it signals that the recipient has received and acknowledged the information or reminder from the speaker.

Firstly, "*hǎo lei*" serves as a response token when acknowledging received information. In such cases, the speaker provides the recipient with important information that they need to know or collect. The recipient then uses "*hǎo lei*" to acknowledge that they have received the information from the speaker and that they have understood the information and that they are ready to take any necessary action.

Excerpt 9:

01　生：老师我做完核酸了

02　师：好嘞

This interaction involves a situation where a student is required to inform the teacher once his covid test has been taken. The exchange only consists of two lines. In the first line, the student informs the teacher about the covid test result, which the teacher is obligated to know. Then, the

teacher responds with "*hǎo lei*" to acknowledge receipt of the information.

Secondly, "*hǎo lei*" can also occur in a remind-reply sequence-closing position. In this sequence, the first part is a reminder, and the second part is a response to the reminder. "*Hǎo lei*" not only serves as a response to the previous turn, but is used to indicate the end of the sequence. In the following excerpt of WeChat group interaction, the teacher reminds the student to change his alias in the group (line 04). After receiving confirmation from the teacher, the student uses "*hǎo lei*" to acknowledge receipt and conclude the interaction.

Excerpt 10:

04　师：@生　顺便这位同学改一下群备注哈

05　生：好哒，已修改，谢谢

06　师：好嘞

Thirdly, in sequence-closing spots, "*hǎo lei*" marks receipt of acceptance to suggestions, which informs its prior participant that he/she has received the acceptance. This interaction occurred between two classmates, where Yao was asked to prepare some materials and provide them to Xue within a specific time frame. In line 07, Yao begins a new turn constructional unit (TCU) by asking a question and giving an account. However, Xue responds negatively and makes a proposal to Yao, asking her to deliver it that night. Then, Yao accepts the proposal. Xue then uses the phrase "*hǎo lei*" to indicate that she has received Yao's acceptance and that they will meet later that night.

Excerpt 11:

06　瑶：学姐，你在宿舍吗？我的材料整理差不多了，一会给你送上去

07　雪：我现在不在呢~

08　　　晚上吧可以吗

09　瑶：可以可以

10　雪：好嘞

4.3 Granting the Request

Requests are one of the widely studied speech acts in the fields of pragmatics, cross-cultural communication, and conversation analysis. The act of requesting is the imposition of the requester's will on the requested person, a social act that requires the requested person to give and the requester to benefit (Wu & Liu, 2020). When the FPP is a request, or implied request, "*hǎo lei*" in the responding position can be used to grant the request.

Excerpt 12:

01　瑶：婷婷

02　　　帮我带个皮筋和黑夹子好吗

03　　　谢谢

04　瑶　（（瑶拍了拍婷））

05　婷：好嘞

06　婷　（（婷拍了拍瑶））

07　瑶：[玫瑰]

Request is a very common social behavior, through which social members can directly obtain the help of other social members (Yu, 2019). In this excerpt, Yao and Ting are roommates who attended the same class on that day. In the first four lines, Yao asks Ting for help and uses the WeChat feature "tickle" to get Ting's attention. In line 05, Ting grants Yao's request and also employs the transactional practice of "tickle" to interact with Yao, which helps to develop their relationship in the interaction (Wu, 2021). Sometimes, participants may not make a request directly and explicitly. Instead, they may use a pre-expansion sequence that lays the groundwork for the base first-pair part of the request in some way.

Excerpt 13:

01　晓：在宿舍吗

02　　　@鹿

03　鹿：在

04　晓：婷婷手机没带

05　　　你看看

06　鹿：是的

07　　　好嘞

08　晓：[感谢]

The above WeChat interaction took place on a weekday morning. Xiao, Lu, and Ting are roommates who were attending the same course that morning. Xiao and Ting left earlier than Lu, but Ting forgot her smartphone at the dormitory. In line 01, Xiao initiates the interaction through a yes/no question, which receives a positive answer from Lu. Xiao then gives an account as to why the question was asked, which avoids possible request sequence. The interaction could have ended here, but Lu immediately responds with "*hǎo lei*" indicating that she has understood Xiao's request implied in the pre-sequence question, that is, if Lu can locate Ting's smart phone, she should bring it with her to the

classroom for her. Therefore, Lu offers to help before Xiao makes her final request. Additionally, Xiao's gratitude in line 08 confirms Lu's prediction of Xiao's ultimate goal.

5. Conclusion

With the aim of addressing previous research gaps, this study systematically examines the sequence organization and interactional function of "*hǎo lei*" in WeChat interactions, using CA as the research methodology. Observation reveals that "*hǎo lei*" performs various interactional functions, highly dependent on its position within the conversation sequence. It emerges either as a response to the preceding turn in the responding position or in the sequence-closing position, addressing the turn where the recipient has previously engaged with a participant's action.

What's more, in WeChat interactions, "*hǎo lei*" exhibits two primary characteristics across different sequence organizations. On the one hand, it frequently combines with various punctuations, emojis, and modal particles, enhancing the speaker's positive attitude or commitment to the action suggested by the previous turn. On the other hand, "*hǎo lei*" is typically followed by supplementary information, such as expressions of gratitude, information receipt tokens, and additional explanations, all of which help strengthen agreement and understanding within the interaction.

Finally, "*hǎo lei*" is a prevalent conversational practice in online exchanges, predominantly used to align the speaker's stance with that of another participant. Firstly, it appears in the responding position to signify acceptance of suggestions, proposals, invitations, or encouragements. Secondly, "*hǎo lei*" serves as a crucial receipt token, signaling that the recipient has acknowledged the information or assistance provided by the speaker. This function manifests in the responding or sequence-closing positions within informing-reply or reminding-reply sequences. Thirdly, "*hǎo lei*" can also be employed in the responding position to grant requests or implied requests. The conventional use of this conversational practice allows both parties to express agreement, acceptance, receipt of information, and transition between topics while maintaining harmonious social relationships.

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