Text Message Openings in Mandarin in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the opening sequences of Mandarin text messages on WeChat, focusing on the role of the phrase *zaima*, meaning *are you there?* in English, in digital communication. While conversation openings have been widely studied in face-to-face and telephonic interactions, research on text message openings, especially in non-English languages, remains limited despite a growing dependence on digital text-based interactions through short messaging services (SMS). Using a conversation analytic (CA) framework, this study analyzes 50 instances of openings initiated with *zaima* from a dataset of 255 WeChat conversations, identifying two sequential environments: a unilateral conversation opening where the *zaima* producer moves directly to the main topic of conversation without waiting for a reply, and a bilateral conversation opening, where the *zaima* producer pauses for the recipient's acknowledgement before continuing. The findings contribute to understanding how Mandarin speakers adapt conventional structures in digital openings to manage the affordances of online interactions.

Keywords: Conversation analysis; Conversation openings; Instant messaging; Online interaction; Mandarin

INTRODUCTION

The opening moments of any conversation are crucial because they set the scene for the interaction, influencing its direction, effectiveness, and the relationship between the participants. Early conversation analysis (CA) studies (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) on the systematic structures of conversations have laid the foundation for understanding conversation openings, whether in face-to-face or telephonic conversations. Extensive research (e.g., Schegloff, 1968; Pillet-Shore, 2018a; Pillet-Shore, 2018b) has examined the sequential elements of conversation openings in non-digital settings. Schegloff (1968) identified four basic sequences of telephone: summons-answer, identification-recognition, greeting, and "how are you" inquiries. The complexity of face-to-face conversation openings is captured in the eight components that consist of both verbal and nonverbal actions, including co-present, greeting,

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touching, introducing, personal state, registering, settling in, and bridging time (Pillet-Shore, 2008).

The 21st century has witnessed a significant shift in communication modalities, with a growing dependence on digital text-based interactions through short messaging services (SMS) and social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Similar conversation opening structures have been found in online settings compared to face-to-face or telephonic interactions. E-mail, being one of the earliest ways to communicate online with people in different locations, was closely examined by Duranti (1986). By examining hundreds of messages between Duranti and his students over nine months, it was found that greetings usually appear only in the first message exchange but not in subsequent ones, even if the email chain continued for several weeks. For example, in one of the emails, a student started the message with *Hi, Professor Duranti! Sorry I didn't come up sooner.* However, in subsequent emails, such greetings were omitted. This suggests that the parties in the interaction assumed the messages were part of an ongoing conversation and viewed subsequent emails as a continuation of the conversation, even when communicating asynchronously over an extended period.

Rintel et al. (2001) specifically examined the summon-answer sequence in Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and described how the system would generate prompts at the beginning, such as *xxx has joined this channel*, indicating a participant's presence and current availability. Meredith (2019) observed that greetings such as *Hey* on Facebook were adaptations of the traditional summon-answer sequence found in telephonic conversations and that relational closeness was often signaled by casual and personalized greetings at the beginning of a chat or no greetings at all. Chatting with close friends often started with informal greetings such as *heya how's it going!* and sometimes salutations were entirely omitted. In online counseling emails, on the other hand, counselors typically began with formal salutations such as *Dear…* while clients gradually shifted towards using informal openings as they became more familiar with each other (Stommel, 2012).

Despite the extensive CA work on telephone and face-to-face conversation as well as the rapid development of CMC, little to no research has been done on text message openings, particularly in non-English languages. This is particularly noteworthy in the context of Mandarin text messaging, a domain yet to be explored in the CA field. Therefore, this paper takes a step in this direction by exploring the opening sequences of Mandarin text messages, particularly those initiated with the phrase 在吗 (pronounced *zài ma* in Pinyin), meaning *are you there?* in English, addressing the key question: how is *在吗 (zaima)* used as an opening in Mandarin text message conversations?

DATA AND METHOD

A total of 10 participants were recruited for data collection, and 255 sets of text messages were initially extracted from their Weixin (WeChat), a popular Chinese online chat application. The messages shared by the 10 participants include a total of 29 individuals as part of these conversations. All participants, including those whom the 10 participants messaged, have either native or near-native Mandarin proficiency. Of the 255 sets of conversations, 50 commence with either 在吗 (zài ma) or 在(zài), accompanied by an optional question mark. These 50 cases form the main focus of this study.

Figure 1
Weixin Conversation

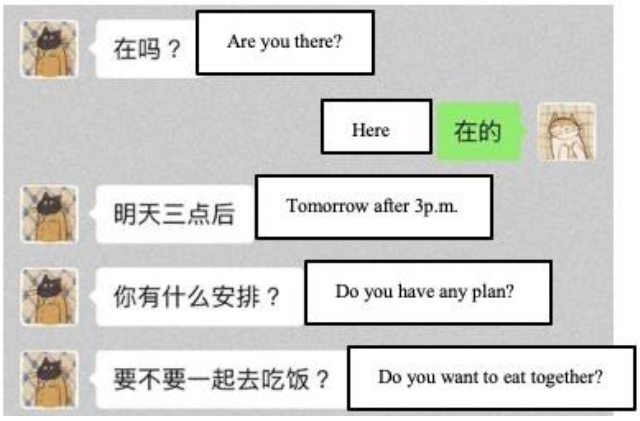

Figure 1 exemplifies a typical conversation format in WeChat with the translation. Typing a single message (e.g., invitation in lines 3-5 in the above conversation) in separate lines/bubbles, each containing its own lexical, phrasal or sentential TCU (turn constructional unit), is now a common practice.

The analysis was conducted within a CA framework. First, the original Mandarin data was translated into English, line by line. Each line in the transcript corresponds to a separate message bubble as displayed in the WeChat interface. Since text messages do not contain details such as volume, pitch, and intonation, only line numbers and time stamps were added to the transcription. These text messages were then closely analyzed within the conversation analytic framework guided by the question *why that now?* (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 299), i.e., why this particular piece of talk is produced in this particular way at this particular time, by considering its composition and position.

ANALYSIS

In this section, I elucidate the usage of *zaima* in Mandarin text message openings in two broader contexts: (1) a unilateral text message opening and (2) a bilateral text message opening. Unilateral text message opening involves the sender posing *zaima* and, without waiting for a reply, immediately proceeding with the main topic. On the other hand, the bilateral text message opening entails a two-step process where the sender, after asking *zaima*, waits for the recipient to respond before proceeding. I conclude with an example of conversation opening without the use of *zaima* to further explore its use.

Unilateral Text Message Opening

One might start with *zaima* prefaced with an optional address term and followed by the first topic. In this dataset, 27 out of 50 instances follow this pattern. Consider the following conversation opening between a grandmother and her grandson R.

Extract 1: Making tea egg

01	@18:36	R:		奶奶 Grandma **Grandma**
02	@18:36		→	在 吗？ Present PRT **Are you there?**
03	@18:37			茶叶 蛋 用 的 是 什么 茶叶？ Tea egg use POS is what tea leaves **What kind of tea leaves are used in tea eggs?**
04	@18:37			红茶 还是 绿茶 Black tea or green tea **Black tea or green tea**
05	@18:40	G:		一般 茶叶 Normal tea leaves **Ordinary tea leaves**
06	@18:40			怎么 你 做 茶叶蛋？ What you make tea eggs **You are making tea eggs?**
07	@18:40	R:		我 有 一 个 电饭煲 I have one MSR rice cooker **I have a rice cooker**
08	@18:40			一般 的 茶叶 是 红茶 还是 绿茶 Normal POS tea leaves is black tea or green tea **Is ordinary tea leaves black or green tea**
09	@18:42	G:		红茶 Black tea **Black tea**
10	@18:43	R:		好 Okay **Okay**

R starts the conversation by addressing Grandma (G) in line 1 followed by the question *zaima* in line 2, making an answer conditionally relevant. However, instead of waiting for Grandma's response to the question, R goes on to provide the first pair-part of the base adjacency pair in line 3 and line 4, inquiring about the tea eggs. Grandma responds to this question in line 5, and the conversation continues with several turns of post-expansions. From this extract, the question *zaima* in line 2 is not answered. However, the conversation goes on very smoothly even without a response from Grandma, which signifies an understanding between the participants that it may not require the sender to wait for an immediate or explicit response to move forward to the main topic.

The immediate transition from *zaima* to the first conversation topic without pausing for a response may reflect an adaptation to the fast-paced nature of digital communication. By going directly from the pre-expansion inquiring to the actual purpose of the message, R also manages

to convey a sense of urgency that overrides the response requirement of his first availability-checking question.

Bilateral Text Message Opening

Rather than immediately launching into the business of the text, the *zaima* producers sometimes wait for a response before proceeding (n=23). The most common trajectory is a simple acknowledgment of availability *在的 (zài de)* followed by the business of the text launched by the *zaima* producer (n=20), as shown in Extract 2, where one friend is asking for another friend's help.

Extract 2 Translation help

01	@11:33	S:	→	在 吗？
				Present PRT
				Are you there？
02	@11:33	Y:		在
				Present
				Here
03	@11:42	S:		((A table of product specifications written in Japanese))
04	@11:43	Y:		收 到， 我 空 下 来 帮 你 看
				Receive COMP I free down COMP help you look
				Received, I will help take a look when I am free
05	@11:43	S:		不 急
				No hurry
				No rush

S opens the conversation with a pre-expansion, which typically ensures the smooth running of the conversation (Wong & Waring, 2021). More specifically, he starts with a question *zaima* in line 1, making an answer conditionally relevant. Then in line 2, the participant Y responds to the question by replying *here.* In other words, Y is confirming her availability or willingness to communicate. Y's response is an expected and straightforward acknowledgment of presence. After this pre-expansion, S goes on in line 3 and sends a picture of a table of product specifications written in Japanese. Y in line 4 acknowledges the receipt of the picture and agrees to help take a look when she is free. By looking at line 3 alone, it is a bit unclear what the purpose of sending the picture is. But Y's willingness to help shown in line 4 suggests that she knows S is requesting help. Perhaps similar situations have happened before where S needs help from Y, so there is no need to make the request explicit this time. At the end, S expresses the lack of urgency in line 5, which closes the conversation for now.

A delayed response to *zaima* in pre-expansion, however, can result in the non-production of the base sequence. The following conversation between two friends reveals interesting dynamics about timing and response in digital communication.

Extract 3: Never mind

01	@11:12	P:		牛　兄 Niu brother **Brother Niu (name)**
02	@11:12		→	在　吗？ Present PRT **Are you there?**
03	@12:15	R:		嗯嗯 Mm-hm **Mm-hm**
04	@13:55	P:		没　事　了 NEG matter PRT **Never mind**
05	@13:55			牛　兄　新年　快乐　啊 Niu brother new year happy PRT **Brother Niu Happy New Year**
06	@13:57	R:		新年　快乐 New year happy **Happy New year**

Similar to the previous extract, P opens the conversation with an address term in line 1 followed by the question *zaima* in line 2, making an answer conditionally relevant. R then responds with a colloquial response *Mm-hm* (line 3), signaling his availability to communicate. What's different here is that R does not respond to P until an hour later. Even though R does confirm his availability, it is too late that P may have already resolved his issue. This conversation highlights the contextual flexibility of *zaima.* Even though pre-expansion is typically used to establish immediate communication readiness, in this case, the delay in response changes the conversation's trajectory. The initial purpose of the conversation becomes irrelevant due to the timing of the response as P does not need help anymore by the time R responds. This scenario also touches upon digital etiquette and the expectations of timely responses. The delay in R's response, although not uncommon in digital communication, ultimately affects the interaction's outcome. This phenomenon aligns with previous research that has shown how delayed responses in digital communication may affect coherence. It shows how response time can be a crucial factor in terms of the effectiveness and relevance of digital conversations.

Sometimes, the affirmative response to *zaima* is followed by a more explicit go-head, as shown in the following conversation between two friends:

Extract 4: Invitation

01	@17:42	A:		哥 Brother **Bro**
02	@17:42		→	在

			Present
			Are you there
03	@17:45	R:	在
			Present
			Here
04	@17:45		怎么 了
			what PRT
			What happened
05	@17:47	A：	吃饭 吗？
			Eat PRT
			Do you (want to) go eat?

In this particular extract, we observe A opening a conversation by addressing R in the first line and subsequently posing the question of *zaima* in a declarative format in the second line, although it essentially serves an interrogative purpose. In Mandarin, the phrase 在吗 (*zàima*) with 吗 (*ma*) being widely used question particle transforming statements into questions, commonly inquires about the presence or availability of the person being addressed. Conversely, the word 在 (*zài)* on its own usually implies a declarative sense, signifying a state of existence or presence. Yet, in these introductory messages, 在 (*zài*) appears to take on an interrogative function, akin to 在吗 (zaima), despite its declarative structure. This adaptation in usage, often linked to informal speech or a preference for conciseness, could be indicative of the evolving nature of language, particularly in the realm of digital communication that appears to prioritize brevity. R's affirmative response in line 3, however, is immediately followed by his own inquiry *what happened*, hearable as a more explicit go-ahead.

This explicit go-ahead can also be produced in lieu of the confirming response to *Zaima* entirely (n=2). Consider the following conversation between two international students who study at the same university. One of them is inquiring about off-campus housing.

Extract 5: Off-campus housing

01	@09:05	C:	→	在吗
				Present
				Are you there
02	@13:10	R:		怎么 了
				what PRT
				What happened
03	@23:07	C:		我 想 问 问 你 那边 有 没有 租 房子 的 人
				I want ask ask you there exist no rent house PRT people
				I want to ask if you have someone who rents houses
04	@23:07	R:		租 房子 ？
				rent house
				(someone who needs) to rent house ?

05	@23:07		还是 往 外 租 房子 的 ？
			Or towards outside rent house PRT ？
			Or (someone) who is renting their houses to others?

C asks the question *zaima* in line 1, inquiring about R's availability to converse, which makes an answer conditionally relevant. R's *what happened* goes beyond demonstrating his availability by offering an explicit go-ahead for C's to proceed with the business of the text. In other words, it both implicitly answers the question of *zaima* and explicitly tells the inquirer to go ahead with the main topic.

Opening without *Zaima*

I end this analysis with a conversation opening in WeChat that does not start with *zaima* (n=205). The case involves two peers who are studying in the same program talking about returning to New York.

Extract 6: Travel plans to the U.S.

01	@11:22	L:	你 啥时候 回 美国
			You when return USA
			When are you coming back to the U.S.
02	@11:33	S：	12 号 飞
			12th fly
			Flying on the 12th
03	@11:33		13 号 到 纽约
			13th arrive New York
			Arriving in New York on the 13th
04	@11:34	L:	ok
			Ok
			Okay

L's question in line 1 makes an answer conditionally relevant, which is provided by S immediately in lines 02-03. L in line 04 closes the conversation with *okay*, indicating that she has seen and is satisfied by the response. Different from all the other extracts shown in this paper, this extract has no pre-expansion and goes directly into the subject matter. Still the participants are able to start and continue the conversation, without any problem.

Unlike the "reasons for the texts" in the other cases shown above that are more transactional and task-oriented (e.g., making tea egg, seeking help in reading texts in a foreign language, finding information on rentals), L's question here regarding S's return date may be more accurately characterized as small talk. Further research can determine whether such reasons for the texts indeed play a role in the presence or absence of *zaima.* Likewise, while anecdotal evidence appears to suggest that age and familiarity among the participants are possible factors as well, with older generations having a tendency to use more *zaima*, and less familiarity

requiring greater use of *zaima*, these remain speculative observations that await empirical investigations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has explored the use of *zaima* in Mandarin text message openings specifically from Weixin (WeChat) in two sequential contexts: a unilateral conversation opening where the *zaima* producer proceeds with the topic of conversation immediately thereafter, and a bilateral conversation opening, where the *zaima* producer awaits a go-ahead form the recipient.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the conversation analytic studies on openings as well as the broader research on interaction in digital contexts, particularly in non-English languages. It does so by highlighting how traditional conversational openings adapt to the digital medium in the Mandarin speaking environment. Practically, these findings can inform intercultural communication, especially for those who are learning Mandarin as a second language and those who wish to engage in Mandarin-speaking digital communities.

Future research could build upon these findings in several ways. First, it could explore how digital affordances, such as message read receipts and typing indicators, shape the design and timing of conversation openings. Second, examining openings across different platforms and modalities may reveal platform-specific norms and practices. More broadly, comparative studies on how openings evolve in the digital age could provide deeper insights into the management of conversation opening in technologically mediated interactions.

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APPENDIX A

Grammatical Gloss

MSR	measure
COMP	resultative, directional, or descriptive complement
POS	possessive
PRT	sentence, vocative, or nominal subordinative particle