

Turn-taking and Simultaneous Speech

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Abstract

Turn-taking is the prominent feature of dyadic conversation. It is termed as an interchanging of utterance sequences between two or more speakers. Many a time, this turn-taking does not take place smoothly as it involves simultaneous speech namely interruption and overlap. Interruption is an indispensable aspect of conversational behavior. Therefore, it cannot be relegated as a rude and disaffiliative act harming the flow of conversation. Like interruption, overlap too is the essential ingredient of interaction as it helps enhancing conversation at hand. In short, our interaction itself necessitates interruption and overlap. The present paper aims at defining interaction and overlap in the line of their function, types, and differences.

Keywords: turn-taking, interruption, prosody of interruption, overlap, conversational floor, dyadic/triadic conversation, face, face-wants, negative face, face-saving/threatening strategies, deference, pause, pitch, tempo, non-verbal behavior, adjacency pair, TRP (transition relevance place), repair, backchannel, paralinguistic features, illocutionary force, hitches and perturbations.

1. Introduction

Turn-taking is the most important feature of dyadic (two-party) conversation. Our verbal interaction is realized in the form of turn-taking. As Goodwin (1981, p. 5) observes, turn in conversation requires action by at least two parties; one who changes his/her role from speaking to hearing and another who moves from hearing to speaking. Thus, turn is an interchanging sequence of utterance by two or more speakers.

The nature of conversation is of typical kind. In terms of turn-taking, conversation proceeds more or less orderly which includes smooth interchanges of the speaker-auditor roles. However, sometimes there occur simultaneous speech exchanges creating a little irregularity in conversational exchanges. These simultaneous speech activities do not have negative impact on the flow of speech. They are produced with certain immediate needs. This paper proposes to

fathom into mainly two notions under simultaneous speech: interruptions and overlap along with their nature, types, and functions.

2. Turn-taking and Interruption

Interruption is an obvious feature of any conversation. It is generally implied that interruption makes a disruptive effect on the ongoing interaction. It seems that the interrupting person attempts to grab the floor by ignoring turn-taking rules.

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) suggested the principle of "one-speaker-at-a-time" for smooth turn-taking. Under this framework, more than one-at-a-time conversation becomes a violation. In essence, in the Sacks et al.'s system, interruption is treated as a violation of interactional norms and hence the person interrupting is seen as rude and impolite.

The phenomenon of interruption has received a considerable attention during the last few decades. Generally, in interruption we verbally attempt to discontinue the other person's speech and want ourselves to be heard first. Woods (1988, p. 157) views interruption negatively. He calls interruption an intrusion into other interlocutor's speech boundaries. Hirschman (1994, p. 437) thinks that interruption is nothing but a sort of overlap. He suggests that interruption is a period of overlapping speech where the interrupting speaker is trying to obtain the floor. Furo's (2001, p. 31) idea of interruption is similar to Woods'. She claims that interruption is a non-systematic occurrence of deeper intrusion into a speaker's utterance. Most of these researchers view the event of interruption negatively affecting the current speaker's turn.

How's and Why's of Interruption

French and Local (1983) report their research findings on how interruptions are operationalized. They believe that interruptions are turn-competitive incomings. In an interruption, the incomer (French and Local's coinage) can be heard as wanting the floor to himself/herself not when the current speaker has finished but now, at *this* point in conversation.

Simultaneous or overlapping speech is observed to be the more recurrent feature of multi-party conversation than dyadic (two-party) and triadic (three-party) conversation. French and Local (1983) observe that such speech may occur for reasons other than a speaker having misconceived the completion point of another's turn or the timing of his/her own beginning. To get more details of how's and why's of interruptions, it is essential to understand prosodic nature of interruption along with non-verbal elements that underpin such behavior.

Prosody of Interruption

The prosodic features of interruption have received very scant attention in the analysis of interruptive talk. These features, according to French and Local (1983), involve pitch height,

tempo, and loudness variation. Roger (1989) observed in his transcript that interrupters speak with great amplitude than interruptees during but not prior to the interruption. Interrupters spoke faster than interruptees during successful interruptions, which was reversed during unsuccessful interruption and associated with speaking louder and faster speech. In this way, his assertion is that both floor holding and floor taking is associated with speaking louder and faster so that speech rate and amplitude might be expected to increase for both interrupter and interruptee during interruption. When floor is yielded by either of the participants; the pitch height, tempo and loudness gradually normalize and achieve the pre-interruption stage.

French and Local (1983) note that those interruptive incomings which have high speech rate and amplitude are shorter in duration and are characterized with interjections, asides, quips, etc. rather than serious attempt to take an extended turn. The incomer may repeat his/her utterance particles quite a number of times till the current floor holder yields floor to him/her.

Interruption and Non-verbal Behavior

During interruptive talk, especially the movements of hands, change in posture and even facial expositions play a significant role. It's a common observation that during interruption, the interrupter's hand movements are quite quick, and he/she moves his/her hands in this way to retain the floor. Likewise, even the interrupter uses his/her hand movements to support his/her point of view and get the floor for himself/herself.

When conversation proceeds smoothly, generally, there is no sudden change in postures of participants. But during or before the occurrence of interruption, the interrupter or interruptee may suddenly change their posture (postural alignment) to meet the emergent need of the situation. Some interrupters are likely to stand up before they interrupt, or they may even exit the place of conversation after the interruption. It is also observed that even the interruptee may stand up to powerfully retain the floor and let the participants hear his/her say first. Sometimes, during interruptive talk, the facial expression of interrupter and interruptee may be of a different kind. Most people's facial expressions indicate agitation or strain not during normal talk but during interruptive conversation.

Functions of Interruption

For a number of reasons and intentions, participants in conversation exploit interruptions. Goldberg (1990, pp. 886-887) properly deals with the scheme of interruption in a systematic manner. He summarizes that interruption functions to:

- secure (immediately) the turn space at the end of ongoing turn;
- display active and continued listenership;
- achieve the *precise* placement of comments and next items such as topics, stories and badinage in order to guarantee their sequential implicativeness;

- gain the speaker's immediate attention to present issues of somewhat greater priority than those under discussion (e.g., 'Fire!');
- address the interactional requirements entailed by one's role and situation;
- satisfy one's own "face-wants" and/or notions of “distributive justice” presenting one's own issues and perspectives irrespective of their topical fit affecting upon the speaker’s “face”;
- indicate the interrupter's disdain, antipathy, hostility towards the person interrupted; and
- control the topic under discussion.

Types of Interruption

Murata (1994) has meticulously elaborated various types and subtypes of interruption with suitable examples. She mainly divides these types in two categories: cooperative interruptions and intrusive interruptions.

Cooperative Interruption

This type of interruption occurs when a conversational partner joins the ongoing speaker's utterances to suggest a word or phrase which the speaker is searching for. Even the new speaker sometimes completes the ongoing utterance for the sake of its original speaker. For instance,

A: I'm surprised that the doctor treats his patients on the
 B: trial=
and error basis.

Such interruptions generally take place without any overlap or without harming the ongoing speaker's conversational topic. It is the indication of solidarity and cooperation with the person interrupted. However, there are some cultures in which deference and independence are preferred. So, in these cultures cooperative interruptions may be treated negatively.

Intrusive Interruption

Murata (1994) uses the term “intrusive” in comparison with cooperative. This type of interruption is more aggressive than the cooperative. The basic purpose of initiating this interruption is to change the ongoing topic, to disagree with the speaker or to get hold on the conversational floor. The types of intrusive interruption can be discussed as follows:

Topic Changing Interruption. In the topic changing interruption, the interrupter tries to replace the interrupter’s topic with his/her own. For example,

A: I am so busy with=
 B: How is your son...
 A: =my research project.
 B: I am asking about your son.
 A: He is doing well now.

Floor Taking Interruption. The floor taking interruption bears similarity with the topic changing interruption. However, it does not entail a complete change in the ongoing speaker's topic. It aims at obtaining the conversational floor. Its purpose might be to create balance in turn-taking and to develop the ongoing topic. For example:

- A: And I was shocked by the theft of my bag=
B: when?
A: = of my son's documents.
A: On last Sunday when I was travelling to Pune...
B: Did you complain in the police?
A: Yes I did. But I think=
B: Any message from police?
A: =I will not get it back.

Disagreement Interruption. The disagreement interruption is used when the interrupter disagrees with the opinion or fact stated in the utterance by the interruptee. If the interruptee indicates in his/her further utterances that he/she is firm on the opinion or fact that stated earlier, the disagreement interruption is more intensified by the interrupter. Generally, such interruptions intend to take floor, whereas they may or may not change the ongoing topic of discussion. For instance,

- A: Since you are my son's classmate, you should have immediately informed me that he skipped=
B: No aunty, I am in a different division this year.
A: =his test.

Interruption: More Types

The aspect of interruption has extensively been studied by many researchers. Moreover, Zimmerman and West (1975), Beattie (1981), French and Local (1983), Goldberg (1990) and Makri-Tsilipakou (1994) have named various types of interruption.

In addition to various types discussed so far, interruptions are categorized differently by many researchers. Here, we have briefly discussed some of the categories as follows:

Silent Interruption. This kind of interruption is mentioned by Beattie (1981). In certain cases, the current speaker loses the floor before he/she had intended to relinquish it leaving his/her current utterance incomplete. This may occur when the auditor seizes the floor during an encoding pause in the floor holder's speech.

Neutral - Non-neutral (power/rapport) Interruption. The traditional approach to interruption is based on power, control or dominance. Goldberg (1990) systematizes various interruptions to cross this line of thinking. He advocates viewing interruptions according to the neutral and non-neutral standpoint.

i. Relationally Neutral Interruptions. These interruptions propose to address the immediate needs of the communicative situation. They may elicit a repair, repeat or clarification of the utterance already interrupted. Relationally neutral interruptions attend to some urgent events/issues that require immediate attention before the conversation continues. Such interruptions are not directed to wrest control over the situation. Only then this interruption becomes neutral when the interrupter's task is over, and he/she is obliged to hand over the floor to the person interrupted to achieve the pre-interruption state of conversation.

ii. Non-neutral (Power/rapport) Interruptions. The non-neutral interruptions are relationally loaded with power-*rapport* continuum. They are designed to satisfy listener wants. The power type interruptions are so designed to wrest the discourse from the speaker by gaining control over the conversational process and/or content. These are the interruptions in which individual interests and wants of interrupter are reflected. Such types are generally heard as rude, impolite, intrusive and indecent which convey interrupter's antipathy, aggression, hostility, dislike, disdain, etc. towards the interruptee and/or the talk at hand. They seriously damage the flow, topic and the content of current utterance. These interruptions may result in acrimony between the interlocutors.

On the other hand, the *rapport* type interruptions are not directed to wrest control over the current conversational process. These interruptions are generally regarded as the expressions of open empathy, affection, solidarity, interest, concern, collaboration and cooperation with the person interrupted. The *rapport* interruptions invigorate the interruptee's talk by inserting short informative or evaluative comments as well as feedback. The consequence of such interruptions may be development of goodwill between the persons who are interacting.

Another type of interruption is termed as competitive interruptions which is a blend of the above two. This type exhibits features of power and *rapport* type interruptions. Like *rapport* type, such interruptions maintain the main topic and like power type they address the speaker's negative face. Here, the interactants strive to get the other to acknowledge their own particular beliefs, accomplishments, or experiences as being in some sense *superior* to those of others.

It is suggested by Goldberg (1990) that one shouldn't rely on a priori interpretation of interruption. Interruptions are rather influenced by variables like respective rights, emergent obligations, wants of speaker and auditors.

It is very difficult to classify teases and on-liners like puns, quips and banter under any single heading because of their queer conversational form. Nevertheless, sometimes these are very powerful tools of interruption.

Affiliative and Disaffiliative Interruptions. Sack et al.'s (1974) conversational model regarded simultaneity as a breach of interactional norms. Since then, quite a huge number of researches have quantitatively investigated interrupting habits. Makri-Tsilipakou (1994) is one of them who gave a new direction to the study of interruption. On the basis of place of their occurrence, she divides interruptions between two broad categories: "shallow interruptions" and "deep interruptions". Shallow interruptions are the simultaneities occurring within the second or second to last syllables, or between first and second or nearest to last or last syllable of unit types. On the other hand, the deep interruptions are those onsets of simultaneities more than two syllables away from the beginning or end of a unit type.

Makri-Tsilipakou (1994) further divides all the simultaneous speech occurrences on the ground of their content. She dichotomizes such occurrences between affiliative and disaffiliative interruptions. She argues that affiliative interruptions are initiated as addressee oriented "face saving strategies", preferred second pair part or adjacency pair, genuine repairs, ratifying backchannel responses, initiation development of affiliative topics and affiliative topic change/shift, etc.

Disaffiliative interventions, on the other hand, consist of the antagonist performances exactly opposite to those of affiliative. These include addressee-oriented face threatening strategies, dispreferreds, hurtful repairs, disaffiliative topic change/shift and backchannel responses. These are like delayed minimal responses and disapproving minimal responses, for instance, sneers, jeers, jabs, etc. Additionally, scornful laughter, disrupting coughing, disapproving sighs, intense chortle during listening and so many paralinguistic features are highly disaffiliative. Finally, Makri-Tsilipakou (1994) argues that all the affiliative and disaffiliative acts cited above are highly context sensitive. The illocutionary force of these acts is in accordance with the performer's intent.

Interruption is an indispensable feature of conversational behavior. It should not always be relegated as a rude and disrespectful act, indicative of indifference, aggression, or hostility towards the floor-holder. But as we have pointed out, the interruptive speech may even be of affiliative and rapport oriented in nature and an indicator of solidarity.

3. Turn-taking and Overlap

Overlap in conversation is the interactional cousin of interruption. Like interruption, overlap also tends to be the regular feature of conversation. It has been observed by scholars that

overlap occurs in about only five per cent of conversations or even less than that. Some researchers have studied the event of overlap in conversation and defined its nature. Murata (1994, p. 386) thinks that overlaps are unintentional acts. She suggests that overlaps are unintentional infringement in conversation. Makri-Tsilipakou (1994, p. 402) describes the event of overlapping in terms of its location. She explains the notion of overlap to be those simultaneities occurring within the first or last syllable of unit types. Furo (2001, p. 31) idea of overlap is similar to Makri-Tsilipakou's. Following West and Zimmerman (1983), she defines overlap as the brief simultaneous talk near possible completion points which is considered by the turn-taking system. Schegloff's (2000, p.7) conceptualization of overlap is straightforward. He refers to overlap as talk by more than one at a time. In short, overlaps are those instances of simultaneous talk initiated during others' turns and are not intentional infringements to grab the conversational floor.

Overlap and Interruption

In her paper on interruption, Murata (1994, pp. 385-400) has explicated various differences between overlap and interruption. They are:

- Interruption carries negative meaning, whereas overlap necessarily does not.
- Overlap tends to dissolve soon after by one party yielding the floor, on the other hand, interruption does not immediately get dissolved after the yielding of the floor.
- Overlap is briefer than interruption.
- Generally, overlap tends to occur at a TRP but interruption necessarily occurs at random places other than a TRP.
- Overlapping usually does not entail topic change but in maximum cases interruption results in topic change.
- Overlap is an unintentional act occurring due to the misprojection of TRPs, whereas interruption is an intentional act to take the floor.

Configuration of Overlap

Schegloff (2000, p. 38) systematically characterizes the following configurations of overlap in three party conversation:

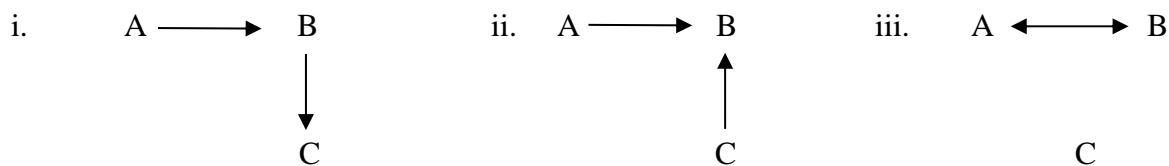


Figure 2.3 Overlap Resolution Device

Regarding this configuration, Schegloff (2000, p. 8) makes two observations. The first is about the deployment of body, especially gaze direction. In configuration (ii), the gaze direction

of B is likely to figure centrally. A and C seem to be competing for *this* recipient, namely B and the recipient may direct his/her gaze to indicate his favorable competitor. If B gazes at A, then C can drop out of the competition, and it seems that B has decided his/her matter. But on occasion, C can respond by competing for the recipient more intensely by talking louder at a higher pitch and so on. Even in configuration (iii), the body can be deployed properly in a manner relevant to overlap, but it does not seem so.

The second observation is that despite the three different configurations, (i) and (ii) can naturally alternate under the operation of the turn-taking system. But how? Let's begin with (i): A is talking to B and B to C. One *natural* new phase may occur in which one possible completion of B's turn, C properly responds to B. If C does so, the configuration (ii) is activated: A is talking to B, and C is talking to B. When C comes to a possible completion, B may appropriately address C again and configuration (i) is again active. Schegloff (2000) concludes that these two configurations are, in a sense, natural alternators. He calls this system "overlap resolution device." Overlap may be resolved in this way in a three-party conversation. However, it is very difficult to draw such a device for two and multi-party conversation. Schegloff (2000, p. 10) elucidates following grossly apparent observations about overlap:

- i. Most overlaps function very quickly.
- ii. Some overlaps persist to a considerable length.
- iii. Many overlaps are the sites of hitches and perturbations (moments of arrests in continuity) of the talk.

Functions of Overlap

Fasold (1990) cites three chief functions of overlap (as mentioned in Tannen, 1983, p. 6). They are:

- Cooperative sentence building: Here speaker and auditor together cooperatively complete an utterance.
- Requesting and giving verification: In interaction, one of the participants asks for verification during the ongoing talk of the current speaker without causing speaker change.
- Repetition: Participant repeats what the current speaker is saying along with the current speaker's flow of speech.

These functions are of those overlaps which are initiated by auditor with an intention or purpose. However, the overlaps which are a result of judging TRP improperly they may or may not have functions of their own.

Types of Overlap

In his exclusive paper on overlapping talk, Schegloff (2000, pp. 1-63) divided overlaps among four categories. These categories are given below.

- i. Terminal overlaps:** These overlaps occur when a speaker appears to be starting up by virtue of prior speaker's analyzably incipient finishing of a turn.
- ii. Continuers:** The interpolation like uh, huh, mum, by which the auditor indicates that he/she understands that the speaker is in the course of extended turn which is not yet complete.
- iii. Conditionals:** Here the speaker of an incomplete turn yields floor to the auditor, or even invites him/her to speak in his/her turn's space, especially for a word search or collaborative utterance construction.
- iv. Chordal/choral overlaps:** These overlaps are chordal or choral in nature which occur during collective greeting, leave taking, and congratulations in response to announcement of personal good news. Such activities in multi-party settings are regularly produced chorally, nor serially.

4. Conclusion

The above discussion points out to the fact that there may not be a fruitful conversation without any interruption and overlap as well. Although Sacks et al. (1974) alluded to one-at-a-time principle, it overtly seems that it is too ambitious a requirement to generally meet in conversation. Thus, interruptions and overlaps are the natural ingredients of human communicative behavior. Hence, communication itself necessitates interruption and overlap.

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