



# Turns, Turn-Taking, and or Interruptions! a Pragmatic Approach to Discourse

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## Abstract

This paper reports on findings from qualitative and empirical studies on turns and turn-taking in human interaction which are set on the assumption that all conversations are conducted with strict adherence to turns and turn-taking for effective communication. These trends only took into account formal discourse situations without recourse to informal talk scenarios which are mostly what normal human interaction appears to be. The purpose of this review was to evaluate the relationship between the evidence-based findings on turn-taking in formal discourse and its application to real-world interaction to ascertain its workability and significant outcomes. It was observed that because previous studies have been patterned and trajectorized in a manner which indicated that all forms of conversation (under review) were hitch-free hence yielded to turn-taking strategies, same would not be easily said for conversation scenarios (informal) not investigated by these studies. The implications therefore remain that these studies though laudable, have made limited progress in adequately meeting all components of the turn-taking mandates and fulfilling the purpose of human verbal conversation in general, which is communication. The limitations of this work as well as directions for future research were discussed.

**Keywords:** Discourse, Formal conversation, Informal conversation, Turn-taking, Turns.

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## INTRODUCTION

Human conversation is replete with structured/unstructured, written/unwritten, visible/invisible, planned/unplanned, coded/encoded elements which are believed to govern or underlie interactions between and among participants in speech situations. To any lay language user, one may argue that speech just happens without strict control and or oversight of the process; but to a discourse analyst, there is always more to the profundity of speech than just mere stringing of understandable words, phrases, clauses etc for better outcomes. Conversation which involves producing and negotiating language remains the basic feature of face to face interaction in human society and social order and continues to delineate man from other species that communicate in various forms and patterns other than speech. The distinction hence between communication and conversation is closely related to the observation that information may be transmitted more or less strongly or weakly. In any case while communication on the one hand, dwells on outcome as well as the responsiveness of the participants to the message; conversation, on the other hand is concerned with not just the locution, illocution and perlocution of an utterance but with the otherwise constellation of unseen intricacies among which are: turns/turn-taking, politeness, hedging, adjacency principle, code mixing/switching etc delicately nuanced in the speech process.

Turns and turn-taking are so inextricably intertwined that they are often mixed up and to accommodate this overlap, it will be only fair to extend this narrative to x-ray holistically the subject matter. According to Burns and Seidlhofer (2010), speaking is so much part of daily life that it is often taken for granted. However, speaking, be it in the first or other language, critically involves developing subtle and detailed knowledge about the how, why and when to communicate as well as the complex skills for producing and managing interaction, such as asking a question or even obtaining a turn. A turn therefore is a speaker's assigned space to speak in a conversation usually occasioned by the end of an earlier turn taken by another speaker in the same speech situation often characterized by certain mutually observable, understandable and identifiable idiosyncrasies accompanying natural human interaction. On a grand scale, particularly with urgent, disagreement, competitive, dispute and or dialogic circumstances, it is not a very seamless act to take turns in long or short stretches of conversation and that partly accounts for the reason Conversation analysts are concerned about how speakers accomplish smooth turn-taking and what the regulations are for who speaks when.

Turn-taking is a speaker's ability to tell that a turn has come to an end and another should rightfully commence. Since conversation is more or less an intercourse or exchange of ideas; therefore, individuals actively involved in this sequence of exchange are contributory elements to the totality of this web of ideas. Conversation analysts have tried to simplify the complex network of spoken discourse by pointing out a number of cues such as – pauses, laughter, fillers, hedges, intercalary devices, adjacency pairs etc that signal the next or another turn. Studies (Yngve, 1970; Sacks et al., 1974; McCarthy, 2001) have shown that for the avoidance of inevitable clashes/hitches in human interactions especially the informal spoken discourse particularly with regard to turn-taking, there may be instances of nomination, self-selection, back-channels, completions or overlaps known as co-operative activity by participants to smooth the progress of communication. This still leaves conversation analysts with these lingering questions: how do participants - take turns in conversation; open and close conversation; introduce fresh topics, close old ones, shift topic; and how do conversations progress satisfactorily from one utterance to the next? In a nutshell, how do people navigate the entire

conversation process appropriating the right and acceptable unseen/unwritten details to attain communication?

Interruptions in conversations are perceived as unsolicited and unapproved turn taken by a speaker which causes friction in the free flow of an on-going interaction. This often happens when a speaker feels the need to share an opinion, contribute in the interaction or make a point but there always seems to be no timing appropriateness and cannot get a word in edgeways, hence the speaker chooses to take an awkward turn regardless of the seemingly seamless flow of the conversation thereby injecting a near chaotic atmosphere and distorting the speech process for a supposedly good course – to be heard.

Having drawn a distinction between turns/turn-taking and interruptions, let us accommodate other studies for a more holistic understanding of these elements (turns/turn-taking) and how they play out in natural human discourse. The body of literature on turns/turn-taking show that the duo are not just theoretical constructs in discourse analysis but are clear organizational patterns in communicative situations that govern, manage, regulate and define roles in interaction among speakers while establishing and maintaining relationships. Sacks et al. (1974) whose seminal work championed the course of conversation analysis as a field of enquiry has continued to act as a framework for further studies and has provided evidence-based component in interaction. For Sacks et al., this is anchored on the alternation of speech and the precise coordination of participants as speech moves from one speaker to another within a specific spoken interaction. Of immense importance is how speakers assume roles, negotiate meaning in the form of dialogue as well as assign turns to one another in the daily business of talk. Quite a number of studies have been done on turns/turn-taking exploring various facets of communication; the present study will contribute to on-going research as a conversation strategy by reviewing through correlations and specific subskills of turns/turn-taking and noting how interactants align with the unwritten rules of turns and turn-taking for different conversation scenarios.

### **Turns/Turn-taking Genre through the Lens of Researchers**

Schegloff (1972) noted that true discourse happens when there is turn taking process in which one participant talks, stops and another one takes over the floor. He stresses that “if turn-taking really occurs in talk, there must be turn as one of the categories of discourse”. The implication therefore is that in conversation, there appears to be an undisclosed chain of discussion which continues to unfold as interaction progresses and in which case, speakers and listeners naturally swap roles; hence a speaker at some point turns listener and vice versa. While Schegloff maintains that a turn ends before another begins believing that other parameters that facilitate a hitch interaction are in place in most routine talk exchange, one may wonder if there are cases of grossly inadequate turns particularly in structured discourse where turns are measured and regulated based on the overall time assigned to the speech situation.

Sacks et al. (1974), explanations anchor on the detailed organization of everyday interaction which is essentially about spoken dialogue and query how people manage conversations in terms of opening and closing, turn taking, introducing fresh topics, closing old topics and even shifting topic as well as the satisfactory flow from one utterance to another. Sacks et al. believe that conversations are not only interactional episodes but speech events that include a beginning, middle and an end. They further observe that speakers are allowed to take turns often through nomination by the current speaker but if no one is openly chosen, they may

speak of their own accord (self-selection). However, if neither of these circumstances applies, the current speaker can just carry on. In a nutshell, Sacks et al. reiterated that management and organization of taking turns to talk remains crucial to conversation while noting that taking turns in conversation should be locally managed, interactionally controlled and sensitive to recipient design.

Baker (1977) took a plunge into different types of turn-taking regulators in American Sign Language and identified the use of holds as the last sign of a proposition among other strategies deployed to either hint turn continuation and or turn shifting. Baker identified holds and its turn-shifting function which works well with the speaker's gaze at the other interactant to signal a response and which by extension is indication a completion of an already existing turn and inviting the next speaker to take the turn. Also, the study explained that the first speaker returns to rest position by hand gesture as soon as the next speaker resumes his turn thereby showing the turn completion of the first speaker. Furthermore, Baker detailed that when a possible next speaker in the same location does not receive the signal by way of the gaze from the current speaker to assume a turn, it is treated as continuation regulator. In sign language therefore, the gaze direction of the current speaker is integral to the interpretation of what function the hold accomplishes in the said discourse situation.

Bublitz (1988) focused on conversations involving more than two participants and whose roles in everyday interaction had to be divided into the primary speaker, the secondary speaker and the hearer. These roles are so created along the lines of communicative actions in terms of speaking, hearing, giving the hearer signals and making him/her a key or negligible speaker contribution as the case may be. Bublitz noted that although every participant has the right and stands a chance to comment, to speak or to listen in most informal situations, there is always one primary speaker who initiates the talk or offers the first topic. Such a one opens the conversation but is not in any way mandated or compelled to maintain the principal role through the entire period. Also, the author tries to substantiate these roles assigned to participants by further stating that the primary speaker's role is usually marked by such speech acts as—telling, reporting, arguing, etc.

The secondary speaker who is assumed to make minor contributions performs speech acts like – agreeing, supporting, approving, doubting, inquiring and avoids performing topical actions. While the hearer as a more passive participant completes the communicative cycle by keen attentiveness to the speaker by employing 'hearer signals or back-channels/small syntactic units' all indicative of his agreement and flow with the ongoing process. In addition, Bublitz stressed that the non-appearance of verbal and non-verbal hearer signals which are integral to conversation leads to a breakdown in everyday exchange. More so, is its applicability even in telephone conversation; the absence of which does not guarantee interest in the conversation and possible feedback may not arise. Bublitz' interest therefore focuses on two major phenomena (1) discourse topic and topical actions (like Introducing and Changing a Topic or Digressing from it), (2) hearer signals and reactive speaker contributions.

Kato (2000) examined discourse approach to turn-taking from the perspective of tone choice between speakers and carefully described turn-taking as "one of the basic mechanisms in conversation which aims to promote and maintain talk. Kato stressed that the knowledge as well as appreciation of linguistic and conversational rules of the target language holds the key to smooth turn-taking particularly for learners of the language. In addition, the author tied seamless turn-taking to speaker's tone as she observed a tangential relationship between tone which signals the end of a turn and the beginning of yet another turn. Yet, in the study, tone mastery

received a lot of attention as falling tones were indicative of declaratives; interrogatives etc. while a rising tone often showed dominance which provides adequate cue to choice of tone in response as tone is believed to carry meaning and plays a significant role in turn-taking. Culture specificity was also elaborately implicated in the study as the author found reasons to establish that there were sociocultural leanings attached to turn-taking since common attitudes, beliefs and values are reflected in the way languages which naturally vary from culture to culture are used.

Hudson (2001) faithfully analyzed other kinds of structure in speech acknowledging that there is no agreed single theoretical framework for the analysis of these coherent patterns and structure that run through discourse. Hudson particularly picked on the fact that people take turns at speaking in most kinds of interaction and as such, speech is divided up into separate stretches spoken by different speakers. He posed certain questions ranging from whether turns are taken strictly in sequence or overlap one another, how speakers show that they are about to finish speaking, how listeners show that they would like to start, who decides who should speak next, who does most of the talking, who speaks to whom and so on. The study carefully described turn-taking as a very highly skilled activity involving many kinds of behavior (eye movement) as well as speech all coordinated with split-second timing and reacted to with great accuracy by other participants. For Hudson, speech structure plays a vital role in smooth turn-taking as some structures present a sequence for example: question + answer, greeting + greeting, complaint + apology, summons + answer, Invitation + acceptance etc. which must naturally be adhered to in order that the flow may not be distorted and to sustain speech as social interaction. Hudson's explications appear to have undermined the fluidity of speech in human interaction but highlighted it as a transactional affair series.

Burns and Seidlhofer (2010) have argued that for the precise timing of turn-taking in interactions; 'pitch and loudness' remain instrumental to turn signals and realizations. They stated categorically that turns can pose a problem to get particularly when it is no longer the usual cordial interaction among speakers. When conversations are laced with high competition, urgency, disagreement, speakers are expected to adjust to local transition points such as pauses and fillers in conversations to assume a turn. For these authors, another turn-taking opportunity arises when the current speaker nominates the next which may be achieved directly or by means of Adjacency pairs where speakers allocate or give up turns. In other words, Burns and Seidlhofer acknowledge that turns/turn-taking are routine in conversation but its application vary and are operational according to discourse type.

McCarthy et al. (2010) extended their study by describing a turn as "each occasion that a speaker speaks and a turn ends when another speaker takes a turn." Accordingly, they noted that in everyday casual conversations, hardly would there be overlaps or interruptions rather there may be only minimal seconds of silence if at all it happens. Also, drawing from Sacks et al. 1974, these authors posit that turn-taking is context-oriented and that language provides ways of getting the next turn but if neither nomination nor self selection fails to apply as turn-taking signal, vocalizations, otherwise referred to as back channel responses are features of turn-taking. They maintain that back-channels, completions and overlaps were co-operative activity by interlocutors to facilitate communication and must not be interpreted as interruptions or rude. They further noted that in conversation, there is usually a pair of turns that jointly affect one another and that is to say that one turn definitely triggers the next in form of response and that they called – adjacency pairs. Typical examples of everyday adjacency pairs include greeting-greeting, compliment-thanks, apology-acceptance etc. it is important to note that although adjacency pairs appear to represent a certain sequence based on routine application, it is not at all

times that the preferred sequence is realized and in which case speakers try to adopt some strategies like politeness, small talk, openings, closings and the like, to save face and manage the conversation.

Girard-Groeber and Pochon-Berger (2014) methodically examined turns and turn-taking in Swiss German sign language interactions with emphasis on turn-final holds. The study elaborately showed that turns (referred to as “holds”) a resource deployed sequentially in spoken discourse is meaningfully applied in spatio-visual modality otherwise known as sign language which by extension is a system of communication. They went ahead to describe turns-at-talk and their alternation between speakers as the building blocks of social interaction while equally stressing that non-verbal resources (such as gaze, gestures, posture, etc) of both speakers and recipients have also shown to play a central role in managing turn-taking in spoken interaction. Groeber and Pochon-Berger concluded that holds are a powerful resource in social interaction that participants draw on not only to project a next action to take place, but also to display on-line their understanding of its relevant accomplishment. Similarly, holds, just like turns have a way of signaling the next action and its release marks the fulfillment of expectations thereof while availing participants the opportunity to adjust their conducts as the case may be. Following the details of the Groeber and Pochon-Berger study, we may necessarily infer that in interaction, the term Holds in sign language act as turns/turn-taking mechanism in spoken language.

Okata (2016) analyzed turn-taking sequence in discourse as a tool for effective conversation in related speech of interlocutors. The study dwelt on the role of the current speaker (the speaker who holds the moment) in a discourse floor by trying to ascertain the connectedness of the speech of interlocutors as a factor and regulator of their social and interpersonal relationships. Okata explained that conversation structure plays a role in turn-taking and stated that a turn begins when a speaker begins to speak and ends when same speaker stops speaking within a discourse situation. The author argued that there may be instances of vagueness, ambiguity and communication breakdown among interlocutors often arising as a result of wrong or inappropriate sequencing of turns in conversation. This is so because in most unstructured, naturally-occurring discourse situations, interactions appear to have an even flow as interlocutors manage conversation knowing when a particular speaker’s turn is up and another resumes. Whereas in rehearsed and structured interactions such as (debates, courtroom sessions etc) turns are regimented and strictly controlled as speakers are only allowed to express themselves with the limits of time allocated to each speaker regardless of the partial fulfillment of a given turn. The study concluded that turn-taking is influenced by a number of social factors, personality and professional variables which makes conversational sequence deep with complex implications.

Granted that quite a number of research have been done on turn-taking in the field of conversation analysis, yet the views do not exactly tally with expectations as ongoing studies continue to introduce new dimensions to the field or reestablish existing shift in the paradigm as researchers work from diverse yet acceptable perspectives.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Our review of turn-taking indicates that there is approximately equal coverage or a general trend which earlier reported studies on turns and turn-taking have taken to account for certain gaps existing in the otherwise thoroughly researched field of conversation analysis. If researchers defined the constructs of turn-taking in conversation by adequately accommodating all talk/discourse scenarios and provided support for the validity and effectiveness of exchange, not

much will be debatable as issues concerning natural human interaction would have been fully addressed. On the contrary, there seems to be an angle of interest in the entire turn-taking genre or a near-deliberate attempt to circumvent the uproar often occasioned by error, disagreement, misunderstanding in interaction/dialogue which is duly human or sheer presumption that every human interaction is civil.

Addressing conversations from the point of politeness reflected in previous studies does not attend to very likely events of commotion, hue and cry, pandemonium etc usually observed in meetings of all kinds, dispute, argument, and in which case a shouting match becomes unavoidable and turn-taking becomes a non issue. When we limit our examples of talk situations to portray only the adoption of the face-saving strategy, or the offense-mitigating approach, it only amounts to unnatural display of harmony. The question remains; what is human interaction without controversy? When shall we begin to treat human conversation without borders and without being predicated on the not-so-attainable rules made with a particular culture in mind and expected to work well with/across other cultures?. It is in the face of controversy that one fully appreciates the fragile human core which finds release in unexpected situations that make outbursts inevitable.

Until conversation analysts begin to address these language concerns exclusive of each other and acknowledging that every culture is unique, we cannot boast of a theoretical concept that sufficiently accommodates various language/culture distinctions. Also, apart from formal debates, meetings, courtroom sessions, classroom setting etc characterized by question and answer series, other forms of human interactions are fundamentally informal and marked by some degree of impoliteness and addressed without implication. It is therefore imperative to take a holistic view of every possible interaction scenario and accommodate human errors and idiosyncrasies potentially brought to the fore considering the nature of the exchange. Unlike formal discourse scenarios often marked by regimented dialogue and speech which makes turns/turn-taking visibly present, appreciable and operational, informal discourse which naturally happens without prior planning is characterized by all forms of uncontrolled human mannerisms which makes the exchange unique and strict adherence to turns/turn-taking hardly consequential.

This review has provided a framework for understanding the importance of turns/turn-taking as well as its application in interaction. Like all empirical studies, it is clear that the categories though supported by conversation analysis were largely based on authors' interpretations which are subjective and conceivably influenced. Our contribution only offers a possibly more in-depth study through observation of naturally occurring informal conversation as against an otherwise stage-managed formal conversation that eliminates the very fundamental nature of human interaction which may defy existing theories and practice of turn-taking. This may serve as a launch pad for future studies related to turns/turn-taking in particular and conversations in general as issues that transcend traditions.

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