

build up a comprehensive picture of how conversation is structured to achieve its goals.

In the next section we will continue our description of the interactivity of conversation by describing one key aspect of interaction: how interactants know when it is their turn to talk, at what points in the conversation another interactant can self-select to take the turn or what linguistic strategies the speaker uses to select the next speaker.

4.2.3 *Turntaking in conversation*

Perhaps the most significant studies on turntaking have come from CA, from within sociology rather than linguistics. In Section 4.2.1 above we described CA's concept of adjacency pairs and in this section we will describe CA's research on turntaking.

Sacks (1974), who developed CA into a distinctive field of enquiry, transcribed and analysed many hours of naturally occurring conversations. He describes how turntaking works in English: the current speaker can either select the next speaker, by for example, naming them, looking at them, directing a question to them, or the next speaker can self-select, with many possible strategies, such as *that reminds me of* or *have you heard what Mary did yesterday?*

In conversations, although there are many overlaps and interruptions, the way people take or allocate turns is not random. It is systematic and the signals, which may not be explicit, are clearly understood by speakers familiar with the cultural context. This is evidenced by the fact that conversations can flow coherently for extended periods of time, and without prolonged silences or breakdowns in communication. CA is interested in uncovering how it is that conversation keeps making sense and how people know when and how to make a contribution.

So, in trying to explain how it is that speakers keep taking turns, Sacks (1974) argued that it is because interactants in the conversation recognize points of potential speaker change, these being indicated by linguistic units which he calls *turn-constructive units*. A turn-constructive unit (TCU) is the minimal semantic unit that can constitute one complete turn of talk. In this example each of these turns is a TCU:

- A: Do you want to have a drink?
- B: Great idea

However in the following example each utterance could constitute a complete turn in its own right. Hence there are two turn-constructive units within the one speaker turn:

- A: Do you want a drink? We could go somewhere after work.

The discourse features of conversation

The turn-constructive unit is a central concept in the CA explanation of how it is that in conversation

- i) only one speaker speaks at a time; and
- ii) speaker change recurs (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974: 700).

It is at the end of the turn-constructive unit that interactants in conversation recognize points of potential speaker change. One of the problems, however, with using the TCU as the basic descriptive unit of conversational interaction is that it is not clear how to identify the boundaries of a TCU.

A related issue of interest for CA researchers is how interactants determine, at the end of the turn-constructive unit, who the next speaker will be. There are two possibilities: the first is that the current speaker selects the person who is to be the next speaker, and the second possibility is that the next speaker self-selects. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974/1978) argue that speaker change needs to be negotiated at every turn. This is partly motivated by the need to avoid the possibility of a lapse, i.e. of no one speaking. Thus central to CA's modelling of conversation is the existence of a turn-taking mechanism, having the function of assigning turns to interactants in conversation.

In formal spoken English contexts, such as a doctor's appointment or a job interview, the turn-taking is more ordered. The person with the higher status (e.g. doctor or interviewer) assigns the turns. In an interview the interviewer initiates the exchange and then, through a series of questions, assigns the turn. For example, the following extract is from an authentic interview with a prospective student who wishes to apply to do an English honours degree.

A = interviewer; B = prospective student

- A Come in. Come in. Ah good morning.
- B Good morning.
- A You're Mrs Finney?
- B Yes.
- A I am, *((syll))* How are you? My name's Hart and this is Mr Mortlake.
- B How are you?
- A How do you do? Won't you sit down?
- B Thank you.
- A Well you are proposing taking on a, quite something Mrs Finney, aren't you?
- B Yes.

(from London – Lund Corpus of Spoken English, Svartrik and Quirk, 1980)

Note that the turn-taking is ordered and assigned by a series of questions by the interviewer. Essentially the talk consists of a series of exchanges, or

adjacency pairs. From this it can be seen how the concept of the adjacency pair is closely linked to the formulation of turntaking 'rules'. It is a strategy for assigning turns, since a question seeks an answer, a statement, a response, etc.

By contrast the turntaking in casual conversations is not assigned by any particular person, and so it is much more intricate than a series of exchanges or adjacency pairs. As can be seen in the extract that follows, overlapping, interruptions and back-channelling are very common. They are all aspects of successful conversations and demonstrate that the speakers are collaborating and actively participating in the conversations.

The transcript is from an authentic conversation between two cooks and two kitchen hands in a hospital on their break. There are four participants: Gary, Mark, Chris and Doris. They first talk about food and then the conversation abruptly shifts to the discussion of a programme ('Willesee') on the previous night's television about delinquent children.

Text 4.4: Willesee

- Gary: Oh I've forgotten about lunch.
Mark: Have you? You don't like the fish?
Gary: No it's not that I don't, I LIKE it, it's the way it's done.
Mark: Every time it's the same there's fish on every day.
Gary: Yeah, called fish of the day.
Doris: Yeah I mean some of the patients have got to have it for dietary reasons.
Chris: Yeah. I love fish, = = I like
Gary: = = That's stylish.
Chris: I like Jewfish cutlets grilled or = = barbecued.
Gary: = = See Willesee last night?
Mark: Yeah that was good eh? Kids at the Cross.¹
Gary: Kids at the Cross.
Chris: The young ones? The babies?
Gary: Fourteen, fifteen.
Chris: They start at nine.
Mark: And the language.
Chris: Mmm it's not their fault.
Gary: The hooker brings back the
Mark: I blame their parents.
Chris: That's right.
Mark: At fourteen they ended up the Cross doing it themselves.

¹ Cross refers to a suburb of Sydney called King's Cross which is well known for its brothels and nightclubs.

The discourse features of conversation

- Chris: But mm, the thing is Mark until you have children you don't understand. To me, you just don't understand.
The, you can have the best of parents
- Mark: Oh true. Things can still go wrong.
- Chris: You just guide them and hope that they = =
'cause I've got
- Mark: = = Yeah sure because
- Chris: I've got a nephew that his mother just raised three kids by herself and they get everything. She works hard you know. They've got a nice = = home, they've got everything and now he is twelve and and he's an animal.
- (Authors' data)

When Gary says *Oh I've forgotten about lunch*, this is a turn – constructional unit (TCU), where speaker change can occur. Mark's response *Have you? You don't like the fish?* is two TCU's within one turn of talk. The conversation proceeds with the participants self-selecting to talk, ensuring that there are no long lapses or awkward pauses – and the change of speaker occurs either at the end of a TCU, or a person interrupts and takes the turn. The more informal the conversation the more overlapping and interruptions occur. As you can see from this conversation, overlaps are very common, and speakers interrupt or complete each other's turn. For example:

- Chris: Yeah. I love fish. = = I like
- Gary: = = That's stylish

This extract also demonstrates how, amongst participants who are familiar, conversation tolerates – indeed thrives upon – disagreement and difference, whereas the talk between people less familiar to one another is characterized more by the exploration of similarity.

The conventions for turntaking in a language can be culturally specific and can therefore cause misunderstandings in cross-cultural contexts where these conventions are not shared. Moreover, Slade's (1996) research on workplace conversations (see below) has shown that there are significant differences in the way men and women take turns: the men interrupted each other much more frequently, while the women asked many more questions to indicate interest.

Because CA was one of the first approaches to demonstrate that conversation is systematically structured, it has had an important influence on the teaching of conversation. Structures lend themselves to instruction, and it is easy to see how such features as adjacency pairs, turn-taking strategies, conversational gambits and different feedback mechanisms, might inform the content of conversation classes. (For a more detailed discussion on teaching conversation see Chapter 9.)