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A Comparison of Speaker Overlaps Across Three Genres of Discourse

**A COMPARISON OF SPEAKER OVERLAPS ACROSS
THREE GENRES OF DISCOURSE**

Anita Pomerance

Introduction

Interruptions are generally considered bad manners, and most people have experienced the annoyance of being cut off in mid-sentence. Yet people often talk simultaneously, without any apparent disruption of the conversation. What can we learn about spoken discourse and social relationships by studying these overlaps of one speaker's words with another's?

A study of the incidence and nature of overlaps across three genres of spoken discourse may add to our understanding of overlaps and of the genres in question. For this purpose, I have selected a conversation between three people which includes process description, narrative, and exposition of beliefs. Overlaps are frequent throughout the conversation, but the distribution of type of overlap changes from one genre to the other. Consideration of the relationships between the overlaps observed and the purpose of each genre should help us to understand and evaluate the role of overlaps. Which type of overlaps, in which genres, further the purposes of both the speaker and the listener, and which are only useful for the speaker? To answer this

question adequately, one must investigate the overlaps, first by classifying them and seeing where they occur, then by studying the context of their occurrence, including the familial, social, and power relationships between the participants. By differentiating between the role of overlaps in the three genres, we can better understand the effect of overlaps in different situations, and also refine our perception of the purposes and effects of different genres.

Previous Studies

The presence of overlaps in conversation has been studied extensively by researchers from various branches of linguistics over the past fifteen years. In particular, back-channel cues and the type of overlap termed "an interruption" have been studied from both a structural perspective and a functional point of view. The structural studies investigate such factors as the length of an overlap, its location in the first speaker's discourse, and the volume and speed of either speaker; the functional perspective focuses on such questions as who overlaps whom and for what purpose and to what effect.

The earlier studies examined overlaps primarily from a structural point of view. Meltzer et al. (1971), for example, concluded that the volume of an overlapped utterance served as a signal to prevent an interruptor from continuing. Duncan (1972) studied both verbal and non-verbal signals for turn-yielding or turn-holding, taking the point of view that all overlaps were to be avoided, using moralistic phrases such as "blame may be laid" (p. 291) to characterize speakers who do

not follow the "rules". Rules are the cornerstone of the work of Schegloff, who constructed an elegant model of conversation as an achievement collaboratively accomplished through an intricate system of turntaking with self-regulating mechanisms to prevent simultaneous speech and enforce his model's "one speaker at a time" rule.

Later writers turned to the interpretation of overlaps from a social or political viewpoint. Many studies deal with the issue of male dominance. Zimmerman's study (1975) of the effect of gender on interruption in conversations between male and female college students, and Esposito's analysis (1979) of nursery school children concluded that the preponderance of interruptions by males reflected the male dominance implicit in our culture. Grief (1980) came to the same conclusion when she found that male parents interrupted their children more than did female parents, and that both parents interrupted female children more than they did male children. Edelsky (1981) concluded that women were only dominated in certain types of discourse situations. She found that men took a dominant role in hierarchical types of "floor", but that in more informal exchanges, the women of the same group were verbally more aggressive than the men, engaging in long and frequent overlaps. On the other hand, Desautels' Canadian study (1983) found that females interrupted males much more than they did other females. Researchers working in languages other than English have looked at further considerations. Rasper et al. (1978) found that the rank, or popularity, of German high school girls influenced the success of their attempts to take the floor. Japanese studies by

Pomerance

Mizutani (1982) and Hinds (1983) stressed the Japanese expectation of more frequent back-channel cues than in English. Hinds also described the Japanese use of back-channel cues as a way of responding to intrusion by building barriers of excessive politeness.

One recent writer has refined the concept of an interruption by questioning whether one should define it in structural terms. Bennett (1978), while expressing admiration for the Schegloff model of conversation, questioned in general the structural approach to discourse analysis, and specifically, the use of the term "interruption" to specify a type of overlap. Using similarly structured texts which were consistently judged in contrasting ways by groups of listeners, he demonstrated that an utterance could not be defined as an interruption through its structural features alone, as suggested by Schegloff et al. One must also analyze a network of factors, including the semantic content of the exchange, the relationship of the speakers, the situation, and ultimately the entire world context, some, but not all of which might be revealed by verbal and non-verbal features of the discourse itself.

Background of the Participants

The three participants in the conversation under investigation are members of the same family who see each other frequently. They include a young married couple, referred to here as Louise and Ted, and the woman's middle-aged mother, referred to as Ann. The mother and daughter are of English descent; the young man is Afro-American. All

three are college-educated and have white-collar jobs. The couple have been together for several years, in another city, and moved to their present home a year and a half ago. They lived in the mother's house for a few months, then moved to an apartment in a neighboring section of the city. The mother divorced and remarried a few years ago, and the two couples eat dinner together every two weeks or so. The present conversation took place at dinner in the mother's house. The meal had been cooked by the daughter, at her suggestion, in exchange for using her mother's washing machine.

The Genres and the Overlaps: Definition of terms

The conversation under study includes three categories of discourse which may be regarded as genres, identifiable by the participants' purpose in each, as well as by more formal characteristics which include the sequence or simultaneity of turn-taking. Of the three spoken discourse genres, the first to take place is a process description, that is, an explanation of how something is done. The next is narration, the telling of a story, one of whose characteristics, according to Labov (Pratt, 1977), is the presence of at least two temporally ordered clauses the reversal of whose sequence would change the meaning of the whole. The narrative also includes Labov's elements of introductory orientation and closing evaluation. The third genre will be referred to as "exposition", that is, the assertion of general ideas or beliefs held by the speaker.

One may classify the overlaps into four types. The first is the

Pomerance

brief, one- or two-word utterance such as "yeah", "right", or "mhuh", which I shall term "back-channel cue". These words usually signal agreement or understanding, or, as Schegloff (1972) points out, at least the intention of appearing to agree or understand. This type of overlap is the least intrusive, being of brief duration and not usually in conflict with the content of the first speaker's utterance. The next type is longer, but similar to the back-channel cue in that it does not impede the first speaker. I call it the "insert", as it is a group of words which is begun while the first speaker is talking, but which is completed before the first speaker finishes. The third type may be termed a "false start", an abortive or failed attempt at turn-taking. Like the insert, it begins after the first speaker has begun and ends before she has finished, but it is different in being an uncompleted statement, syntactically and usually semantically as well. It is more intrusive than the insert because its speaker appears to want the first speaker to stop talking. It seems reasonable to assume that she only halted in mid-sentence because the first speaker didn't stop. The fourth type of overlap begins after the first speaker has begun talking and continues after that speaker stops. This may be called a "floor-taking". It is the most intrusive of the overlaps, as it does actually seem to stop someone from talking. Whether the second speaker is furthering the first speaker's purposes or opposing them, power is exerted over another person.

A Comparison of Speaker Overlaps

TYPES OF OVERLAPS PER GENRE

genre:	PROCESS		NARRATIVE		EXPOSITION	
total turns:	69		42		164	
	number	% of total	number	% of total	number	% of total
total overlaps:	32	53%	22	52%	66	40%
type	number	% of overlap	number	% of overlap	number	% of overlap
BACK-CHANNEL CUES	17	53%	11	50%	5	7%
INSERTS	9	28%	6	27%	16	24%
FALSE STARTS	1	3%	0	0%	9	14%
FLOOR-TAKINGS	5	16%	5	23%	36	55%

Analysis of the discourse

Process descriptions

The process descriptions in the conversation in question take place at the beginning of the meal in response to Ann's enthusiasm and inquiry about the fish. The account of how the fish is cooked leads to other questions about food, which in turn lead to a description of how to make certain items of Mexican food. The apparent purpose of these descriptions is to convey information. To use Edelsky's term, it is a "Floor 1" situation, with a clearly designated speaker. In this particular case there is one speaker, Louise, and two listeners, Ann, who expressed interest in the first place, and Ted, who is present but participates minimally, except for a brief exchange at the end which includes his process description of cooking a Mexican dish.

Overlaps occur frequently in the two process descriptions. Out of the 69 turns, 32, slightly under half, are overlapped in some way. The most common type of overlap is the back-channel cue, of which there are 17, close to half of all the overlaps. The next in frequency are the inserts, of which there are nine, 28% of the overlaps. False starts are rare; there is one, but there are five cases of floor-taking.

The preponderance of back-channel cues, which convey support, indicate the cooperative nature of this genre of discourse. Most of them consist of "mhm", encouraging the speaker to continue. The inserts express surprise, confirmation, emotional reaction to the

topic, or are used to ask a question. They demonstrate that it is quite possible for an overlapped speaker to simultaneously talk and listen, as in the following example:

L: And then you roll the whole thing - sort of - yeah =
A: [this is enchiladas]
L: = yeah basically an you roll them up -

Louise hears the question asked while she was talking, answers it and continues with her explanation. In these descriptions, both the back-channel cues and the inserts are supplied entirely by Ann.

The occasional floor-takings usually occur at a break in the sentence, near the end of a clause, in a place where the speaker might be construed as having finished. Two of them are done by the main speaker, Louise, as Ann finishes a clause. The listener, Ann, on the other hand, cuts Louise off in mid-phrase to add information about her own cooking of Mexican food. Although she is adding to the conversation, the location of the overlap clearly prevents Louise from completing her thought. The other floor-taking occurs when Ted and Ann overlap each other, Ann to ask a question and Ted to answer it before it is finished. Since the question gets answered, the overlap does it no harm, but the question itself is an intrusion:

T: Yah - just with guacamole an
A: [Do you heat em the way Louise described in the
T: [No you fry em. More so than she fries hers.

Looking at the overlaps in this genre as a whole, one sees a consistent tendency for the four types to occur at a break rather than in the middle of a clause. The location of overlaps, as well as the

Pomerance

non-intrusive nature of the predominant type of overlap demonstrates that on the whole, process description involves fairly orderly turn-taking. Even though there is a very generous amount of simultaneous talk, most of it consists of contributions by the listener to encourage the main speaker.

The differences between the goals of the three genres provide part of the explanation for the differences in overlaps. While the purpose of a process description is primarily to share information in such a way that another person can use it, it may also express solidarity through shared interests, and pleasure in the display of expertise. All of these goals are met by encouraging the speaker to continue. Of course, it is reasonable to expect that the encouragements provided be as unobtrusive as possible, so as not to interfere with the flow of information. However, we have found that inserted comments abound, and it appears that brief, relevant inserted comments, such as questions, create little or no obstacle to the discourse. The fact that false starts and floor-takings are relatively uncommon seems reasonable when one considers that having a tacitly designated speaker whose goal is to share news makes the more intrusive type of overlap particularly counterproductive.

Narratives

The next of the genres of discourse to occur is the narrative. The genre is represented by four anecdotes, two told by Ann and two told by Louise. They begin with talk about the dog, then relate to

misbehaving children. Like the process descriptions, they create a "Floor 1" situation, in which one speaker is granted the floor by the others. The purpose of telling stories is to prove a point, or perhaps, as Mary Pratt (1977) has suggested, to present a problem for contemplation by the group, as well as to entertain, and therefore the listeners have to be willing to give up their turn opportunities for a while. Nonetheless, this genre did not, with this group, result in a lack of overlaps. While the four anecdotes occupy fewer turns than did the process descriptions, a total of 42, the overall incidence of overlaps is slightly higher than for the descriptions, being 22, or 56%, (compared to 46%). On the other hand, the proportion of back-channel cues to the number of overlaps is very close to that of process description — 11, or exactly half (compared to 53%). The number of inserted remarks is remarkably close to that of the other genre, 27% compared to 28%. There were no false starts, but a slightly higher percentage of floor-takings.

The pattern of listener participation in this genre is somewhat different from that in process description. It is reflected in the nature of the back-channel cues and inserts in particular. Although the events in the narrative are narrated by one person, the evaluation is done collectively by all three participants. The back-channel cues are more varied, with "right", "yeah", "oh good", "aw", and laughter. They are like the back-channel cues in the process description in that they encourage the speaker to continue, but they also reflect the narrative's entertainment function by conveying emotional reaction, and

its problem-contemplation function by expressing agreement with the other listener's evaluation of the events of the story. One of the inserts is similar to the inserts described in the process description, consisting of an overlapping question which is promptly answered by the speaker even though she was talking while it was being asked. They also include an instance of cooperation, in which a rather lengthy side comment provides evaluation through an absent person's reaction. This overlap may have triggered the self-repair that introduces the first speaker's continuation, but it certainly does not deter the overlapped speaker from her recounting of events.

- A: His mother would tell him to turn down the Atari
- so he would turn up the volume - and she would
yell at him to turn it down and he would turn it
up a little more - sweet kid - He had - yes he=
L: [This was when Henry was over there. Henry was=
A: [=spent the night. Actually they went to someone=
L: [=horrified.]

In contrast to the process description, the incidence of floor-takings in the narratives is rather one-sided, as four of the five are done by Ann. Two of them occur to begin anecdotes, one to illustrate disagreement with a point Ted makes, and one in response to Louise's "all clear" comment as to why a story could be told (Ted hadn't heard it yet), and they occur in the middle of the speaker's phrase. The other two are less intrusive, one being an evaluative comment and the other being an echo of Louise's evaluative remark, both of them occurring near a break. The other floor-taking also occurs near a break, as Ted makes a humorous remark in response to the story.

In comparing this genre with process descriptions, we find that the location in the first speaker's utterance at which the overlaps begin implies a somewhat greater degree of intrusion by one speaker into the discourse of the other. Slightly more of the back-channel cues occur in the middle of a clause than at a break in the sentence, all the inserts do, and so do the majority of the floor-takings, by a slight margin.

Since the goal of narrative is for a primary speaker to convey information in a special way which entertains and invites shared speculation, back-channel cues from the listeners seem to be particularly appropriate for indicating that the listener is appreciating the emotional effect of the story. The evaluation phase of a narrative invites a certain amount of intrusive floor-taking as the listeners share impressions of the story's significance.

Exposition

The next discourse genre engaged in by the speakers is exposition, or assertion of beliefs. The conversation shifted to this genre directly from the narratives, as the narratives' topic of unruly children led to a discussion on the role of punishment in causing people to live up to society's expectations. This discussion was quite lengthy, compared to the others, with 164 turns in all, and involved primarily Ted and Ann, with 65 and 62 turns, respectively, and Louise half as much, with 37 turns. The floor may be characterized as an Edelsky "Floor 2", in which there is not one recognized speaker, but

Pomerance

the topic is open to all.

The overall rate of overlaps in this genre is somewhat lower than the others, 40% (65 out of 164) rather than close to half for the other two genres. However, the distribution of types along the continuum of intrusiveness is completely reversed. Floor-takings predominate, there being 36, or 55% of the total. Although false starts still form a relatively small category, there are many more of them, proportionately, than in the other two genres -- 14%, compared to 0% and 3%. As we consider the less disturbing types of overlap, the relationship to the other genres switches. The proportion of inserts is slightly lower -- 24%, as opposed to 27% and 28%. The difference in back-channel cues is most striking of all. In the whole conversation, there are only five, forming 3% of the overlaps, compared to more than 50% for each of the other genres.

The five back-channel cues are all spoken by the same person, Ann, and consist of "yeah"; four of these are addressed, not surprisingly, since he speaks twice as much as Louise, to Ted. The word is more of an expression of opinion than is the "mhm" that dominated the process description, and so may be considered to be somewhat less supportive and more assertive than the back-channel cues used in the process descriptions. On the other hand, four of these back-channel cues are spoken near the break, which mitigates their competitive quality.

The majority of the inserts, nine of the sixteen, are of a cooperative nature, including paraphrases, elaborations, answers to

embedded questions, and classification of the topic, such as

- A: I mean not everything boils down to - uh - other=
L: [Getting down to moral issues]
A: =people controlling you - fortunately.

A smaller number, three, are less cooperative, as they qualify someone else's assertion, and thus suggest disagreement:

- Well it all depends
and:
Unless somebody sets morals

are phrases whose opening words mark a contrast with what was just said. The remaining four were unintelligible. The location of the overlaps in the first speaker's sentence is different from the other two genres, and reflects the more competitive atmosphere. Three times as many occurred in the middle of the speaker's phrase, compared to the nearly equal distribution in the other genres. The distribution among speakers was similar to that of the back-channel cues, with Ann uttering nine, three times as many as Ted's four or Louise's three.

False starts are a sign of struggle, but they give ambiguous information about the person who is assertive enough to try to get the floor but not assertive enough to succeed. The highest number are done by Louise, who speaks the least, and is overridden in an equal number of turns by Ted and Ann. Ann, on the other hand, is overridden by Ted in all her attempts. Ted is overridden equally by Ann and Louise. The location of the overlaps suggests an overall pattern. Louise tends to overlap near breaks, while Ted exclusively, and Ann to a lesser extent, overlap in mid-phrase. The one who is most frequently unsuccessful in

Pomerance

attempts to get the floor is also the one who seems to choose less disruptive places to begin her overlaps.

The most significant aspect of the overlaps in this genre is the predominance of floor-takings. Their large number shows that the participants are not following the Schegloff (1982) rule of "one speaker at a time" or "wait until the speaker indicates by a pause or dropped pitch that he/she is finished". Their presence in this genre suggests that there is less cooperation and more competition among the speakers. However, in keeping with Bennett's (1978) reminder of the relevance of all aspects of any conversation under investigation, it is wise to consider the content of the conversation when analyzing these floor-takings. Most of them can be identified as either agreeing or disagreeing with the speaker being overlapped, although a few are ambiguous. Of the thirty-six floor-takings, ten support the speaker, by paraphrasing, completing a sentence, or providing an example. This triple-speaker overlap provides an example:

L: If the reason you need God is (to balance) your morals
A: [If God is daddy who's gonna=
punish you.
T: [for punishment - yeah

On the other hand, twice as many, or twenty-one, express disagreement. In the next passage, the discussion is on whether most people will only come to work on time under the threat of punishment.

T: ...cause I have a pretty - you know - average
cross-section of the population - that
+ A: [They're young.
T: Yeah they're young - but I have some people that
are older.
A: An they don't come to work on time?

A Comparison of Speaker Overlaps

- T: Oh no - the older ones come to work on time.
A: Okay - so it's the young people's problem.
T: Well - or it's being - yeah.
+ A: [They're still functioning - how old are they?
- T: Well - I have people from (2 sec.)- twenty
+ L: [and a lot of em are living
at home.

Each of three marked utterances expresses disagreement with Ted's idea that most people need the treat of punishment to do what is expected. Louise's first overlap, which is unmarked, is also in disagreement, but in this case she is not overlapping with that person, but the one whom she is paraphrasing.

Another feature of the floor-takings confirms this genre as being more intrusive. A predominant number of the floor-takings, twelve out of twenty-one, occur in the middle of the first speaker's clause.

A study of who takes the floor from whom shows some interesting similarities and contrasts with the other genres. On the one hand, Ann still does twice as many floor-takings as the other two, over all. However, Louise's role is quite different. Whereas during the narratives Ann took the floor from her three times as much as she did from Ann, the case is reversed in the exposition, with Louise taking the floor more times both from her and from Ted. This fact supports Edelsky's observation that in "Floor 2" situations such as this type of discussion, in which there is no tacitly agreed-upon speaker, it is easier for people who normally do not take the floor from others to do so.

The purposes of the type of exposition in this conversation should help explain the marked difference in the pattern of overlaps. The purpose of this discourse is in some ways different from process description and narrative. Several speakers, ostensibly in turn, but in reality often simultaneously, assert general propositions, both for the listeners, whom they may be trying to persuade, and for themselves, to clarify their own thoughts. The goal, then, of these participants, is to enjoy the pleasure of trying together to assemble a collection of ideas that they can agree makes sense. Each speaker wants the pleasure of knowing that his or her own thoughts make sense. If an important goal for each speaker is the expression of his or her own propositions, then competition for the floor is bound to result in assertive overlaps. The result in the conversation under investigation was a great number of floor-takings and false starts. Back-channel cues are scarce because in the absence of an "official" speaker, there is no particular reason to encourage one person to keep talking. On the contrary, the other speakers interfere with one's own desire for a turn. In this type of discourse, the talk becomes like a brainstorming session, producing a large tangle of ideas. The drawback of this style of discourse is that not all the ideas which are started are completed. There is also a certain injustice, as the least assertive speaker gets to express fewer ideas. On the other hand, the advantage is that the participants have the instructive opportunity of hearing each other's ideas, and, perhaps even more important to each speaker, of formulating their own thoughts, hearing them spoken, and having them reacted to by others.

Conclusion

As Bennett (1978) has pointed out, the interpersonal elements of any conversation must be taken into consideration when it is being analyzed. This is particularly true of overlaps, which by definition involve more than one speaker. In this conversation, the overlaps show a pattern which is at least in part the result of the speakers' personalities and their relationships to each other. Ann is the most active participant, both in helpful verbal behavior such as giving frequent back-channel cues, and in intrusive floor-taking. Even among adults, parent-child patterns of domination are deeply engrained. Ted is somewhat intrusive into his wife's speech, taking the floor from her and talking more during the exposition. To some extent, he follows our culture's pattern of male dominance. On the other hand, Louise asserts herself in the other genres by being the main speaker more often than not. Yet, useful as these patterns are to help explain why individuals behave as they do, they only partially account for what happens between speakers. One can still compare what they do in the different genres, since the same people are present in all three. Furthermore, since this particular mix of roles, relationships and personalities is not unusual, it seems reasonable to draw conclusions about the interplay of overlaps and conversational goals in each genre without further analysis of the participants.

With its frequent overlaps, many of them five, six, and seven words long, this conversation demonstrates that turn-taking can be quite disorderly, and the "one speaker at a time" rule can be broken as

Pomerance

often as every two turns. As we have seen, the overlaps can be explained in terms of the purposes of each genre. Some of the time, as with the back-channel cues and inserts in the process description and the narratives, the overlaps are unquestionably helpful to the overlapped speaker. Other times, such as at the beginning of the narrative and the evaluation of the narrative, floor-takings serve the purposes of the speaker, who wants to get on with the story, and are tolerated by the others, perhaps in hopes of being entertained. During the exposition, overlaps seem to be a mixed blessing, in what Edelsky terms a "free-for-all" atmosphere of collective expression of ideas. Depending on the purposes of the speakers, simultaneous talk may be a needless impediment, or it may be a valuable means of carrying out the participants' goals.

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