

Chapter LIV

Turn Taking in E-Mail Discussions*

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates turn taking in naturally occurring e-mail discussions. In e-mail discussions, participants can self select to contribute at any time, turns cannot be interrupted, and adjacency cannot be guaranteed. However, participants engage in recognisable discussions and “speaker” change occurs. Patterns of turn taking can be observed in the data, and there are many parallels with spoken conversation. In e-mail discussions, the current participant may select a new participant, and those selected usually respond; participants may self select (the most common method of turn taking); and the current participant may choose to continue, either by writing an extended turn or by sending separate consecutive messages. Response is not obligatory unless a respondent has been specified. There is no priority system through which a change of participant takes priority. Because there is less pressure toward current speaker selects last, the system encourages multiple participants to engage in the discussion.

INTRODUCTION

It appears likely that conversation should be considered the basic form of speech-exchange system, with other systems on the array representing a variety of transformations of conversation’s turn-taking system, to achieve other types of turn-taking systems (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, p.730).

Central to Conversation Analysis (CA) is the examination of conversational turn taking, the rules for which were described by Sacks et al. (1974). In contrast with spoken conversation, e-mail discussions can appear chaotic: in e-mail discussions, participants can self select to contribute at any time, turns cannot be interrupted, and there is no guarantee that a response will be received adjacent to the turn it is responding to. To date, various researchers, for example, Mur-

ray (1985, p. 212), have made passing comments to the effect that turn taking does not apply to computer mediated communication (CMC); however, despite the apparent “interactional incoherence” of CMC discourse (Herring, 1999, title), participants do engage in successful interactions. This might suggest that turn taking is not absent, merely different from spoken conversation, but no studies have been found that investigate in detail how turn taking functions in e-mail discussions. This chapter addresses this deficiency and looks at how participants construct successful interaction. It addresses the following questions: (a) is turn taking in e-mail discussions governed by any rules of interaction; (b) if it is governed by any rules, in what respects are these similar to and different from the rules for turn taking in spoken conversation.

BACKGROUND

“Rules” for Turn Taking in Conversation

Sacks et al. (1974, p.704) found that turn taking in conversation was governed by the following rules:

1. For any turn, at the initial transitional relevance place of a turn-constructive unit:
 - a. If the turn-so-far is so constructed as to involve the use of a “current speaker selects next” technique, then the party so selected has the right and is obliged to take the next turn to speak; no others have such rights or obligations, and transfer occurs at that place.
 - b. If the turn-so-far is so constructed as not to involve the use of a “current speaker selects next” technique, then self-selection for next speakership may, but need not, be instituted; first starter acquires rights to a turn, and transfer occurs at that place.
 - c. If the turn-so-far is so constructed as not to involve the use of a “current speaker selects next” technique, then current speaker may, but need not continue, unless another self-selects.
2. If, at the initial transition-relevance place of an initial turn-constructive unit, neither 1a nor 1b has operated, and, following provision of 1c, the current speaker has continued, then the rule-set a-c re-applies at the next transition-relevance place, and recursively at each next transition-relevance place, until transfer is effected.

These rules were found to operate in priority order as listed above. Thus, 1a takes priority over 1b, and so forth.

Sacks et al. envisage a “continuum” of “speech exchange systems” from casual conversation at one extreme to debates and ceremonies at the other, predicting that other speech exchange systems will vary from the benchmark of conversation in the ways in which turn taking is handled (1974, p. 730).

Developments in Conversation Analysis

Since the chapter outlining CA by Sacks et al. in 1974, several later writers have summarised the features of CA (see e.g., Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; ten Have, 1999). Essential elements according to Heritage (2001, p. 52) are the use of naturally occurring data and the assumption that there is order in spoken interaction.

Of particular relevance to the study of e-mail discussions is work that investigates institutional talk, see for example, the collection of papers in Drew and Heritage (1992), which includes papers on talk in psychiatry (Bergmann), news interviews (Clayman, Greatbatch), the courtroom (Atkinson, Drew), job interviews (Button), general practice consultation (Heath), and emergency calls (Zimmerman). This research on the organisa-

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