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Frank Bramlett

University of Nebraska at Omaha, fbramlett@unomaha.edu

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TALKING POINTS

A DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY FRANK BRAMLETT, PH.D.



Frank Bramlett, Ph.D., is a linguist who teaches in the English Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He specializes in sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, English grammar and teaching English to speakers of other languages.

What are Conversation Systems?

The study of conversation as a serious field of inquiry began in the 1970s when sociolinguists Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson first turned our attention to the way people talk to each other. Interestingly, they began looking at talk not for the sake of talk itself but instead as a way to understand social interactions. They collected samples of conversations and analyzed them to help answer questions that sociologists (not necessarily linguists) are interested in answering. For instance, how do people manage their daily lives through talk? How do people establish, maintain, improve and end relationships with each other by using talk? How do people create and recreate social rules for themselves, their families, and their communities through talk? Eventually, though, talk itself was no longer viewed simply as a mediating "tool" by which to study other aspects of society. In fact, it became (and remains today) an important subject of investigation in its own right.

In 1974, Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson published a ground-breaking article in *Language*, the official scholarly journal of the Linguistic Society of America. In this publication, they set out what they believed was the

basis of the conversational system used in everyday talk. This article was so influential that it helped bring about a revolution in linguistic research.

Today, the field of conversation analysis plays a major role in the study of language in many different environments: talk between friends, talk between parents and children, talk between spouses. In fact, the importance of conversation is recognized in a wide variety of fields, and now conversation analysis is used by linguists, language teachers, and specialists in computer science and artificial intelligence to understand more about conversational exchange and the rules and principles by which we operate.

Taking Turns

One of the major finds by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson is the turn-taking system in conversation. This system rests on the notion that the central element of any conversation is the turn. Even from the time before children can talk, they learn how to take turns. Caregivers often treat coos and gurgles as turns, even sneezes and coughs and belches; mom and dad might reply to baby as if the baby were producing language. So part of the process of socialization for children is learning that the turn-taking system in conversation operates in a very regular way, undercutting the notion that talk is "free" or "no-holds-barred."

Participants in a conversation orient to roughly the same kinds of rules for taking turns. For illustration's sake, consider the fol-

lowing example in which three friends are having lunch and chatting.

- Kevin: Dang this soup is good.
Debby: I know. I had it last week and couldn't wait to come back for it today.
Kevin: What do you think, Kim?
Kim: Well, it's kind of—
Kevin: You never like anything, do you?
Debby: Kevin, leave him alone. You know he's a finicky eater. Right, Kim?
Kim: Right.

This conversation reveals a number of turn-taking principles and at least one broken "rule." When Kevin says, "What do you think, Kim?" he is selecting the next speaker. In all ordinary conversations, it is the right of the current speaker—the person who holds the conversational floor—to select the next speaker. If the current speaker did not choose a next speaker, then the next person to speak would self-select, would take a turn. So in the above example, if Kevin had not asked Kim a question, then either Debby or Kim could have taken a turn on their own.

In response to Kevin's question about how he likes the soup, Kim begins to reply, but Kevin interrupts—this is breaking a rule because we're supposed to let people finish their turns before we start talking. Debby, trying to avert a conversational mishap, expresses her understanding of Kim's eating habits. Then, since Debby is the current speaker and has the conversational floor, she gets to choose the next speaker, which in this case is Kim.

Talking Techniques

As far as scholars can tell, people in all cultures participate in conversations by listening to what other people say and contributing what they believe to be an appropriate turn. Whether those contributions are appropriate in topic, length, tone, or timing is decided by the group of people who are having the conversation. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson express this notion by saying that conversations are "locally managed" and "interactively managed." In other words, the people involved in the conversation create the conversation as they see fit, according to the turn-taking system or their usual variation on that system. It's a lot more socially acceptable for Kevin to interrupt his friend Kim at lunch than it would be for Kevin to interrupt the President of the United States.

But taking turns means different things to different people. One linguist, Deborah Tannen, discusses the fact that in some subcultures, taking turns in the way that Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson describe is inappropriate. Tannen, raised in the Jewish community in New York, learned to communicate with what she dubs a "rapid fire" turn-taking system. In some cases, it is not considered polite to let someone finish a turn without speaking at the same time they do. In mainstream American culture, this would be considered rude or at least inconsiderate. But for Tannen, if a conversational partner isn't producing "simultaneous talk" with another speaker, then that person isn't participating energetically enough and indicates his or her boredom or disinterest in the conversation.

I Didn't Mean to Interrupt

Earlier, I mentioned that conversational participants manage their own conversations within their immediate context; that is, conversations are locally managed and interactively managed. Friends who spend a lot of time together get used to talking to each other in specific ways. If you think about it, with all the possible ways to screw up, everyday conversation is very nearly miraculous. We participate in conversation in order to communicate with other people—to exchange news, to inquire after another's well-being, to see who got into an argument with who. And we do this on a daily basis, largely without thinking about how we do it. Most of the time, with the exception of an occasional misstep, overlap, or interruption, it works beautifully.