Which criteria do naïve people use for identifying and evaluating different kinds of interruptions?

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In two experiments, we played an audio recording of a conversational exchange for N = 224 and N = 144 participants, manipulating the point of interruption (early, late or no interruption = control) and types of interruption (change of subject, disagreement, clarification and agreement) in order to understand their effects on naïve observers' perception (Study 1) and evaluation of interruptions (Study 2). Results show that: early rather than late interruptions, changing the subject rather than disagreement, disagreement rather than clarification, and clarification rather than agreement were regarded more as interruptions and were evaluated more negatively; although both criteria—type and point of interruption—showed significant effects, naïve observers used the point of interruption more than the type of interruption for identifying and evaluating the interruptions. Valence and perception of a conversational transition were correlated: in the interruption condition and even in non-interruption conditions, the more a turn taking was evaluated as negative, the more it was perceived to be an interruption. Finally, the results did not support the gender hypothesis. Results were interpreted in terms of politeness theory and considering cultural and contextual factors.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Interruptions and criteria for identifying them

Conversants engaged in a conversation usually are expected to change their turns smoothly, contributing to actively constructing their talk. However, sometimes conversational hitches may occur. Interruptions represent this kind of hitch. In literature, many studies have focused on the definition and classification of interruptions in conversation (see below in 1.1). Based on the sequential model (Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 2001), an interruption is defined as a violation of the "golden rule" of conversation (West and Zimmerman, 1983): one speaker at a time (Sacks et al., 1974).

But what characterizes an interruption? Many studies have paid attention to the classification of different kinds of interruption, which are defined by many parameters. For instance, it is possible to identify a structural or conversational aspect of interruptions (Bazzanella, 2001; Gnisci et al., 2011; Kennedy and Camden, 1983; Roger et al., 1988). Based on this criterion, successful/unsuccessful and single/complex interruptions have been distinguished (Roger et al., 1988). In successful

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ones, the interrupter prevents the first conversant from completing his/her turn and meanwhile takes the floor, while in unsuccessful ones the interrupter doesn't; single and complex interruptions are constituted by one versus multiple attempt/s to take the floor, respectively. Some studies have categorized interruptions on the basis of their *semantic link* with the interrupted turn, that is, on the content association among consequent turns. An absent or marginal semantic link characterizes change of subject interruptions, while disagreement and agreement interruptions have a central or pertinent link (Murata, 1994): when disagreeing, the interruptive turn denies the contents of the previous turn, contradicts its words, presents opposite arguments, raises doubts, or brings into question the other's opinions or assertions (Gnisci et al., 2012). There are also interruptions that aim at further exploring what the conversant asserted in the preceding turn (Murata, 1994). These are interruptions made to request clarification (Kempson et al., 2007). Actually, not every interruption has the aim of disrupting the first conversant's speech and taking the floor: some interruptions are intended to show involvement and sustain the first conversant (Bogetic, 2011; Goldberg, 1990; Makri-Tsilipakou, 1994; Murata, 1994; Okamoto et al., 2002), while other interruptive processes are associated with a collaborative task that requires high coordination (Chevalley and Bangertera, 2010). Some of the last types of interruption, different as far as semantic link concerns (change of subject, disagreement, clarification and agreement), will be studied in our experiments, in particular their effect on naïve observers.

Finally, interruptions may intrude in the interrupted sentence early or later, giving rise to deep or shallow interruptions (West and Zimmerman, 1983). Indeed, interruptions have different outcomes based on the *point* at which they occur (Coon and Schwanenflugel, 1996): when syntax is complete, every sentence provides the basic information that allows the understanding of its meaning. If a sentence is interrupted, the sentence is syntactically incomplete and semantically not completely understandable. Recent studies demonstrate that the lexico-syntactic completeness and, thus, content of an utterance (more than the intonation contour) is crucial for participants' identification of the point of completion of the utterance and for regulating turn taking (De Ruiter et al., 2006; Eshghi et al., 2015). In our study, together with types of interruption, we will also study the effect of the point at which interruption occurs.

1.2. Interruptions and individual features

Many studies examined interruptions in association with some personal characteristics, such as dominance (Ferguson, 1977; Roger, 1989; Rogers and Jones, 1975) or gender (Anderson and Leaper, 1998; Aries, 1996; Beattie, 1981; Dindia, 1987; James and Clarke, 1993; Marche and Peterson, 1993; Murray and Covelli, 1988; West and Zimmerman, 1983; Zimmerman and West, 1975) or both (Roger and Nesshoever, 1987). In some experiments, for example, dyads formed by two dominant people, preselected on the base of a personality questionnaire, interrupted each other more as conversation developed (e.g., Roger and Schumacher, 1983). However, not only do dominant people interrupt more, but people who interrupt more are perceived as more dominant and influential (Farley, 2008).

Gender issues have inspired many studies. Researchers have hypothesized that the gender of conversants—whether they are same-sex or mixed dyads—may affect the use of interruptions. Their prediction is that in general, males will interrupt more than females, who would instead be interrupted more than males (e.g., the classic study by Zimmerman and West, 1975). The cultural assumption would be that, in a patriarchal society, men and women do not have equal status: men have more right to talk than women; consequently, men interrupt more and females can be more interrupted. The violation of turn taking is less severe for males than for females. This set of predictions has been labeled as the "gender hypothesis" (LaFrance, 1992; Orcutt and Mennella, 1995; Robinson and Reis, 1989; West and Zimmerman, 1983), but we should emphasize that this is only the most well-known version of the gender hypothesis, the one that culturally explains *objectively* the fact that males interrupt more than females. Indeed, reported results do not appear definitive and are well summarized by a meta-analysis of Anderson and Leaper (1998) which emphasizes the importance of considering the many variables at stake, such as definition of interruptions, gender composition of conversants and, even, the gender of the first author of the article.

1.3. Perception and evaluation of interruption: their effects

In the above-cited studies (1.2), interruptions have been studied to see objectively how much men and women interrupt and are interrupted. Different studies have focused on the *perception* and *evaluation* of interruptions, that is, on a *subjective* phenomenon.

The few experiments conducted on the effects of conversational interruptions on the interlocutor are usually of two types. Some studies examine the *valence* of the interruption or of the conversant who interrupts (i.e., how much an interruption or the person who interrupts is regarded as negative/positive or impolite), whereas other studies focus on the *perception* of the interruption (i.e., to what extent a determined turn transition is recognized as an interruption).

The trend in research on evaluation starts at the end of the '80s. On average, less than an experiment per year was conducted during the next decade (Chambliss and Feeny, 1992; Crown and Cummins, 1998; Hawkins, 1988, 1991; LaFrance, 1992; Orcutt and Mennella, 1995; Robinson and Reis, 1989). Then, the experiments stopped until recent times (Farley, 2008; Gnisci et al., 2012). Instead of research on evaluation of interruptions, there is only one experiment on the perception of turn taking as an interruption (Coon and Schwanenflugel, 1996).

The main result of the studies on the evaluation of the interruptions is the opposite evaluation of the interrupter in terms of status and likeability. People who interrupt more are perceived by external observers, and by the interrupted interlocutors themselves, as having more status in terms of dominance and influence, and as more assertive, but as being less likeable and