

Speakers formulating their talk as interruptive

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Received 8 August 2016; received in revised form 19 November 2017; accepted 22 November 2017

Available online



Abstract

Interruption has predominantly been conceptualised as a violation of normative turn-taking practices and speakership rights. The present study further develops a broader perspective by showing that speakers can orient to matters of sequential organisation, other than turn-taking, when they claim their own talk is interruptive. Drawing from a larger collection of 72 cases where explicit claims to interruption were made, this paper uses conversation analysis to examine a subset of 20 instances where speakers specifically described what they were doing was interruption. Our target phenomenon was expressions such as “I want to interrupt” and “apologise for interrupting”. Speakers can prospectively mark some upcoming talk as interruptive and they can also retrospectively cast what they have just said as an interruption. Either way, the observably relevant disruption was not to turn-taking but to other sequences of action, namely the proper order of activities, the organisation of topics and adjacency pairs. Furthermore, by focusing on cases from institutional settings we propose that by explicitly claiming one’s own talk as interruptive participants make relevant membership categories and their associated deontic responsibilities for the progression of activities within institutional settings.

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Keywords: Interruption; Action ascription; Conversation analysis; Sequence organisation; Deontic authority

1. Introduction

A common-sense understanding of interruption is one speaker starting to talk before another has finished speaking. Interrupting can be sanctioned for being rude. For example, adults can admonish children for interrupting. [Drew \(2009\)](#) suggested that interruption is a moral category that assigns blame to the in-coming speaker for a hostile transgression upon another person’s speaking rights (also see [Hutchby, 1992, 2008](#); [Schegloff, 2001](#)). Given the negative associations with interruption, it is perhaps surprising that speakers might formulate what they are doing as interruptive. It is exactly such explicit claims to interrupting that are the focus of this paper. Taking a conversation analytic approach, we ask where and why speakers formulate their own talk as interruptive. Our contribution is to further develop a broader perspective on interruption. We identify three normative orders in the organisation of social interaction, other than turn-taking, which members are orienting to when they explicitly describe what they are doing as interruption.

1.1. Overlapping talk

Research on language and social interaction typically refers to ‘overlap’ rather than ‘interruption’. Overlap is a more neutral term for simultaneous speech, freer from the negative moral connotations associated with interruption. [Sacks,](#)

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Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) conversation analytic model of turn-taking established a compelling interactional account for the common but brief occurrence of overlap. They identified two systemic bases for occurrences of more than one speaker talking at a time. At the end of a turn at talk, if no next speaker has been selected, then two or more parties might self-select at once, producing simultaneous talk at the beginning of next turns at talk. Another reason for overlap arises from the turn-constructive component of talking. According to the Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson model, a turn at talk is built out of turn-constructive units (TCUs). A fundamental aspect of a TCU is that it can constitute a possibly complete turn at talk (also see Clayman, 2014). Towards the end of each TCU is the beginning of a Transition-Relevance Place (TRP) where speaker change may occur. Variability in the way a turn is brought to completion can produce overlap between the end of a current turn and the beginning of a next. For example, overlap can occur when there is a sound extension on the last word of a TCU. The addition of an additional element such as a personal name is another reason a next speaker mis-projects the actual completion of a current speaker's turn. Jefferson (1983) identified and differentiated 'recognitional' and 'progressive' overlaps as types of non-interruptive simultaneous speech. Overlapping talk can simply be due to turn-taking miscues whereby a next speaker begins their turn at talk early.

Although turn-taking miscues are common not all overlaps are mistakes in projecting completion of a current speaker's turn at talk. Jefferson (1986) used the term 'interjacent onset overlap' to describe instances when a next speaker started talking in the middle of a current speaker's turn. In addition, entry into another's turn-space is not necessarily 'intrusive', but can involve a pro-social action. For example, collaboratively completing another speaker's turn-in-progress (Lerner, 1991, 1996). Vatanen (2014) showed that responsive turns done in overlap have their own order and actions. She demonstrated they can convey a sense that speakers have independent epistemic access to information in initiating actions. Taken together, these findings suggest that overlapping talk occurs for a variety of reasons including turn-taking miscues and marking epistemic stance. Simultaneous speech is not necessarily about competing for a turn at talk, which is the case for interruption. As Murray (1988) proposed "simultaneous speech is neither necessary nor sufficient for identifying... interruptions" (p. 115).

The discussion so far raises the question of what interruption actually is if not a next speaker selecting themselves before a previous speaker has finished talking. Schegloff (2001) suggested there is no independent, objective definition of an interruption. He instead proposed that an ingredient that makes talk interruptive is that it is treated by the speakers themselves as a 'complainable' (Schegloff, 2001, p. 305). Our particular focus is on speakers' explicit descriptions of their own talk as interruptive. Using a conversation analytic approach we ask what exactly is being breached when a claim to interrupting is made.

1.2. *Interruption as a member's category*

Conversation analysis examines interruption not as an analyst's category, but instead a 'members' one. The term (cultural) member has ethnomethodological roots and is used in conversation analysis to refer to speakers or parties/participants in an interaction. As a grounded approach conversation analysis describes what members themselves observably display, and orient to, as 'interruptive' in their interactions (Bilmes, 1997; Schegloff, 2001). For example, Hutchby (2008) demonstrated that in disputatious contexts, such as radio phone-ins and small claims courts, overlapping talk was regularly negatively evaluated and oriented to as argumentative or disagreeing. He contended that it was the moral dimension of the activity that took precedence over simultaneous speech for speakers treating an incoming turn at talk as interruptive. Thus, claims to interruption can be part and parcel of doing some actions such as disagreement and argumentation.

French and Local (1986) examined the prosodic characteristics of what they called turn-competitive interruptions. They found loudness, pitch and sound extensions were used when there was competition for the conversational floor. Non-prosodic features of interruptions included repetitious syntax. In addition to disagreement and argumentation, French and Local noted that competition for the conversational floor occurred when the talk of the current speaker was being qualified or corrected.

Bilmes (1997) also investigated how speakers accomplished the act of interruption in conversation and the ways in which violations of speaking rights were claimed. In particular, he focused on the verbal and non-verbal practices used to display that one was being interrupted. Speakers can directly claim that they are being interrupted by saying things like "wait a minute" or "let me finish". Speakers can also increase the volume of their talk as a way to display that some overlapping talk is being treated as interruptive. Bilmes' emphasis was on displays of being interrupted. However, he also noted that in-coming speakers could display their own talk as doing interruption.

The aim of our study was to conduct a detailed examination of speakers directly formulating that what they were doing was interrupting. We found that parties seemed to be orienting to breaches of normative orders of talk, other than turn-taking. They were disruptions to aspects of overall structural organisation or supra-sequential coherence (namely, order of activities and topic) and to adjacency pair sequences.

1.3. *Relevance of category membership to interrupting*

There is a persistent and widely held belief that gender, as a social category, is relevant to interruption. For example, the term 'maninterrupting' has been recently coined to refer to the idea that men intentionally speak over women in order to

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