

Embodied and spatial resources for turn-taking in institutional multi-party interactions: Participatory democracy debates

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Abstract

This paper addresses a central topic of conversation analysis: turn-taking organization. It describes a specific turn-taking system, characteristic of an institutional setting involving larger groups of participants. Whereas turn-taking has been widely studied and diverse settings have been considered, from informal everyday conversations to formal institutional interactions, turn-taking organization as it is managed by and within larger groups remains understudied. This paper aims to sketch the systematics of turn-taking practices within political meetings that are part of a participatory democracy project. In these meetings, everybody is expected to contribute ideas, opinions, and proposals; controversial topics, disagreements, and political oppositions are also expressed. The analysis focuses on the practical problems encountered by speakers bidding for turns and by the chairman trying to make the floor accessible. The analysis also examines the methodic and timed mobilization of embodied resources and their local accountability, as recognized and treated as situated by the participants. Systematic practices for pre-selecting, announcing and establishing the next speaker, selecting and queuing multiple next speakers, defending speakership in contexts of persistent overlaps, and managing confrontational exchanges during the debate are described in detail. This description casts light on the way in which 'participatory democracy' is locally brought into being. © 2012 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Turn-taking machinery is a fundamental principle of social interaction and has been widely studied since the pioneering work of Sacks et al. (1974). A variety of resources for turn construction have been explored and a variety of settings have been observed in order to characterize differences between turn-taking in everyday and in institutional settings (Drew and Heritage, 1992). Turn-taking organization has been studied within multi-party interactions, but it remains understudied as it is managed by and within larger groups. This paper aims at sketching the systematics of turn-taking practices within political meetings that are part of a participatory democracy urbanism project. These meetings constitute a perspicuous setting for the exploration of turn-taking in institutional contexts involving larger groups of people, in which everybody is expected to contribute ideas, opinions, and proposals, and in which controversial topics, disagreements, and political oppositions are also discussed and expressed. In this context, turn-taking involves specific constraints, opportunities and resources, which are investigated in this study. More specifically, I focus on the practical problems encountered by candidate next speakers bidding for a turn, and by the chairman trying to make the floor accessible to them, as they are locally treated and solved by the participants. These practices are characterized by the methodical, detailed, and timed mobilization of a variety of embodied resources and by the finely tuned monitoring of what is happening within the room,

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with special attention paid to the localization of the co-participants and the constantly changing interactional space. The paper analyzes a range of systematic embodied practices observable in these political debates. It first discusses existing studies of the organization of interaction within larger groups (section 2) and presents the empirical data on which the study is based (section 3). Detailed analyses deal with systematic practices for pre-selecting, announcing and establishing the next speaker (section 4), for selecting and queuing multiple next speakers (section 5), for defending speakership in contexts of persistent overlaps (section 6), and for managing confrontational exchanges during the debate (section 7).

2. Multimodal resources for turn-taking in institutional interactions within larger groups

Turn-taking organization has been described in relation to ordinary conversation as well as in institutional settings. Whereas turn-taking in conversation is mostly unconstrained and unplanned, in institutional settings the system has been described as being more restricted and specialized (Drew and Heritage, 1992). Moreover, this very specification of the turn-taking system indexes the way in which the participants locally and reflexively accomplish the institutionality of the setting, both by adapting to its normative expectations and by contributing to this normativity by their ordered conduct. In this sense, the solution to turn-taking problems remains always a practical and contingent interactional achievement, which cannot be reduced to a mere application of other social or cultural organizations (Sacks et al., 1974).

Studies of institutional talk-in-interaction have shown distinctive features of turn-taking in news interviews (Greatbatch, 1988; Clayman and Heritage, 2002), in classrooms (McHoul, 1978), in courts (Atkinson and Drew, 1979), in counseling (Peräkylä, 1995), and in mediation (Garcia, 1991). Particular turn-taking formats in institutional and professional contexts shape the opportunities for action and participation. Thus, a change in the turn-taking format can operate a switch in the definition of the activity itself and in the interpretation of the participants' actions – as shown by Schegloff (1988/1989) about an interview that turned into a confrontation.

In institutional situations in which large numbers of participants gather together, specialized turn-taking formats can restrict the number of persons allowed to speak and who can initiate talk, contributing to focusing the activity on a main participant and defining the audience as constituting a single *party* rather than a number of possible *persons* (Schegloff, 1995). For Heritage and Clayman (2010), there are two specific ways to manage larger groups: within the *turn-type pre-allocation system* (such as in interviews, courts and formal academic events), the type of person and the type of action performed is restricted (the interviewee is expected to answer questions and cannot perform other types of action); within the *mediated turn-taking system*, a chair mediates the distribution of turns, controlling both speakers and topics. Mixed systems exist, in which a mediator can also impose restrictions on the type of action or turn allowed for given participants.

Nonetheless, turn-taking management in larger groups remains an understudied topic: it has been explored mainly in relation to classrooms (McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1985; Macbeth, 1992; Lerner, 1995) and professional meetings (Boden, 1994; Ford, 2008). Within the latter, the role of the chair has been analyzed by several scholars (Boden, 1994:99ff; Pomerantz and Denvir, 2007; Svennevig, 2008; Mondada, 2012). Other settings involving larger groups of participants are press conferences (Schegloff, 1987:224ff), and auctions (Heath and Luff, 2007). Political meetings are a perspicuous setting in which to investigate these phenomena. They make observable how a main speaker can mobilize the audience and its responses in a systematic way, such as through applause (Atkinson, 1984) or through booing (Clayman, 1993). Occasions in which the audience has a more active role have been less studied, such as participation in public debates in differentiated and not exclusively choral ways (but see McIlvenny, 1996a, 1996b; Llewellyn, 2005). In these latter contexts, which are the focus of this paper, turn-taking practices are crucial for the shaping of opportunities for the public to participate and for more or less restricted access to the floor; in so-called 'participatory democracy' meetings, they are central in configuring the 'participatory' dimension of the event in an interactional way.

Forms of participation in public debates do not only make observable the practical problems participants have in accessing and controlling the floor; they also show vividly the resources that participants mobilize in order to achieve turn-taking.

Turn construction, as well as forms of turn allocation, have been described as mobilizing a range of different linguistic resources, using phonetics, prosody, grammar, syntax and lexis (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 1996; Ochs et al., 1996; Hakulinen and Selting, 2005), as well as embodied resources, such as gesture (Schegloff, 1984; Schmitt, 2005; Mondada, 2007) and gaze (Goodwin, 1981; Rossano et al., 2009), as they are distributed within the material environment (Goodwin, 2000; Mondada, 2009a).

Although visual resources may be vulnerable to context-specific limitations (Lerner, 2003), they are central in the organization of turn-taking in larger groups (Sahlström, 2002; Schmitt, 2005; Ford, 2008; Mondada, 2012; Markaki and Mondada, 2012), especially for the identification and pre-selection of future speakers and the progressive emergence and visibility of next candidates to speakership. For instance, when raising their hand, participants orient to the appropriate

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