

Turn-Taking in Conversations for Language Learning

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Abstract

In their pioneering study Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) outlined the basic features of turn-taking in conversations between native speakers. Some researchers (e.g., Heritage & Clayman, 2010) have detailed how turns are taken among native speakers in news interviews, emergency calls, and a variety of other institutional settings. Other researchers have focused on how turn-taking is organized in educational settings such as language classrooms (e.g., Hosoda & Aline, 2006, 2010, 2013). The current study analyzes interaction in a university language lounge from a conversation analytic perspective and reveals (a) how turn-taking is organized, (b) the interactional devices used to select a next speaker, and (c) how the participants' orient to their identities throughout the interaction.

Keywords : turn-taking, conversation analysis, second language conversations, institutional talk, language learning

Introduction

In recent years, many Japanese universities have established language lounges with the goal of improving students' competence in English. A language lounge is a place where students can go to practice English with a native English speaker. It is not mandatory and students can participate whenever they want. As I demonstrate in this paper, the language lounge resembles a language classroom in the way that turns are

distributed in the interaction. The native English speaker usually provides topics or activities, allocates turns, corrects students' mistakes, and guides the discussion like a language teacher would. Thus the actions of the native English speakers are generally indistinguishable from teachers, and they, as well the students, treat each other as teachers and students throughout the interaction. It is for this reason that I will be referring to the participants as students and teacher. There has been a considerable amount of research on turn-taking in institutional settings (e.g., Heritage & Clayman, 2010) and language classrooms (e.g., Hosoda, 2014; Hosoda & Aline, 2006, 2010, 2013; Hauser, 2009; Kaanta, 2013; Mortensen, 2009), but interaction in university language lounges is still an under-researched area.

This paper analyzes the turn-taking organization of talk in a university language lounge from a conversation analytic perspective and aims to address the following questions:

1. What interactional devices are used to select a next speaker?
2. How is turn-taking organized in a university language lounge?
3. How are the participants' identities made visible through the interaction and how do the participants orient to their identities?

Turn-Taking and Classroom Interaction

There has been extensive research done in the field of conversation analysis (CA) on how turn-taking is done in mundane conversations and conversations in institutional settings. Mundane conversation refers to conversations between family, friends, and strangers and institutional conversations refer to conversations in institutional settings such as classrooms, courtrooms, hospitals, etcetera.¹

One of the most influential studies done on turn taking was done by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). In their study they identify a basic set of rules which govern turn-taking. At the initial transition-relevance place of an initial turn-constructive unit the current speaker can select a next speaker (rule 1a), but if the current speaker does not select a next speaker, someone else can self-select and begin their turn (rule 1b).

If neither rule 1a nor 1b occur, then the current speaker can, but is not obligated to, continue speaking (rule 1c). Rule 2 states that if rules 1a and 1b are not applied, and the current speaker continues to speak as stipulated in rule 1c, “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” (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, p. 704). Regarding how speakers select next speakers, Lerner (2003) describes two forms of addressing used when selecting a next speaker in multiparty conversations: explicit addressing and tacit addressing. Explicit addressing is directing one’s gaze at another participant and addressing them by name or other address terms. Tacit addressing refers to the selection of a next speaker based on the content of the utterance or specific circumstances.

In this paper I demonstrate how the rules proposed by Sacks et al. can be applied to turn-taking in conversations in a university language lounge in order to better understand what is happening and why.

Turn-taking in mundane talk and institutional talk, like talk between a teacher and student, are markedly different. Ellis (1992) states that “in classroom discourse there is frequently a rigid allocation of turns, who speaks to whom at what time, about what topics is subject to strict control” (p. 38). This control was also seen in the language lounge interaction. Because the students treated the teacher as a teacher whose role is to guide the conversation and not as an equal member of the conversation, the teacher had to control various aspects of the conversation, such as topic and turn allocation. Regarding kindergarten-first grade classroom interaction, Erickson (2004) mentions that the teacher “exercised kinds of control over topic, turn exchange, and the allocation of attention among the participants in the interaction” (p. 181). He also points out that the rights of each participant are predetermined by the institutional setting.

Heritage and Clayman (2010) identify three elements of institutional talk and state that institutional interaction:

1. involves institution-relevant identities

2. contains special constraints on what is acceptable in the interaction
3. occurs within a certain framework and has procedures that are specific to the institutional context

Antaki and Widdicombe (1998) point out that from an ethnomethodological perspective a person's identity is their display of membership to a certain identity category and that identity category and its associated characteristics are "knowable to the analyst only through the understandings displayed by the interactants themselves" (p. 2). In this study I demonstrate how participants orient to their institution-relevant identities and how their identities affect the organization of turn-taking in the language lounge.

For each institutional context there are special constraints regarding what is acceptable in that context and certain procedures that are specific to that context. For example, in a teacher-fronted classroom it is the teacher who asks the questions, decides the topic, and decides who speaks when. It would generally not be acceptable for a student to shout out a question without raising their hand, to ask another student a question while the teacher is talking, or to try to change the topic of discussion. How participants understand their identity and the identities of the others in that context affects how participants interact and how turns are taken and allocated.

Data

The data used in this analysis are taken from a university language lounge conversation in Japan which lasted approximately 50 minutes. Any time the participants' real names were mentioned in the conversation, they were changed in the transcripts to protect the identities of the participants. The conversation was audio and video recorded and transcribed using the transcription conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). There are four participants: three university students who are non-native English speakers and one native English teacher. In the transcripts the students' names are listed as Makoto (Mak), Takeshi (Tak), and Shu (Shu), and the teacher is listed as (Tea). In

the university language lounge teachers often prepare activities or topics for students to discuss, and occasionally students prepare a topic that they would like to discuss with the other participants. On the day that this conversation was recorded, Shu brought in a movie to discuss, but this is not mentioned until late in the conversation.

Analysis

In the following excerpt the participants are talking about basketball. Jefferson (1978) states that “something said at a particular moment in conversation can remind a participant (speaker or hearer) of a particular story” (p. 220). Earlier in the conversation below, Tak mentions the NBA player, Isiah Thomas. This triggers Tea to begin a telling about Isiah Thomas in line 01.

(1)

- 01 Tea: like like kind of close to like where I go to school (you know
 02 how you were saying) Isiah Thomas his house his house is
 03 close kind of close to where I went to university
 04 Tak: eh?
 05 Tea: yeah
 06 Tak: ah::
 07 Tea: it's so: big ((extends his arms to emphasize the size))
 08 Tak: ah::
 09 Tea: he's(.) he's he's rich
 10 ((laughter))
 11 Tea: I mean it's like, his house is s:o big ((extends arms again))
 12 (3.0)
 13 Tea: oh- anyways
 14 ((laughter))
 15 Tea: so basketball eh- so feel free to so please you know we're
 16 having a conversation (0.2)feel free to ask ((points at Tak,
 17 looks at Shu))(.)/Takeshi questions
 18 (3.0)
 19 Tea: ((points and gazes at Tak)) so how long have you been playing

- 20 basketball?
- 21 Tak: (2.0) nine years
- 22 Tea: nine years?((head nod))ok wow so yo- you must be pretty
good
- 23 Tak: hehehe uh::n (not really)
- 24 Tea: okay can you dunk?
- 25 Tak: n(hh)o
- 26 ((laughter))
- 27 Tea: no? huh huh can you do layups?
- 28 Tak: yes

In lines 02, 03, and 07 Tea gives a description of the NBA player's house. He uses his arms to convey the enormity of the house but the recipients' responses are minimal. Tak says "eh?" and "ah::" in lines 04, 06, and 08, which are both extremely weak responses given the emphasis and enthusiasm with which the telling and assessments are made. Tea then states that the NBA player is rich and manages to get some laughter as a response. Because the response to the initial telling was marginal, Tea seems to be trying to elicit a better response in line 11 by restating the fact that the house is very big. The third time Tea made an assessment the student's response is downgraded from "ah::" and laughter to a silence, a dispreferred response. The end of Tea's turn constructional unit in line 11 is a transition relevance place, which is a place where the transition to a next speaker becomes relevant (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 2007), but because Tea does not select a next speaker in this turn (rule 1a), and a next speaker does not self-select (rule 1b) to respond, Tea, the current speaker, continues speaking in line 13 (rule 1c) and the rules 1a-1c reapply (rule 2).

After Tea fails to get any uptake from the listeners, he waits for three seconds before resuming his turn. In line 13 Tea says, "oh- anyways", and reminds the other participants that the topic they were discussing was basketball. Because the focus of the topic changed from basketball and favorite teams to the house of one particular player, he reminds the

other participants that the topic under discussion is basketball in order to refocus their attention.

In lines 15-17, we can see how Tea orients to his role as the teacher. First, he reminds the other participants about the topic that they are discussing and that they are having a conversation. Even though he tells the students to feel free to ask questions, the students do not self-select and ask questions. He encourages Mak and Shu to ask Tak questions, which is something not commonly seen in mundane conversation. He points to Shu as he tells Mak and Shu to feel free to ask Tak questions. Throughout the conversation we can see how the teacher holds the floor, and decides who will be the next speaker and when. In Excerpt 1 we are also able to see how the students are doing being students through their lack of self-selection and their minimal responses. They are features often seen in teacher-fronted classrooms because students usually only speak when asked a question.

One way to select a next speaker is by gazing at them, but even though it appears that Tea has selected Shu as the next speaker (rule 1a) in lines 16-17, there is no uptake, and Shu does not take the turn. Because Shu does not take the turn or because he was unable to produce a question for Tak quick enough, there is a 3.0 second silence after which the teacher self-selects (rule 1c) and selects Tak as next speaker (rule 1a), both gesturally and verbally. Tea gazes and points at Tak and asks him how long he has been playing basketball. In addition to gazing and pointing at Tak, Tea has made it obvious that the focus of the discussion will be on Tak by telling the others to ask Tak questions. When Tak is asked questions by Tea in lines 19-20, 22, 24, and 27, besides a slight delay in answering the question in lines 19-20, he has no problems and the interaction proceeds smoothly.

The following excerpt begins with Tea explicitly selecting Tak by gazing and pointing at him and asking what position he plays in line 01 (rule 1a).

(2)

- 01 Tea: ((gazes and points at Tak))wha- what position do you play?
 02 Tak: maybe:: play(.) guard or forward
 03 Tea: is there a: ((shifts gaze from Tak to Mak)) basketball team in
 04 Kanagawa?
 05 (1.5)
 06 Mak: ((gazes at Tak))
 07 Tea: ((gazes at Tak))
 07 Tak: su:- ((gazes at Mak))
 08 Shu: (does this university?)
 09 Tak: ((gazes at Shu))((gazes at Tea)) [nods
 10 Tea: [yeah. university basketball
 11 teams?
 12 Tak: uh:::n ten from ten to fifteen teams

After Tak responds in line 02, the teacher shifts his gaze from Tak, around whom the conversation is centered around, to Mak, thereby selecting him as next speaker (rule 1a) and asks if there is a basketball team in Kanagawa. This question could be taken as asking if there is a basketball team in Kanagawa Prefecture, the prefecture where the university is located. Or, it could also be taken to mean, “Does this university (Kanagawa University) have a basketball team?” Shu’s turn in line 08 is difficult to hear, but it sounds as if he is asking, “Does this university?”, which would be a confirmation of what Tea is asking.

Judging from the context, this question could be seen as a general question that anyone going to the university would be able to answer. However, the wording or the fact that the teacher shifts his gaze from Tak to Mak even though Tak is the basketball player whose epistemic domain (Heritage, 2013) is basketball, could be creating some confusion. After Tea gazes at Mak, Mak shifts his gaze to Tak and Tak starts to say something as he gazes at Mak. It seems as if Tak is checking to see if Mak is going to answer the question. The teacher returns his gaze to Tak and Tak returns his gaze to the teacher and nods. Up until this

point in the talk Tak has been the focus of the interaction and the topic has been a “recipient-oriented topic” (Schegloff, 2007, p. 170) so it seems possibly appropriate that he answers the basketball related questions even though the teacher shifts his gaze to Mak when asking the question.

After the teacher secures Tak’s gaze, thereby selecting him (rule 1a), he tries to confirm whether there are university basketball teams in Kanagawa in lines 10-11 by rephrasing the question to include the expression “university basketball teams.” This expression is much clearer than, “is there a basketball team in Kanagawa?” and Tea is finally able to get a response from Tak after he fixes his gaze on him. Lerner (2003) states that gaze “shows the gazed-at participant that he or she is the intended recipient” (p. 179), and although it does explicitly show the co-participants who is being selected, Tea’s gaze shifting in line 03 seems to create some confusion for the other participants. Only after he fixes his gaze on Tak in line 07 does he get an answer.

Again, in Excerpt 2 students treat Tea as the one who has the exclusive right to control turn-taking. Tea continues to guide the conversation, to ask questions and follow-up questions, and continues talking when the selected next speaker does not take the turn or when no one self-selects. This seems to resemble a teacher-fronted classroom setting where the teacher talks for the majority of the time and students only speak when asked something by the teachers, and when they do speak their answers are minimal. In this extract, Shu does self-select (rule 1b) in line 08 to confirm what the teacher is asking, but most of the interaction consists of the teacher selecting a next speaker (rule 1a) or the teacher continuing to speak (rule 1c).

In the excerpt below the participants are talking about college basketball conferences and we are able to see a similar interactional pattern to that seen above.

(3)

01 Tea: and does every university in Japan participate?

02 Shu: uh:: maybe

- 03 Tea: yeah? oh cool. hehehehe
 04 Tak: hehehe
 05 Tea: okay okay alright well a(hh)nyways hehehehe
 06 Tak: hehehe
 07 Tea: ok so any ((gazes at Mak)) other questions for Takeshi-kun?
 08 ((gazes at Shu))
 09 Tea: I guess we should move on (.) to you Shu:
 10 Shu: [do you:-
 11 Tea: [so let's
 12 Shu: do you belong to to: this uni [iversity's
 13 Tak: [ah :
 14 Tak: I belong to (.) network
 15 (1.0)
 16 Shu: ah :

After Tea asks Mak and Shu if they have any other questions for Tak in line 07 (rule 1a), he fails to receive any uptake (rule 1b), and he continues speaking (rule 1c). The process starts over (rule 2) and he selects Shu as the next speaker in line 09 (rule 1a). Liddicoat (2007) points out that questions do not necessarily select a next speaker, and that a “question for example may be addressed to a group, any one of whom could be an appropriate next speaker” (p. 63). In lines 07 and 08 the teacher tacitly and explicitly addresses Shu and Mak. He tacitly selects them by saying, “any other questions for Takeshi-kun?”. This implies that everyone besides Takeshi-kun is being selected. He explicitly addresses Shu and Mak by gazing at them, but neither of them take a turn. Only when the teacher selects Shu in line 09 by calling him by name does he take his turn. It may be less likely that a current speaker will receive a response when addressing two people at the same time, especially when they select a next speaker(s) by gaze and not by name. Tea explicitly addresses Shu in lines 08 and 09, both by gaze and by calling Shu by his name. In line 08 he selects Shu by gaze and Shu does not take his turn, but when he is selected by name in line 09, he takes his turn. Because it

is evident who is being selected, there is no confusion about who should go next and Shu begins his turn without delay.

In this excerpt we can see how participants orient to their identities as teacher and students. For example, in lines 01, 02, and 03 there is a question, answer, and assessment and that sequence appears to be finished.² Here someone needs to add something to the current topic or change the topic, and as seen above, the students do not self-select to change the topic. They wait for the teacher to change the topic and ask questions before they take their turn. Another example that demonstrates how participants orient to their identities can be seen in line 07 when Tea gazes at Mak and Shu while asking if anyone has any other questions for Tak. Since the students rarely self-select, the teacher needs to guide the conversation and allocate turns. The students' responses are similar to those seen in teacher-fronted classroom settings; they are minimal, they usually only answer the question asked, and answers are rarely of any significant length.

In Excerpt 4 below, which is a continuation of the conversation in Excerpt 3, Tea gazes and points at Tak and asks, in line 01, how many people are in the basketball network in (rule 1a).

(4)

- 01 Tea: ((gazes and points at B)) how many people are in the network?
 02 Tak: (1.0).hh hm:: (5.5) four?
 03 Tea: ((nods))
 04 Tak: four yes
 05 Tea: that's that's pretty big
 06 (2.0)
 07 Tak: s:
 08 Tea: [hehehe
 09 Tak: [hehehe
 10 Tea: okay .h alright well anyways let's move on to: Shu (.) so Shu
 11 please introduce yourself to these fine gentlemen
 12 Shu: ah:: my name is Sho and uh I belong to: uh: economics uh: I
 13 major in economics(.) uh::I:: I'm freshman and I enter entered

14 this uh last april u::h so I I play basketball too:

Tak seems unsure about the answer so he says “four?” with rising intonation, which signals his uncertainty. The teacher nods to show his acknowledgement and the student confirms the number in his next turn. Tak starts to say something in line 07, but starts laughing with the teacher and does not continue. Both Tea and Tak laugh and the teacher changes the topic in line 10 by saying, “okay .h alright well anyways let’s move on to: Shu (.) so Shu please introduce yourself to these fine gentlemen.” Holt (2010) points out that joint laughter often occurs near an area of topic termination and we can see this in line 10 when Tea changes the topic after his laughter overlaps with Tak’s in lines 08-09. “Anyway,” “alright,” “well,” and “okay” are prefatory discontinuity markers which are often used to change the topic and disconnect the next turn from the prior turn (Drew & Holt, 1998). Before the prefatory discontinuity markers “anyway” and “alright,” Tea says “okay.” This “okay” could be an acknowledgement token of Tak’s previous utterance. Jefferson (1993) notices a similar phenomenon and states, “a recipient will at some point produce a minimal acknowledgement of a prior utterance and follow that with a shift in topic” (p. 4).

In Excerpt 3 when the teacher says, “let’s move on to: Shu”, Shu seems to take it to mean, please ask Tak a question. It is possible that he did this based on the pattern of the interaction up to that point. The teacher had tried to get the students to ask each other questions, but was rarely successful, and Shu seems to think that the teacher is again asking him to ask another student a question, when in reality the teacher wants to ask Shu to introduce himself to others as we can see in lines 10 and 11 of Excerpt 4.

In Excerpt 4, the teacher again says an expression similar to that in Excerpt 3, “well anyways let’s move on to: Shu”. However, this time, in order to avoid confusion, the teacher asks Shu to introduce himself to the other students, making it clear that he does not want him to ask another student a question, rather he wants him to introduce himself. This

seems easier for Shu to understand and we can see that he understands in line 12 when he begins his self-introduction. This turn again demonstrates how the students treat Tea as the facilitator of the interaction. Tak and Shu only speak when asked a question, or more specifically, when they are selected by name, gaze, or by being pointed at by the teacher. In mundane conversation participants are free to talk when they want and self-selection is more prevalent, but in the structure of talk in institutions such as teacher-fronted classrooms, turn-taking is more restricted and participants orient to their environment and their identities.

In the final excerpt below, Tea shifts the focus of the conversation to Mak. In line 01 he points and gazes at Mak and asks, “do you like basketball?” After this question is asked, all of the participants laugh. This could be because Mak’s contributions to the conversation have been minimal or that the main topic of conversation up to this point has been basketball and no one has asked Mak if he is interested in basketball. Mak’s minimal contribution to the conversation could be attributed to the fact that Tea has selected him as a next speaker only a few times, and as mentioned above, the students, Mak, Tak, and Shu rarely self-selected and usually only spoke when selected by Tea. Jordan (1990) reports that self-selection by students occurred infrequently in university Spanish classes, and this was evinced in the language lounge data as well.

(5)

01 Tea: ((points and gazes at Mak)) do you like basketball?

02 ((laughter)) (2.5)

03 Mak: I like basketball I like sport (.) but (.) I love: huh

04 Tea: hehehe[he

05 Mak: [basketball

06 Tea: cause everyone has a favorite team right? the ((points and gazes

07 at Shu)) Spurs u::m ((points and gazes at Tak)) [Mavericks

08 Tak: [Mavericks

09 Tea: ((points and gazes at Mak)) do you have a favorite NBA team?

10 (1.0)

11 Mak: I (watches) Chicago Bulls

In line 01 Tea selects Mak by saying, “do you like basketball?” (rule 1a). He points and gazes at Mak so it is apparent who is being selected as a next speaker. Lerner (2003) explains that the recipient reference term “you” can indicate that the current speaker is addressing a single participant in a multiparty conversation. Using “you” when selecting a next speaker could possibly create some confusion as to whom is being selected, but coupled with gaze, the selected next speaker can be made evident.

In lines 06 and 07, Tea mentions the favorite teams of Tak and Shu, and while saying the favorite team of each person, he points to the person whose favorite team it is. After saying the favorite team of each person, which was information provided earlier in the conversation, he returns his gaze to Mak, points at him and asks Mak if he has a favorite basketball team. As seen in all of the extracts above, Tea and Mak make their identities as teacher and student apparent through their actions. Tea continues to guide the conversation, select speakers, ask questions and follow-up questions, and continues speaking when others fail to self-select or take their turn after they have been selected as next speaker. Mak only speaks when asked a question and does not self-select throughout the interaction.

Discussion

In this paper I have shown how turn-taking is organized in a university language lounge. Turn-taking in the language lounge resembles turn-taking in a traditional classroom setting in the sense that teachers do the majority of the talking and allocate turns and students only speak when selected by the teacher. The extracts presented in this paper have demonstrated how turn-taking is implemented and how the teacher controls the topics, turn allocation, and how he goes about selecting the next speaker. Selecting next speaker can be done in a variety of

ways, but as we have seen in the examples in this paper, Tea, the teacher, often selects next speaker by gazing at them, gazing and pointing at them, or, very rarely, by calling their names. The teacher was more likely to get a response from a selected next speaker when that student had the floor and was being gazed or pointed at by the teacher when selected. However, even when the teacher selects a next speaker through gaze and pointing, if the utterance could be heard as addressing more than one person, he was less likely to get a response, as we saw in Excerpt 1, “please feel free to ask Takeshi questions,” and Excerpt 3, “any other questions for Takeshi-kun?”

In each of the excerpts we were able to see how all of the participants oriented to their identities as teacher and student in a language lounge through their actions. For example, Mak rarely spoke, and after a careful analysis we could see that this can be attributed to the fact that the teacher rarely selected him as a next speaker, and he, being a student, oriented to his identity as a student, by not self-selecting and actively contributing to the conversation.

Talk in the language lounge resembles formal classroom talk in the way that turn-taking is organized. The teacher has the floor for the majority of the time, he changes the topics or focus of the topics when he wants, he selects next speaker, asks follow-up questions, and when other participants do not self-select or selected next speakers fail to take their turns, he continues speaking and keeps the conversation going.

Applying the turn-taking rules established by Sacks et al. helped to elucidate how turns are organized in the language lounge. It helped to clarify that the majority of the turns were the teacher selecting a next speaker (rule 1a) or the teacher continuing to speak after the selected next speaker failed to take his turn or no one self-selected (rule 1c).

The conversations seem to have both features of an “action pre-allocation system” which can be seen in classrooms and a “mediated turn-allocation system” in which a single person guides the topic and allocates turns (Heritage & Clayman, 2010, p. 37). In conclusion, this paper showed that the teacher and the students in the language lounge demonstrated

their orientation to their roles as teacher and students in the manner that they managed turn-taking throughout the interaction.

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Footnotes

- 1 However, mundane conversation can occur in classrooms (e.g., Waring, 2013) and pedagogical talk can occur in mundane conversation (e.g., Hosoda, 2006).
- 2 This is sometimes called an Initiation-Reply-Evaluation (IRE) sequence (Mehan, 1979).

Appendix

Transcription conventions

- () inaudible talk
- ? rising intonation
- : prolongation of sound or syllable (more colons indicate more prolongation)
- (()) transcriber's comment
- (.) micropause
- . fall in intonation
- , continuing intonation
- (3.0) silence (in tenths of a second)

- cut-off or self-interruption
- (h) laughter inside a word
- [] overlapping talk