

An Investigation of How the Pragmatic Features of Interruptions and Back Channel Responses Function as a Cooperative Device in Natural Conversation

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INTRODUCTION

This essay is a pragmatic analysis on a sample of spoken discourse between two Australian men in their early twenties. The nature of this research is an investigation into how these particular male speakers use two pragmatic features, such as, back channel and interruption to express support and agreement with each other in ‘natural’ conversation.

What is ‘natural’ conversation?

According to Stubbs (1983), natural conversation is language, which occurs naturally without any intervention from the linguist and occurs in an unplanned, spontaneous fashion that is in response to immediate situational demands. This type of conversation characterizes most spoken language, which includes everyday conversation (Stubbs, 1983).

The Aim of this Analysis

In analysing conversational interaction, many researchers make assumptions that interruptions indicate dominance, especially dominance caused by male speakers to female speakers or to other male speakers. However, Aries (1996) found that interruptions as well as back channel responses may also be used to convey confirmation and rapport, depending on the participants in interaction (eg. age, race, and social class), their relationship to each other, the interaction setting and the topic of conversation.

Many researchers have drawn conclusions that men express dominance and women express tentativeness in their speech, but these conclusions were based on incorrect assumptions regarding the meaning of the behaviours under consideration (Aries, 1996). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to link the collected sample of spoken discourse between two Australian men in their early twenties to Aries’ claim that men could also use interruptions and back channel responses to express solidarity, rapport and facilitate interaction with each other.

METHOD

Participants

The two participants who were selected for the sample spoken discourse used in this research are Australian males in their early twenties from a middle-class background and students of Macquarie University in Sydney.

Social Distance

The relationship that the participants A and C has with each other appears to be close and intimate friends. In fact, the two men met as students studying at Macquarie University and have known each other for approximately three years, therefore, causing the social distance to be small.

Topic of Conversation and Interaction Setting

The conversation (see Appendix A) was an informal chat about each other's weekend in A's bedroom. Based on Pridham (2001), the purpose of A and C's conversation is categorized as interactional, which refers to language used for socialising. The two men covered a range of topics such as, assignments, a party, drinking and cricket.

Method for Data Collection

The method used for obtaining this conversation was that the participants were told openly that their conversation was to be recorded without the presence of the researcher in the room. One of the participants, C, brought the tape recorder to A's bedroom and openly recorded the conversation. This option of leaving the tape-recorder with one of the speakers was to allow them to record themselves when they wish without the researcher present which was suggested by Stubbs (1983) as a method of obtaining authentic discourse data without deviating too much from natural speech. In addition, McLaughlin's (1984) researches found that knowledge of being taped does not produce speech act differences in conversational behaviours and subjects did not appear to increase in anxiety or suppress responsiveness. In fact, subjects appeared more relaxed and more responsive over the course of the recording time in McLaughlin's (1984) research as well as in the recording of A and C's conversation used for this article.

Results and Discussion

The five minute conversation between A and C was an informal chat about catching up on each other's weekend. Initially, C walked into A's room and asked A how everything was going. This was a strategy for C to initiate discourse with A. However, A replied to C's question without asking C how he was going, as a result, there were a few seconds with back channel responses of "yeah" (lines 3 and 4) before C launched into a discussion about assignments (see Appendix A for the transcription key).

1. C: How's it all going?
2. A: Aww, yeah, its like could be better.
3. C: Yeah
4. A: Yeah
5. C: I have heaps to do, I'm so far behind. I spent all afternoon doing this
6. A: ^ comp
7. C: yeah, this Comp 224 assignment. It's a lot of data bases and all
that but

8. A: ^= aw man
 9. C: so annoying. I didn't, didn't see you around much this weekend. What have you been up to?

After a couple of minutes later, C introduced another topic about the weekend on line 9. A answered C's question by talking about going out, then on line 13, C interrupted A by uttering "yeah" to show cooperation and support as a listener, thereby encouraging A to continue with his story about a night of partying and drinking.

9. C: so annoying. I didn't, didn't see you around much this weekend. What have you been up to?
 10. A: I was..quite a few things actually
 11. C: ^yeah? What happened? Like
 12. A: =for Friday night you went out, but I was kind of
 13. C: ^=yeah
 14. A: =out too, out for a little bit.

On line 24, C encourages A again to continue with his story by using a tag question of "did you" at the end of his statement.

24. C: You didn't make it to The Ranch, did you? (laughing)

On line 65, A used "cuz," a common conjunction, to make a smooth transition between the topics shifting from the previous night's activity of drinking to the next day's activity of playing cricket.

65. A: But yeah, what else, and then I dried myself up, um, I was feeling a bit seedy, um cuz I went to play cricket

Throughout the conversation (see Appendix A), both speakers demonstrated cooperation by building the discourse with the adjacency pair of question-answer, tag questions, interruptions and back channels. Although, there were other pragmatic features, which displayed cooperation, support and agreement in the conversation, this analysis will focus only on the pragmatic aspects of interruptions and back channel responses.

Interruption

An interruption is a speech form which is commonly viewed as a feature of power, dominance, violation of a speaker's right to speak, used to usurp a person's turn and is used to control the topic of conversation (Aries, 1996). However, a critical re-evaluation of the literature on interruptions stated by Aries (1996) suggested that interruptions may be used for many functions in conversation other than to demonstrate dominance.

Carol Kennedy and Carl Camden developed a classification system of interruptions into five types:

1. clarification-interruptions that ask for clarification of the speaker’s meaning.
 2. agreement-interruptions that demonstrate support, understanding or agreement.
 3. disagreement-interruptions that challenge, reject or contradict the speaker.
 4. tangentialization-interruptions that show awareness of the speaker’s statement but make light of the message.
 5. subject change-interruptions that reflect no awareness of the speaker’s statement and have no common theme.
- (Aries, 1996, p. 85)

In the case of the conversation between C and A, C interrupted A by using minimal responses to indicate to A that he was demonstrating agreement as in support and understanding to what A was saying. Table 1 shows a breakdown by line numbers of where C interrupted A in the sample spoken discourse (see Appendix A), and the types of positive minimal responses that C used to show support and understanding to A’s story- telling.

Table 1 Interruptions with Minimal Responses by C

Line Numbers from A & C’s Conversation	Types of Minimal Responses
11	Yeah? What happened? Like...
35	(laughter)
47	right, right (laughter)
54	in the morning?
58	oh, o.k.
68	(laughter)
70	yeah (laughter)
72	Oh
74	Yeah
84	oh, no
86	Yeah
92	club most improved?

In the case of speaker A, he interrupted C’s speech only twice by showing acknowledgement and understanding to C’s speech on lines 6 and 32. On line 6, A interrupted C by demonstrating to C that he knew exactly what C was about to say by interjecting the word “comp” before C finished his sentence.

5. C: I have heaps to do, I’m so far behind. I spent all afternoon doing this
6. A: ^ comp
7. C: yeah, this Comp 224 assignment. It’s a lot of data bases and all
that but

On line 32, A interrupted C by using the filler of “oh dear” followed by laughter to show C his interest and involvement in the story.

31. C: They were trying to encourage you to go inside and something like that but
32. A: ^oh dear (laughing)

Simultaneous Talk and Overlaps

Another pragmatic speech feature linked to interruption found in the conversation between A and C is simultaneous talk or overlaps. Simultaneous speech refers to conversational exchanges in which more than one speaker is speaking simultaneously with neither speaker yielding the turn (McLaughlin, 1984). In addition, simultaneous speech is often characterized by overlaps in speech (McLaughlin, 1984).

Upon examination of the transcript of the conversation between A and C, there were a substantial amount of simultaneous speech or overlaps which often made it difficult to tell exactly whose turn it was as well as to differentiate between an interruption and overlap. Deborah Tannen and Jennifer Coates have found that simultaneous speech is common in a conversation between friends, in which there were numerous cases where overlaps occurred, yet the conversation proceeded smoothly (Tannen, D. and Coates, J., 1989, cited in Aries, 1996). The overlaps identified in A and C's conversation demonstrate cooperation, and the speakers built on one another's sentences by chiming in to assist the other in completing the sentences as in lines 8, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 22, 27, 33, 34, 44, 45, 46, 55, 59, 61, 66, 67, 69, 71, 73, 75, 78, 79, 80, 85 and 87 (see Appendix A) (Aries, 1996). Below is a part of the conversation taken from the transcript to demonstrate A and C's discourse with simultaneous speech, interruptions and overlaps.

1. C: How's it all going?
2. A: Aww, yeah, its like could be better.
3. C: Yeah
4. A: Yeah
5. C: I have heaps to do, I'm so far behind. I spent all afternoon doing this
6. A: ^ comp
7. C: yeah, this Comp 224 assignment. It's a lot of data bases and all that but
8. A: ^= aw man
9. C: so annoying. I didn't, didn't see you around much this weekend. What have you been up to?
10. A: I was.. quite a few things actually
11. C: ^yeah? What happened? Like
12. A: =for Friday night you went out, but I was kind of
13. C: ^=yeah
14. A: =out too, out for a little bit.

Back Channel Responses or Minimal Responses

In face-to-face conversations, listeners do not remain silent, but utter a variety of vocalizations such as *m-hm*, *yeah*, and *um* to provide feedback to the speaker as the conversation progresses (Aries, 1996). These utterances are labeled as back channel responses or minimal responses. A

group of behaviours which constitute back channel responses are: sentence completions, brief requests for clarification, brief restatements, head nods and shakes and minimal responses like *m-hm, yeah, right, yes* and so on (Aries, 1996).

Minimal responses are the signals used generally to convey the listener's continuing interest and co-participation in discourse, however, when there is lack of minimal response in conversation, it signals to the speaker that the listener is not listening or is trying to discourage interaction (Aries, 1996). From another perspective, the role that minimal responses play in discourse is that the case of acknowledgements such as "uh huh" or "right" can be counted as a turn or even allocated as an interruption to the speaker (McLaughlin, 1984).

In the five minute casual conversation between A and C, there were 47 "yeah" found throughout the discourse as well as other types of back channels such as, "oh right," "oh o.k.," "right, right," "oh no," "oh," and "um." As a result of the high frequency usage of minimal responses in this conversation, it could be concluded that this was a cooperative conversation due to the substantial amount of back channels used to signal support and continued interest in topic development. Lines 15-22 show a cluster of minimal responses in the conversation.

15. C: Oh right, right, yeah and you had your floor party as well didn't you?
16. A: =yeah, that's right. Yeah, we just went upstairs and had a few drinks
17. C: =yeah
18. A: ^=some had a few drinks ()
19. C: ^=oh right.
20. C: Well, the plan was um, wasn't it drinks, drinks at college, drinks at The Ranch, then drinks in the city or something like that?
21. A: Yeah, I got the first one down
22. C: ^=yeah

As shown on lines 15 through 22, there were some minimal responses which can be interpreted or counted as interruptions and overlaps. However, due to the nature of this conversation, there was no suggested display of power, dominance or competitiveness between the speakers in using minimal responses as a power struggle for trying to dominate the conversation or competing for turns.

Limitations

There are some limitations within this research that should be addressed. One issue dealing with research is the question of how natural is a sample of recorded conversation. Stubbs (1983) argues that speakers will inevitably be affected by the presence of a tape recorder and will result in speaking more politely than usual as well as being careful not to over use obscene references. This was the case as admitted by the two participants in this research after the recording was over.

Another issue is concerned with biasness in transcription of conversation. In dealing with unclear speech and words, difficulty in distinguishing between overlaps and interruptions and auditory hallucinations cause many errors in transcribing a conversation. In addition, there are

some conversational features such as, conversation with false starts, hesitations, ungrammatical and unfinished sentences, overlapping utterances and so on, which may not sound odd when spoken, but will appear odd when seen in written mode. Therefore, these features make transcribing a tape-recorded conversation exactly as it was spoken onto paper a complex matter (Stubbs, 1983).

Finally, more data are needed in order to compare with different sets of speakers in a variety of situations to ensure validity and reliability (Stubbs, 1983). It is certainly ideal to use a larger sample of speakers to speak on a wide range of topics for this analysis; however due to the size constraint of this paper, there is a limitation on the amount of participants that could be sampled.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded through the sample spoken discourse gathered from the two Australian male speakers that the conversation was cooperative and was an informal chat about their weekend. The numerous amounts of back channel responses and interruptions observed from the cooperative conversation demonstrated support and continued interest in topic development. This supports Aries' (1996) claim in her study that men could use interruptions and back channel responses to express solidarity, rapport and facilitate interaction, not dominance with each other. Another possible reason as to why the participants from this research generated such a high amount of back channel responses and interruptions could be that these speech features are used more often in certain cultures. According to Stubbs (1983), it is a general rule in western society which dictates that interaction should proceed smoothly and silences are often considered embarrassing, therefore speakers use different pragmatic features such as interruptions and back channel responses to maintain communication equilibrium. This cultural claim can be further investigated in another research.

References

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APPENDIX

Transcription of a Five Minute Casual Conversation between Two Australian Men

Transcription Key (Gumperz and Roberts, 1987)

(x) Unclear word	= Overlap and latching of speakers' utterances
.. Pauses of less than 5 seconds	^ interruption
^= interruption and overlap	() unintelligible speech

1. C: How's it all going?
2. A: Aww, yeah, its like could be better.
3. C: Yeah
4. A: Yeah
5. C: I have heaps to do, I'm so far behind. I spent all afternoon doing this
6. A: ^ comp
7. C: yeah, this Comp 224 assignment. It's a lot of data bases and all
that but
8. A: ^= aw man
9. C: so annoying. I didn't, didn't see you around much this weekend. What have you been up
to?
10. A: I was.. quite a few things actually
11. C: ^yeah? What happened? Like
12. A: =for Friday night you went out, but I was kind of
13. C: ^=yeah
14. A: =out too,
out for a little bit.
15. C: Oh right, right, yeah and you had your floor party as well didn't you?
16. A: =yeah, that's right. Yeah, we just went upstairs and had a few drinks
17. C: =yeah
18. A: ^=some had a few drinks ()
19. C: ^=oh right.
20. C: Well, the plan was um, wasn't it drinks, drinks at college, drinks at The Ranch, then
drinks in the city or something like that?
21. A: Yeah, I got the first one down
22. C: ^=yeah
23. A: That's it.
24. C: You didn't make it to The Ranch, did you? (laughing)
25. A: I tried, apparently, um, they sorta half carried me. (laughing)
26. A: Anyway, but um, there's nothing happening so
27. C: ^= I heard you were laying in the grass (laughing) yelling out to someone that you loved
them.
28. A: WHAT? (yelling)
29. C: (laughing)
30. A: I didn't hear that, no one tell me that one yet.
31. C: They were trying to encourage you to go inside and something

- like that but
32. A: ^oh dear (laughing)
33. C: =yeah and I heard something about the PRICE IS WRONG BITCH!
34. A: =yeah, I've heard that one a few times from Gleeson. (laughing)
35. C: ^ (laughing)
36. C: (laughing again)
37. A: I think he started that one, yeah..
38. C: yeah
39. A: Ah man..yeah ole Happy Gilmore
40. C: (speaking softly) the price is wrong
41. C: Oh, is that where it's from?
42. A: Oh in the Pro Am, where he hits the guy.
43. C: OH, right!
44. A: ^=That's where I got that, yeah.
45. C: = I thought that it was from where they were ripping it off the show
The Price Is Right, because
46. A: ^=I think that's where, that's to do with the I think
that guy was the American (x) something
47. C: ^ right, right (laughing)
48. A: or other, yeah.
49. A: I don't remember saying so.
50. C: Yeah, uh (laughing) cool.
51. A: Yeah
52. C: Yeah..you feeling alright the next day then?
53. A: Nap, uh, no um, I woke up at around 6
54. C: ^ in the morning?
55. A: =um, yeah, then I went straight to the shower. I felt pretty hazy and sort of slept there for
the next 6 and a half hours.
56. C: In the shower?
57. A: Yeah, I wasn't, I was awake but I just had water all over me and stuff
58. C: ^oh, o.k.
59. A: =and sort of watched different people coming in and out and two different thongs and I
go yeah, that's Sumi, that's Myers with the thongs
60. C: (laughing)
61. A: =(laughing) yeah, cool, but I did sleep for awhile.
62. C: Yeah
63. A: Yeah (laughing)
64. C: Yeah
65. A: But yeah, what else, and then I dried myself up, um, I was feeling a bit seedy, um cuz I
went to play cricket
66. C: =yeah, yeah
67. A: =and so that I went to the Mac Centre and got a bit of bread, it took me fuckin' ages just
to get down there.
68. C: ^ (laughing)
69. A: =I was, not not in great shape and then, yeah, eventually I went over, cuz there were a

- few guys missing from cricket so
70. C: ^yeah (laughing)
71. A: =yeah, but um and I almost had to bat as well, shady, that would have been
72. C: ^oh
73. A: =I scored for the most of the day, but I was the next man at the end and
74. C: ^yeah
75. A: =yeah, I lucked out with the last ball..so another over, another ball and I would have been there batting, but yeah
76. C: (laughing)
77. A: Whoa uh, shady batting
78. C: =that was lucky yeah
79. A: =and then there was presentation night that night for hockey
80. C: =so out again drinking again
81. A: well, I had a sip of a Bloody Mary and that's it. I was, I was almost sick just smelling beer.
82. (both guys laughing)
83. A: oh, oh it was terrible, I was seedy, I couldn't
84. C: ^oh, no
85. A: =eat much food. Oh, I had a bit to eat
86. C: ^yeah
87. A: =and felt a little bit better, particularly by the end of it, I was feeling alright but um, yeah, won a couple of awards, so it was pretty good.
88. C: You did?
89. A: Yeah.
90. C: Oh what did you get?
91. A: Yeah, I got the Coach's player for second grade and the club most improved so
92. C: ^club most improved?
93. A: yeah, that was pretty good.
94. C: Oh wow!
95. A: Pretty happy with that.
96. A: And yeah, a few mates did pretty well, as well, so pretty rowdy table. It was pretty funny.
97. C: (laughing)
98. A: A lot of guys from uni games being drunk dickheads, it was great
99. C: Of course.
100. A: Yeah
101. C: Yeah
102. A: So it was pretty funny.