

## Turn-Taking Strategies: Alignment Development in Casual Discussion

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Received 9 September 2016; accepted 12 November 2016  
Published online 26 December 2016

### Abstract

This paper reports a conversation analysis of a 10-minute-long audio-recorded casual conversation between two Asian women and identifies the strategies they used to achieve alignment in casual discussion. It then argues that organizational patterns of conversation are context-sensitive; the turn-taking strategies adapted by participants to establish alignment can be influenced by factors such as culture and gender but ultimately determined by the communicative goal in a given speech event.

**Key words:** Aligning actions; Turn-taking strategies; Casual conversation

Qiao, P. (2016). Turn-Taking Strategies: Alignment Development in Casual Discussion. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 12(12), 48-54. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/9117> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/9117>

### INTRODUCTION

Conversation is a joint construction which requires speakers and hearers to work collaboratively to negotiate mutual understanding and achieve coherence through aligning actions (Nofsinger, 1991). Turn-taking, therefore, is not merely a mechanic faculty of interlocutors, but “a jointly determined, socially constituted behavior” (Denny, 1985, as cited in Coates, 1994) significant in establishing, maintaining, and shifting social relationships and identity performances (Johnstone, 2008).

This study intends to investigate how two Asian women establish alignment in a 10-minute-long audio-recorded casual discussion. In this paper, I take ethnomethodology

as a starting point to explore what turn-taking strategies they adapted to achieve mutual understanding and establish alignment in the theme-guided casual discussion, offering interpretations of their aligning actions from an ethnographic view. I thus argue that organizational patterns of conversation are context-sensitive; the turn-taking strategies employed by participants to establish alignment can be influenced by factors such as culture and gender but ultimately determined by the communicative goal in a given speech event.

### 1. ALIGNMENT AND TURN-TAKING ORGANIZATION IN CONVERSATION

It is now plausible that the coherence of conversation is based on mutual understanding. To make a conversation coherent, participants must keep the conversation on track through “aligning actions”, namely “the largely verbal efforts to restore or assure meaningful interaction in the face of problematic situations” (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976, p.838). According to Stokes and Hewitt, there are two kinds of alignment: The first one concerns the process of resolving problems arising from discrepancy between participants’ behaviors and cultural expectations; the second refers to activities through which individuals achieve successful interaction by constantly aligning their actions. It is the second alignment this study concerns. This kind of alignment is often realized through successive utterances which function to clarify and orient conversation participants toward a particular topic and achieve mutual understandings rather than individual understandings (Nofsinger, 1991).

Alignment in conversation can be realized in various ways. According to Goffman (1983, as cited in Warren, 2006), “back-channel feedback”, “pre-emption signals”, and “framing capabilities” are important in establishing alignment between conversation participants. Here, the framing capabilities refer to one’s ability to change

footing in the way we manage to produce or receive an utterance to imply the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others (Goffman, 1983, as cited in Johnstone, 2008). Techniques ranging from gross changes in the social capacities to the most subtle shifts in tone can all be used to signal significant shifts in alignment of speaker to hearers (Woolard, 2006).

As a matter of fact, the normative turn-taking mechanism (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) in conversation itself is also “a prime example of conversational alignment in action” (Warrant, 2006, p.60), which requires speakers and listeners to cooperatively take turns accurately at transition relevance place (TRP) in order to avoid noticeable gaps and overlaps. According to this model, overlaps could only occur when two speakers self-select at the same time at a TRP or when the next speaker over-anticipates the end of the current turn and starts a new turn at a possible TRP before the current speaker finishes. Overlaps involving more than that, therefore, can be considered as interruption, a violation of a speaker’s right to the floor. However, this “violation” is found common in spontaneous conversations and simultaneous speech when speakers cooperatively construct a turn to show rapport and intersubjective understanding (Johnstone, 2008). In this way, overlapping and simultaneous talk, as Gumperz (1982, as cited in Habib, 2008) argues, are also important means to signal alignment.

Coates (1994) found that women talk is often characterized by simultaneous talk and overlaps, which do not imply negative meaning but are cooperative mechanisms functioning to emphasize the shared meanings and degree of solidarity and intimacy. She argues that the overlapping speech is not a deviant phenomenon but a positive politeness strategy to claim common ground and strengthen friendship and solidarity. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish overlap from interruption—a desire to exercise power.

In this paper, I would define interruptions as cooperative interruptions and assertive interruptions in line with Warren (2006). Cooperative interruptions and overlaps in this paper are used interchangeable to refer to conversation participants’ joint efforts to make mutual understanding and conversation coherence, while assertive interruptions refer to participants’ attempts to dominate the speech. However, assertive interruptions could also be cooperative in terms of the wider aim of achieving a successful outcome. This is because conversation is fundamentally collaborative. Whether a turn-taking strategy is cooperative or not should be examined in a given context with consideration of the overall goal of a particular speech event.

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## 2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology adapted in this study is a combination of conversation analysis (CA) and ethnographic methods. CA is used to explore how people say and do in ordinary talk,

and with transcription consistent with CA, ethnographic methods are used to offer insights into why people say and do in a particular way.

### 2.1 Data Collection

The data was a 10-minute excerpt of a 28-minute-long audio-recorded casual discussion between two Asian women about the procedure of an oral presentation on “popular culture and literacy education.” The two participants were well-informed of the purpose for the recording before the data was collected. To collect natural data, they were not told when the recording would start until the recording was done. Therefore, the data is spontaneous talk in interaction.

After I collected the recorded data, I did proof-listening for at least 5 times and transcribed it based on my understanding. The transcription notation was mainly based on Gail Jefferson’s (1973) system or transcribing talk to write form. After that I played back the conversation for the two participants to check my transcription and validate my interpretation. The checking process was also a discourse-based interview which was retrospective by nature that participants were required to respond to certain conversational features and explain the communicative purposes behind them. Important information was taken down as reference for further interpretation and data analysis of the turn-taking actions of the two participants used to achieve alignment.

### 2.2 Participants

The two participants are Asian women. One is an Indian Singaporean, who studied in USA for three years and married a Caucasian. She is now a primary teacher in Singapore and uses English as her second language. The other is Chinese, who has learnt English as a foreign language for 19 years and taught English in a university when she was in China. Both of them were MA students of applied linguistics when the data was collected. In this paper, I would use the pseudonyms Su and Joe respectively to refer to the Indian Singaporean woman and the Chinese woman.

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## 3. ALIGNMENT DEVELOPMENT IN CONVERSATION

The recorded conversation shows that this is a successful casual discussion in which Su and Joe employ a wide range of turn-taking strategies to negotiate meaning and align with each other and finally reach agreement. However, their alignment is not established from the very beginning. There is a gradual process of adaption for the two to modify their turn-taking strategies in order to achieve mutual understanding.

### 3.1 Disagreement and Disalignment

At the very beginning of the conversation, when Su and Joe argue whether the discussion activity should be done

before or after Joe sums up the required readings, their aligning actions seem not very effective probably due to their different ways of showing disagreement.

In conversational analysis, disagreement is often connected with Sacks' (1987) concept of preference and Brown and Levinson's (1978) notion of politeness and face. Disagreement is a dispreferred response, which is usually marked by linguistic features like delay (uhm), mitigation, giving reasons and so on (Sacks,

1987). However, although the (dis)preferred response sequences is probably universal, the way (dis)preference is realized is not (Cheng & Tsui, 2009). Individuals' management of turn-taking strategies for disagreement may be different and lead to misunderstanding in social interactions. In Extract 1, the two participants' different preferred turn-taking strategies or aligning actions generate misunderstanding and thus fail to establish alignment.

Extract 1:

- 001 **J:** I just wonder um first we just focus o[n pro:blem] problem  
002 **S:** [talk about]  
003 problem yeah=  
004 **J:** =And then we will see how to solve the problem, and the:n I think you can just  
005 bring all this out and then (.) after (.) we have done the activity so can spell out like (.)  
006 **S:** [Too tight  
007 **J:** Yeah  
008 **S:** Too tight yeah?  
009 **J:** Yeah  
010 **S:** So: I think because you know why I thought about we do the activity first we don't know  
011 how long it is gonna to be, if we give them towards the end then it gets too long, you  
012 remember the first group?=  
013 **J:** =Yeah [yeah yeah  
014 **S:** [You know the extra time?  
015 **J:** Oh yes [yes  
016 **S:** [So better if we get the activity before because we don't know how long it will  
017 take=  
018 **J:** =O[h-  
019 **S:** [We keep it fifteen um- not (too long ah) and fifteen or twenty, bu:t if they do it they  
021 don't get it we just stop, and we just move on and then we'll see the example but if you can  
022 do it (which means) they can do it that' why I want to do the activity first  
023 **J:** (yeah)=  
024 **S:** ='cause we don't how long they are gonna take  
025 **J:** Yea:h=  
026 **S:** =and then we sum up (XXX) of the article  
027 (.)  
028 **S:** So you [see:: what [do you think  
029 **J:** [a: [u:m  
030 a:: you you think that first we [we just after (.) after we just introduce the topic  
031 **S:** [No  
032 (Yeah)

In Extract 1, we can see Su is quite direct in showing disagreement. She interrupts Joe twice in line 006 and line 019 to express her opinion. In contrast, Joe seems not comfortable with direct confrontation and tries to avoid giving the opposing opinions. Their conflicting turn-

taking strategies lead to a noticeable breakdown in line 27. In line 001 and 004, Joe argues that they should first focus on the problem and the reasons why teachers are reluctant to use popular culture before they do the activity, while Su interrupts her directly in line 006 to show disagreement,

because Su thinks the time schedule would be so tight that they may not be able to finish their presentation. Interestingly, although the preferred response to Su should be an objection, Joe avoids direct confrontation but says “yeah” in line 007. The word “yeah” here is obviously not used to show agreement but quite likely to be a politeness marker to give the floor to Su. Somehow, Su doesn’t get it and seems confused. So in line 008, Su asks “too tight yeah?” to make clear whether Joe is in line with her, but unexpectedly Joe says “yeah” again in line 009. Then Su takes Joe’s “yeah” as agreement, because in line 010, she begins her utterance with “so” and tries to persuade Joe with an example. Clearly, the example Su gives to support her opinion in line 012 and line 014 is based on their shared experience and can be considered as an aligning action achieving mutual understanding, because in line 015, the stressed “yes” in Joe’s utterance shows a strong agreement.

However, after that, Su interrupts Joe again in line 018 when Joe attempts to take the floor to give her opinion as a possible TRP. Su holds the floor until line 026. After that there is a noticeable breakdown in line 027 where Joe is supposed to give her comments. This breakdown could be interpreted as a consequence of Su’s successive interruptions which make Joe reluctant to respond, or it could be interpreted as Joe’s unwillingness to show disagreement. Noticing the breakdown, Su asks Joe directly for her opinion in line 28, but Joe seems hesitant. It can be seen in line 29, the “a:” and “em” are not used as back-channeling but markers to indicate Joe’s hesitation to give opposing opinions. But to keep the conversation going, instead of refuting directly, Joe tries to formulate what Su said first before giving comments in line 030. It should be noted that this is significant in their mutual understanding and alignment establishment in the later stage of the conversation.

According to Nofsinger (1991), “formulation” (p.121)

Extract 2:

- 030 a: (.) you you think that first we we jus[t after (.) after we just introduce the topic  
 031 S: [No  
 032 (Yeah)  
 033 J: And then we just let them to experience [how] to do [that] right?  
 034 S: [Yeah] [how to do]  
 035 Yeah  
 036 J: And then after they have done, we say that you see this is how the things g[o: and yeah  
 037 S: [(so interesting)  
 038 and all things you know can be done  
 039 J: But why  
 040 S: ((laughing)) (first we ask)  
 041 J: Yeah  
 042 S: ((laughing)) (th(h)e problem is why)  
 043 J: Y[eah

is an important action to establish alignment, because when one formulates what other people said, he or she is displaying his or her understanding of the prior talk. However, Joe’s formulation of the earlier talk could also be interpreted as a delay of the dispreferred answer—opposing opinions. Interestingly, when Joe formulates what Su said earlier in line 031, Su disagrees even before Joe finishes, probably her preferred answer is an objection. As we can see, the discrepancy between their preferences of the turn-taking organization of disagreement is an obstacle for their mutual understanding and alignment. It’s worth noting that Extract 1 is just a small portion of their arguing, the previous part which is not included in this excerpt possesses the similar features that Su interrupts more often and Joe tends to avoid conflicts.

### 3.2 Agreement and Alignment

The rest part reflects a high degree of solidarity and affiliation: after Joe formulates what Su said, there’s a clear-cut division in their conversation. It seems that through the process of formulation, Joe tends to understand why Su insists on having the activity first and finally realize the significance in doing so.

As Extract 2 shows, in lines 036 and 037, the overlap between Joe and Su is a sign of mutual understanding. And in lines 038 and 039, the “collaborative completion” of Su and Joe reveals a high degree of cooperation, which involves an acceptance of each other and aligns both the utterances and understanding. Joe’s rising pitch on the word “why” in line 039 indexes that she is in tune with Su. Then, the following overlaps from line 043 to line 048 reflect their engagement in talking. In line 51, Joe gives a positive comment on Su’s idea that to have the activity first will not be too straightforward, and Su’s “overlap” and “repetition” in line 52 indicates her attentiveness to the conversation that she knows what Joe wants to say even before Joe finishes.

- 044 S: ((laughing))[Y(h)ea:h  
 045 J: (I think [XXXX)  
 046 S: [(XXXXXXX)  
 047 J: Yeah [good good  
 048 S: [(Because if you see all the articles)=  
 049 J: =Yeah yeah  
 050 S: And why?=  
 051 J: =not so: straight[forward  
 052 S: [straightforward  
 053 J: Yeah yeah

What should be noted is that in line 40 Su's laughing voice could be interpreted not only as a strong agreement but as a cue for "change of footing" to index the shift in their conversation style from a theme-guided group discussion to a less formal and more relaxing talk among female friends. And this shift of footing is based on mutual understanding and agreement on their schedule for the presentation. After line 40, the turn-taking strategies they use to signal alignment and solidarity share a lot common with typical women talk, involving extensive simultaneous talk and overlapping.

Simultaneous talk always involves participants' joint construction of a turn that speakers share a floor and speak in a single voice. One example can be seen in Extract 3 when Joe shares her experience talking about on-line games with her students who, however, couldn't understand why a teacher is interested in that. As we can see, in line 284 and line 285, Joe and Su jointly construct a turn and share the floor. Because "joint construction" of a turn requires a high degree of mutual understanding, it can show cooperation and alignment between conversation participants.

Extract 3:

- 284 J: They <couldn't imagine me>, they may think teachers are (.)  
 285 S: Old.  
 286 J: Yea:h.

Apart from that, "overlapping" is also prevalent in this conversation. Except for back-channeling, it often happens when Su and Joe pursue a theme simultaneously. As Extract 4 shows, the overlapping speech and joint construction do not threaten comprehension but present

a sense of intimacy and solidarity. Their rapport for each other increases, as is shown In Extract 5, when Su not only successfully provides utterance completion but also says the exact words in union with Joe.

Extract 4:

- 152 S: [so  
 153 J: [I think that popular culture- although the three articles (.) I think doesn't give us a [very  
 154 S: [direct  
 155 J: Yeah [direct  
 156 S: [Any sort of definition yeah  
 157 J: Popular culture is like (.) you know something different from the [(laughs)  
 158 S: [Different from what you  
 159 teach in the course.  
 160 J: Yeah yeah

Extract 5

- 238 S: E:[m  
 239 J: [I think we've already known what we are going [to do, and it'll be [easier,  
 240 S: [to do [easier,

As we can see, with the footing changes, their relationship gets closer. Accordingly, there is also a change in Joe's management of opinion expression. In Extract 6, in line 074, Joe takes the floor at a possible TRP even when Su may not have finished. She stops Su and suggests the feasibility of using popular culture to enhance teaching at a tertiary level. What merits attention is that Joe prefaces this action indirectly in line 065 where she compliments Su to avoid possible insults, and with the word "but" in line 074, she interrupts Su directly and gives her suggestion. Although her choices of words are still careful ("I'm also thinking about if there is some possibility"), she gives her ideas more

directly, quite different from what she does in Extract 1. And Su, as is shown in the examples, also produces more cooperative interruptions as back-channeling or joint construction, different from what she did in Extract 1 where she executes assertive interruption more often to take the floor for her expression of opinion. This shows that conversation participants do know how to use different turn-taking strategies in different situations. When footing changes, their strategies also change and their relationship get closer. Their capacities make the conversation more cooperative and thus strengthen their mutual understanding.

Extract 5:

- 065 J: It's very nice that you [bring bring [out this you know this a- [activity  
066 S: [Yeah [yeah yeah [article=  
067 J: =because I've been  
068 thinking about you know how to get them [involved in that  
069 S: [popular  
070 yeah  
071 J: because I I em I haven't done [that] be[fore you know em (.)  
072 S: [Yeah] [yeah  
073 ((laughing))S(h)o I I [am just thinking about the activity=  
074 J: [Yeah = but I'm also thinking about if  
075 there's some possibility that this this activity ca:n be you know used in the- in the teaching  
076 of [the elder (.) elder students  
077 S: [(classroom)  
078 Yeah why not why not

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## CONCLUSION

The analyses do show that the coherence of a conversation is based on participants' mutual understanding. To achieve alignment, two participants employed various turn-taking strategies. Although they encountered communication breakdowns and conflicts, with a shared ultimate goal in mind, they finally achieved alignment.

The analyses also show that misunderstanding could happen when participants differ in their preferences for aligning actions. The follow-up discourse-based interview seems to support the view that this misunderstanding could be attributed to the discrepancy between cultural expectations: people from different cultures tend to prefer different communicative behaviors to manifest the possible universal pattern of conversational organization of certain speech act (FitzGerad, 2003). It seems to reinforce the dichotomy associated with high-context (collectivist) and low-context (individualist) cultures that Asian people, especially East Asians and South

East Asians, in high-context cultures are likely to avoid public confrontation in competitive situations such as discussions, meetings, seminars and debates typical in low-context (individual) societies where conflict is often separated from interpersonal relations (Cheng & Tsui, 2009; FitzGerad, 2003). Since Indian culture follows "the Greek pattern that it arose out of conflict", while Chinese culture "minimized dispute and thought of rhetoric as serving propriety and harmony" (Ong, 1992, as cited in Fitzgerald, 2003, p.137), it's not surprising that Su and Joe do not achieve mutual understanding at the beginning of the conversation.

However, most importantly, this analysis demonstrates that conversation participants are active agents. Regardless of their cultural backgrounds, when conflicts happen, they know how to adjust their aligning actions to achieve solidarity. In this study, the two participants' successful outcome suggests that turn-taking strategies characterized by women talk can be chosen by participants to index

their identity as female to recognize each other and achieve group solidarity through change of footing.

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