

## An Analysis of Conversation Structure in Ellen Show

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### Abstract

The conversation analysis theory is applied to analyze the structure and organization of human oral conversation. This paper attempts to apply conversation analysis theory to analyze conversation structure features of Ellen Show from two aspects: global structure and local structure. The features of global structure are analyzed from opening, body and closing process. As to local structure, features in turn-taking strategies, adjacency pairs and feedback are analyzed. The study can help appreciate Ellen Show and contribute to developing people's communication skills and enhancing their discourse competence.

**Key words:** Conversation analysis theory; Ellen Show; Global structure; Local structure

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### INTRODUCTION

TV talk shows has gained wide popularity since it originated in America. Ellen Show, a popular daytime talk show from Columbia Broadcasting System, started in 2003, and has 11 seasons at all until now. The program has been a success in America with increasingly higher audience ratings since its debut because of the host Ellen DeGeneres' relaxing, natural, sincere and humorous style and lots of hot stars' coming to the show. Due to

its coexisting features of both daily conversation and institutional language, the discourse of talk show has aroused many scholars' interest.

This paper attempts to apply conversation analysis (CA) theory to analyze conversation structure features of Ellen Show, which will be conducted from two aspects: global structure and local structure. In terms of global structure, the paper studies the features of Ellen Show from opening, body and closing process. As to local structure, features in turn-taking strategies, adjacency pairs and feedback are analyzed. The study may not only enrich CA theory's research content, broaden its application scope, and presents an integral picture of Ellen Show by concluding its overall and local conversation structure features.

### 1. THEORIES ON CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

Conversation analysis studies the structure and organization of human oral conversation. American sociologists Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson developed CA theory by studying data gathered from naturally occurring conversation. Heritage put forward global conversation structure. Linguists hold that a complete conversation is made up of opening, body and closing. The opening is essential during the whole conversation process. A famous study on conversation opening is Schegloff's "summon-answer" sequence of telephone conversation opening that when someone wants to talk to others, he/she must send summoning signals in a linguistic or non-linguistic way (Schegloff, 1972). The issues involved in opening of face-to-face conversation are similar to those found in telephone opening because one needs to identify an interlocutor in both situations. A whole closing includes topic bounding sequence, pre-closing sequence and closing sequence. Topic bounding

sequence is the first stage of closing. When one party proposes a topic and another party's consents to it leading to a possible termination. Pre-closing sequence marks a forthcoming closing whose typical utterances include "okay" "all right", etc.. The section between the opening and closing is the body of the conversation which the local structure chiefly focuses on.

Local structure analysis usually includes the analysis of turn-taking, adjacency pair, feedback, overlapping and interruption, etc. Liu (2004) holds that turn refers to continuous utterances with communicative function by a speaker within a certain period of time. End of the turn is marked by role change between speaker and listener or by signals of giving up the turn such as two parties' silence. Turn-taking is the most obvious feature of conversation. In short, there are two conversationalists A and B. While A begins to speak, B stops. In return, A stops talking while B is speaking. The whole conversation is organized as A-B-A-B in general. During the process of conversation, participants attempt to practice some strategies to achieve turn-taking.

Schegloff and Sacks proposed adjacency pair which is composed of two adjacent turns by different speakers. A particular first part is followed by a particular second part, like questions take answers. Many first parts have two second parts. For example, requirement is followed by grant or rejection. In this case, grant is considered as the preferred second part which is unmarked while rejection is the dispreferred second part that is marked. In order to avoid dispreferred second part, pre-sequence is used to detect feasibility for the speaker's utterance. In addition, two turns of an adjacency pair are separated sometimes and there may be one or more embedded parts between an adjacency pair. The embedded part is called inserted sequence by Schegloff. (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974)

Feedback is the brief response from the listener to the speaker's utterance which intends to encourage the speaker to continue his/her turn. Although offering no important information, feedback plays a key role since it contributes a lot to a smooth and successful conversation.

## 2. GLOBAL STRUCTURE IN ELLEN SHOW

### 2.1 Three-Step Opening

The three-step opening consists of background introduction, guest's showing up, and phatic communion between the host and guest(s) in the dialogues of Ellen Show.

First of all, Ellen Show begins with the host's monologue to introduce the visiting guest(s), usually with the help of a video, which informs the audience of background information of the guest(s). This step is mainly addressed to the audience so as to help them

understand and appreciate the program better by providing the contextual framework of conversation.

Secondly, the guest(s) shows up along with music usually after the host's such words as "Let's welcome ...". The guest(s) always dances for a while which is a typical feature of Ellen Show. Meanwhile, the majority of guests will greet the audience and the host briefly in verbal or non-verbal ways. To some extent, the first two steps in opening are audience-oriented.

The last step of opening is phatic communion before the formal conversation. Phatic communion provides no important information but sets up a communicative bridge and creates a harmonious atmosphere to make good preparation for the following formal interaction. It is concluded that there are several forms of phatic communion in Ellen Show: a) greeting, like "How are you" "Hello" and "You haven't been here for a long time"; b) utterance rising from the current situation; c) compliment utterance; d) utterance about other people or things. Here's an example examining the three-step opening.

(A) H: ①Our next guest has been a teacher in Chester Pennsylvania for two decades. Last month she learned the state ran out of funds to pay every teacher's salary, so she did something amazing and began working without pay. Here is her story. [Playing a video] ②From Chester, please welcome an incredible woman, Sara Fegurson. [Showing up and dancing]

③H: You are amazing. You are amazing, Sara Fegurson.

G: Thank you very much...

④H: ... So you, what do you want people to know about Columbus elementary?

In ① the host Ellen introduces the guest Sara Fegurson in simple words and then plays a video which gives more detailed background information about the guest. A video is often used to present a visual picture so that the audience can directly and easily gain the information. In ② the guest appears, dancing along with music. She smiles to the audience and briefly greets the host. In ③ they starts phatic communion which in this case belongs to compliment utterance. The host shows her compliment and great respect for the guest by repeating the words "You are amazing", since Sara Fegurson continues teaching children without pay. After this, the formal conversation begins from ④ by raising the first topic "What do you want people to know about Columbus elementary".

### 2.2 Interaction-Oriented Body

As the main content of conversation, body is interaction-oriented, since it is presented chiefly in the Q-A format between the host and guest(s). Questions are designed in advance, but guest(s) may give unexpected answers sometimes. Therefore, control of the host on the turn or topic is reflected in the part. To some extent, the success

of the body is determined by topic transition, turn-taking, adjacency pairs and repair apparatus.

In Ellen Show each conversation talks about several sub-topics centering on a main topic. The following is the body conversation between Ellen and Michelle Obama.

(a) H: You are ready to get to move later. That's we gonna do, right?

G: Awesome, yes.

H: We are gonna move later.

(b) H: All right, now, you really are a good dancer. And are Sasha and Malia good dancers as well...

(c) H: Sasha and Malia whenever you are, you have to know she is a good dancer and she is a cool mom... The entire life of living...as the first family in the White House ...

H: So ... what is the best part for them?

H: Yeah, yeah, they really are, and to see different things in the world. Do they make their own bed?

(d) H: That's great. And Ball that dog is cute.

G: He's very cute.

(e) H: He really did. It's a really smart dog... You are about to celebrate your 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary?

G: Oh, yeah, October, 20 years.

(f) H: Well, that's the true test, isn't it? Now, does he pick up his socks?

(g) H: We are back with the first lady Michelle Obama, and now you have this "Let's move" campaign, which I love... You get up at 4:30 every morning to work out, is that right?

This body part unfolds mainly in the Q-A format between Ellen and Michelle which consists of several topics. In (a) Ellen mentions the main topic which is also the purpose for Michelle's attending to the show. But then they start talking about other sub-topics. (b) - (f) are the sub-topics designed in advance, which respectively talk about her daughter's dancing, the daughters' life in White House, the pet Ball, the 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and her husband Obama. (g) is the main topic that talks about Michelle's new campaign "Let's move". Each topic is made up of several turns and it is always the host Ellen who offers a new topic.

The structure of body is relatively stable, which is composed of several topics. The host put forward each topic and leads the guest to talk. When they finish one topic, they enter into next new one. It finds out that the main topic is usually talked about at last because other sub-topics lay the foundation for the main topic and it's impressive when the main topic is discussed at last. Usually the host's turn is shorter than that of the guest due to their different role in the conversation. The host is responsible for controlling the whole conversation process and she is the one who offers a point to lead the guest to talk and make a conclusion of what the guest has said. But the guest is to answer questions and share information,

which usually takes up a longer turn. Since the guest's response may be out of expectation in talk show, the host needs to improve the ability of quick response to timely arrange the conversation and to strengthen the control force on the whole process.

### 2.3 Three-Step Closing

The closing section is also an influential factor of conversation. A successful closing should be naturally transitioned from body in order to make guest(s) prepare for the termination and lead audience to endless aftertaste. Linguists believe that a complete closing includes topic bounding sequence, pre-closing sequence and closing sequence. The closing part in Ellen Show is flexible, but it follows the three-step sequence.

Firstly, the host raises a topic that may lead to a possible end and guest(s) also agrees to it. For instance, the host Ellen usually gives a present to guest(s), asks guest(s) to play games, or interacts with the audience. Secondly, the host emphasizes the reason for guest(s)' visiting or expresses thanks for guest(s). Finally, the host ends the conversation formally by broadcasting next guest or just with farewells, like "bye-bye" and "see you tomorrow". At the end of Ellen Show, the host will always add the words "Be kind to one another" which can be viewed as its motto. The following examples present the three-step closing in Ellen Show.

(a) H: ①Yeah, good, good, in a good way. All right, the whole audience, so are you enjoying it, right? ②Watch *The Lorax* in theaters on March, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Thanks so much for that song. That was great. Thanks for being here, and I just love you two so much. Thank you so much for being here. ③Listen, when we come back, the big surprise is happening. We'll be back right after this.

(b) H: ①We are back with Kat Dennings and Beth Behrs. And I thought this would be fun to play Heads Up...

H: ②I wanna thank Kat and Beth, and Miley Cyrus and Twitch. ③See you tomorrow. Be kind to one another, bye-bye.

From the above examples, the three-step closing is clearly shown. In example (a) Ellen asks the audience's opinion on the show, which indicates that they have finished their topics and the conversation is going to end. Then Ellen advocates the audience to watch the movie *The Lorax* that is the purpose of the guests' visiting, and she also expresses her thanks for the guests, which presage the forthcoming end. Finally, Ellen ends the conversation formally by broadcasting the next period of the program. In example (b) they play a game which may lead to an end at any time. Then the host thanks the guests, which is the pre-closing sequence. At last the host terminates the conversation with the farewell "See you tomorrow" plus its motto "Be kind to one another". The first two steps in both examples are similar, but the last step is different in the above two examples. The reason is that there are

usually two or three groups of guests in each episode of Ellen Show. The conversation with the first group of guests ends by broadcasting the next guest, like example (a), while the conversation with the last group of guests is terminated with farewells plus its motto, like example (b).

It is clear that the distinct overall structure of Ellen Show consists of three-step opening, interaction-directed body and three-step closing. The features of opening and closing are three-step and audience-oriented, while the body may present different characteristics because of different guests, contents, etc. The body, composed of several topics, proceeds mainly between the host and guest(s) who have their own role in the conversation. The host plays a leading role controlling the whole process and guides guest(s) to talk, while guests are to share information and their turns are usually longer than those of the host. Compared with the body, opening and closing account for less content and seem to be less important. However, those two sections are necessary in conversation and contribute a lot to a successful conversation. A good opening offer clear conversational context and creates a happy atmosphere for the smooth body part. Thus the audience can easily get involved in the show. A successful closing can make conversation even better. A key criterion for a good closing is natural transition, for conversation can't be terminated all of a sudden. In addition, guests and audience need space before the end of conversation so as to get themselves prepared for it.

### 3. LOCAL STRUCTURE IN ELLEN SHOW

#### 3.1 Turn-Taking Strategies

The basic form of turn-taking is A-B-A-B-A-B in Ellen Show, with the host being the controller of the turn and the guest being the receiver of the turn. In order to promote the whole conversation process, the host employs various strategies to win over, maintain and give up the turn.

##### 3.1.1 Turn-Claiming Strategy

Turn-claiming is that one participant attempts to get the floor and become the current speaker. It is found that using interjections or conjunctions is the most frequently used strategy to claim the turn. Facial expression or body language is least used since it is less powerful than verbal strategy to claim the turn. Besides, it is used along with other verbal strategies most of the time. Here are some examples.

(a) G: I actually met Mrs. Obama before...

H: Yeah...every time I see her it reminds me how much I like her. Congratulations on the entertainer of the year 2011.

(b) G1: And I'll say the biggest difference... Everybody is really good.

H: [Raising her tone] and your favorite part... is not seeing them, and really figures out do I want to have that person.

G2: ... when you hear something you like, just hit the button...

(c) G: ... So he would just have jackets on the edges of the door...there is a hanger. You know, but, no, he isn't getting any points.

H: You can't do everything right...

In example (a), the guest talks a lot about his previous experience of meeting Michelle Obama at the beginning. Due to the limited time, Ellen claims the turn using the interjection "yeah" at a proper point. She first expresses her agreement with the guest and then she raises the first topic to arrange their conversation. In example (b), the second guest says a little while the first talks a lot. Therefore, the host claims the floor by raising her tone in order to distribute the turn to the second guest. In example (c) the guest talks a lot about her husband Obama's living habit. When it's time for commercial break, Ellen claims the turn by supplementing the guest's meaning.

##### 3.1.2 Turn-Holding Strategy

If the current speaker has something more to say, he/she needs to make use of some strategies to maintain the turn, and that is the turn-holding strategy. The most common turn-holding strategies are the use of tone or closing remarks at the end of discourse, such as "but" "and" "however" "then", etc.. The following examples illustrate how the host maintains the turn.

(d) H: Right, or hope to god, they pick you though everybody is fighting for the same person. [Raising the tone] Because you must get frustrated if you won't that person and they pick somebody else.

(e) H: He is... but he might be at the Super Bowl.

The above two examples respectively maintains the turn by raising the tone and using "but". The host holds her turn to express clearly what she wants to say in order to guide the guest to continue the topic.

##### 3.1.3 Turn-Yielding Strategy

When the current speaker finishes his/her talking, he/she will give up the turn and give it to the next speaker. The examples below illustrate the turn-yielding strategies.

(f) H: ... you all be traveling together in the same car. Are you imagining?

G1: Yes, to travel everywhere together.

G2: Just like this.

(g) H: ... but do they think you are a cool when you dance? [Slow down]

G: No, no...

(h) H: ...unbelievable. [Silence]

G: It was such an honor...

(i) H: So you are gonna be at the Super Bowl. [Gesture]

G: ...I am going to be at the SB singing with a microphone at television.



In example (f) Ellen yields the turn to ask guests to answer the question. She doesn't nominate the next speaker and just offers the question. The first guest self selects him as the next speaker, and then the second guest also answers the question. It is a three-turn adjacency pair presented as Q-A1-A2. In example (g) the host slows down the last syllable to send signal for the guest that she has finished and wants to yield the turn. In example (h) when the host pauses for a second, she means to give up the turn. The guest recognizes it, so she receives the turn and becomes the next speaker. In example (i) the host makes the gesture of inviting the guest to speak at the end of her talking so that she yields the turn to the guest.

### 3.2 Adjacency Pairs

Adjacency pair is the fundamental unit of conversation. The main form of adjacency pair in the body part of Ellen Show is Q-A type with the host questioning and the guest answering in general. Of course, there are some other types of adjacency pairs, for instance, requirement-grant, statement-confirmation, etc..

(a) H: ...you have to tell me that you must work out every single day.

G: Yeah, I trained and ...

(b) G: ...I just wanna to ... the best way I could.

H: You did, you did it...

The two examples respectively belong to requirement-grant and statement-confirmation adjacency pairs. No matter what type it is, the above adjacency pairs stick to strict adjacency pair rules and they belong to regular adjacency pairs. That is, an adjacency pair is composed of two turns by two speakers which are ordered. There are another two kinds of adjacency pairs.

First of all, the particular first part requires a particular second part and the first part may have two second parts, one being preferred and the other dispreferred. In order to avoid embarrassment caused by dispreferred second part, pre-sequence is required, which serves to make an exploration before the speaker implements the verbal behavior. The speaker will start the formal adjacency pair when he/she gets a satisfactory answer. Pre-sequence itself is an independent adjacency pair.

(c) G: Am I allowed to cut you off?

H: Yes, of course, you can do whatever you want.

Example (c) is a pre-sequence. At the beginning of the conversation, the guest asks Ellen whether he can interrupt for a second. When he makes sure that he can do so, he puts forward his formal adjacency pair.

In addition, another exception is inserted sequence. Inserted sequence is more common and is often used when the listener attempts to avoid or delay responding to the speaker. However, since the host is responsible for asking questions, he/she hardly has the opportunity to use inserted sequence to impose an influence. Instead, it is the

guest who often uses inserted sequence to respond to the host. Look at the following example.

(d) H: And are they really aggressive with you? ①

G: Sort of... define "aggressive", uh...②

H: Grabbing you? ③

G: sometimes, sometimes. ④

In example (d), the guest finds that he doesn't clearly understand the meaning of "aggressive" by the host when he is answering the question, so he inserts a sequence to ask the host to define the meaning. Then he answers the question again. ②③ is an inserted sequence, and ①④ is an adjacency pair. It is presented as Q1-Q2-A2-A1.

Therefore, there are three kinds of adjacency pairs in Ellen Show: regular adjacency pairs, pre-sequence, and inserted sequence. The regular adjacency pairs are in the majority, since conversation is a cooperative activity and conversationalists need to comply with cooperation principle and the politeness principle. The TV talk show is live and their conversation can be broadcast immediately to people around a nation even the world. Therefore, conversationalists are cautious to speak so that they use pre-sequence to make an exploration. Inserted sequence shows that adjacency pairs are unnecessarily adjacent.

### 3.3 Feedback

Clancy (1996) holds that feedback refers to those brief reactive signals from the listener to the current speaker's content. Including verbal and non-verbal forms, feedback is usually short and simple aiming to encourage the current speaker rather than interrupt and claim the turn. The following examples explain the function of feedback. The words in parenthesis are feedback from the host.

(a) G: You know, they're pretty good. I think they each got one of our genes. (Oh, oh) Sasha has my genes.

(b) G: ...at a performance, and they are like [Making an expression] (Ur) so I'm like, you gotta smile, cause people need to know that you are happy. And they are like, I'm smiling. (Yeah) So I usually lean over to SM and say I'm gonna start dancing.

(c) G: ... it's not you that's neat; it's the people who are... (Right) The people who pick your socks, those are the neat people.

From the above examples, we can see the host often uses such verbal feedback as Ur, yeah, oh, and right. She doesn't mean to claim the floor but to tell the current that she is listening in order to encourage the speaker to continue. The host Ellen prefers to use "ur" or "yeah" to give feedback. She sometimes uses "right", but seldom uses "oh".

As for non-verbal feedback, it is facial expression, like eye expression and smile, or body language, such as nodding. Every time the host listens to the guest, she will look at the guest, nodding or smiling sometimes. It is true that the host always gives non-verbal feedback to the guest.

The turn-taking strategies include turn-claiming strategy, turn-holding strategy and turn-yielding strategy. The host Ellen prefers to claim the turn by using interjection or conjunction, to maintain the turn by using closing remarks at the end of discourse, and to give up the turn by initiating the guest to give the second part of an adjacency pair. The basic adjacency pair is Q-A type in Ellen Show. However, there are other types of adjacency pair, like compliment-appreciation, request-grant, etc.. Pre-sequence and inserted sequence are needed sometimes in order to reach their expected purposes. The author also figures out that Ellen would like to use verbal feedback “ur” “yeah” to indicate that she is listening and to inspire the guest to share more information.

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## CONCLUSION

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Many scholars have done researches on conversation of TV talk show, but usually focused on comparison between language of talk show and daily conversation or on conversation structure analysis of TV news program, ignoring those entertainment TV shows, like Ellen Show and Oprah Winfrey Show. Ellen Show enjoys great popularity in America, China and many other countries. This study shows the whole conversation process of Ellen Show, namely how conversationalists enter into, develop and exit from conversation by analyzing the clear global structure. And the local structure in the body is analyzed, aiming to understand how the host control the

turn and give feedback to the guest and what the features of adjacency pairs in Ellen Show are. The study can help audience appreciate Ellen Show and contribute to developing people’s communication skills and enhancing their discourse competence which is crucial for a successful conversation.

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