Chapter LIV

Turn Taking in E-Mail Discussions*

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates turn taking in naturally occurring e-mail discussions. In e-mail discussions, participants can self select to contribute at any time, turns cannot be interrupted, and adjacency cannot be guaranteed. However, participants engage in recognisable discussions and “speaker” change occurs. Patterns of turn taking can be observed in the data, and there are many parallels with spoken conversation. In e-mail discussions, the current participant may select a new participant, and those selected usually respond; participants may self select (the most common method of turn taking); and the current participant may choose to continue, either by writing an extended turn or by sending separate consecutive messages. Response is not obligatory unless a respondent has been specified. There is no priority system through which a change of participant takes priority. Because there is less pressure toward current speaker selects last, the system encourages multiple participants to engage in the discussion.

INTRODUCTION

It appears likely that conversation should be considered the basic form of speech-exchange system, with other systems on the array representing a variety of transformations of conversation’s turn-taking system, to achieve other types of turn-taking systems (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, p.730).

Central to Conversation Analysis (CA) is the examination of conversational turn taking, the rules for which were described by Sacks et al. (1974). In contrast with spoken conversation, e-mail discussions can appear chaotic: in e-mail discussions, participants can self select to contribute at any time, turns cannot be interrupted, and there is no guarantee that a response will be received adjacent to the turn it is responding to. To date, various researchers, for example, Mur-
ray (1985, p. 212), have made passing comments
to the effect that turn taking does not apply to
computer mediated communication (CMC); however, despite the apparent “interactional inco-
erherence” of CMC discourse (Herring, 1999, title),
participants do engage in successful interactions.
This might suggest that turn taking is not absent,
merely different from spoken conversation, but no
studies have been found that investigate in detail
how turn taking functions in e-mail discussions.
This chapter addresses this deficiency and looks
at how participants construct successful interac-
tion. It addresses the following questions: (a) is
turn taking in e-mail discussions governed by
any rules of interaction; (b) if it is governed by
any rules, in what respects are these similar to
and different from the rules for turn taking in
spoken conversation.

BACKGROUND

“Rules” for Turn Taking in
Conversation

Sacks et al. (1974, p.704) found that turn taking
in conversation was governed by the following
rules:

1. For any turn, at the initial transitional re-
levance place of a turn-constructional unit:
a. If the turn-so-far is so constructed as
to involve the use of a “current speaker
selects next” technique, then the party
so selected has the right and is obliged
to take the next turn to speak; no oth-
ers have such rights or obligations, and
transfer occurs at that place.
b. If the turn-so-far is so constructed as
not to involve the use of a “current
speaker selects next” technique, then
self-selection for next speakership may,
but need not, be instituted; first starter
acquires rights to a turn, and transfer
occurs at that place.
c. If the turn-so-far is so constructed as not
to involve the use of a “current speaker
selects next” technique, then current
speaker may, but need not continue,
unless another self-selects.

2. If, at the initial transition-relevance place of
an initial turn-constructional unit, neither 1a
nor 1b has operated, and, following provision
of 1c, the current speaker has continued,
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.

These rules were found to operate in priority
order as listed above. Thus, 1a takes priority over
1b, and so forth.

Sacks et al. envisage a “continuum” of “speech
exchange systems” from casual conversation at
one extreme to debates and ceremonies at the other,
predicting that other speech exchange systems
will vary from the benchmark of conversation in
the ways in which turn taking is handled (1974,
p. 730).

Developments in Conversation
Analysis

Since the chapter outlining CA by Sacks et al. in
1974, several later writers have summarised the
features of CA (see e.g., Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998;
ten Have, 1999). Essential elements according
to Heritage (2001, p. 52) are the use of naturally
occurring data and the assumption that there is
order in spoken interaction.

Of particular relevance to the study of e-mail
discussions is work that investigates institutional
talk, see for example, the collection of papers
in Drew and Heritage (1992), which includes
papers on talk in psychiatry (Bergmann), news
interviews (Clayman, Greatbatch), the courtroom
(Atkinson, Drew), job interviews (Button), general
practice consultation (Heath), and emergency calls
(Zimmerman). This research on the organis-
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