

The Priority Structure behind Overlap of Multi-Person Conversation

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Abstract: This article explores the priority structure underlying overlapping speech in multi-person conversations. While most research on overlapping talk has focused on resolution and management, there remains a gap in understanding multi-party conversations. Drawing on a self-collected corpus of dialogue materials, the author analyzes existing data to examine the influence of underlying priority structures on overlapping phenomena. By delving into the observable implicit communicative structure and regular characteristics, this study sheds light on the prioritization dynamics in multi-person conversations. The findings contribute to conversation analysis research and enhance our comprehension of the complexities involved in managing overlaps in communication.

Keywords: Conversation analysis, Multi-person conversation, Overlap, Priority structure.

1. Introduction

As a common speech phenomenon in conversation, overlapping talk was first raised as a research problem in the paper of Harvey Sacks, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Gail Jefferson (1974) on turn-taking [1]. Gail Jefferson (1983, 1986) was the first to systematically examine the organizational structure of overlapping talk in turn and its starting position [2]. The focus of research on overlapping talk has since shifted to how it is resolved, how it is managed, and why. So far, most domestic research on overlapping conversations is biased towards the dialogue between two parties, and there are relatively few studies on multi-person conversations. Priority is one of the core issues of conversation analysis research, which refers to some observable implicit communicative structure and some regular characteristics [3]. This article is based on the author's self-collected corpus, collecting various dialogue materials. Existing material is analyzed theoretically, and the influence of underlying priority structures on overlapping phenomena is explored through the study of multi-person conversations.

2. Conversation Analysis

2.1. Answer Preference in the Same Turn

2.1.1. Different people have different emphasis on the same thing

When multiple people are having a conversation, different people may ask different questions about the same thing. For example:

Example 1:

A: My dad once bought me a mobile phone, and I lost it three times.

B: [What kind of] cell phone?

C: [Is it a smart] phone?

In Example 1, it can be seen that B and C asked different questions about the facts stated by A. Although they both revolved around the same topic "mobile phone", the angles and ways of asking questions were different. B prioritizes understanding the main content of the story when asking

questions, and C prioritizes understanding the importance of the story by judging the value of the mobile phone. In such overlapping phenomena, we can find that different people have different thinking angles on the same thing without interference from others. Some people care about the main body of the story, while others put value judgments before subject of things.

2.1.2. Preference to answer when overlapping messages are received

Example 2:

C: [Blackberry] cell phone?

B: [Nokia]?

A: Huh?

C: Blackberry?

A: <@Nokia. @>

In Example 2, B and C asked A a question at the same time, and A could not hear clearly when they overlapped. At this time, C repeated her question. Instead, A repeated B's question and laughed, that is a prioritized response to B's question. It can be seen that when receiving different information at the same time, people tend to choose the aspects they are familiar with. This is in line with the "face theory" proposed by academic circles. The so-called face, from a psychological point of view, reflects the value of individual self-esteem and the importance of oneself related to social relations and the whole society [4]. Face is linked to self-esteem. In a conversation, in order to take into account self-esteem, the talker will subconsciously choose to protect his own face, and he will tend to choose more suitable questions to answer.

2.2. Overlap between different turns

2.2.1. Preference to answer when overlapping messages are received

When conducting a long conversation, multiple conversation turns are bound to occur. It often happens that certain sentences pop up in the next turn to fill in the blanks of the previous turn, resulting in overlap, which is especially common in multi-person conversations. According to *Conversational Structure Analysis*, there are two main ways

to take turns: the speaker chooses the next speaker or the listener chooses himself. In the case where only two people are involved in the conversation, according to the context, the two parties in the conversation take turns, which is not only a process in which the speaker naturally transfers the speaking right after completing the turn, but also a process in which the listener receives a signal that the speaker is about to terminate the turn [5]. However, due to the overlapping phenomenon, the turn-taking signal becomes unclear. Sometimes before the turn of the conversation is over, it is forced to end by the insertion of others. In order to ensure the integrity of the turn, the speaker of the previous turn usually supplements the unfinished turn in next turn.

2.2.2. Insertion from a person who already away from the conversation

In a multi-person conversation, it is easier for the interlocutor to step away from the conversation than in a conversation between two people. Because even if he moves away, the rest of speakers is still in the conversation and will not bring it to a screeching halt. When the distant talker wants to rejoin, his insertion may overlap with the others' voices.

Example 3:

C: It was my senior year of high school, and my parents wanted to buy me a cell phone.

A: Well.

C: I thought it would be fine if it was just an ordinary

one and could make phone calls.

But my dad insist to buy me one with a camera

[then]

B: [why]

C: Well.

It's just a one with a camera on the back.

In Example 3, C is telling A about her experience of losing her cell phone, and the focus is on how the phone was lost. The description of "with camera" is just a factual statement by C, probably to emphasize the higher value of the phone compared to a normal phone. For B, who has been away from the conversation for a long time, if she wants to rejoin the conversation, she needs to ask a question about such a sentence. Generally speaking, the description immediately after the word "definitely" is what the speaker wants to emphasize. So, B naturally throws out a question about this description. But since this is not the point that C wants to emphasize, B's question obviously interrupts C's narrative, and therefore seems abrupt in this conversation. C gives a non-priority answer to this, and she does not give a direct explanation to B's question. It shows that in the case of a sudden interruption, the speaker will give a non-priority answer in order to continue his or her narrative.

3. Study Results

Table 1. Prioritized structures in different overlaps

Overlap Type	Times	Priority Structure	Remark
Different questions about the same thing	3	YES	personal preference
Answers to different questions	2	YES	personal preference
Turn supplement	1	NO	N/A
Insertion from person far away	1	YES	Continue narrative with non-priority answer

The above table shows that there are various kind of overlap phenomena within a conversation of about only one minute in length. Among them, three overlap phenomena all contain obvious priority structures. From here, we can see that overlapping phenomena are very common in multi-person conversations, and these overlap phenomena contain many priority structures. From the observations, the author summarizes the following conclusions:

In the face of overlapping questions, respondents will subconsciously make priority choices. When faced with overlapping questions, the respondent will make a judgment call and give priority to one of the questions, which of course is a non-priority for the other question. This theory can be applied to everyday questioning sessions: If the questioner wants the other party to choose to answer his own question among multiple questions, he should ask the question in the simplest possible way and grasp the area of interest of the other party. Such cases are common in many-to-one news media interviews, or in other conversations where overlap is common.

When already away from the conversation for a period of time, release the signal and rejoin. After leaving the session for a period of time, if a person wants to rejoin the session, he can release the signal by asking questions. But it should be noted that it is best to find the right time to join after listening

for a while, so as to avoid asking questions that are not related to the narration, interrupting the narrator, and causing unnecessary embarrassment.

4. Conclusion

Overlapping phenomena often occur in multi-person conversations, and behind these overlapping phenomena there are various priority structures. By analyzing different priority structures, we can derive theoretical knowledge that can be applied to real conversations. There are many different reasons behind the overlap phenomenon, and priority structures are one of them. By strengthening the study of the overlap phenomenon in multi-person conversations, we can better explore the mechanisms behind it, which can help further the work of conversation analysis.

References

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