

A NOTE ON CONVERSATIONAL INTERRUPTIONS

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In their seminal article, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) examine procedures for turn-taking in conversation. Sometimes, they note, a speaker will select who has the next turn, but more frequently a "self-select" system operates, whereby the participants in a conversation themselves determine when they wish to speak.

But how, ask Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, do the interlocutors secure a turn in the ongoing flow of another speaker's utterance? To answer this question the authors introduce the notion of "transition relevance place", that is, a point in the turn-holder's utterance where another speaker is most likely to take up a turn. Clearly the most obvious transition relevance place occurs at the end of an utterance sentence, where a pause may be made. However, clause or other syntactic boundaries also offer opportunities for other speakers to interrupt. As Sacks et al point out, if conversational participants do not take up a turn at a transition relevance place the turn holder will normally continue.

The valuable observations of these authors are, however, very much concerned with the formal 'mechanics' of conversation; questions that still need to be answered are: why participants wish to interrupt and whether it is possible to describe the nature of conversational content at the point at which interruptions occur. This note takes the pragmatic categories introduced by Grice (1975) as a possible starting point for research into why conversational participants interrupt each other. We look at instances of interruptions taken from the Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson paper and suggest that one reason for interruptions may derive from conversational

participants applying Grice's notions of Quantity (amount of information), Quality (veracity), Relation (relevance) and Manner (clarity).

The sections below cite interruptions illustrating the four Gricean maxims in the order given at the end of the preceding paragraph. Square brackets are used where an interruption occurs, hesitations are indicated by colons and the terms A and B are used for speaker and interruptor respectively (even in examples 10 and 14).

2.1. Some examples of interruption that can be accounted for in terms of Quantity are as follows:

- 1) Desk: What is your last name [Lorraine
Caller: Dinnis
Desk: What?
Caller: Dinnis
(p.702 (a))
- 2) A: Uh you been down here before [havenche
B: Yeh.
(p.703 (g))
- 3) A: Well if you knew my argument why did you bother
to [a:sk
B: [Because I'd like to defend my argument.
(p.707 (4))
- 4) Tourist: Has the park changed much?
Parky: Oh yes
Old man: Th' funfair changed it 'n [ahful lot [didn't it
Parky: Th - [That-
Parky: That changed it.
(p.721 (25))
- 5) Louise: I think it's really funny [to watch
[Ohhh God!
(p.721 (27))

In all these examples the interruptor cuts the speaker off at the point where he feels that enough has been said. He believes he is able to predict the rest of the utterance and

thus enforces the maxim of **Quantity** on the speaker.

In the first example it is evident from the situation of telephone communication that Loraine is being addressed. Loraine does not, therefore, expect to be addressed by name, and provides an answer to the question before the questioner has finished. In 2) we have an instance of a Labovian "B event". A makes a statement about a B event which, under the Labovian rules, A interprets as a question. This is sufficient to indicate sentence function, and A's tag question is thus superfluous as far as B is concerned.

4) differs from 3) in as far as the Parky undoubtedly feels that the old man's "'n ahful lot" is superfluous in view of the fact that he, the Parky, has already taken account of quantity in his answer "yes" to the tourist's question "Has (it) changed much?". He thus attempts to interrupt both before the quantifier, and before the tag. In 3) however there is a prediction of content by B from the situation, rather than from what has already been said. We may assume from 5), too, that what is funny can only, in fact, be watched, in the same way as in

6) Kan: I saw 'em last nigh [at uhm school
] They're a riot
 (p.721(26))

the event referred to could only have taken place (or has already been referred to as taking place) at the school.

In all these cases, then, the second speaker ensures that A "(does) not make (his) contribution more informative than is required" (Grice, op. cit., p.45) either due to the situation, the nature of the interaction or to shared assumptions.

2.2. Interruptions that invoke Grice's second maxim, that of Quality — "try to make your contribution one that is true" — are commonplace within our experience. Nevertheless it is worth quoting the following illustrative examples from Sacks et al.

- 7) Lil: Bertha's lost, on our scale, about fourteen pounds.
 Damora: Oh [no
 Jean: [Twelve pounds I think wasn't it.
 (p.707(2))
- 8) Roger: Your just agreeing?.....
 Al: With us. Just going along with us.
 Jim: No
 Roger: Saying 'yes, yes' [Hehhheh hehh
 Jim: [Well, i - i - it's true.
 Jim: Everything he said is true, so.....
 (p.708(12))
- 9) J. But by the time you get out of the shower and get
 your d - self [ready
 M: [well I'm not ready.
 (p.722(31))

The three examples above illustrate cases where a speaker interrupts to correct what he believes to be false. In example 8) Jim interrupts, (or is, at least, anxious to override Roger's laughter) to answer a false charge being made against him after his initial single word denial, 'no', has failed to convince. Example 9) combines the application of the maxim of Quantity observed in 2.1. with that of Quality; M predicts what J is about to say to the extent that he is able to do without the adjectival complement and, at the same time, contradict it. Sometimes A may not tell the whole truth and B will interrupt to provide it:

- 10) B: Well, it wasn't me [::
 A: [No, but you know who it was.
 (p.707(5))

The illustrations above were concerned with the first maxim of quality where B constrains A from saying what is false. The second maxim of quality requires that speakers "do not say that for which (they) lack adequate evidence". B interrupting A on these grounds may take the form of requesting such evidence,

- 11) R: Hey: the place looks different
 F: Yea: hh
 K: Ya have to see all ou [r new
 it does?
 (p.720 (23))

even though, in this interchange, K seems on the point of supplying it. On other occasions, people interrupt to **provide** evidence supporting a point made by a previous speaker:

- 12) Claire: So then we were worse o - 'n she went down four...
 Chloe: Well there it was **her** fault [Claire
 Claire: [Yeah she said one
 [no trump, an I said two, an'
 t' two.....
 (p.704 (b))

Sometimes such evidence is provided cumulatively through interruption:

- 13) B: Maybelle's takin' this week off, and she — you know something, she looked kinda tired.
 A: Uh huh. Uhm, well I guess she's been working pretty steadily [hasn't she
 B: [Yeah, she's been working pretty steadily, and she's had some difficult cases.
 (p.722 (32))

On the other hand, speaker B may interrupt A to indicate that he accepts a statement and **does not need** evidence.

- 14) Ava: He he'n Jo were like on the outs, yih know?
 [So uh
 Bee: [They always are (hh)hhh
 (p.704 (a))

The final example above illustrates, besides **Quality**, the close proximity which Grice himself admits between quantity and relation. No evidence is required; it would be superfluous and irrelevant, since Bee assures Ava that she does not need to be convinced any further of the truth of Ava's last statement.

2.3. We now turn to further illustrations of interruptions on the grounds of **Relation** or 'relevance'. A speaker may

interrupt another when he feels that A's contribution is irrelevant to what he, B, wishes to know:

- 15) V: Th' guy says tuh me — 'hh my son [didid
[Wuhjeh do
(p.731)

One common instance of irrelevance is when speakers "protest too much", very often out of politeness, knowing (or hoping) that some sympathy or assistance will be offered. In the following example an offer is obviously forthcoming, as evidenced by B's attempted interruptions. On this occasion, however, B does not succeed, as A re-interrupts to conclude his 'excuses'.

- 16) A: Well, we just wondered, we just come in from Alexandria.
Just got home and [these winds were so
B: [Mm. hm
A: bad, we're gettin scared 'again' heh
B: No, [we doh
A: [And we wondered whether we should go to a motel
or something.
B: No, you stay right where you are.
(p.721(28))

Grice himself admits that relevance "conceals a number of problems" (p.46), not least its evident overlap with quantity. Without wishing to enter further into this complexity, therefore, we hasten on to Grice's final maxim of clarity!

2.4. Grice's maxim of MANNER is glossed thus:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief.
4. Be orderly.

An example of B helping A to achieve all this (and more!) occurs at a central point in Sacks et al's paper:

- A: So it could happen to :: some people, hh But I : I wouldn' uh I wouldn' : I won - I say I wouldn' uh (pause) I don't know of anybody - that - 'cause anybody that I really didn't dig I wouldn't have the time, uh a:a: to waste I would say, uh if I didn' [And you
- B: consider it wasting to jist be - you know - to jist like talking an' being with somebody.
- A: Yeah. If you haven't got nothin' goin (you're) jist wastin' your time.

(p.723(34))

B here interrupts A's remark, not only to clarify the gist for himself, but, it seems, even to help A continue.

3. In their original conception Grice's maxims are evidently to be seen as directed at only one speaker with a view to explaining how that speaker achieves 'implicature'. In other words his emphasis is not so much on

Do not say what you believe to be false

as on

Only say what you believe to be false when your interlocutor realises you are doing so intentionally and can therefore understand your implicature.

In this paper we suggest that the maxims could however, be considered in their own right when applied to more than one participant. Conversation proceeds by speakers applying the maxims to each other as well as to themselves. They may be rephrased in the light of our observations, as:

1. Let your interlocutor know when he has been as informative as necessary.
2. Let your interlocutor know when he has said what you believe to be false.
3. Let your interlocutor know when he's saying is no longer relevant.
4. Let your interlocutor know when he's being obscure.

with an additional strategic maxim:

5. Interrupt him if necessary to enforce these.