A Case Study of Turn-Taking In a Meeting

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Introduction

This paper presents a case study of the turn-taking patterns that occur in a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) committee meeting. There has been very little research on proceedings of meetings with participants of various cultures. Such a study is significant in view of the fact that examining turn-taking in such a situation will inevitably add to our general knowledge of how teachers communicate with parents and vice-versa, and by extension, provide insights into the way Malaysians interact in all meeting-like situations.

1.0 Aims of study

The study has two main aims:

(i)   to study and describe how parents and teachers construct turns at speaking and how they allocate them during the different phases of a PTA meeting.

(ii)   to examine whether the communication between teachers and parents in a semi-formal interaction differs from the current widely accepted models of successful turn exchanges in other situations.

Since meetings are a form of interaction among people, they are highly predisposed to patterns of behaviour which are culture-specific. What is considered as a norm in one culture may not be accepted in another culture. Generally, speakers in a multi-lingual society like Malaysia comprising the Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others, have to adjust to various cultural norms and expectations when they interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. In order to achieve effective communication, an understanding of cultural influences in the way people communicate is vital.

Thus, the secondary aim of this study is to look at how conversation is managed among committee members of different cultural backgrounds.

2.0 Sample

One PTA meeting in a school in Petaling Jaya, comprising nine members was selected to form the sample :

-       2 Malays (1 male and 1 female)
-       5 Chinese (1 male and 4 females)
-       2 Indians (1 male and 1 female)

The PTA meetings would lie somewhere between informal conversations and formal meetings and these, to the researcher make interesting situations for investigation. Furthermore, a meeting room interaction, among people who knew each other over a period of time with a chairperson and an agenda, to give shape and direction to the discussion would be academically rewarding. The fact that the people involved in the meeting and the issues have an on-going status would make the study of PTA meetings a good source of insights into issues such as effects of shared knowledge in spoken discourse and the possibilities for exploiting or responding to established conventions within a semi-formal situation.

3.0 Methodology

The data for the study was obtained in the following ways:

(i)   audio-recording the proceedings of the meeting
        A tape-recorder was used to gather the data for two main reasons:

        (a)   the data needed to be as authentic as possible
        (b)   it was felt that video-recording may generate unnatural behaviour among the participants.

        Prior permission was obtained from the Chairperson and the Headmistress to audio record the PTA meeting. The Chairperson informed the committee that the meeting was being recorded and thus the use of a tape-recorder did not raise any suspicions of a new variable being introduced at the meeting.

(ii)   observing relevant non-verbal behaviour
        There is a great deal of research which highlights the importance of both verbal and non-verbal elements in the construction of conversation. However, the researcher was not able to record all the non-verbal cues. Only those considered relevant to turn-taking were recorded.

        The sample was verified through:

(iii)   a questionnaire given to an experienced PTA member to verify representativeness of the sample selected for investigations

        The data obtained through the questionnaire provided confirmation that the sample meeting used as a case-study in this research was typical.

(iv)   examination of relevant documents

        The role and the objectives of the PTA meetings had to be examined as the sample for this research was a PTA meeting. Therefore it was necessary to examine:

        a)   the constitution of the PTA
        b)   minutes of the meeting preceding the sample meeting
        c)   the agenda of the meeting which helped the researcher in analyzing the flow of topics in the meeting

4.0 Definition of terms

turn-taking - "Conversation is characterised by turn-taking: one participant, A, talks, stops; another, B, starts, talks, stops; and the A-B-A-B-A-B distribution of talk across two participants is obtained. Thus when two people communicate, they will have to synchronize their utterances to avoid constant clashes. This makes turn-taking one of the most obvious features of conversation." (Levinson,1983.)

back channel - are listeners' brief reaction to the speaker's message supplying him with feedback and signaling attention, agreement and various emotional reactions.

adjacency pairs - are paired utterances of which question-answer, greeting-greeting, offer-acceptance, etc are examples.

side sequence - this is another type of embedded sequence proposed by Jefferson (1972). The general drift of a conversation is sometimes halted at an unpredictable point by a request for clarification and then the conversation picks up again where it left off.

Speech acts - are the minimal terms of the set speech situation/event. When we speak, we perform such acts as giving information, making statements, asking questions, giving warnings, making promises, approving and apologizing.

transition relevance point (TRP) - may be conceived as a point of possible completion of linguistic units. Given that a turn may be constituted by a clause as well as single lexical units, transition points are extremely variable in length.

5.0 Models of Turn-taking

5.1 The Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (SSJ) Model

In this model, the turn-taking system for conversation can be described in terms of two components and a set of rules.

Component 1 - Turn-Constructional Component
There are various unit-types with which a speaker may set out to construct a turn. Unit-types for English include sentential, clausal, phrasal, and lexical constructions. The boundaries of these units are defined as having 'transition

relevance'. In other words, the first possible completion of a first such unit constitutes an initial transition-relevance point (TRP). Such transition-relevance points provide listeners with the opportunity to take the next turn.

Component 2 - Turn-Allocational Component
Turn allocational techniques are distributed into two groups:

a)   those in which a next turn is allocated by current speaker selecting a next speaker
b)   those in which a next turn is allocated by self-selection

Features of the SSJ Model

a)   only one person speaks at a time
b)   the number of participants can vary
c)   the order of speaker turns is variable, not pre-set
d)   turn size is not fixed, but varies
e)   the content of speaker turns is spontaneous
f)   occurrences of simultaneous speech are infrequent and brief
g)   techniques exist for repairing turn exchange errors
h)   turn allocation techniques are used by the speaker or the listener to regulate the exchanges

5.2 The Sinclair and Brazil Model

Transcribed classroom discourse was analyzed by Sinclair and Brazil (1982) using a model they devised. They perceive a three-part interaction pattern (initiation - response - feedback). Each of these elements, is a move. Not all exchanges have all three elements present, but in teacher talk the I-R-F structure is regular

5.3 The Duncan and Fishe Model

Both Sacks et al. (1974) and Duncan and Fishe (1977) have described systems of turn-taking that optimize the smooth exchange of the turn. While both models adhere to the notion that the smooth exchange (minimal or no overlap in speech) is a structurally undifferentiated phenomenon, the models differ in their explication of the functional elements by which smoothness is maintained and can be characterized.

In the system modeled by Duncan and Fishe (1977), the listeners have the option of taking the turn at terminal boundaries of phonemic clauses marked by Turn Signal display. The Turn Signal is empirically derived from an analysis of smooth and simultaneous exchanges.

As in the SSJ model, it is possible to influence the listener's behaviour in taking the turn. While in the SSJ model the influence is derived primarily through the illocutionary force of the utterance, in Duncan's model it is primarily through the speaker's use of a strategy signal which is composed of nonverbal behaviour (Duncan et al. 1979).

6.0   Findings

6.1   Overall Findings

There were 823 turns in the 90-minute long meeting. The meeting consisted of 34 transactions or topics, marked off by boundary exchanges and comprising one or more sequences.

The meeting agenda fell clearly into three main phases: the opening phase, the medial phase and the closing phase. The 'main business' of the encounter, it was found, was carried out in the medial phase.

(a)   The opening phase of the meeting was short. The meeting started with greetings from the Chairperson and the declaration of the meeting number

Extract 1

Yap: Good evening everybody Meeting number 6.
All.   No, number 7

(b)   Most of the transactions were in the medial phase. The first item on the agenda was "Confirmation of the Minutes" 34 transactions were present during this agenda item. The second item on the agenda was "Matters Arising" There were 21 transactions during this agenda item. There were fairly long transactions as well as very brief transactions. In all these transactions, the Chairperson initiated and ended the transactions. In all these transactions, there was a high level of shared knowledge as no explanation of the topic was required.

The third item on the agenda was "Other matters", during which 11 new issues were raised. These were not initiated by the Chairperson but by the other members. All the transactions in this agenda item were long as the new initiations required an explanation.

(c) The closing phase had only one transaction, 'Next Meeting' The committee discussed the matter and decided that the meeting would be two weeks before school closed for the holidays:

6.2 Structure of transactions

Among the transactions identified, 24 or 70.6% were initiated by the Chairperson. Only 10 topics were initiated by other participants.These 10 topics were initiated by four participants. The remaining five participants did not initiate any transactions. The four members who initiated the new transactions held important posts in the PTA committee. This shows that status definitely affects the turn-taking patterns in a meeting. Cheepen (1990) takes the view that "the status patterns which are adopted in a dialogue are an important aspect of both transactional and interactional encounters in that they serve to define the precise nature of the encounter, and to enable the participants to pursue their goal, whether that goal be transactional or interactional."

Even when these transactions were initiated by the other 4 members, the Chairperson invariably closed all topics. It was observed that 24 topics were initiated by the Chairperson and all the 34 transactions were closed by him. This emphasizes the extent of Chairperson control.

On closer examination of the discussions during the meeting, it was clear that the Chairperson would initiate and close topics of discussion. Only specific topics could be covered during the limited time. So the Chairperson had to use his authority to close and change topics in order to ensure coverage of all agenda items in the allotted time. According to Hall (1977), one of the duties of the Chairperson is confining discussion within the scope of the meeting and reasonable limits of time. Most episodes were, therefore, short.

The findings can be summarised as follows:

a) In continuing or old transactions, the initiator is the Chairperson whereas in the new transactions, the initiator is not the Chairperson.

b)   In old transactions, there is a high degree of shared knowledge of the
        topic initiated. Thus an explanation of the topic is not required. In
        new transactions, the topic initiated had to be explained before any
        discussion took place as the issue was being raised for the very first
        time.
c)   In old transactions, an update of the issue raised is presented. So, the
        acts are mostly informing, directing, eliciting for information and
        clarification. In new transactions there is no update of any issue.
        Unlike old transactions, there is not a great deal of follow-up and the
        acts are mostly eliciting, explaining, accepting and commenting.
d)   In the short transactions, the acts performed are eliciting and respond-
        ing only

Thus, it can be observed that there are differences in the features be-
tween short and long transactions, and between old and new transactions.

6.3   Nature of Interaction during the different phases

The nature of interaction varies through the opening, medial and closing
phase of the meeting.

(i)   Opening phase

Before the encounter begins, the participants are ready for the Chairman to
initiate the opening. The participants have shared knowledge and know which
speaker is the superior (in status) and which the inferior (in status). Accord-
ing to Laver (1975), there is a predetermined status differential between the
Chairperson, who is the superior participant and the other members who are
the inferior participants. This opening phase is very brief as the Chairperson
gets straight to the point.

Opening transaction

1)   Yap: Good evening everybody / Meeting number 6/
2)   All. No, number 7/
3)   Yap : O.K. Any changes to the minutes or not?

The opening phase displays linguistic signals of formality and the goal of the
encounter is unambiguously transactional. Transactions are pre-determined
(Agenda is given to the participants beforehand) so the participants are well
aware of the topics to be raised and who will initiate them.

(ii) Medial phase

Most of the transactions took place in this phase. As Laver (1975) says, the 'main business' of an encounter is carried out in the medial phase. A description of how the transactions are structured will be discussed here.

Chairman initiates

Out of a total of 34 transactions, 24 were initiated by the Chairperson. These initiations were all introductions to the items on the agenda. The execution of the agenda, and the movement from one "item" to another, as well as decisions as to relevance and appropriateness are often in the Chairperson's hands, subject, of course, to the particular conventions of the meeting (Atkinson, 1978). In initiating these transactions/topics, certain words were found to mark transaction boundaries like 'O.K' and 'So" There were three occasions where 'O.K' was mentioned and another five occasions with 'So'. Therefore, out of 34 transactions, only eight had transaction boundary markers.

Five of the initiation moves were requests for information updates. Sometimes agenda numbers were mentioned and at other times they were not.

Yap   O.K. 2.3 School Hall? What's the latest?/
Yap   2.3.2 / So tong sampah area all done all ready?
Yap   O.K. / Track suits / this one agree a::

Other transactions were initiated by nominating the next speaker or the mere mention of a new topic. Nomination was carried out either by gaze or by addressing the participant.

Shared knowledge

From the manner in which the transactions were introduced and developed, the members present at the PTA meeting appeared to know what was happening. This PTA meeting, being one of a series of meetings for the stated year, had items of the agenda which were continuing. So, very little needed to be explained about the issues.

Length of transaction

After a transaction is initiated, the person responsible for that action responds. At times a transaction was rather long as action needed to be taken. Suggestions were put forward and a decision had to be made. Hence, the long

transaction. On the other hand, if the issue did not call for action, the transaction was very short. If a speaker was engaged in a long move with any other member, the other members were able to discover that the utterance concerned did not condition any relevant next speaker utterance.

Example: Yap   O.K/Track suits / this one agreed a::
            Amnah   Yes/

In this meeting, there are 34 transactions, of which 31 are long and the remaining 3 are short. A total of 11 new transactions were initiated under the agenda item, 'Other Matters'

Digressions

Although the Chairperson initiated the topics, some topics became occasions for extended talk by the other participants. This at times led to digression, and the Chairperson allowed this because the digression led to important matters that should have been discussed but were overlooked.

(iii) Closing phase

The meeting came to an end when all the items on the agenda had been dealt with. In other words, when the participants had managed to achieve the stated goal. In this closing phase, reference was made to the next meeting. The closing phase begins with this expression:

Yap   Next meeting.

This was the initiation of the last transaction, which was fixing the date for the next meeting. Here again, the initiation, like the rest of the initiations of the transactions, was very brief. The other speakers involved in this transaction, - the secretary, headmistress and treasurer - discussed the choice of a suitable date for the next meeting to accommodate the Chairperson. They finally came to a consensus, after which the Chairperson went into another interactional phase with the members until the meeting was adjourned.

Yap ; O.K. Nice and short.
'O.K.' denotes adjournment of the meeting. 'Nice and short' is an evaluative
     comment.

The above findings suggest that the structure of a PTA meeting is determined largely by the Chairperson, just as the structure of classroom discourse is determined largely by the teacher The PTA meeting encounter is similar to

a classroom encounter, and the Chairperson divides the meeting into trans-
actions (according to the given agenda). It was observed that the transactions
were launched into moves in the following manner·

a)   eight of the transactions were initiated by transaction boundaries such
     as 'O.K.' and 'So';
b)   generally the next speaker was nominated by eye-contact or gaze while
     mentioning the next topic; sometimes this was not so as with Lam,
     who initiated the topic on Finance
c)   mention of next topic, expecting self-nomination;
d)   markers/signals such as Aa.., which can serve as attention-attractors.
     Given that Aa:. is heard as a floor holder, the pause which follows
     could signify a motivated pause, made in order for the participants to
     keep quiet so that the next speaker can take her turn.

Interactional phases

Earlier it was stated that a meeting is a speech encounter with an overall
transaction goal, which means that it is a goal-oriented situation. However,
the language throughout the meeting appears to be informal. The formal
aspects of the meeting were present when the meeting was introduced, at the
introduction of agenda items and initiations of transactions.

Example
Yap : So anything? No change?
      Can anyone propose the minutes to be passed?//Seconder?
      So, we go through the minutes / Matters arising /

In the above example, the Chairperson is following the conventions of meetings
in general.

There are a number of interactional phases found throughout the en-
counter These interactional phases can be referred to as 'chats' During
these interactional phases, it was observed that the language used was more
informal.

The Chairperson makes an effort to set up some kind of interactional
relationship at the outset, which lends a conversational flavour to the event.
But these digressions are often terminated skilfully by the Chairperson, as
this is one of his functions.

7.0 Conclusion

Although a meeting reputedly is a formal, transactional encounter with an external goal, the PTA meeting investigated in this study appears to be semi-formal in nature. While the proceedings adhere to the formal aspects of meetings in following set agenda etc, the process of turn-taking, turn-alloca-tion and patterns of digression, and chats allowed gives the setting an infor-mal character. The semi-formal aspect is visible in the use of boundary markers during the transition phases from the Chairperson's utterances of 'O.K.", 'So', 'Next item' 'Well', etc. (Sinclair and Brazil, 1982.)

Because the members were not all from the same professional group, the language throughout the meeting remained that of informal conversation. This may also be explained by the fact that the topics on the agenda were primarily of a housekeeping nature and did not require any technical exper-tise.

The effect of cultural values is evident but does not come up strongly due to the small sample of the mix of cultures at the meeting.

The meeting generally adhered to the same structure as other meetings. It had three phases, namely, the initial phase, medial phase and the final phase. The opening phase of the meeting began with a greeting and a dec-laration of the meeting number Laver (1975) defines the opening phase as the beginning of the conversational encounter after the exchange of greetings, to signal and establish an interpersonal framework for the encounter The medial phase consists of several transactions. The transactions roughly follow the Sinclair and Brazil model with boundary exchanges, followed by the main business and then the closure. The closing phase is semi-formal and there is no formal declaration like, 'I now declare the meeting closed.'

Transactions

Distinct features appeared in the transactions

i)   One feature was the absence of any explicit framing of issues as each agenda item was announced by the Chairperson. This perhaps is due to the continuing nature of PTA meetings.

ii)   Some were very brief transactions as no discussion took place. There were three of these among the 34 transactions. Two of these brief

transactions were just confirmations that the issues were taken care of. Another was a request for issues to be raised.

iii) The length of the transactions was probably due to the need for explanation and clarification of the issues raised. At times some of the transactions branched into sub-transactions or digressions of an informal discussion.

iv) Another feature was that only the office bearers were contributing to the proceedings most of the time. The ordinary members hardly contributed to the discussion. The Chairperson was generally in control of the discussion and was able to cover the items on the agenda.

PTA Meetings are governed by the same conventions that govern all meetings. There is, therefore, some degree of formality present when the Chairperson initiates new transactions following the given agenda. Thus the openings and closings of agenda items make the meeting more formal in procedure than in the language. The Chairperson's initiations are ritualistic, as he acts according to convention. This allowed members to anticipate the chairperson's turn.

Informal sub-transactions

It was observed that during discussion phases of transactions, non-agenda issues sometimes did arise. These sub-transactions led to 'chats' where the language was very informal and the content a lot more person-centred rather than issue or transaction-centred. Such 'chats' appeared throughout the meeting, especially in longer transactions. According to Sacks (1974), in a conversation where turns are allocated singly, there are strong pressures from other participants wanting to speak and the turn is typically only one sentence long. But in a PTA meeting it appears that this is not so.

7.1 Strategies used to control interaction

(a) Cultural facilitation

Following cultural practice, no interruption of senior people (all office bearers who took long turns) was allowed. The nature of the information too probably explains the absence of turn-keeping devices to ensure their turn would not be snatched away As members all knew the items being discussed, they could assess how much needed to be said about the topic and therefore would wait for the speaker to actually stop and offer the turn to someone

else. The normative pattern that emerged from this meeting was that Malaysians at meetings tend to speak only if it is mandatory for them to speak. They tend to remain silent if the initiative for taking a turn must come from them through self-selection.

(b)   Conjunctions as controls

Occasionally, however, turn-keeping signals do appear. The secretary, for example, keeps her turn by using conjunctions like, 'and', and 'and also' These conjunctions were uttered more loudly, the loudness indicating she wanted to keep her turn.

There are two possible reasons for the absence of interruptions in the moves. Firstly, it could be because it is a meeting encounter, and the participants are aware that a particular issue demands a long explanation. The next reason could be that the participants are able to identify the Transition-Relevance Point (TRP) which provides listeners with the opportunity to take the next turn. According to the SSJ Model, the speaker can set out to construct a turn at boundaries called TRP Sacks suggests that the next speaker can begin as soon as a current speaker has reached a possible completion; hence the low incidence of silence. In this study unintentional overlaps do occur, frequently caused by self-selection. Thus participants have to possess the ability to come in as soon as a speaker has reached a possible completion. But not everyone is able to identify this point.

Back channelling items, such as, 'hmmm' and 'ya' do occur especially during long moves. They indicate attentiveness to the speakers and encourage the speakers to go on.

7.2 Turn-allocation characteristics

Turns were primarily allocated by the Chairperson either verbally or non-verbally This is consistent with the role assigned to the Chairperson by the Constitution of Meetings as well as from the general patterns of meeting proceedings as cited by Hall (1977)

Silence

Silence is one of the factors involved in turn allocation. In this study, there were not many occurrences of silence. This is partly because any possible silence was filled by the Chairperson.

7.3 Turn-taking patterns at different phases of the meeting

Initial phase - Only the Chairperson greeted the members thus initiating his turn. The rest of the members only participated when they corrected the meeting number, which was declared wrongly by the Chairperson.

Medial phase - The main business was in this phase. Turns were taken by members involved in the respective issues raised according to the agenda items. Participation related to the participants' possible contribution to agenda items. If participants did not have a role they did not take turns. The findings revealed that there were three committee members who did not contribute actively

Adjacency pair interactions appear throughout the meeting and are probably the most common rhetorical pattern in this kind of speech encounter This is quite understandable in view of the fact that information regarding the agenda issues is elicited from the members concerned. These adjacency pairs occur at the juncture where information or confirmation is sought. The most frequent speakers of the majority of adjacency pairs were the Chairperson and the Headmistress.

Closing phase - The meeting ended with the fixing of a date for the next meeting. However, there was no formal announcement that the meeting had ended. The agenda thus acted as a guide to the flow of topics and everyone seemed to have some sort of shared information.

7.4 Effects of status and topic on turn-taking

Status and topic do affect turn-taking patterns as observed in the findings. The participants already know who is in control of the meeting and are ready for the Chairperson to initiate the opening. As Laver (1975) says, there is a pre-determined status differential between the Chairperson who is the superior participant and the other members who are the inferior members.

In this meeting, the participants in the transaction have some shared knowledge before the encounter begins, and this provides them with a ready-made framework for the exchange of talk. They know·

a.   specifically what their goal is
b.   what the relative status of each speaker is in terms of that goal
c.   which speaker is to be the superior and which the inferior

d.   which topics will be discussed (agenda is given) and who will raise
      them except for issues that arise in 'Other Matters"
e.   that it is a continuing meeting and the participants have shared knowl-
      edge. This shared knowledge is reflected in several ways in the course
      of the meeting.

Chairperson's role status

Summarizing the Chairperson's contributions, it can be said that the data
shows that his participation patterns, and the speech acts he performs are
common to those predictable for the roles he has as Chairperson viz-a-viz:

a.   preserving order in the conduct of those members present as he has
      overriding speaking rights;
b.   deciding whether the proposed motions and amendments are in order;
c.   the execution of the agenda and moving the meeting on to the next
      stage when he feels an issue has been adequately dealt with;
d.   deciding as to relevance and appropriateness to the objective or agenda.

7.5 Interruptions as turn-taking devices

An interruption occurs when the next speaker starts to talk when the pre-
vious speaker has not yet reached a TRP. It is a violation of a current
speaker's right, according to Sacks. One typical feature of interruption in this
meeting is overlap with some prior speaker's turn.

A high degree of shared knowledge among the participants may be another
reason for the occurrence of overlaps at non-proximal TRPs in this PTA
meeting since shared knowledge enables listeners to anticipate the flow of
thought of the speaker and contribute where he pauses for lack of words.
Secondly, shared knowledge increases familiarity and familiarity allows the
same rules of conduct to function as in a conversation.

According to Testa (1988) overlaps and interruptions are common in
conversations and are not considered rude. Two types of overlaps are no-
ticed:

a.   those that occur when the current speaker's turn, though overlapped
      by the next speaker's utterance, is brought to completion;

b.   those which by overlapping the current speaker cause him to yield the
          floor (self-interruption). These are classified as simple interruptions by
          Beattie. In this study the high degree of shared knowledge among the
          participants is one reason for the occurrence of overlaps at non-proxi-
          mal TRPs. The informal nature of the discourse allows for interrup-
          tions without causing any offense to members. It is an acceptable
          norm.

7.6 Suggestions and recommendations

In the course of the investigation, it was felt that certain areas need to be
investigated further in order to make more conclusive judgements about
turn-takings in PTA meetings. Separate studies would be required to make
an indepth research. A more detailed analysis of non-verbal clues would have
affected the perception of turn-taking patterns in a PTA meeting. Compari-
sons could be made with other types of meetings, taking into account the
different socioeconomic background of the participants. Another aspect that
requires deeper study is the language used by the participants. In the meeting
examined, the language used by the participants was informal. A discussion
of these aspects is, however, beyond the scope of the present study, but a
look at strategies and language used could provide some interesting insights.

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