To follow or to flout? Communicative competence and the rules of turn taking

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Due to differing cultural contexts, adequate understanding, and successful negotiation of turn-taking behavior in the L2 can be notoriously difficult for language learners to master. For Japanese learners of English, turn taking can be particularly challenging with regard to more aggressive modes of communication such as debate and argumentative discourse, in which the ability to gain and hold the floor is essential to effective communication. This study examines the turn-taking devices used by a group of Japanese university students to successfully gain and maintain the floor while performing a discussion task. Incorporation of interruption techniques in the language classroom is discussed as well as the need for students to have not only an awareness of turn-taking rules but also a willingness to break them.

異なる文化的背景により、L2でのターンテイキングを十分に理解し有効活用することは、外国語学習者にとって難しいことで知られている。日本人の英語学習者にとってディベートやディスカッションなどのより論争的なコミュニケーションに於けるターンテイキングは、特に難しい。そういったコミュニケーションを効果的に行うには、話すタイミングを見計らい発言権を得る能力が必要だからである。この研究は、話し手がそのタイミングを捉え、発言権を得るためのディスカッションタスクを行っている、日本人大学生のターンテイキング行動を検証するものである。会話をさえぎるテクニックを外国語教室に取り入れて、学生にターンテイキングのルールを意識させるだけでなく、時にはそのルールを破ろうとする意欲を持たせる重要性についても検討する。

As language instructors, many of us are aware of the reticence Japanese students often show when speaking English, particularly in more assertive modes of communication. While the passive role of the student (Williams, 1994) and insufficient focus on oral communication (Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000) in the English education system in Japan are contributing factors, a lack of understanding of turn-taking conventions may provide additional difficulty for language learners (Cook, 1989). Turn taking systems can vary across cultural contexts (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006), and transfer of such conventions from one language to another can hinder successful communication (Tarone & Yule, 1989). For non-native speakers of English, adequate understanding and successful negotiation of turn-taking behavior in the second language (L2) is an essential skill to master. Through conversation analysis, this study aims to evaluate the use of interruption and other turn-taking devices by Japanese speakers of English in order to show how successful speakers negotiate turn taking in their L2 and to further explore the pedagogical implications for the language classroom.

Interruption and other kinds of simultaneous speech

Zimmerman and West (1975), define interruption as a simultaneous utterance which occurs in the middle of another speaker's turn. It is a violation of the turn-taking rules of Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1978), which mandate that only one participant speaks per turn and that speaker change occurs at *transition relevance places* (TRPs), which Sacks, et al. (1978) describe as "'possible completion points' of sentences, clauses, phrases, and one-word constructions" (p. 34). According to the rules of turn taking, speaker change occurs at TRPs in the following manner:

1. Current speaker (CS) may select next speaker (NS).
2. If rule one is not invoked, NS may self-select.
3. If the above rules are not invoked, CS may continue with his or her turn.

Overlap is distinct from interruption, as it is a simultaneous utterance which occurs at a TRP (Zimmerman & West, 1975; Sacks, et al., 1978). Although a breach of the turn-taking rules does not occur, overlap may limit the other speaker's participation (Itakura & Tsui, 2004).

Cameron (2001), however, finds that such notions of interruption and overlap are unable to account for instances where the breaching of rules has a supportive function between speakers. Hatch (1992) notes that the use of simultaneous speech can "show alignment with communication partners" (p. 16), while Coates (1986) similarly describes such behavior as indicating that interlocutors may be approaching mutual agreement on a topic. Coates defines interruption, by contrast, as simultaneous speech in which the first speaker's utterance may be contradicted or disregarded. For our purposes, however, we shall consider interruption to be utterances occurring at non-TRPs which minimize the turn of another speaker, regardless of orientation to said speaker's viewpoint.

Methodology

For this study, students from the Kochi University English Program for International Communication (EPIC) class were selected to give samples of talk. These students, ages 19-20, had spent eight or more years studying EFL and upon entering university had been evaluated as either lower or upper intermediate level speakers on the Kochi University English Conversation Placement Exam (Nunn & Lingley, 2004). Most had also studied English overseas for a period of six months, on average.

A video recording was made of seven students having a twenty-minute discussion based on an argument-style task entitled "Lifeboat." The task involves nominating two people to leave an overcrowded lifeboat following the sinking of a cruise ship. As part of the pre-task stage, students were assigned characters and then spent time planning their arguments in order to facilitate greater fluency during the task (Skehan, 1996b). The task was then performed, followed by a post-task analysis in which students reflected on the language forms, learner participation, and pragmatic skills involved in the activity, similar to what Murphy (2003) and Skehan (1996b) suggest as possible task follow-up activities. Students generally felt that the task was difficult due to a lack of vocabulary and negotiating skills; this was addressed in the following lesson with an emphasis on teaching students techniques for interrupting and expressing disagreement. Students then repeated the activity with different members and this second task performance was

video-recorded. This repetition was intended to allow students to put their reflections to use and to aid in bringing greater awareness to the learning goals of the activity, objectives encouraged by Skehan (1996a). Three portions of one discussion, totaling six minutes, were selected for their salient features, namely little silence and significant amounts of heated, simultaneous talk. These were then transcribed and analyzed for the occurrence of specific language devices used to gain and maintain the floor (see Appendix for transcription conventions). Student names have been substituted with their character names to protect anonymity and aid in readability.

Japanese patterns of conversational interaction

Simultaneous speech in Japanese most commonly occurs as backchanneling (Murata, 1994), brief utterances which are spoken during or immediately after a speaker's turn. Backchannels do not indicate a request for a turn (Donahue, 1998), but rather serve a variety of functions in conversations, including signaling for the speaker to continue, showing one's understanding of content, giving emotional support, agreeing, and giving minor additions (Maynard, 1997). Such behavior is displayed by the Criminal in Extract 1, as the Millionaire tells the Sailor that the food rations are not enough to support him.

Extract 1. Millionaire and Criminal

```
1 Millionaire: We only have uh food
   for five people and you are, you
   are fat. //It means you eat a lot.

2 Criminal:
        //Yeah.
```

Backchannels in English include short utterances such as "hmm," "uh huh," and "really" (Donahue, 1998). In the above example, the backchanneling of 'yeah' in line 2 serves as a means of supporting the speaker and expressing a shared viewpoint, a typical function of backchanneling as it occurs in Japanese (White, 1989).

According to Maynard (1997), most Japanese communication is governed by a desire to maintain "nonabrasive human relationships" (p. 156). While conflict is generally avoided, it can occur in interaction between people of intimate standing or in socially sanctioned arenas, such as televised debates. In casual conversation, however, Murata (1994) found that interruption as a means of initi-

ating a turn occurred far less frequently between native Japanese speakers than between native English speakers, for "the Japanese have respect for the 'territoriality' of their conversational partners, and do not impose on them" (p. 399). In a study of conversation among close friends, Kitamura (2001) similarly found that participants actively avoided conversational overlap, often falling silent in instances where turns were made simultaneously.

Floor-grabbing devices

Despite a cultural background which stresses mutual consideration between interlocutors, analysis of the talk showed participants were generally unafraid to impose on one another, with 27 percent of the 165 turns in the talk stemming from interruptions. Three interruption types, as defined by Murata (1994), were identified, comprising 75 percent of all interruptions: topic-changing, floor-taking, and disagreement interruptions (see discussion below). The remaining 25 percent were unsuccessful interruptions, in which the interrupter was not able to take the floor or alter the course of the conversation.

Topic-changing interruptions accounted for 20 percent of the interruptions in the talk. In Extract 2, the Sailor suggests that the Criminal be sent overboard, but the Criminal interjects with a topic-changing interruption, shifting the emphasis onto the Doctor.

Extract 2. Sailor and Criminal

```
1 Sailor:  But hey so there is a
  criminal in in //in in… {gestures
  to the Criminal}

2 Criminal: {pointing to the Doctor}
             // No but he sh...
  he stole the money.
```

Even when the turn-taking rules of speaker selection appeared to be invoked, participants did not hesitate to grab the floor. In Extract 3 the Sailor, an expert in navigation, questions the Millionaire's assertion that the survivors are drifting off the shore of Hawaii.

Extract 3. Sailor and Millionaire

```
1 Sailor: Why  //do you know?=

2 Millionaire: //You can…

3 Millionaire: =//Nobody knows no-
```

```
  body knows so you, only you know,
  ok?=

4 Sailor:      //I know I know.
```

Sacks, et al. (1978) note that question and answer adjacency pairs are often used as a means of "possibly selecting next speaker" (p. 28). Though he directs his question to the Millionaire, the Sailor initiates a floor-taking interruption in line 4 precisely when Millionaire starts her response, which according to the rules of Sacks, et al. (1978) violates the right of the selected NS. Floor-taking interruptions, unlike topic-changing interruptions, do not alter the topic, but rather expand upon it (Murata, 1994). Such interruptions accounted for 23 percent of the interruptions in the talk.

Nearly a third (32%) of the interruptions came in the form of disagreement interruptions, which not only involve changing the topic or taking the floor, but express a disagreement with CS's utterance (Murata, 1994). In Extract 4, the Sailor poses a question, leading the Millionaire and the Criminal to respond simultaneously with differing assertions.

Extract 4. Millionaire, Sailor, and Criminal

```
1 Millionaire: So you can swim to
  Hawaii.

2 Sailor: Hawaii?=

3 Millionaire: =Ha… or somewhere is-
  land.

4 Criminal: Hawaii.=

5 Sailor: =Yeah but only I?

6 Millionaire: Yeah //because you,
  only you know…

7 Criminal:       //No with your
  partner.

{laughter}

8 Criminal: You need to have a part-
  ner.
```

In question and answer adjacency pairs, Sacks, et al. (1978) note a bias for CS to select the previous speaker (PS) as NS. This tendency suggests that the right to the turn following line 5 belongs to the Millionaire, who has been the main interlocutor for the past few turns and whose utterances provide

the impetus for the Sailor's questioning. Furthermore, the Millionaire appears to have earned the floor via the "first starter" rule (Sacks, et al., 1978, p. 31), having initiated her turn a split second prior to the Criminal. Yet the Criminal's repetition of "Hawaii," to which line 5 is latched, begs the question: Where is the divide between backchannel and turn? Coulthard (1985) notes that while backchannel behavior such as nods and murmurs are generally not considered turns, longer instances of backchanneling are more difficult to categorize. If considered a turn, the utterance in line 4 places the Criminal in the sequential role of PS, which primes her for the floor despite a split-second late start. Should her statement be a mere example of backchanneling, however, line 7 then becomes a disagreement interruption, both a usurpation of the floor and a clash with the Millionaire's utterance.

While it is often regarded as an act of conversational aggression, there are instances where interruption may be seen as simultaneously supportive and aggressive. In Extract 5, the Millionaire and the Criminal argue on the behalf of the passengers who have children.

Extract 5. Sailor, Millionaire, and Criminal

```
1 Sailor: The uh the fact you have
  uh kids or not is not so big
          prob… //not…

2 Millionaire 1: //Big problem //for
  us who has k//ids. Yes…

3 Criminal:                    //It
  is.

4 Criminal:   //Kids. You //don't
  understand cause you don't have a
  kids.

5 Millionaire 2:          //(we…)
```

The Criminal is able to anticipate Millionaire 1's utterance and show alliance by chiming in with "kids." While this simultaneous utterance along with backchanneling in line 3 appear to have a supportive function, the Criminal does not stop with the synchronous word, but rather takes the floor in line 4. According to Coulthard (1985), in such instances the right to the next turn belongs to the speaker whose utterance was jointly completed, a tendency which is evidenced by the Millionaire's attempt to hold the floor in lines 2 and 5. In this particular interaction, the floor-taking interruption initiated by the Criminal involves jockeying for the position of CS despite a shared viewpoint.

Floor-holding devices

With pressure from other participants wanting to speak, the ability to gain a turn and keep it requires the use of additional language devices. A feature of successful speakers is their ability to counteract the interruptions of others. In Extract 6 the Criminal suggests that the Sailor should leave the boat with a suitable partner.

Extract 6. Criminal and Sailor

```
1 Criminal:She or he //can teach
       you //how to swim.

2 Sailor:              //But…

3 Sailor: //I can't swim. I can't
  swim.=

4 Criminal: =No no your partner can
  teach you how to swim.
```

The Sailor attempts an interruption in line 2 and then launches a disagreement interruption in line 3. The Criminal then initiates a repair in line 4 by restating her interrupted utterance, thereby ensuring not only the comprehension of her statement but her share in the distribution of turns (Sacks, et al., 1978).

Similarly, repetition within a single turn helps speakers hold the floor. In Extract 7, the Millionaire insists she is too feeble to swim to safety, while the Student argues that she must be healthy since she can afford to eat expensive food.

Extract 7. Millionaire, Student, and Doctor

```
1 Millionaire: //Skinny, very very
  skinny body, very very //skinny
  body. Little skinny. //Too skinny
  to swim.

2 Student 1:  //Because you very
  nice…

3 Student 2:           //Very nice
  food…

4 Doctor:            //So you can…
```

Cameron (2001) notes that repetition serves as a "way of 'buying time' to plan the next chunk" (p. 34) while aiding in listener comprehension. Repetition during simultaneous speech accounted for 66% of the 38 instances of repetition in the talk, suggesting

that participants also use it as a means of maintaining the floor in the face of interruption and overlap.

Lexical devices may also be employed to grab the floor when it is otherwise unavailable. In Extract 8, the Millionaire and the Sailor argue against each other, each insisting they are unable to swim and should not be asked to leave the lifeboat.

Extract 8. Millionaire and Sailor

```
1 Millionaire:  but I… Listen //lis-
  ten listen my opinion. //Listen to
  me. And if I go swim    it means
  you all kill me kill //me because
  everybody on this boat knows I
  cannot survive if I swim.

2 Sailor:                    //I
  cannot swim.

3 Sailor:                 //Ok.

4 Sailor:             //Yeah.
```

The use of pre-sequences such as "listen my opinion" and "listen" occurred three times in the talk, enabling speakers to gain and maintain turns (Cook, 1989). According to Sacks, et al. (1978) these "interruption markers" (p. 39) serve as devices for repairing the organization and distribution of turns. In the example above the tactic not only minimizes interruptions from the Sailor, but also elicits back-channeling acknowledgment, thereby enabling the full realization of the Millionaire's turn.

According to Coulthard (1985), there are several grammatical devices which may also be employed to acquire a more extended turn. In Extract 9, the Sailor attempts to plead with the Millionaire to give up her life for the sake of the other passengers.

Extract 9. Sailor and Millionaire

```
1 Sailor 1: But I want you help us.

2 Millionaire: Hai. [Yes.]

3 Sailor 1: If you go swim //we can
  survive so=

4 Millionaire:            //Uh-huh.

5 Millionaire: =No no //no bec… be-
  cause of because //of you are on
  this boat, no body
  survive because you are too heavy.
```

```
6 Sailor 2:            //can you…

7 Sailor 3:            //can you allow us
  to give…
```

Beginning with the appositional "but," the Sailor's statement in line 1 is on one level a request for help, but on a rhetorical level it is also a request for a longer turn, a pre-sequence that prefaces the message that will follow (Cook, 1989) and thus elicits acknowledgment from the Millionaire in line 2. The Sailor's use of the conditional "if," which Coulthard (1985) refers to as an "incompletion marker," (p.64) further prevents NS from immediately grabbing the floor, as the completion of the utterance hinges on the realization of the necessary clauses. This instead prompts an instance of backchanneling from the Millionaire in line 4. Once the requisite clauses are completed, however, the Sailor attempts to continue with an *utterance incompletor,* or conjunction, in line 3. This is met with an immediate interjection, however, from the Millionaire. Such interruptions at conjunctions are quite common according to Ferguson (1975, as cited in Coulthard, 1985), who in examining eleven hours of conversation found that they account for 28 percent of interruptions. Coulthard (1985) notes that these devices do not necessarily guarantee an extended turn, but their employment can place NS in "a position where he must interrupt and be seen to be interrupting" (p. 64).

Conclusion

Cook (1989) has noted the difficulty that foreign language learners have in negotiating turn taking in their L2, and not all students in the study were comfortable making interruptions (see Table 1). The Doctor made significantly more backchannels than interruptions, while Mr. Video, a shy student who often falls silent during group discussions, did not contribute any utterances during the six minutes of analyzed talk. Various factors, including extroversion (Cohen, 1990) and gender (Itakura & Tsui, 2004; Zimmerman & West, 1975) may contribute to a speaker's ability to dominate in a conversation. It should be noted that the Sailor, the sole male participant, contributed the greatest number of turns and interruptions.

Table 1. Breakdown of interruptions and non-TRP backchannels by participant

	Turns (does not include backchannels)	Interruptions	Non-TRP backchannels
Overall	165	44	25
Sailor	52	19	4
Millionaire	39	10	12
Criminal	39	7	1
Doctor	7	1	6
Student	12	3	1
Actor	16	4	1
Mr. Video	0	0	0

Yet analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data suggests that students are generally not shy to take and maintain the floor. Though Murata (1994) found that simultaneous speech among Japanese native speakers predominantly occurs as backchanneling, there were 76 percent more interruptions than backchannels occurring at non-TRPs in the talk. Students may be adapting their turn-taking behavior according to L2 conventions, for not only had they had just completed a reflection task and training on interruption techniques in the L2, but many of them had also studied English overseas. A similar trend was found by Murata (1994), who observed that Japanese speakers display greater use of interruption in L2 conversations with English native speakers than in L1 conversations with Japanese native speakers.

As language teachers it is therefore important, as McCarthy (1991) points out, to bring awareness of various turn-taking systems to the classroom. Language devices such as lexical phrases (Glick, 2002) may aid all learners in making more interruptions. Li, et al. (2005) found that conversation pairs trained with a list of interruption phrases were able to make more interruptions than those who had not been trained. In addition to basic techniques such as repetition, knowledge of grammatical devices such as utterance incompletors and incompletion markers may aid students in formulating turns that are more resistant to interruption when performing discussion oriented tasks. Ultimately students should be made aware of turn-taking conventions in order to understand the liberties they can take. It appears that successful negotiation of the turn-taking mechanism depends not only on the ability to know the rules but also knowing when and how to flaunt them.

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Appendix
Notes on transcription

Transcripts follow various conventions described in Cameron (2001), Carter and McCarthy (1997), and White (1997) with certain adaptations. Symbols and their indications are as follows:

,	recasting of utterance
{ }	description of non-verbal communication and additional sounds
…	incompletion of word or syntactical unit
//	simultaneous speech between two or more utterances

```
Criminal:  I have a wife //four
kids.
Sailor:                 //Well
life is very difficult so…
```

=	latching, or connection without pause or overlap, between utterances
	Speaker 1, 2 continuation of turn broken up by non-simultaneous utterance or portion thereof

```
Millionaire 1:  You don't know=
Sailor:   =But //I will have a
kids.
Millionaire 2 //our big problem.
```

( )	uncertain transcription of talk
[ ]	translation of Japanese utterances

Periods, question marks, and additional commas have also been added to aid in readability.