10. When is an Overlap Not an Interruption?
One Component of Conversational Style

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"As I was saying when I was so rudely interrupted . . . "
"Excuse me for talking while you were interrupting . . . "
Or, as the caption of a cartoon read, "If you're going to interrupt me, Leroy, you might at least wait until I'm finished."

Formal expressions (and jokes) reflect cultural values and concerns (Matasoff 1979; Tannen and Oztek 1977). It is clear from the above and other common sayings that according to American conventional wisdom interruption is bad, something to be avoided. Such demands as "Let me finish" or "Don't interrupt" are heard as claims of an inalienable right.

In a scholarly vein, ethnomethodologists have made similar assumptions. Schegloff and Sacks (1974:236) propose as one of "two basic features of conversation," "at least, and no more than, one party speaks at a time in a single conversation." Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson have described a model of conversation in which each party seeks to begin speaking at "transition relevance places." In this system, interruption is seen as evidence of a malfunction: a speaker has mistakenly identified a transition relevance place. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson observe:

"The lore and practices of etiquette concerning "interruption" and complaints about it, the use of interruption markers such as "excuse me" and others, false starts, repeats or recycles of parts of a turn overlapped by others, as well as premature (i.e., before possible completion) stopping by parties to simultaneous talk, are repair devices directed to troubles in the organization and distribution of turns to talk. (1978:39)"

Bennett (1978) notes that these researchers differentiate between overlap and interruption on structural grounds, as seen in Schegloff (1978):

By overlap we tend to mean talk by more than one speaker at a time which has involved that a second one to speak given that a first was already speaking, the second one has projected his talk to begin at a possible completion.
Thus, speakers are seen as intending to achieve turn-taking when another speaker has finished; an overlap represents a tactical error in this system, an interruption a violation of it.

Bennett points out that overlap and interruption are in fact categories of logically different types. Whereas overlap is a descriptive term referring to the observable coincidence in time of contributions by two speakers, interruption is an interpretive category, reflecting speakers' interpretations of “prevailing rights and obligations” in the interaction. Thus, the question of whether an overlap is an interruption—i.e., whether it is an obstructive device, evidence of a conflict of conversational interests—is not merely a matter of determining its relation to some structural feature of talk.

I shall propose here that speakers differ with regard to when they expect overlap, how much they expect, and how they interpret and intend overlap—i.e., the rights and obligations attached to these phenomena. I will demonstrate, moreover, that there are many speakers who regard overlap as a cooperative device in certain conversational settings.

The cooperative use of overlap will be shown in a segment taken from two-and-one-half hours of tape-recorded and transcribed conversation that occurred naturally over Thanksgiving dinner in 1978 among six native speakers of English. That these instances of overlap are not interruptions for these speakers can be seen (1) in the effects of their use on the conversation as well as (2) in participants' interpretations as expressed upon hearing a tape recording of the conversation (the process called “playback” by Labov and Fanshel 1977).

Expectations and practices with regard to overlap constitute an element of conversational style; in other words, they are among an array of linguistic and nonverbal devices that co-occur to give each person's speech a distinct and recognizable character (Lakoff 1979).

Analysis of the entire Thanksgiving conversation (Tannen, 1979b) indicates that cooperative overlap is an element in a repertoire of devices used by three of the six participants. Other features of their style include expressive phonology, sharp shifts in amplitude and pitch, resulting in exaggerated intonation contours; fast rate of speech as well as fast pacing with respect to turn-taking; frequent and expressive back-channel responses, preference for personal topics; frequent and abrupt topic switching; propensity to tell personal narratives; and use of direct quotation and even role-playing in narration. Thus overlap is one feature of a style whose cumulative effect is a feeling of intensity and rapid pace that led those who used it to experience the conversation as “great” but struck others present as “frenetic” and “dominating.” As Bateson (1972) has pointed out, every utterance has both a message and a metamessage. At the same time that the words impart information (the message), the fact of their utterance and the way they are uttered carry a metamessage—a statement about the relationship between speaker and hearer. To those who favor this style, the very fact of overlap is a vehicle for a metamessage of interpersonal rapport. This hypothesis will be discussed further after the data are presented.

Cooperative Overlap in Action

In the transcribed Thanksgiving conversation, overlap often did not lead to obstruction of conversational flow. Although there were clearly individual differences among them, three of the six participants evidenced far more use of overlap than the other three. The transcript shows numerous interchanges among these speakers in which overlaps abound, yet conversation proceeded in an animated and rhythmically smooth manner that participants later reported having found satisfying. Therefore I shall refer to these three speakers as “overlap-favoring.”

I shall describe three distinct functions of cooperative overlap as used in the speech of the overlap-favoring speakers: K (Kurt), P (Peter), and N (myself).

The following brief excerpt is representative of much of the conversation at this dinner, which took place at the home of Kurt, a native of New York City living in Oakland, California. The following segment shows Kurt's attempt to explain the location of a building in New York that he has referred to. The talk was occasioned by mention of New York by another guest who had recently visited the city. Kurt directed a question to him, but soon after that the three participants who were from New York launched a rapid and animated discussion in which the three other guests did not participate. Peter (P) is Kurt's brother; N (I) am his friend.

This short segment is characterized by much overlap, including at least three different types: (1) cooperative sentence-building, (2) requesting and giving verification, (3) choral repetition.

Cooperative Sentence-Building

Cooperative sentence-building is a device by which a listener participates in what is clearly someone else's sentence, as in (1)-(3).

When is an Overlap Not an Interruption?
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(11) K The Huntington Hartford is ______ on the South side.
(12) D ______ on the other side across.

This generally occurs at the end of a sentence, so that the listener "chimes in" to complete the sentence together with the speaker. The overlap is not turn-claiming; the speaker is entitled to continue speaking, as Kurt does in the present example in (11), despite my continuing overlap, which is an example of the type to be considered next. By testimony of those who practice cooperative sentence-building, the metamessage lies in the overlap: "I understand you so well that I know what you are going to say." Those who do not share a preference for this device, however, do not understand the metamessage. They are the people who are likely to complain, "Don't put words in my mouth," or, "Don't tell me what I'm going to say."

Requesting and Giving Verification

At times, for some speakers, the preferred way to request or give verification is through use of overlap, as in (5)-(10).

(5) K Right where Central Park West met Broadway. That's a building shaped like that. [Makes a pyramid with hands.]
(6) P Did I give you too much? [re turkey]
(7) D By Columbus Circle? ... that Columbus Circle?
(8) K Right on Columbus Circle. Here's Columbus Circle. ... here's Central Park West.
(9) D Now it's the Huntington Hartford Museum.
(10) P That's the Huntington Hartford, right?

My (7) verifies the location of "where Central Park West met Broadway" in (5), and is timed to begin smack in the middle of Kurt's continuing talk. (Peter's overlap in [6] is concerned with food-serving, which can always come as an overlap during dinner conversation, as Sapir has noted.) Then Kurt ratifies my verification by repeating in (8) my offering ("Columbus Circle") and working it into his own talk. (I call this a "ratifying repetition"—a
common phenomenon in the cooperative enterprise of talk. The
strength of the impulse to ratify an offering in this way—for Kurth at
least, in this setting—is elegantly demonstrated in (12–14), where
Kurt begins to repeat a preceding phrase that he in fact thinks is
wrong).

Similarly, my (9) and Peter's (10) are offered as verification of
the building Kurt attempts to describe in (5). As has already been
noted, (12) also contains a verification about the building location
that overlaps with (13).

For these speakers in this setting, it is not only permissible to
seek to verify information by overlap (as Sacks, Schegloff, and
Jefferson have noted); it is preferable, if not required. The quick
pace of the question or comment, together with its timing as an
overlap, serves to signal, "This is not central to our talk: I don't want
you to stop for my comment, but I really am interested and want to
let you know that I'm with you thus far." By the same means, the
quick pace and overlap of the answer serve to signal, "Got you;
here's your answer; and don't worry, your question/comment didn't
stop me." If the speaker, upon hearing the overlapped question or
comment, stopped the flow of her/his talk, the overlapper would be
surprised and disconcerted; it would seem like an overreaction, as if
the speaker were trying to make the cooperative enterprise look
like an interrupter—which she does not intend to be. This happens,
in fact, in interactions between cooperative overlappers and others
at the Thanksgiving dinner.

Choral Repetition

Sometimes two speakers say the same thing at the same time
in the same or slightly different form. This phenomenon is
associated with what Jane Paik (1979) has identified as a
conversational duet, by which two speakers (usually spouses,
relatives, or close friends) jointly hold one conversational role.

In the present example, Kurt is trying to explain where a
certain building used to be; hence, he is playing the role of teacher.
Peter and I are trying to follow his lesson that he too has some
familiarity with the geography of New York. During playback,
however, Peter commented that he felt insecure in this interchange
and was trying to "hold his own" with some difficulty. He remarked
that he does not know New York very well, since he never lived

When is an Overlap Not an Interruption?

there as an adult. What he did was to piggyback a verification
question on mine, taking advantage of our joint role as students in
the geography lesson. He was able to use his familiarity with the
rhythms and devices of the conversation to participate by echoing
my comment. In fact, the "student" chose to copy from hadn't
much more knowledge than he did; Kurt corrected us both.
Nonetheless Peter was perceived as a full participant in the
conversation by all those present. His success is a striking
testament to the fact that knowledge of a topic is not necessary for
participation in a conversation, whereas familiarity with
conversational control devices is not only necessary but sometimes
sufficient. His choral repetition was not only acceptable; it was the
means for his participation in the interchange.

Persistence

A concomitant of the overlap-favoring style, one which is
presupposed if the overlap strategy is to work at all, is that speakers
will persist in their attempts to make a conversational
contribution. In this system, it is not the business of listeners
to make sure that others have "room" to talk. It is their business to
short-circuit the free flow of speech by creating silences and
pressuring others to talk. Indeed, it is incumbent upon speakers, if
they are observing this system, to find things to say and places in
the conversation to say them. A person who gives up after a single
try is perceived by overlap-favoring speakers as being uncooperative,
withholding, even sullen.

Persistence can be seen in the present example in (12) and
(14). I begin to suggest in (12) that the site Kurt has in mind is now
a round building with a movie theater in it, but Kurt does not stop
his contribution for me to do so. Therefore I make this
contribution at the next possible time in (14)—probably occasioned
by the slight elongation of the vowel in "to"—which constitutes a
slight but perceptible slowing down of his talk. During the
Thanksgiving conversation, Kurt, Peter, and I persist with our
conversational contributions for free turns as long as we can;
and not without receiving responses from other participants. Two of
the other speakers never persist beyond two tries if their topic are
not picked up.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overlap-favoring speakers not only accept but expect overlap
in a casual and friendly conversation. The failure to overlap is
perceived by these speakers in these settings as lack of interest or
dissent. I have hypothesized that overlap, like other features of
this style that contribute to its "animated" character, represents
conventionalized ways of honoring the quest for overt show of
rapport. Robin Lakoff (1973 and in 1975) points out that speakers
may be "polite" by following either the injunction "Don't impose" or the conflicting injunction "Be friendly." Drawing on Lakoff's work, Brown and Levinson (1978) have identified two overriding goals of conversation: positive and negative face. Positive face, they are to be approved of by others (what I like to think of as the need for community; negative face is not to be imposed upon (in other words, the need for independence). Overlap-favoring speakers, then, honor above all positive face. They find it better to risk imposing than to risk showing too little rapport. Their style, moreover, always prefers talk to silence. Overlap and latching (i.e., beginning to talk immediately after a prior speaker) are necessary to avoid the ultimate evil—silence—which seems in this system to be evidence of lack of rapport.

There is a device in service of these broad strategies is conventionalized. Speakers who use these devices do not necessarily feel a greater need for rapport; nor do they make conscious choices of how to achieve it. Rather, they habitually use devices that they have learned in previous interaction and that are, for them, self-evident and natural ways to have conversation. Problems arise only when the devices are used with others who have different conversational habits that are to them equally self-evident and natural.

The activity being engaged in the example analyzed above is an identifiable activity that one commentator dubbed "New York geography." This activity has been recognized by numerous informants who have lived with native New Yorkers but are not themselves from New York; their responses to it range from amusement to feeling rejected or offended by it. New York geography is an activity they are not able to participate in, not only because they lack appropriate information but more because they are not familiar with the appropriate conversational control devices. One participant in the Thanksgiving dinner scene, for example, commented, "I'm amazed at how you guys talk over each other, saying the same thing at the same time."

Another one, Sally, commented, "I find it incredibly funny. I love it. Its ultimate New York." She said she could not distinguish between what was important and what was not in such a discussion: "I would never talk so intensely about something so insignificant." Sally remarked, furthermore, that when she was first exposed to conversation of this sort she found it offensive.

Sally is not the only one who may have found for may find an overlapping style offensive. A recent article in New West magazine (Foster 1979) tells of the work of a psychologist at UCLA who believes that fast talkers are a conversational menace. He calls them "ranters" and offers a training course (at a price) designed to help them learn patience.

Indeed, it might be useful for some overlap-favoring speakers to learn patience for the purpose of interaction with others who do not share their style, especially if the others are likely to judge them—for example, in a job interview—just as speakers of nonstandard dialects may choose to adopt a standard idiom for interaction in public settings. However, the present study indicates—and the larger study of which it is a part amply demonstrates—that cooperative overlap is an effective device for establishing rapport among those who share expectations about its use.

Afterword: Ethnol and Cultural Basis of Conversational Style

Throughout this discussion I have avoided direct consideration of the correlation between the style I have described as overlap-favoring and ethnicity. Although I have made reference to the association of this style with speakers from New York City. It is impossible to make statements about ethnicity or geographical background based on a sample of six speakers. The present study seeks only to present those settings in which overlap-cooperativeness is clear, however, that in the minds of the participants as well as the others present at this dinner (and countless commentators), that such a style is associated with speakers from New York City. One thinks, for example, of the split-screen segment of Woody Allen's Annie Hall that juxtaposed for the purpose of contrast a dinner scene at the home of the New York Jewish hero with a dinner scene at the home of the midwestern WASP heroine. It seems clear, moreover, that it is the extreme of just such conversational devices that led Dave, for example, to recall that this dinner scene was dominated by the New York Jewish element—and that has led to the stereotyping of speakers of this background as "pushy." In the present discussion, furthermore, it does not seem coincidental that the topic of talk was "New York geography." It has been the experience of numerous informants that they find themselves exercising the most exaggerated forms of a particular style when they are talking to others who share the style and in contexts associated with the one in which they learned the style.

Clearly, however, more research is needed to determine the ethnic, geographical, and other cultural correlates of this and other features of conversational style.

NOTES

1. The entire conversation is the subject of a lengthy study (Tannen 1979b) of conversational style in which features making up participants' styles are analyzed in detail. In conducting that study, I incurred lasting debts to all my informants, particularly called here Kurt, Peter, Sally, Dave, and Cindy, as well as those who read and commented on my work, discussed it with me at various stages, and inspired me throughout.
When Is an Overlap Not an Interruption?

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