

# Turn Features: A Comparative Study

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## ターンの諸相

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### Abstract

‘Talk is accomplished through a series of turns’ (McLaughlin, 1984). Thus a turn is the starting point for analyzing the mechanics of conversation. This paper reports on a study which compared turn features viz. turn distribution and turn length of Japanese Speakers of English (JSE’s) with Canadian Native Speakers of English (NSE’s). The results showed that with turn distribution, there was no significant difference either in the number of turns taken in each group by the individual speakers, or in the total number of turns taken by the two groups. However with turn length, there was a significant difference in the total turn length for each speaker as well as in the total turn length for the two groups.

**Key words:** turn, floor, utterance, turn boundary, turn construction unit, transition relevance place

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### 抄 録

対話は一連のターンによってなりたっている (MacLaughlin, 1984)。故にターンは会話の構造を分析する出発点である。本稿は、日本語を母語とする者 (JSE) の英語と、英語を母語とするカナダ人 (NSE) とで、ターンの諸相、すなわち長さや配分を比較した研究について報告する。その結果、一回のターンの長さに関しては個々の話者の間にも、JSE と NSE のグループの間にもかなりの違いがあった。しかしながら、ターンの配分については、それぞれのグループ個々の話者のターンの回数もグループごとの総ターン数にも JSE と NSE では大きなちがいはみられなかった。

**キーワード:** ターン、フロア、発話、ターンの区切れ、ターン構成単位、トランジション・レlevance・プレイス

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## **Turn features—a definition**

For the purpose of analysis, the simplest definition of a turn, is a so called 'technical' definition where a turn 'begins the instant one participant in a conversation starts talking alone and ends immediately prior to the instant another participant starts talking alone', 'the speaker who utters the first unilateral sound both initiates the conversation and gains possession of the floor. Having gained possession, a speaker maintains it until the first unilateral sound by another speaker at which time the latter gains possession of the floor' (Jaffe and Feldstein, 1970, cited in McLaughlin, 1984). On a similar vein, Cherry and Lewis, 1976 (cited in McLaughlin 1984), state that 'a turn consists of all of the speaker's utterances up to the point when another person takes over the speaking role'. The above technical definitions do not clearly explain how to deal with the reality of talk i.e. the occurrence of backchannel utterances (verbal and nonverbal signals given by hearers to indicate that they are following what is being said), gaps and silences but are 'primarily concerned with the determination of turn boundaries' (ibid).

By contrast, 'non technical' definitions, though more complex for the purpose of analysis, take into account the turn-taker's intention and the 'participant's sense of what counts as a turn' (Edelsky 1981). Thus Edelsky defines a turn as 'an on-record speaking which may include non-verbal activities), behind which lies an intention to convey a message that is both referential and functional'. Thus backchannel utterances or encouragers such as 'mm hmm' do not count as turns, the former due to their unofficial status and the other due to their non-referential nature.

McLaughlin (1984, p.94) concludes that since there is ambiguity in both definitions, it is important that 'a proper account of a turn' has to do several things:

- (a) 'specify the minimum number and kinds of 'units' of which a turn may be composed;
- (b) clarify the status of the backchannel utterance; and
- (c) provide for the systematic assignment of silences and overlaps, all of these to be satisfied with an eye to the treatment of an event in talk as the ultimate arbiter of its function'.

Accordingly, McLaughlin proposes that the 'utterance' is the most appropriate choice for the turn constructional unit, with a turn consisting of one or more utterances (2).

Despite its subjective nature, for the purpose of this study, Edelsky's definition will be applied to determine a turn.

## **Turn Distribution**

According to McLaughlin (1984: p.91), 'one of the characteristics that distinguish conversation from other forms of discourse...is that during the course of interaction the roles of speaker and hearer are frequently exchanged; further that this exchange of turns-at-talk is nonautomatic...all parties at least theoretically are equally charged with the allocation of turns...neither the size nor the order of turns is predetermined'.

Turn distribution is a function of turn allocation. Sacks et al. describe turn-taking as being 'locally managed' (allocation of turns operates on a turn-by-turn basis) and 'interactionally determined' (both speakers and hearers work collaboratively to determine the length of the turn and the location of the transfer).

'To be allocated a turn is to be given the right, initially to produce one TCU; renewal is a matter for negotiation' (McLaughlin 1984: p.97). Turn allocation is effected through one of the following means:

- a) the current speaker selects the next speaker
- b) in the absence of a), a current non-speaker may self select.
- c) In the absence of b), the current speaker may continue.

The 'relative distribution of turns is the cumulative outcome...of the turn-by-turn determination of turn-order' (Sacks et al. 1974: p.712). Thus, for two parties, the relevant variability is not differential distribution of turns, given that they will, alternate turns. With three parties, the differential distribution of turns becomes relevant 'with each additional increment in number of parties, (the 'last as next' bias) tends progressively to concentrate the distribution of turns among a sub-set of the potential next speakers' (ibid).

Sato (1982: p.113), found 'a significant difference between Asian and non-Asian students with respect to the distribution of talk in the ESL classes', with Asians taking significantly fewer speaking turns than the non-Asian students. This was found to be true for both 'general and personal solicits and self-selections'. The study revealed that Asians who accounted for about 61% of the group took only 37% of the total turns. Similarly with self-selection, Sato found that the Asian students accounted for only 34% of the self-selections made. Shimura (1988), in a contrastive study of turn-taking behavior of Japanese and Chi-

nese ESL students, found that Chinese students took more turns overall, responded more to the teacher's general solicits, and made more self-selected turns. Similarly, Micheau and Billmeyer (1987) comparing NS and NNS found 'a reluctance to bid or self-select in the latter group'.

## **Turn Length**

Turn length varies. Turn length in a conversation depends on a range of variables, from the choice of topic, the tempo of speech, to the number of participants. Sacks et al. state that 'with three parties...here is a bias toward smaller turn size...the "next turn" is no longer guaranteed to any current non-speaker...there will be pressure for minimization of turn size' (Sacks et al. 1974).

The Turn Constructional Unit (TCU) is considered the basic unit of Conversation Analysis. However Selting (2000) considers the notion 'unclear' and questions its 'intuitive and holistic' nature. She suggests separating more clearly the notions of TCU and Transition Relevance Place (TRP) to overcome much of the inherent ambiguity.

Hatch makes the observation that 'in conversation, the length of each turn is fairly short' and that 'in more formalized communication...turns...tend to be longer (Hatch 1994: p.18). Other factors may also come into play in determining turn size, for example the range of Turn Construction Unit (TCU) types, the ability to identify the type of TCU (i.e. whether it is sentential, clausal, phrasal or lexical) and the projectability of Transition Relevance Places (TRP's). In addition it is quite conceivable that the profile of the speaker, such as age, gender, personality as well as cultural influences would affect turn size.

In a study comparing discourse strategies of Native Speakers of English (NS) with Non-native Speakers (NNS), Micheau and Billmyer found that NNS's took 'excessively long turns by coordinating gesture, gaze, and hand movement with speech and 'by increasing the tempo across phrase boundaries and pausing at unpredictable moments the NNS was able to extend his/her turn' (Micheau and Billmyer 1987: p.93). Interestingly they also found a preference for relatively short and fairly distributed turns in the NS case and makes the assertion that the above mentioned 'NNS strategy is likely to be regarded as an inappropriate, uncooperative discourse strategy' (ibid). This has also been attributed to the possibly different perception of quality vs. quantity in the contributions of NS's and NNS's.

## **Research method**

Two discussion groups of three speakers each were set up. The first group consisted of

three Japanese Speakers of English (JSE's) A, B and C, and the second group consisted of three Native Speakers of English (NSE's) D, E and F. The groups were given three topics X, Y and Z and asked to discuss each topic for fifteen minutes. Both groups were given the same predetermined topics, presented in the same order. The topic was revealed immediately prior to the discussion. The topics were discussed in the same order in each group, viz. X, Y and Z. The topics were chosen so as not to give one group an unfair advantage over the other. Therefore care was taken in choosing topics that were not too culture specific or taboo and where much background information was not necessary. They were topics that the participants could relate to directly through their own day-to-day experiences. The topics were:

X: Leisure and entertainment in the year 2050

Y: Lifestyles in the year 2050

Z: Employment in the year 2050

The discussions were recorded on audio tape. The recorded discussions were then transcribed and analyzed for turn distribution and turn length.

The rationale for using three participants per group was that the speech event under study was 'natural' conversation among friends (McLaughlin, 1984, Ch. 7). Three was therefore considered an optimum number for the study which was based on audio recordings only, making transcribing more manageable. With larger groups, there is also the possibility of the conversation breaking down into two-party exchanges (Langford 1994, p.108).

**Limitations of the research method** (see Wanduragala, C. 2000 "Turn-Taking a comparative study of Backchannelling Behavior of Japanese and Native Speakers of English," *Journal of Osaka Jogakuin* (Vol.30: 148)).

### **Method of Analysis**

The taped discussions were transcribed and coded. The raw data was analyzed using simple totals and averages and then subjected to more rigorous statistical analysis. In particular, the chi-square test was used to test the hypotheses.

**Limitations of the method of analysis** (see Wanduragala, C. 2000 "Turn-Taking a comparative study of Backchannelling Behavior of Japanese and Native Speakers of English," *Journal of Osaka Jogakuin* (Vol.30: 148)).

## Results

### 1. Turn distribution

Table 1 : Number of turns

	JSE					NSE			
	A	B	C	Total		D	E	F	total
X	32	25	15	72	X	32	30	28	90
Y	43	30	17	90	Y	33	27	23	83
Z	44	44	14	102	Z	38	38	27	103
Total	119	99	46	264	Total	103	95	78	276
(ave)	40	33	15	88	(ave)	34	32	26	92
%	45%	38%	17%	100%	%	37%	35%	28%	100%

From the above data it is evident that the total number of turns in each group was fairly similar (JSE's: 264, NSE's: 276). However, the number of turns was more evenly distributed among the NSE's (37%, 35%, 28%) compared with the JSE's (45%, 38%, 17%).

A chi-square test was conducted using the above data.

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant difference between the number of turns taken by the different speakers for the three topics.

H<sub>a</sub>: There is a significant difference between the number of turns taken by the different speakers for the three topics.

Based on a 0.05% (5%) level of significance and 4 degrees of freedom, if  $x > 9.488$  then reject H<sub>0</sub>.

JSE's: the chi-square value for the above data was 3.059, thus H<sub>0</sub> was accepted.

NSE's: the chi-square value for the above data was 0.935, thus H<sub>0</sub> was accepted.

**There is no significant difference in the number of turns taken in each group by the individual speakers for the three topics.**

A second chi-square test was conducted using **group totals** to test the following hypotheses:

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no significance difference in the total number of turns taken by the two groups for the three topics.

H<sub>a</sub>: There is a significance difference in the total number of turns taken by the two groups for the three topics.

Based on a 0.05% (5%) level of significance and 2 degrees of freedom, if  $x > 5.991$  then reject H<sub>0</sub>.

The chi-square value for the above data was 2.018, thus H<sub>0</sub> was accepted.

**There is no significant difference in the total number of turns taken by the two groups for the three topics.**

The number of turns alone gives an incomplete picture of the turn distribution; it is necessary to consider turn length to get a more accurate picture.

## 2. Turn length

Table 2 : Total turn length (in seconds)

	JSE					NSE			
	A	B	C	Total		D	E	F	total
X	432	309	157	898	X	510	145	208	863
Y	424	279	58	761	Y	491	196	197	884
Z	1259	846	264	2369	Z	569	163	117	849
Total	403	258	49	710	Total	1570	504	521	2595
(ave)	419	282	88	789	(ave)	523	168	174	865
%	53%	36%	11%	100%	%	61%	19%	20%	100%

From the above data, it is evident that each group had a dominant speaker accounting for 61% of total turn length in the NSE group and 58% in the JSE group. In the NSE group, the other speakers showed a fairly even distribution of turn length for the three topics. However, in the JSE group, speaker C consistently accounted for a much smaller proportion of total turn length.

A chi-square test was conducted using the above data.

$H_0$ : There is no significant difference in total turn length for each speaker for the three topics.

$H_a$ : There is a significant difference in the total turn length for each speaker for the three topics.

Based on a 0.05 (5%) level of significance and 4 degrees of freedom, if  $x > 9.488$  then reject  $H_0$ .

JSE's: the chi-square value for the above data was 60.18, thus  $H_0$  was rejected.

NSE's: the chi-square value for the above data was, 42.19 thus  $H_0$  was rejected.

**There is a significant difference in the total turn length for each speaker for the three topics.**

A second chi-square test was conducted using **group totals** to test the following hypotheses:

$H_0$ : There is no significance difference in the total turn length for the two groups for the three topics.

$H_a$ : There is a significance difference in the total turn length for the two groups for the three topics.

Based on a 0.05% (5%) level of significance and 2 degrees of freedom, if  $x > 5.991$  then reject  $H_0$ .

The chi-square value for the above data was 11.93, proving the alternative hypothesis

**There is a significant difference in the total turn length for the two groups for the three topics.**

## **Discussion**

### **Turn distribution**

The number of turns taken showed a significant difference for the three JSE's with speaker A accounting for 45% of the total, speaker B for 38% and speaker C for only 15%. However, among the NSE's, the turns were fairly evenly distributed. This pattern was consistent for all three topics, hence the null hypothesis was accepted. The differences in the JSE discussions could be attributed to the proficiency level of the participants as well as to their respective personalities. Thus speaker A, with the highest proficiency and the highest score in the personality test for sociability and expressiveness, accounted for the largest number of turns. Speaker A was also responsible for the highest number of interruptions, taking away the turn from the current speaker. Her relatively higher level of proficiency could have created a 'hierarchical' system where the other speakers played a deferential role. She was also very adept at coming up with new ideas which enabled her to take several turns. She would also gain a turn by disagreeing with or challenging the current speaker. Among close friends, speaker A could freely disagree, interrupt or even ridicule others.

The number of turns alone does not give an accurate picture of overall turn distribution. For example, among the NSEs the relatively even distribution of turns does not show to what extent speaker D dominated the discussion. Turn length needs to be considered.

### **Turn length**

This shows vast differences within both groups. JSE speaker A and NSE speaker D accounted for 53% and 61% of total turn length respectively. The other two NSE speakers accounted for an even distribution of turn length while in the JSE group speaker C clearly took much shorter turns. This could be explained by her lower level of proficiency and more introverted personality. She was very much a cooperative participant supporting the other speakers and expanding on their ideas.

The chi-squared test rejected the null hypothesis thereby showing variability in turn length for both intra- and inter-group comparisons, thus confirming the Sacks et al. rule 6



viz., turn size is not fixed but varies.

### Summary and conclusions

The aim of the study was to determine whether there were significant differences in turn features, i.e. turn distribution and turn length, between Japanese and Native Speakers of English. Results showed both similarities and differences. However there was no significant difference in the number of turns taken by the individuals in each group and the number of turns taken by the two groups. However there was a significant difference in the total turn length for each individual speaker in both groups as well as the total turn length for the two groups.

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