TURN-TAKING IN RADIO TALK:
A CASE STUDY

Vincent W. Chang

I. Introduction

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) point out that turn-taking is "a prominent type of social organization, one whose instances are implicated in a wide range of other activities." For example, it is used for ordering of moves in games, for allocating political office, for regulating traffic at intersections, for serving customers at business establishments, and for talking-in interviews, meetings, debates, ceremonies, conversations, etc.

Extensive research has been done on turn-taking in conversation, e.g., Kendon, 1967; Clancy, 1972; Duncan, 1972, 1973, 1974; Jefferson, 1973; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; De Long, 1974; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974; Coulthard, 1977; and Goffman, 1981. However, with the exception of Goffman, little research has been reported on turn-taking in radio talk.

The present paper aims to examine turn-taking in one popular radio talk show: Talk Net, a program which claims to "cover 40 different professions and locations; a program of good will, inspirations, information, and human interests." Since turn-taking itself is a very complicated phenomenon of human interaction, a detailed analysis covering all aspects of this fascinating phenomenon is virtually beyond the scope of the present study. Therefore, I will limit my research to exploring only the following topics: (1) What constitutes a turn in radio talk? (2) How does a participant find out that it is his/her turn to talk? and (3) What would happen if the participants compete for a speaking turn?

1. Goffman (1981), however, examines radio talk from a wider perspective, with no special emphasis on turn-taking.
2. This is a direct quote from the host of the program, Dr. Bernard Nelson, who frequently uses it as the introductory remarks at the beginning of each broadcasting.
These topics will be examined in turn in the following sections, where recorded samples will be cited to supplement the discussion.

II. A Speaking Turn in Radio Talk

Coulthard (1977) observes that there are two basic features of conversation. One is that the roles of speaker and listener change and the other is that speaker change recurs. In the change from speaker to listener and from listener to speaker, a switch in speaking turn is executed.

But what constitutes a turn? This, in fact, is the problem which conversational analysts encounter in their analysis of turn-taking. Most analysts would agree that nods of agreement and murmurs of assent do not count as turns in conversation, but there are important differences in opinion as to whether the so-called "back channels"3 (Duncan 1973) such as "sentence completions", "request for clarification", and "brief restatements" should be analyzed as turns in conversation. For Duncan these do not constitute as turns but only serve as signals to provide the speaker with useful information as his turn progresses. But for Sacks, Scheglo afflict Jefferson (1974), they would be complete turns.

Goffman (1981) draws a distinction between "turn" or "turn at talk" and "talk of a turn" A "turn" or "turn at talk" refers to an opportunity to hold the floor, whereas "talk of a turn" refers to what is said while holding it. In the present study, a turn in conversation is treated as the speech that a participant in communication utters before another participant begins to speak.

What's in a turn? Sacks4 observes that turns consist of one or more sentences, with a sentence being defined as a unit which has

its completion recognized on its completion, and that it is not complete [is] recognizable by participants; also it can be monitored, from its beginning, to see from its beginning what it will take for its completion to be produced, in such a way that, on its completion, its completion may be recognized.

Although this definition points to the heuristic role of sentence as an indicator of completing utterances, it does not help much in our understanding of the general features

3. Goffman's (1981) use of this term is quite different from Duncan's. For Goffman, "back-channel" cues refer to facial gestures and nonverbal vocalization.
4. This definition is cited in Coulthard (1977: 54).
of a speaking turn. In what follows, I will examine the form and size of a speaking turn in everyday conversation.

In daily conversation, as is often observed, the form and size of a speaking turn are not fixed: they vary greatly according to different speech situations. Typically, a turn in conversation may take the form of a statement, a question, a command, or an exclamation, as in the following exchanges:

A: "You forgot!" (exclamation)
B: "Yes, I AM sorry." (statement)
A: "Where is it?" (question)
B: "It's in the car." (statement)
A: "Shut the window!" (command)
B: "Why me?" (question)

In terms of size, a turn can be as small as a single word (yes), a phrase (no way), a clause (when I'm through with you), or as large as a complete sentence (I'm going to the bank to cash some checks).

Occasionally, we also find cases where a speaking turn contains more than one sentence, for example:

That's right. He's going to put us on stage and start talking about how bad we were in our old school. . . He will get the people at the dinner to donate more money to help other unfortunates like us.

In general, however, a turn in conversation occurs as a single sentence. Thus, Coulthrad (1977) notes that "turns to speak are valued and sought and thus the great majority of turns in any conversation consist only of a single sentence, unless premission has been sought for a longer turn, perhaps to tell a story or a joke."

From my analysis of the recordings of Talk Net5, I found that the form and size of a speaking turn in a talk show are essentially the same as those in everyday conversation. In terms of form, a speaking turn also appears in one of the following forms:

---

5. The analysis is based on a 28-hour recording of the program.
Statement: That’s all I can tell you.
Question: Where are you now in school?
Command: Go ahead.
Exclamation: Oh, no!

In terms of size, a speaking turn consists of linguistic units as small as a word (Hi!), a phrase (In college?), a clause (‘cause I want to help people), a sentence (That’s what I want to tell you anyway), or a stretch of sentences, as the following sample shows:

Sample I
(The host (H) of the program, Dr. Bernard Nelson, is offering advice to a caller (C), a 14-year-old young man whose girlfriend is pregnant.)

C: Yeah. wha-what if she had an abortion/
H: that’s not for YOU to decide: that’s for HER and her PARENTS to decide: you understand that/
C: ye-yes/
H: and that. see. when you’re as young as you are: see. you’re playing with fire: and don’t burn yourself up. honey/
C: hmmm/
H: you’ve got to tell your Daddy and Mommy: i’ll tell you. it’s IMpossible: for you to keep it a secret: even if you’re thinking what you’re thinking: you don’t have the money: number two: uh. this is a young lady of fifteen: she can’t keep it a secret: you understand that/
C: yeah/
H: so-instead of everybody in town knowing about this: what you do: is you sit down. with your father and mother: may i suggest you do as follows: may i make this following suggestion/
C: yes/
H: that you and this lady friend of yours: arrange a meeting: with your parents and her parents there/
C: yes/
H: and both of you there: and both of you tell your parents the same kind. . . .

Key / = end of turn . = pause : = long pause
- = lengthening CAPITALIZATION = heavily stressed
This sample shows that there is a sharp difference between the host’s and the caller’s
turns. The host’s turns are longer and contain greater linguistic complexity in form where-
as the caller’s turns consist mainly of single-word utterances. This is different from what
we usually find in daily conversation. In everyday talk, turns are equally distributed
among the participants, and no participant is allowed to serve more frequently or for a
long summation of time than any other participant.

Recordings of Talk Net, however, show that turns of one participant tend to be
longer and sometimes linguistically more complicated than those of another participant.
This typically occurs in two kinds of situations. One is when the host is offering solutions
to the caller’s problems, as shown in Sample I. The other is when the caller is stating
his/her own problems, as in the following:

Sample II
(The caller, an 80-year-old widow, is telling the host about her financial pro-
blems.)
C: i'm uh.an eighty year old widow/
H: right/
C: and just last year: my husband died.last year/
H: hmmmm/
C: and i have uh.140,000 dollars in C D/
H: hmmmm/
C: because i was worrying: about going to a nursing home: i'm afraid.ah.getting money
out front/
H: right/

In this sample, the host’s turns consist solely of one-word utterances: right and
hmmm. These short responses are very similar to what Goffman (1981) calls “keep-
going” signals or “booster-like encouragements”. In fact, such signals occur very frequent-
ly in my recordings of Talk Net: oh, yeah; uhhuh; sure, go ahead; excellent; alright; and
okay are among the most frequent ones.

III. Turn Signals

It is pointed out earlier that in conversation, the roles of speaker and listener change
and that speaker change recurs. This creates problems for the participants. For example,
how does the next speaker know when the current speaker has finished, and therefore it is now his turn to talk? This is apparently very crucial if the participants want to avoid overlap or silence in turn-taking.

The importance of the speaker turn signal is emphasized in Duncan (1973). Duncan very convincingly demonstrates that every smooth exchange of the speaker role follows a speaker turn signal, whereas every attempt by an auditor to claim the turn while no cues are being displayed, results in simultaneous turns.

Goffman (1981) observes that in conversation there exist various turnover signals which “indicate sending of a message and the taking over of the sending role by the next speaker.” It is is these turn-taking signals that help achieve smooth change-over of speakers in conversation.

Furthermore, as pointed out in Duncan (1973, 1974), the cues for speaker change can be grammatical, paralinguistic, or kinesic or any combination of the three. Grammatical turn signals involve “the completion of a grammatical clause containing subject-predicate combination”. Paralinguistic turn signals refer to intonation, especially “the use of any pitch level/terminal juncture combination, other than 22”. Kinesic turn signals, on the other hand, involve body motion, including “the termination of any hand gesticulation or the relaxation of a tensed hand position”.

De Long (1974) presents a detailed analysis of a series of conversations between four- and five-year-old preschool children, which shows a marked correlation between certain body movements and change of speaker. Another important factor which facilitates the smooth change-over of speakers is gaze. For example, Kendon (1967) notes that

usually the person who is bringing a long utterance to an end does so by assuming a characteristic head posture and by looking steadily at the auditor before he actually finishes speaking.

These useful kinesic turn signals, however, were not available in this particular type of radio talk I investigated. The host and the caller in Talk Net were not in a situation where face-to-face communication is possible, so they could not make use of what is generally referred to as “organizationally significant visual back-channel cues”6. The only channel of communication they can rely on was the speech sounds.

As for grammatical turn signals, while it is true that a turn generally ends with a grammatically well-formed sentence, it is not infrequent for us to find cases where a turn does not involve a subject-predicate combination, as in the following sample:

Sample III

(The caller is asking the host about the pros and cons of attending summer school.)

C₁: I'm interested in going to summer school: to graduate a year earlier/
H₁: okay: where are you now in school/
C₂: junior/
H₂: in college/
C₃: ah, high school/
H₃: sure: go ahead/

This sample shows that the ending of a turn is not necessarily signaled by a well-formed subject-predicate construction. In C₂, for example, a single-word utterance, junior, constitutes the caller's turn, and in H₂, a two-word phrase, in college, makes up the host's turn. Recordings of Talk Net show that such short exchanges occur frequently, as in most conversations. So, Duncan's grammatical cues are not necessarily the most reliable turn signals.

My analysis of the recordings shows that what Duncan calls "paralinguistic cues" plays a more significant role in signalling change of turn. A sharp rising intonation contour or a sharp falling intonation contour at the end of the current speaker's utterance usually indicates the completion of the turn and signals the speaker's intention to give up the floor.

A sharp rising intonation contour (represented by ↘ at the end of the utterance) typically occurs in a yes-no question, as in C₂ junior and D₂ in college. A falling intonation contour (↘), typically occurs in a statement or a WH-question, as in C₁ I'm interested in going to summer school: to graduate a year earlier and H₁ okay: where are you now in school. A level intonation contour, 22, represented by →, on the other hand, signals to

7. Each participant's turn is subscripted for easy reference in discussion.
the hearer that the current speaker’s turn is not completed yet, as the following shows 8:

H: that’s not for YOU to decide: that’s for HER and her parents to decide: you understand that /

The occurrence of a speaker turn signal, however, does not necessarily condition a change of speaker. For instance, in the following sample, the host’s turn contains a well-formed grammatical structure, and the last sentence is spoken with a falling intonation. But the caller seems to decline the speaking turn:

Sample IV

(A concerned mother calling to ask about child abuse.)

H: especially in some urban areas like new york for example: where they uh actuall y take their parents to court / (5-second pause)

H: did you hear what I said /

One of the strategies that the current speaker can employ in cases like this is the use of confirming phrases such as do you understand, or can you hear me, which serve to enforce the listener to accept the next speaker role. In general, however, the more turn signals displayed simultaneously, the greater the likelihood that the listener will take over the speaker role.

IV. Turn Competing

During the course of interaction between the speaker and the listener in any conversation, the roles of speaker and listener change, and this change occurs with remarkably little overlapping speech and remarkably few silences. This led Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) to suggest that there is an underlying rule in American English conversation—“at least and not more than one party talk at a time.” This is not an empirical fact, because there are obviously many instances of short pauses and short overlaps in conversation. For example, 9

A: they have at their disposal enormous assets □ and their policy
B: □ look can I just

come in on that □ last year
A: □ YES IN A MOMENT IF YOU MAY AND WHEN

8. This is taken from Sample I (page 154).
9. This is taken from Coulthard (1977:59).
I'VE FINISHED then you'll know what the point is

B: yes I'M SO SORRY

In radio talk, short pauses and short overlaps also occur, as in the following sample:

Sample V
(The host is consoling a woman whose husband has brain disorder.)

C₁: you see it's kind of hard:when your man has been strong and wonderful all his life.
and for him to be put in the position now he has a brain disorder and they don't
even know what it is/

H₁: yes/

C₂: [so-

H₂: of course:but one thing that that is happening is that he has a wife that's standing by
him:VERY important:isn't that.VERY:to me that's uh VERY important:in other
words:the good Lord is testing you:and you're standing up to it.honey/

C₃: well.that's that's what i-am going.under.uh:that's what i called you today.when i was
there/

H₃: yeah/

C₄: i said.you know.i said.he said.i'm getting disgusting:i said.honey you can't do that:i
said.( ) i don't want to get disgusting/

H₄: of course not/

C₅: but he seem can't get around:(afternoon get ) cigarette

H₅: but.but.you see but but

H₆: that's alright:but on the other hand:keep in mind that one thing that keeps him
going.is that he has a wife that is standing by him. . . .

Key: ( ) = unintelligible [ = overlap

There are three instances of overlapping speech in this sample, but soon after the
overlap occurs, the participants set out to remedy the situation and return to the state of
one and only one speaker. In what follows, I will examine the environment where overlaps
are likely to occur and the strategies the participants would employ in competing for
speaking turn.

Close examination of the recordings of Talk Net shows that overlapping speech
typically occurs after pauses, particularly those which indicate the end of current speaker's
turn. Take Sample V for example, the first instance of overlap occurs when both the host and the caller begin to speak simultaneously after the pause at the end of $H_1$. The second instance of overlap occurs in the same environment, i.e. after the pause at the end of $H_4$. The third instance of overlap, however, does not occur at the end of a turn. It occurs within the current speaker's turn. We note that there is a long pause before the overlap occurs. This suggests that a long pause within the speaker's turn, especially at the end of a sentence, is also a place where overlap is likely to occur.

How do participants compete for a speaking turn? In the first case of overlap, the caller yields the turn to the host, although judging from the dialogic format, it is the caller's turn to speak. In the second case of overlap, the caller gets the turn and despite the third instance of overlap, manages to finish her turn. What strategy is involved in competing for a turn?

Coulthard (1977) suggests that there are two possible strategies a participant can use in cases of overlap. One is "by speaking more loudly, more quickly and in a higher pitch; often the surface grammar or phonology breaks down, and frequently there is a reference to the interruption." This strategy is used by Speaker A in the example cited on page 158. The other strategy is "by repeating short, single-tonic, utterances to show his desire for the floor." Coulthard cites an interesting example in which a 2-year-old boy uses this strategy to get the floor:

MOTHER: not sure what she’s been saying
FATHER: not at all today
TOM: ah ah ah ah
MOTHER: oh well at least well I’ll need to know when
FATHER: darling
TOM: ah ah ah ah
MOTHER: she comes in for my con, sorry darling.
FATHER:
TOM: sto stop talking

A similar example is found in the exchanges in Sample VI:

10. That is, $A_1$, $B_1$, $A_2$, $B_2$, etc. (cf. Goffman 1981:6).
Sample VI

C: and i really want to help with people: with their problems.
   because i’m thinking: you know
H: no no no honey: but before you can help.
   you have to be able to grow up and understand/

The second strategy, i.e. repeating short, single-tonic utterances, seems capable of explaining why the host gets his turn to talk: but is repeated five times in H₅ before the host eventually gets his turn to talk in H₆. Neither strategy, however, can satisfactorily account for all of the three cases of overlap in Sample V.

The first case of overlap, i.e. C₂ and H₂, seems to suggest that the length of the utterances at point of overlap is significant in the competing of speaking turn. C₂ contains only a single word so, with the vowel lengthened. H₂, on the other hand, begins with the phrase of course, which consists of two words. It indicates that the longer the speaker’s utterance at overlap, the more likely he/she will get the turn to talk.

Another factor which seems to play a significant role is the speed of the utterances at overlap. A close examination of the recording shows that in H₂, the host speaks at a much faster speed. The second and third instances of overlap seem to support the hypothesis that utterance speed at points of overlap is crucial in turn competing. In H₅, the host’s utterance contains many short pauses, and this slows down his speed of speaking. No such pauses occur in C₅, so the caller’s speed is faster. This enables her to continue through the third overlap.

It is also possible that the use of the word but is crucial in competing for speaking turn. But occurs in all three instances of overlap: after the phrase of course: in H₂, in the beginning of C₅, and almost throughout H₅. Sacks et al. (1974) point out that for the speaker who wishes to continue speaking past a particular possible completion, the simplest technique is to use an “utterance incompletor”, which includes lexical items such as but, and, however, and other clause connectors. The importance of these items is to turn a potentially complete sentence into an incomplete one.

Treating but as an “utterance incompletor” seems able to explain why the host in H₂ succeeds in maintaining his turn and to some extent why the caller in C₅ is able to continue with her turn. But the fact that the host has to repeat but for five times to get his turn shows that linguistic factors alone cannot explain fully the complicated phenomenon of turn-taking.
Close examination of the recordings of Talk Net shows that, except for the beginning portion where the caller states his/her problems, a great amount of talk (about 2/3) in each broadcasting is done by the host of the program, Dr. Bernard Nelson. And interestingly, whenever overlaps occur, it is Dr. Nelson who always wins the turn to talk.

It has been suggested to me that Dr. Nelson is talkative and has the tendency to interrupt the caller’s talk. This, however, is not entirely true. My impression from regular listening to the program is that the callers hold great respect for Dr. Nelson. I have noticed that most callers would begin with high compliments about Dr. Nelson’s wisdom, his concern for human beings, and his great inspirations. (One woman even asked why he did not want to run for presidency!) For the callers, Dr. Nelson is a symbol of authority, a man who is older, wiser, and with better knowledge and more experience. Therefore, he is worth listening to. This suggests that the assignment of turns in conversation depends, among other things, on the distribution of knowledge among the participants. Someone reputed to be very informed on a certain topic has the right to be heard if the topic comes up in conversation.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined turn-taking in a popular talk show: Talk Net. The general features of a speaking turn are explored in Section II, where it is pointed out that turns of one participant tend to be longer and sometimes linguistically more complicated than those of another participant. Section III looks into three kinds of cues which signal change of speaker turn. It is found that due to the lack of visual cues, the participants would rely primarily on grammatical and paralinguistic turn signals. Overlaps and turn competing are discussed in Section IV. Overlaps are found to occur mostly after long pauses, and it is observed that turn competing cannot be fully accounted for by linguistic factors alone. To sum up, turn-taking involves complicated social interaction. In any analysis of turn-taking in conversation, the investigator must consider both the linguistic and the social factors for his description to be faithful as well as accurate.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


