An Emergent, Usage-based Grammar Approach on Overlaps

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Abstract. Selting (2000) describes the dynamics in turn interaction as an "interplay of syntax and prosody in their semantic, pragmatic, and sequential context." In the same way, Ford (2004), putting "contingency" at a central feature for the study of turn construction, highlights how grammar, prosody, action sequential and gestures contribute to the creation of talk-in interactions in face-to-face conversations. In this paper, I will also focus on turn constructions, and in particular, on overlaps, in 11 different invitations made through phone calls and between speakers of different L1. I will show that speakers, when unable to rely on gestures (phone calls do not provide any visual aid to the conversation) and on prosody (different L1s have substantial different prosodic units), relay mostly on action and action projection almost in the same rate than of grammar and action together. These results, on the one hand, challenge the supposed importance of grammar for the interpretation of possible turn completion and, on the other hand, highlights the main role of action and action projection in the construction of turns. The results of this research also emphasize the role of the speakers and how they "constantly detect patterns of conversations, extract probabilistic information about frequency of occurrence and have expectations about how the talk will proceed" (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2009). This holds true, especially when speakers cannot rely on contributors such as prosody and gestures, and suggests, in more general terms, that "action" is, more than any other, the central feature for the construction of turns in conversations.

0.   Introduction

Conversational analysis shares with Emergent Grammar the emphasis and particular attention to linguistics elements, which are considered by the traditional universal grammar approach as irrelevant to linguistic descriptions. UG focuses mainly on written language, neglecting the study of language in naturally occurring environments, such as face-to-face conversations, for instance.

Conversational analysis looks at the dynamic of naturally occurring linguistic interactions and how sparklers manage their contributions to the constructions of discourse. According to Tannen and Chafe (1987), "ordinary conversation is the prototypical form of language, the baseline against which all other genres, spoken or written, should be compared" (390). The attention to natural and spontaneous speeches allows gaining insight on the strategies and resources that speakers use while engaging in conversation. Emanuel Schegloff, one of the most influential scholars in conversational analyses, defines conversations as "the most common and, it would appear, the most fundamental condition of language use or discourse" (1979:283). It should come from alone that, a comprehensive understanding of human language cannot discern from a deep analysis of spontaneous human interactions, since "spoken language is the primary genre from which all other genres are derived" (Bakhtin:1986).

Naturally occurring conversations, as studied in conversational analysis, are also strictly related to the contexts in which such social behavior takes place. Schegloff highlights also the importance of the context in the dynamic of conversation: "It should hardly surprise us if some of the most fundamental features of natural language are shaped in accordance with this home environment in co-present interaction – as adaptation to it" (1996:54). The way speakers manage their interactions is a form of adaptation to the surrounding social environment, and the attention

that conversational analysis put on it is also something that it shares with an emergent grammar view of language. Schegloff (1996) also adds that "for example, if the basic natural environment for sentences is in turns-at-talk in conversation, we should take seriously the possibility that aspects of their structure are to be understood as adaptation to that environment" (55).

The significant relation between context and languages, and, in the particular case of the conversational analysis, between environment and speaker interactions provides a productive framework for the description of conversational elements, in which they can be considered as context-shaped and context-emergent.

In this paper, I will focus on those particular turn constructions units where overlaps emerge, using the data from 11 phone invitations made between speakers of different L1. Overlaps normally happen when one of the speakers interprets the turn as completed and, according to Ford (2004), this is more likely to occur when grammar, prosody, gesture and action-in-context come into place at the same time. My research focuses on the strategies that speakers use when they cannot rely on specific elements such as gesture (phone calls do not provide any access to visual information) and prosody since speakers of different L1 have different prosodic units. Furthermore, speakers of English as a second language often transfer those prosodic units from their L1 to English (Rasier & Hiligsmann 2007:42-43), so that they often don't share the same prosodic features when engaging in oral interactions with other non-native speakers.

Using the Emergent Grammar's view of speakers, who "borrow heavily from their previous experiences of communication in similar circumstances, on similar topics, and with similar interlocutors" (Hopper 1998:158), I also see overlaps as the result of such cognitive processes and speakers as constantly adapting to the discourse dynamics with which they are engaging.

The organization of this study is as follows. In the first part, I will describe in general terms turn taking and overlaps. In the second part, I will present the methodology used in this research, together with a brief description of the data I used. The third part consists of discussion and some concluding remarks.

1.   Turn Taking and Overlaps

Conversational analysis, as mentioned in the introduction, focuses its attention on naturally occurring spoken interactions. One of the basic units in this discipline is called "turn constructional unit," normally referred as TCU, which can correspond to a phrase, a clause, a word and even to a pause. Every conversation is based on turn-constructional units, which will gravitate around turn change relevant points, in which speakers manage their interactions based on their interpretation of such units. Ford refers to such element as essential for conversations: "The timing of turn initiation is an essential semiotic resource for human interaction" (2004:27-28). These key units are constantly subject to the interpretation of the speakers involved, who "both selected by the speaker or self-selected, will start their turn at or just prior to (in terminal overlap) the current speaker's turn" (Schegloff 1996c). The possible turn initiation points are the preferred environment in which overlaps emerge. Deborah Tannen argues that "with overlaps, we tend to mean talk by more than one speaker at a time" (1983:119). In her analyses, she claims that, when overlaps are not to be considered as an interruption, they can have different functions: they can be a sign of linguistic cooperation, a device for requesting and giving verification, a mean for choral repetition, and linguistic manifestations of persistence.

In this paper, as stated in the introduction, I do consider overlaps as emergent in context and as the product of those cognitive processes that see speakers as active members of a verbal interaction, who "constantly detect patterns of conversations, extract probabilistic information

about frequency of occurrence and have expectations about how the talk will proceed" (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2009). Overlaps are, I argue, the linguistic manifestation of such expectations, rather than interruptions or manifestation of persistence, for instance.

The strict connections between TCUs and overlaps require a better understanding of the first, to gain a broader view of these phenomena. TCUs, or, according to Ford & Thompson (1996), CTCP (complex turn-constructional place), encompass grammar, intonation and action projections. "Speaker change more closely clusters at moments where grammar, prosody, and action-in-context converged to form points of possible completion (Ford 2004:37). Such approach sets out the primacy of grammar for the construction of turns in conversations and takes into account more resources shared by the speakers of a specific community. Since such contributors guide participants in the process of interpretations, they also trigger overlaps and could be considered directly responsible for such phenomena.

In this paper, I want to examine which strategies speakers of different L1 use to interpret such TCUs borders when they cannot rely on gesture and prosody for their interpretations. In the next paragraph, I will describe the methodology and the data that I used to conduct this research.

2.   Methodology

The data of this research come from the recording of 11 different phone invitations, made among speakers of different languages. The L1s involved in this study are Italian, Spanish, German and Chinese, together with English, but the conversations included here were never among native speakers of English, so that the speakers involved never shared the same prosodic features. All the conversations are in English, and the data were created during a graduate seminar on Conversational Analysis and Interactional Linguistic in the Spring Semester 2016 at Purdue University. All the recordings were transcribed and anonymized.

The study was made on a total of 95 overlaps, and each on of them was classified using the following criteria, based on Ford (2004): grammar; action, action & grammar. The first one refers to every single unit that contains a minimum of a subject and a predicate (example: *I am tired*). The second one refers to whenever an action is made, without the necessary presence of a phrase containing a subject and a predicate (example: *And what?*- a question without subject and predicate). The last one refers to all those overlaps, in which both grammar and action, as already described, come together in a TCU (example: *Can you hear me?* – a complete grammatical question).

There are, of course, some limitations to this study. First, the claims made in this research should be backed up by a larger number of instances and, maybe, with a greater number of L1s. Second, although it was already stated that a different L1 also means a different prosodic inventory, it doesn't necessarily rule out the possibility that the speakers involved in the invitations included in this study, who are all speakers of English as a second languages, are indeed able to reproduce the salient prosodic features of American English. Furthermore, it is also possible that, even if not able to master those prosodic features, non-native speakers could be able to understand and interpret such features in a successful manner. The possible high amount of variability among the speakers concerning their "prosodic proficiency" made necessary to take this element out of the analysis.

3.   Results

In the 11 invitations analyzed here, I found a total of 95 overlaps. The following chart shows the data classification according to the criteria described in the previous section:

Table 1. The amount of overlaps dived using Ford's categories (2004) of action and grammar

Overlaps	Grammar	Action	Grammar & Action	Borderline cases
95	1?	47	46	1

The table shows that the speakers in the invitation relied in the same way on just action or action and grammar together. Just one case of grammar was found, while one particular example is hard to classify and was put in the category "borderline cases." In the next section I will discuss more in deeply the findings of this study, analyzing each of the four categories presented in the charts.

3.1   Results: Action

A total of 47 overlaps were put in this category, implying that action is one of the main factors that facilitate the interpretation of the possible ending of a TCU and, at the same time, one of the main contributors that triggers overlaps.

The following excerpt shows different examples of overlaps in this category:

```
58            (0.4)
59    ANT     Yeah. [The]    city.
60    LYD           [°Okay°]
61            (0.5)
62    LYD     °uh huh°. Who did you watch it with?
63            (1.1)
64    ANT     Emh: Ira:m <and Germán>.
65            (0.6)
66    LYD     Ah: okay. ↑Cool.
67            (1.2)
68    ANT     [We're doing that] every Saturday.
69    LYD     [Was it as a      ]
70            (0.5)
```

In this part, we have a total of 2 overlaps (57-58 and 66-67). The first overlap happens after the first part of ANT's turn (yeah). The answer of LYD right after it and in overlap with the final part of ANT's turn is the response to the action of ANT at the beginning of his turn, the action of confirmation. The other speaker interprets the word "yeas" already as a completed turn and starts her own. The other overlap happens after a pause, which wasn't assigned to any of the speakers involved in the conversation. The overlap happens here because of the joint but different interpretation of both participants of the 1.2 long pause. ANT interprets such pause as the time to start his turn, while LYD interprets the pause as a moment to ask another question. In this particular example, the pause, which is a sort of action, triggers the overlap but it is interpreted differently by both speakers. This case highlights what already stated in the previous pages about the involvement of the speakers and their continuous effort in detecting conversational patterns, making probabilistic projections and expecting the conversation to go in a certain way.

The following excerpt also contains overlaps of the action category:

```
21          (0.8)
22   ANT    °Yeah.°
23   LYD    Yeah.
24   LYD    .md ehm, I:: [just wanted to-        ]
25   ANT              [↑Are you still in the office?]
26          (0.8)
27   LYD    No, I'm home.
```

The overlap in 24 and 25 is similar to the first discusses in the previous page, but this time the action, expressed by ".md ehm" is seen just by one speaker, ANT as the possible end of a TCU, while the other speaker, LYD, used it as an initiator for the entire turn that ends with "I just wanted to". The different with the first example (overlap triggered by yeah) is that the action here is way more context-related and pragmatic influenced since speakers with the word yeah can also rely on its semantic features to make a proper assessment of the action put in place by one of the speakers. The semantic features of md ehm are weak, and speakers rely more on the context and their pragmatic knowledge to interpret this particular TCU and its possible completion.

3.2   Grammar and Action

There was a total of 46 overlaps that were included in this category, making this the second most frequent strategy used by participants to interpret a possible end of TCU and one of the most common overlaps triggers.

The following excerpt shows some concrete examples of the overlaps that are part of the category grammar and action:

```
1    ((telephone ring))
2              (4.0)
3    JAS      Hello?
4    HAN      Hello↑ Jason. How are you doing?=
5    JAS      =yes. I'm doing ↑fine
6    HAN      (.)Ye:s [uh :      ]
7    JAS              [How'a you]
8    HAN      I'm good↑ So: have you received an email talking abouta program
9             called PGSG buddies? (0.2)
10   JAS      Yes uh I already received i(t).
11   HAN      Yeah, uh: do you wanto: (.)apply that program?
12            B'cuz I'm [very intereste:d]
13   JAS                [Yeah I actually:](0.3)
```

There is a total of 2 overlaps here, on the lines 6-7 and 12 and 13. The first overlap is not triggered just by the action in the line right before it, and not even by action and grammar since it happens right after ye:s, which doesn't have any subject plus predicate structure. It follows in this category because it was triggered by the question how are you doing? in line 4. The presence of a complete grammatical sentence in question form triggered the response in line 7, although the TCU of HAN in line 6 wasn't completed. The same thing happens in the next example when it is a question (in a complete grammatical form – do you want: (.) apply for the program) again that can be considered the causes of the overlap.

The next two examples are overlaps triggered by grammar and action, but they do not contain any questions:

```
54          (1.8)
55   ANT    >It's a documentary< it's not a- really a movie but [really nice]
56   LYD                                                    ↑ [<For       ]
57          get Baghdad?>
58          (0.4)
```

The overlap in the lines 55 and 56 is in response to a sentence which is grammatically completed (subject and predicate are present) and at the same fulfills the action to give information. This example would also fit in Tannen (1983) description of overlaps as a device to request for clarification. Anyhow, it has to be noticed that the overlap happens right after the completion of both a grammatical phrase and an action by which the speaker give specific information.

The next example also illustrates the interplay of grammar and action in the turn construction:

```
20   MAR    Yeah yeah, of course because youknow we are sending out the
21          call for papers, so I wanna just keep you updated and then
22          we can drink coffee [ together]  .hh
23   HAN                        [ yeah    ]     Yeah sounds good to me.
```

The overlap here is trigger by a speaker-hearer oriented invitation. The information was already expressed by "*we can drink coffee*" and the overlap happens right after this grammatically completed invitation. The word "together" may have been, in this particular case, redundant to the invitation and HAN had interpreted the first part of the invitation as an already completed TCU and started her turn after it.

3.3   Grammar
Just one example of grammar was found in the 11 invitations analyzed for this research:

```
99   HAN  Ok then I will [ see:]  you ↑tomorrow
100  MAR                 [ ok  ]
```

The overlap here is triggered by the subject plus predicate construction I will. Although someone could argue that the use of the verb will could also imply an action, for the particular case of this modal verb it is hard to assess to which action is HAN referring. The modal verb will be combined in Modern English with every verb, and the possible combinations in 99 are also more than one or two. For this reason, this particular overlap was put in this category. The frequency of use of the phrase I will see you …. may have played a significant role in triggering this specific overlap, helping MAR in the interpretation of this TUC. As already mentioned, frequency of use influences the probabilistic projections of the path of a particular conversation. For this reason, this example can also be seen as another proof for the view of conversation as a joint action, in which speakers

are cognitively involved, use their own past experiences in similar contexts to interpret the other speaker turn and start their own.

3.4 Borderline Case

There was one particular case that could not be assigned to any of the three categories discussed in the previous pages:

```
75   HAN    ok

76          (.)

77   VAL    [The coffee] will be on me (.) so: (.) 'm gonna treat you well

78   HAN    [Ok        ]
```

The overlap in the lines 77 and 78 comes after a very short pause, and it seems like there is not particular action implied before the pause and after it. The speakers here voluntary self-selected themselves for the next turn. VAL adds some information about the invitation she made a couple of previous lines, and HAN initiates her turn with an ok. It is unclear here what is causing HAN turn initiation and, it is also hard to determine the function of such overlap. For these reasons, it was impossible to insert this example to one of the three categories formulated by Ford (2004) and used in this research.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The analyses of the 95 overlaps in this research have shown on which elements non-native speakers of English relay for the interpretation of a particular TCU and to initiate their turns. In the majority of cases, action and action and grammar played a primary role in the assessment of TCUs and their possible completions. The almost same amount of time in which speakers used action and action and grammar provides support for Ford claims (2004). She recognizes that grammar is not the necessary element in turn constructions, although, she adds, "CA researchers often gesture toward linguistic structures as a basis for turns and their projection" (Ford 2004:31). Action as a category alone seems to be as important as grammar or even more since almost the same amount of overlaps were triggered when grammar and action came together.

The use of action in the same measure of the combination of grammar and action also provides support for an approach that looks at overlaps in the same way emergent grammar looks at grammatical structures. The examples found in the 11 invitations have shown that overlaps emerge in context, they are influenced by pragmatic factors, they are context-related and are by-products of the speakers "participation in conversations." The particular interpretation of a specific TCU is made possible through the past experiences of the speakers in similar situations. The cognitive effort of participants in interpreting TCUs and the consequent overlaps due to a (maybe) incorrect assessment of such units "borders" highlight the active participation and the social nature of this kind of human interactions.

Furthermore, the high number of times in which speaker solely relied on action for the construction of their turns could also suggest its primary importance in the dynamic involved in spontaneous interactions, so that one could assume that without action the turn construction could result difficult to be efficiently organized. Features such as grammar, and probably prosody and gesture also contribute to the construction of such turn, but their importance could also be subordinated to action.

The number of examples included in this research is relatively low to make strong claims about a possible hierarchy of Ford's category, but there were enough to support an approach similar to Emergent and Usage-Based Grammar for the study of overlaps and conversational analysis in general. Such framework emphasizes the fundamental role of speakers when they engage in interactions and how their cognitive abilities are used to make a significant participation in conversations.

5.   References

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