

# Literature Review of Turn-Taking

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## Abstract

Turn-taking theory has attracted a lot of attention from linguistics and other disciplines since its emergence. Numerous studies have been conducted with regard to turn system, presenting its theory and empirical evolution in foreign and domestic research. In terms of turn-taking theory, majority of scholars state interpretation of its definition and rules without breaking through the framework of notion of Sacks. As far as application of turn-taking theory, they mainly focus on news interviews, TV programs, class interaction and daily dialogue and other aspects at home and abroad. Few studies concern about turn features of WeChat language and WeChat multiparty conversation. Through the view of turn and turn-taking, characteristics of WeChat multiparty conversation will be figured out and mechanism and characteristics of WeChat language will be summarized through the analysis of turn system of the WeChat multiparty conversation.

**Keywords:** WeChat, turn, turn-taking

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## 1. Research Background

Turn-taking, a speech conversion system, is suitable for a variety of conversation patterns. Sacks and his associates come up with turn-taking system in an article named *A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation*, in which two components, a set of rules and features of turn are described. In the early 1970s, it was applied to research concerning institution conversation and later in literary works. Many scholars have constantly explored the form and function of the turn in dialogue on the basis of turn. Now with the evolution of new media, a growing number of discourses is generated in the interaction between people with computer as a dominating way of information transmission, during which WeChat language emerged. As one of the core

issues of discourse analysis, turn-taking is also applicable to the study of WeChat multiparty conversation. Though there are plenty of applications of turn system, they focus more on naturally daily conversation or contrastive analysis with chatting room and little attention has been paid to multiparty conversation of WeChat.

WeChat is an instant messaging social software, by which users can send text, voice, pictures, videos and so on for instant communication. Since its establishment in 2011, WeChat has developed into the most frequently and widely used communication software in China. At present, WeChat has a huge user group, and the increasing number and activity of its users are closely related to its communication function. There is no denying that the social function of

WeChat plays a major part role in modern life, and its group chat is equally an essential function which is closely related to daily life. Language is bound to take on new characteristics under a new medium. WeChat language, born with the emergence of WeChat, has been at the forefront of the times. As a kind of network language, accompanying its linguistic value, the analysis of WeChat language is also an urgent need to adapt to blossom of network language. Compared with traditional language forms, WeChat conversation present their new progress and characteristics in the information age.

At present, from the perspective of linguistics, the analysis of WeChat language mainly focuses on ontological structure and characteristics: Yao Xiaoyan and Guan Lixin (2017) summarize the language characteristics of WeChat language as the use of symbolic language in large quantities, closely integrated with popular elements, fast dissemination and update speed. Mao Liqun (2014) mentions the language characteristics of WeChat as the diversification of language means, conciseness of language expression, linguistic form personalization, which reveals the important position of WeChat language in the life of micro-language. Zhang Yaru (2016) introduces that WeChat language is mainly based on declarative expression. Wang Hui (2015) analyzes the combination of text, expression and picture expression in the circle of friends, and believed that the widespread use of pictures and the creative use of symbols are the characteristics of WeChat language; Liu Xin (2017) presents the unique articulation means and conversion characteristics of WeChat conversation, believing that the articulation means of non-verbal symbols and the special articulation means of linguistic symbols together constitute the unique articulation means of WeChat conversation. The research on WeChat language of the predecessors lies mostly in the language ontology, and there are few researches on WeChat multiparty conversation itself without considering communication as its main function. Therefore, there do exist room for study of WeChat multiparty conversation.

From the perspective of turn and turn-taking, through the analysis of the WeChat multiparty conversation, features of its turn system involving turn structure, turn-taking rules, adjacency pairs, silence and interruption and so on will be sort out. Meantime, similarities and

differences between daily face-to-face conversation and WeChat conversation will be figured out, and then the mechanism and characteristics of WeChat language will be summarized. By revealing the turn features WeChat language, it definitely will be easier for people to further understand and grasp the emerging language phenomenon of WeChat.

## **2. Literature Review of Turn-Taking**

### *2.1 Basic Concepts of Turn System*

#### 2.1.1 Conversation Analysis

Conversation Analysis is an important part of Discourse Analysis, and Discourse Analysis was proposed by the Chinese-American linguist Harris in 1952. Professor Liu Xun (2000), a famous scholar in China conceptually defining discourse, who argues that Discourse refers to the completion of expression in a certain context during the communication process and a linguistic whole composed of consecutive sentences with structural articulation, semantic coherence, and logical arrangement of a certain theme. He proposed that discourse analysis is the analysis of structure and function of discourse. Since the most direct form of discourse is oral, what Conversation Analysis discuss refers to daily dialogue. Conversation Analysis can be regarded as an instrument of searching social language phenomena under diverse context. More importantly, the way one speaks can reveal clues about group member including belief and age and also traits of individual. He Zhaoxiong (2000) considers that since the 1990s conversation analysis has transferred from static description to dynamic study with the influence of further research of pragmatics. With the progress of conversation analysis, it has been broadly applied in many fields such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics, literature, membership categorization analysis, discursive psychology, feminist studies, discourse analysis, etc. (Levinson, 1983).

#### 2.1.2 Turn and Turn-Taking

Originally proposed by American sociologist Harvey Sacks, the definition of turn varies among scholars during the evolution of turn-taking theory. The turn-taking system presenting basic organization of daily dialogue came forth in 1974 by efforts of Sacks and his associates without explicit definition of turn, which puts emphasis on its unit role and. Words, phrases, clauses, and sentences can make up a turn. A turn is the basic unit of daily

conversation. Liu Hong (1992) defines it as continuous utterance of speaker at any time during the conversation, which ends at the exchange of the roles of the speaker and the hearer or the silence of all parties or turn signal of quitting. This definition was recognized by the majority of scholars in this field. During the communication process, all contents of a speak comprise the turn. Two distinct expressions of definition of turn imply consistent connotation. According to Willis Edmondson, the term turn owns two aspects of meaning. One is the potential that one becomes the speaker during the communication and the other is the expression, what speaker utters, of the speaker.

Turn-taking generally occurs in transition-relevance place, a certain place one turn may end. It can be regarded as during the interaction, speaker A talks and stops, and speaker B starts talking and stops forming an A-B-A-B distribution of utterance. Sacks and his associates unraveled two constructional components of turn and a series of rules. Two construction components described that the next turn is allocated by current speaker's selecting or by self-selection. A series of rules introduced how turn construction is governed and how turn transfers to minimize silence and avoid overlap. One speaker speaks at a time, and then selects next speaker or if not, the speakership can be transferred in the transition-relevance place by self-selection. But if these two selections do not be made, the current speaker will continue to speak and re-apply the rules to avoid silence. They also come up with fourteen features observed in systemic organization of turn, from which we can summarize that speakers take turns orderly in conversational process containing holding or abandoning the chance of turn.

### 2.1.3 Overlap and Silence

Overlap mostly occurs at the transition-relevance place, usually caused by conversation participants competing for the next turn. There are overlaps or silences (pauses) in daily conversation, but most of them are very short-lived. Overlap refers to more than one speakers utter at the same time and concerned studies mainly focus on probing into the ways triggering the phenomenon of overlapping. Huang (1987) comes up with that interruption, simultaneous start and butting-in interruption will lead to the occurrence of overlap. Schegloff (2000) proposes that overlap can be divided into

four types, continuers, terminal overlaps, conditional access to the turn and choral. Ma Chunyan (2014) holds that overlap can be conducted by collaborative completion, interruption, simultaneous self-select, multiple backchannels and erroneous judgement. Most of time, speaker will give up competing for next turn when overlap takes place. Levinson (2015) proposes the means to assist speaker to obtain the next turn, involving repeating words, increasing intensity and deceleration on purpose. In conclusion, speaker has right to choose to obtain or abandon turn, and who accedes to overlap can take actions from increasing the volume to repeating words to gain the next turn.

In the colloquial turn, silence is usually regarded as a turn. Levinson (1983) divides the turn of silence into pause that occurs within a turn, gap and lapse which are between two adjacent turns and silence referring to the meaning or attributable silence that can act as a turn. Most of the above three different types of silence appear in the transition-relevance place, equivalent to some kind of signal used to indicate that the information has been terminated, generally triggering taking of turn. With little tolerance of silence, speakers will use hesitation fillers, like "mm" or "however" to maintain speakership. If more than one speaker speaks at a time, some participants will yield their floors.

### 2.2 Foreign Studies of Turn-Taking Theory

The origin of turn-taking study can be traced back to 1952, when the American linguist, Z. Harris put forward Discourse Analysis. In the 1970s American sociologists Sacks was conscious of speaker's speech act during interaction by collecting a great deal of telephone recordings. Afterwards, Schegloff and Jefferson conducted research on natural daily conversation before proposing turn-taking rules in conversation, and pointed out that turn-taking generally occurs in transition-relevance place, a certain place one turn may end. In 1974, *A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation* was published by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson in which they unraveled the fundamental mechanism of conversation. They described how participants take turns in a natural context and finally complete the whole conversation. The article emphasized that during a conversation the participants speak alternately rather than occupy the position of the speaker incessantly. The trait of conversation is turn-taking, and the

turn indicates what one of participants speaks at a time during the conversation.

Similarly, Stephen Levinson (1983) defines turn-taking as during the interaction, one speaker A talks and stops, and speaker B starts talking and stops and then an A-B-A-B distribution of utterance takes shape. Thomas P. Wilson, John M. Wiemann, Don H. Zimmerman (1984) reviews current attempts to understand the turn-taking mechanism. Graham Crookes (1990) observes turn as a sequence of utterance that comprised by various units, by which he explored specifics to cope with features of organization in the way of second language discourse analysis. Vimala Herman (1995) regards turn-taking as what is formed by the gap between stopping of one speaker and beginning of the other. Yule George (2000) proposes an interpretation that turn is deemed to be an expansion of utterance of a participant in conversation, and silence exist in the interaction exchange.

On one side, these discussion on turn define it as a continuous speech during interaction of participants and an exchange between speaker and hearer with variety of traits including silence, overlap, interruption and so on. On the other side, they regard turn-taking system as the exchange of utterance with the purpose of implementing Conversation Analysis in specific aspect.

### 2.3 Domestic Studies on Turn-Taking Theory

Turn-taking is the core in Conversation Analysis. Most foreign language scholars conducted research on it when it was introduced to China at its initial stage, which provides foundation for its headway afterwards. The main works on the theory of turn-taking are *Discourse Analysis* by Li Yue'e and Fan Hongya (2002), *Conversation Structure Analysis* by Liu Hong (2004), *Conversation Analysis* by Yu Guodong (2008), etc. Moreover, there are journals on turn-taking, for instance, *Turn Taking System* by Huang Yan (1987) taking English as an example to discuss several components of the turn-taking system: turn, turn-taking rules, turn-taking signal, backchannel, overlap and silence, the way of abandoning or holding turn.

*The Distinction Between Turn, the Non-Turn and the Half-Turn* by Liu Hong (1992) takes Chinese conversation material as example to further clarify the definition and identification criteria for turn and backchannel. And those departing

from this two types are separated into three categories: the auxiliary turn, the unfinished turn, and overlap, which pertain to half-turn. The discrepancy between the different types of half-turn, and the difference between half-turn and non-turn are explored. Ma Chunyan (2014) disaccords with Liu Hong (2004) for noticing different consequence by seeing Liu's standards as guideline. Ma insists that turn is a conversation participant's occupying of communicational rights in a specific time and space and agrees with Sacks that a turn has communicative functions. It can be understood that a turn manifests the relationship to the previous one, completes the function the current turn is needed to do and indicates the relationship to the turn in succession. Correspondingly, Ma (2014) proposes seven principles to standardize a turn with considering the form of a turn and makes detailed criterion to estimate a turn from the point of view of communicational function of a turn.

Zhang Tingguo (2003) discusses the regulation of conversational communication and techniques of how to make turn-taking in conversation from the transformation of the turn, the form of the turn and turn-taking and other aspects. He Huiying (2009) uncovers the laws and features of daily conversation from the perspective of turn-taking and proposes pragmatic strategies of turn-taking for the sake of helping deeply comprehending the laws and techniques of turn, which is of benefit to apply this knowledge to practice to create a good communicative environment. Huang Jing, Xu Xiaoshan (2013) explores the phenomenon of turn-taking in daily conversation and analyzes its regulations and traits, aiming at explaining these characteristics from the theoretical level. Ma Chunyan (2014) re-sorts out the judgment criteria of turn and holds that the unit of conversation structure includes only turn and non-turn. The appearance of overlap is nothing more than a special form of use of discourse power, which can be divided into several rounds according to the situation; Silence, not equal to pause, belongs to the special turn and backchannel is treated as a short structure of non-turn.

The theoretical development of turn-taking in China and abroad is comprehensive, but what discussed above about the turn analysis is still stuck at the level of evaluation. Their basic

statement does not break through the framework of notion of Sacks, but only by means of Chinese materials to clarify and prove these theories, during which not much innovation and commentary in the treatise are produced. There is a consideration that if we combine Chinese background for the deliberation of turn-taking system. The conversion of turn is a complex process of thinking transformation, which is subject to the cultural and intellectual influence and limitation of the discursive community on specific language. Discourse analysis under the constraints of the particular language system cannot be separated from this system reflecting ones thought pattern. Therefore, we believe that the analysis of turn should explore the operation mechanism behind the theory frame, rather than using Chinese materials to confirm turn theory derived from the English language system, through which we have access to get insight into factors that dominates theory formation. What's more, certain language phenomenon that takes place following specific trend is worth being noticed and discussed as well.

#### *2.4 Foreign Studies on Application of Turn-Taking Theory*

Researchers abroad have applied turn to class interaction, news interviews, sex difference, daily dialogue, special language, television programs, etc.

Gorjian and Habibi (2015) mention that turn-taking structure is propitious to advance of students' oral performance and level. Greatbatch (1988) probes into news interview and makes distinction from news interview to ordinary dialogue, through which the relationship between turn type allocation and institutional restriction in news interviews is figured out. Drew and Heritage explored topic on turn-taking in news interview principally from the view of turn-taking rules. Some scholars study the gender difference in turn-taking process. Kollock (1985) researches the gender distinction in overlap, interruption, backchannel and questioning manner by observing the interaction of couples. Zimmerman and West (1975) collect dialogues in public arena from coffee shops to stores and discover that there exist differences between male and female with regard to interruption and silence.

There is one study regarding sign language. *Turn-taking Mechanism in Japanese Sign Language*

*Conversation* by Kikou Kuhei (2008) examines the daily turn-taking in Japanese Sign Language (JSL) dialogue. This article utilizes video and scripted data to illustrate JSL interaction between gaze-moving, handheld, and adjacency pairs in dialogue. As a result of analysis, several functions of gaze movement and grip were discovered. It proves that the application of turn theory is not limited in natural interaction, which opens mind for empirical application domain of turn theory and offers reference for unconventional conversation study. *A Table-based Turn-taking the System and Its Political Consequences* by Lorenza Mondada, Hanna Svensson, Nynke van Schepen (2017) describes a participatory show in which the hosts the brainstorm how the moderator of a violent meeting can take advantage of the spatial distribution of people scattered around the table in the conference room. By group discussion instead of choosing the next speaker, the moderator can select the group and give the conversation to the table specific rights and obligations, and then these tables are treated as a political entity and not just a space.

By means of this exploration of application, researchers also extract turn-taking strategies from different situations. Some scholars research turn-taking strategies under different background. Turn-taking strategies present regularities of how people take turns in daily conversation and how speaker act to have effect on other participants, which includes taking, holding and yielding the turn. These turn-taking strategies are generally divided into two types: nonverbal and nonverbal. Roberts, Torreira and Levinson (2015) probe into turn-taking strategies mainly derive from daily conversation from English telephone dialogue.

Taboada (2006) believes that a speaker who is capable to hold the turn or yield the turn can also take the turn. Dan and Horvitz (2011) insist that besides these three manners, multiparty conversation includes a void action referring to the situation where there is no speaker claiming for a turn. They conclude turn-taking strategies in multiparty situated dialogue as well. Walker (2010) and Torreira (2015) present that speakers make attempts to interpose through the transition-relevance place and speak more to extend turn. Taboada (2006) and Torreira and Levinson (2015) conclude turn-taking strategies from observation of dyadic conversation. It seems that almost all conversation under

specific cultural context comply with rules of similarity. Reed (2017) discussed related strategies through spontaneous utterance of American. He divides these strategies into three types: obvious prompts, meta self-starts and meta cut-offs.

As can be seen, few studies concentrate on multiparty conversation and fewer on multiparty conversation of cyber-language. As a result, there are much room of application left and obviously it is of importance to probe into turn-taking system and strategies used in multiparty conversation of cyber media in order to further see how participants with diverse background and habits to achieve their individual interaction goal.

### 2.5 Domestic Studies on Application of Turn-Taking Theory

Having been explored by more scholars, the research of turn-taking has gradually transitioned from theory to application. The turn-taking theory has been widely applied to many fields including Chinese and foreign TV series, TV programs, gender discrepancy, Chinese and foreign literary works, class interaction, teaching and few amounts of study regarding cyber-language.

There are many papers related to the research of Chinese and foreign film and television dramas, most of which are master degree thesis, such as *Analysis on Power and Turn-taking Strategies on Interrogations in Criminal Minds* by Dong Mengmeng (2014) and *Study on the Molding of Characters in Jin Tailang's Happy Life* by Zhang Benru (2015) from the point of view of turn-taking are respectively based on a well-known crime-themed TV series and a Chinese family ethics TV series as research material to conduct analytical research. Research on the field of TV interview programs takes up a certain part, Du Jiajun (2018) regards a TV talk show hosted by the famous host Li Jing as material to analyze the communicational regularity of the host and guests during the conversation from the view of turn-taking rules. Li Xiaoqian (2019) conducts a comparative study between Chinese and American TV talk shows to dig out the commonality and personality of the two conversation laws from the perspective of turn-taking as well. Qiu Mengying (2016) researches the interruption in a three-party interactional TV program *Road to Health* and investigates the relation between turn-taking

and interruption. There are also contrastive studies about gender difference. Song Yanling (2016) probes into discrepancy between sex and nation by exploring the position of interruptions and reactions of speaker who was interrupted during the conversation and makes attempts to find out dissymmetry regarding allotting rights. There are study concerning China and foreign literary works on the theme of turn-taking. Hu Ting (2017) and She Jundeng (2017) respectively make choice of *Hong Lou Meng* and *Gone with the Wind* to investigate the power relation between characters and personality in the view of turn-taking.

Turn-taking is equally applied in teaching. Wang Fang and Zhao Hong (2004) compares conversation in English and Chinese class with purpose of bringing inspiration for cross-culture interaction and foreign language teaching. He (2010) conduct a research concerning class conversation among foreign students from Vietnam, Korea, Thailand and France, which was recognized by the characteristic of turn-taking system of their spoken language in Chinese, to figure out issues in their interaction. Zheng Yan and Luo Dazhen (2014) conduct analysis on realization of turn-taking in group discussion in English class and summarize that communicational ability of students can benefit from mastering turn-taking strategies. Hu Aining (2015) found that different groups of assessments after conversation exercises were more than those of the same group by analysis of the real corpus of the classroom. Besides the violation of cooperation principle under control of turn also have effects on conversation evaluation. An Yuanyuan (2018) proposes strategies of the application of spoken English in universities based on rules and skills of turn-taking. Chen Tan and Wan Lichun (2018) describes the teaching design in primary school class to explore strategies about how to apply turn-taking system to facilitate efficient class interaction on the groundwork of turn-taking and class interaction theory.

The application of turn-taking also includes teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Song Chunyan (2019) expects teachers to take effective classroom questioning strategies to successfully realize the turn-taking to provide students with more opportunities to participate in classroom activities, so as to effectively improve students oral communication skills. Liu Xiaoyu (2020), having collected and analyzed data in class,

conducts macroscopic and microscopic analysis of turn-taking and pragmatic strategies of teacher-student interaction on account of conversation analysis and survey methods.

Turn-taking study about cyber-language emerged as new media develops. Ning Tianshu (2007) investigates cyber-language from the perspective of conversation analysis, which digs out that online conversation presents dissimilarly from daily face-to-face communication in turn-taking, adjacency pairs and so on. Ji Jianfen and Xu Hui (2007) figure out the features of turn-taking system by comparing online chat with daily communication in terms of turn structure, allocation and rules. Li Weina (2008) researches the discrepancy including writing, vocabulary, syntax and so on of cyber-language variant which of great uniqueness by means of conversation analysis at discourse level. Xu Tao and Li Baoshe (2012) investigate characteristics of cyber-language' turn-taking system under viewshed of pragmatics. Sun Yibing and He Ruihua conduct contrastive analysis between natural conversation and online conversation which sheds light on current foreign language teaching in China. Xu Jiujiu (2019) explores the similarities and discrepancy between online interaction and traditional daily conversation, as well as the essential features of online conversation turns, which focuses on the traits of turn, semantic model and distribution of clauses of online turn.

As is presented, the application of turn researches are productive, involving various fields not only on TV series, TV program, literary works but teaching and cyber-language, which include contrastive analysis and descriptive research. But so far studies aiming at a specific network media is relatively fewer especially in WeChat, of which are mainly about chatting room not to mention multiparty conversation in WeChat. What can be observed that most existing turn-taking researches are explored from the perspective of practical application of turn-taking or contrastive study of turn system between online conversation and natural communication. Fewer studies focus on characteristics of turn system of multiparty dialogue in WeChat. Consequently, from the point of view of turn, it is of absolute significance to probe into this specific field by observing turn-taking mechanism, which not only expands the application of turn system but

provides linguistic view on WeChat language. It deserves noting that conversation analysis on specific language system can not be separated from its thought pattern reflected by language structure. Therefore, to some degree, it makes sense to get deep into turn mechanism which operates the whole system so as to penetrate into the effect brought by cultural background by exploring WeChat multiparty conversation in the context of Chinese social network.

### 3. Summary

Several decades ago, Sacks and his associates came up with turn system and introduced mechanism of turn organization. All along, it has attracted a lot of attention from linguistics and other disciplines. Numerous academic studies have been made regarding turn and turn-taking which presents its theory and empirical evolution in foreign and domestic study. Through investigation of its progress and research achievements, it is detected that few studies concentrate on turn regarding WeChat language and fewer concern turn features of WeChat multiparty conversation. It is obvious that WeChat is on behalf of one sort of cyber language and presents its new progress and characteristics in the information age. Through the observation of turn system of WeChat multiparty conversation, similarities and differences between daily face-to-face conversation and WeChat conversation will be found out, which opens up a new perspective of WeChat language research and expands the application of turn system. In addition, it is of great significance to probe into turn-taking system and strategies used in WeChat multiparty conversation so as to further see how participants with diverse backgrounds and communicational habits to achieve their individual goal from perspective of turn system.

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