

INTERRUPTIONS

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Introduction

Proponents of the interactional version of the professional dominance thesis frequently assert the ubiquity of interruption by the professional, but one is hard put to find cases in their data.¹ For example, Coulthard and Ashby (1976: 78) claim that the doctor “has his own ideas of what is relevant and irrelevant and will interrupt a patient who is wandering,” but no interruptions are indicated in the data they present; there is no overlap in the example they give of a “fight” between doctor and patient (78). In Scheff’s (1968: 8) psychiatric interview it is the patient who does the interrupting (at P95 and P96). In her study of hospital consultations Lacoste (1981: 170) asserts that “control is entirely on the part of the doctor who may interrupt the patient almost at his or her liking.” But in the small number of data she presents, only one overlap (/) occurs, one that is readily analyzable as a *joint* production of the parties speaking. Here is the English translation of the original French data.

Data Extract 1: Lacoste 1981:173

- (1) D: How are you doing?
(2) P: Fine// (3) Except that I caught a cold.

- (4) D: A ... You know that ... You shouldn’t fool around with things like that, you shouldn’t.
(5) P: It’s not dangerous.

Notice the following features of this extract.

- (a) that P’s ‘Fine’ answers D’s ‘How are you doing?’, so permitting D to speak again.
(b) that “a pause separates (2) and (3)” (Lacoste, 1981: 173, fn.5) from which speaker may infer that the other expects him or her to speak;
(c) that P and D, not surprisingly then produce simultaneous starts in (3) and (4) (assuming this is how we are to read Lacoste’s transcript);
(d) that despite the overlap P produces a recognizable sentence in (3) and
(e) D, moreover, responds to it in (4). It is quite unclear why (i) the overlap should be regarded as an interruption, and why (ii) this so-called ‘interruption’ should be regarded as an instance of the exercise of professional power.

Rather, the pause and simultaneous starts are the product of the parties’

orientation to at least the turn-allocational rules for conversation – “if a current speaker has not selected a next speaker, and if no one else self-selects at an initial transition-relevance point, then the third rule applies, which is that the current speaker may (but does not have to) continue ...” (Atkinson and Drew 1979: 38; also 46 and 238, fn. 9 for a comparable case) – and perhaps also to the diagnostic relevance in this setting of what is otherwise a (non-diagnostic) greeting substitute, ‘How are you doing?’ (Sacks 1975)

Consider next the work of West, in part with Zimmerman, first on cross-sex conversation (Zimmerman and West 1975; West 1979; West and Zimmerman 1983: 113-114) and subsequently on physician/patient talk (West 1983, 1984a, 1984b). The analysis within this body of work shows a progressive sophistication in (i) distinguishing ‘overlap’ and ‘interruption’ and (b) the interpretation of interruption as the exercise of professional power. Nevertheless, her analyses are not unproblematic, as in the following case.

Data Extract 2: West 1984a: 96-97; also 1983: 90-91

PATIENT: When I’m sitting *upright*.
 Y’know=
 DOCTOR: = More so than
 it was even before?

PATIENT: Yay::es=
 DOCTOR: = Swelling ‘r anything
 Like that thet chew’ve no:ticed?
 PATIENT: Nuh:o, not th et I’ve *no:di-*
 DOCTOR: TEN::DER duh the
 tou ch?
 Press:ing any?
 PATIENT: No::, jus’ when it’s- *si::tting*.
 DOCTOR: Okay: =
 PATIENT: = Er lying on it.
 DOCTOR: Even ly:ing. Stan:dng up?
 walking aroun:d?
 PATIENT: No: jis-
 Not so mu:ch. Jis’ – ly:ing
 on it.
 Si:tting on it. Jis’ then.

The extract purportedly supports the general contention that “interruptions function as topic control mechanisms” (Zimmerman and West 1975: 124) and the more specific claim that (male) doctors appear “to use interruptions as devices for exercising control over interaction” (West 1984a: 101), thereby preventing patients contributing important information relevant to the care of their health, indeed to the diagnosis of their condition.

But notice in Data Extract 2 that:

- (f) the first overlap occurs, as in Data Extract 1, when the patient Continues talking after having Answered the doctor’s question;
- (g) the ‘not th’ projects a readily analyzable (by the hearer) completion, namely ‘not that I’ve noticed’, which recipient need not wait to hear before proceeding –

- the appended item itself fore-seeably adding little;
- (h) patient's fourth utterance is *not* overlapped after its minimally sufficient answer of 'No:.' but left to apparent completion;
 - (i) patient's fifth utterance is an *unsolicited* item (a self-repair?) that is nevertheless taken account of in the doctor's 'Even ly:ing';
 - (j) the second overlap occurs again as in (f), but with the doctor nevertheless retrieving what, in overlap, he may well suppose the patient would have said 'Jis' - ly:ing on it'.

If these overlaps are interruptions they occur at projectively and interactionally relevant places, they are joint productions, they are general to conversation, the doctor does listen to more than 'yees' and 'nos', and the patient complies.

Here (West 1984a: 91) and elsewhere (West 1979: 82; Zimmerman and West 1975: 114; West and Zimmerman 1983: 104) West seeks to establish a (socio-)linguistically formal criterion (though it gets broader and weaker in the footnotes of one article to the next) for what appears to be conceptualized as a type of speech act: the speech act of interruption is to be identified by the point at which overlap commences relative to the possible completion

Points of what Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) call 'unit-types.' Interruptions may be 'shallow' or 'deep' according to the distance in syllables from those points. Unit-types are words, phrases, clauses and sentences, that is, grammatical units. The problem is that interruptions are not done on grammatical units *per se* (or even perhaps on turns?) but on actions (answers, jokes, explanations, etc): in Austin's (1962) terms, they happen to illocutionary, not locutionary, acts. Thus, they may occur in the midst of a given grammatical unit, or at a turn-transition-relevant place *if* the current speaker should continue talking. (Not all stories are prefaced so as to suspend turn-transition relevance.) But whether overlaps such as those in Data Extracts 1 and 2 are to be regarded as interruptions depends not on the observer's application of a linguistic criterion but on the *speakers' assessment* of the completion of some relevant action.

Since including the foregoing critique in Eglin and Wideman (1986) I am now somewhat embarrassed to find its last and principal point stated in an article by Bennett published in 1981. Bennett writes (1981: 176):

What I have been saying, in effect, is that Schegloff's distinction between 'overlap' and interruption' fails because these two categories

hearable as his candidate reply. But notice that B occupies the answer space with an interactional object that is analyzable over the course of its production as something that does *not yet* constitute an answer to the question. No 'view' has yet been delivered but the utterance can be heard as building a context or otherwise doing preliminary work *for* the delivery of such an item. M's "Sent by whom" in (5) can be heard as tied to a specific item in the previous turn, namely "sent to the area" in (4), but also, since M's previous question has not yet been answered and so is still on the floor, "Sent by whom" can be heard as the first pair-part of a question-answer adjacency-paired *insertion sequence*. It is also a closed question requiring no more than a minimal answer. B's "Uh d... various" at (6) is hearable as the beginning of a candidate answer in second pair-part position to the previous question. M's overlapping "Are they just posted" in (7) is hearable as a repair or reformulation of "Sent by whom," that is responsive to the hesitation and uncertainty in B's answer in (6). It is furthermore hearable as another insertion, again by virtue of being uttered at a position *before* answerer has answered. It is also a closed question requiring only a "yes" or "no" in answer. B's "government and uh" in (8) is then hearable as not an answer to *this* question but as a continuation of the answer begun in (6) to M's previous question at (5). This occasions a reformulated/repared repeat by M in (9)-(11), again in overlap, of his "Are they just posted" question. It is in the form of what Jefferson and Schegloff

(1975: 12-14) call "marked self-retrieval." B then answers the twice-repeated inserted question and, without being overlapped, continues with what is hearable as his answer to the question with which this whole sequence began. He gives his view.

Is "Sent by whom" an interruption? I do not know what, in the talk, we would take as evidence of parties' orientation to interruption as a conversational event. One might expect some noticing of, or comment on, or accounting for a presumably and putatively deviant act. But what we get in this case is the putative victim answering the putative interruptor's question. What makes this possible, and unremarkable, is the open field created by the yet-to-be-filled answer slot established by the opening question. Just as the answerer, Mr. B., may exploit this field in the development of an answer (and, according to Bennett, his eventual answer is interpretable as a challenge to other panel members), so may the moderator through a series of closed questions, the repairs being positioned in overlap, build what is hearable as a single insertion sequence – a sequence, moreover, that is *not* taken as competitive with the talk of his interlocutor.

What is the moderator doing with this inserted question, and why does he place it where he does? The clue to the answer to the first question comes from Heritage on news interviews:

By their formulative activities, which both re-present prior talk and prompt its onward development [news] interviewers orient to the

Overhearing news audience and
Thereby invite their respondents to
speak *on the record* (Heritage 1985:
115; emphasis added)

If, in a live panel discussion on television, the moderator's job *is* to intercede for the overhearing audience in much the same way as Heritage describes for news interviews, then, pace Bennett (1981: 172), an account of his actions which depends on this does not need to invoke justification or excuse as though to act so was to commit an offence. To insert the audience's presumed questions *is* to do the moderator's job.

As for the second question – why the moderator should choose an insertion sequence format rather than doing a correction-solicit formulation in third-turn receipt position as Heritage's news interviewers do – insofar as the programme is both live and involves multiple speakers there is perhaps pressure to get information at the points that possible clarification is perceived necessary rather than 'later' or at the ends of turns/actions. Such 'later' points are ones where, perhaps, the demands of continuity require the moderator to select a formulation that will serve to introduce a next and different speaker. Moreover, rather than, after Bennett, attributing to the moderator the "assumption that B is not able in fact to structure his own bit of discourse coherently" (1981: 180), we could point merely to the moderator's organizational problem of getting the relevant information on the floor given the time and other constraints already alluded to.³

There are parallels with other settings. Let me briefly mention calls

to the police, sentencing talk and psychiatric interviews, before giving more detailed attention to a case from an academic seminar. Consider first the following data extract taken from a corpus of calls to the police.⁴

Data Extract 4: Call 60, Nelsonville, July 5, 1978, 9:50 AM (Eglin 1979)

- P1: Dispatch
C1: Yes I'd like to report a car that's Parking all day on Peter Street in Nelsonville. Uh it's not only the all-day parking that is illegal, he's also parking next to the lane that goes into Smith Manufacturing and the big Transports can't get into it.
P2: Oh
C2: All right. It's a Maverick. I think the person I believe they're leaving it parked here and taking the bus downtown// and it's been going on a =
P3: Oh.
C3: = a couple of days now.
P4: Okay/
C4: All right. the number's A-B-C
P5: Uh-huh.
C5: Five four eight
P6: Uh-huh.
C6: And it's a green Maverick.
P7: Okay, and can I have your Name?
C7: Yeah, all right. It's Bill Jones and I've got the dry-cleaning plant right on the corner here and this morning the transports tried to locate. They thought maybe it's at Co-operative Life and all over and they're Trying to locate, but they Couldn't find who it was
((trails off))

→ Doug: I've been on plenty of Metro trains but erm examining () question on the same phenomenon I found difficult because I didn't really understand it () what competence does (0.5) what competence

Paul: Does anybody have the Sheet?

Doug: () I've copied it down

Paul: okay you do uh thank you yes I just sort of want to have it in front of me

Doug: sort of ((another's cough)) trying to sort of bring some of the things together but I wasn't sure how

Paul: okay

Doug: I wasn't too sure on the questions

Paul: right right right good what's your excuse huh huh huh ((multi-party laughter))

Mike:

Sarah:

Jenn:

Paul: We'll see we'll see⁶

On either Schegloff's or Bennett's criterion, Paul's 'Does anybody have the sheet?' could stand as interruptive. It is not entirely clear from "what competence" how much more of

Doug's talk is analyzably projected to the next transition-relevance place. And no overlap is achieved. It is also unclear whether Doug has completed the action undertaken in this turn. What indeed is the action? It appears to be the work of answering Paul's earlier question "well uh who else has been back." Evidently, just having ridden on more Metro trains does not seem to suffice, according to Doug, and the talk seems to be building an excuse; but insofar as he "found difficult" the exercise it is not to say at this point that he has not done *something* which would stand as "having been back," something that may yet be disclosed in his talk. Into this Paul inserts an interrogative not explicitly addressed to Doug or to the materials of his turn.² But the request (utilizing a pre-form) is granted; indeed it is Doug who makes the first offer; then somebody else provides a copy of the sheet and Paul receives it and accounts for wanting the sheet itself rather than a recounting of its contents from Doug's notes. And Doug picks up where he left off, picking up also Paul's "sort of" locution from the previous turn.

Again, my point is that to treat "Does anybody have the sheet?" as interruptive, in the sense of disruptive, faces the problem of accounting for the close-order organization of this essentially co-operative sequence. Again, I would analyze the exchange here as an insertion sequence made possible by the field opened by Paul's earlier questions addressed to everybody present, a question which remains on the floor until everybody

has answered it. As they eventually do.

Summary and Conclusions

In this paper I have argued:

- (n) that a sociolinguistically formal criterion for identifying interruptions, such as number of syllables between onset of overlap and the nearest turn-transition relevant place, does not work; and that this is so because
- (o) interruptions are done on actions, not turns (and not grammatical units); insofar as a single action may cross an indefinite number of turn-transition-relevant places it may be interrupted *at* such places;
- (p) that identification of interruptions depends upon *speakers'* (not observers' or analysts') assessment of the completion of some relevant action; where that depends on
- (q) speakers' or parties' orientation to the (kind of) activity being engaged in, with its attendant identities and speech exchange system; here I have focused on insertion sequences as utilized in work settings in the sequential environment of some awaited second pair-part of an adjacency pair.
- (r) I would add, moreover, that interruptions are concerted accomplishments; the innings is not interrupted by rain if the players go on playing;⁸ a recognized interruption can be defeated, refused, reduced to an attempt, forestalled, turned to advantage, incorporated, let pass, ignored.

In conclusion, I would claim that analyses of interruptions of the sort discussed here treat, or run the risk of treating, as a technical term (like 'overlap') a natural-language category, an expression of ordinary language, that combines description and appraisal (Louch; Hart). The concept of interruption has an evaluative component. It ascribes rights and responsibilities. When used to refer to another's action or to one's own it imputes a deviant status. As such, it is thoroughly contestable. It seems to me there is more than a little of this moral evaluation in professional analysts' attempted technical use of the concept. We don't like the way doctors and psychiatrists talk to their patients (especially male doctors to female patients), the way police talk to citizens on the telephone, the way (white, educated) panel moderators talk to their (black, less educated) guests, the way teachers talk to students. And so we do indeed see them doing interruptions (in their presumed and attributed interests of professional, gender, racial or class dominance). But I have yet to see a convincing data-based demonstration that the parties to the talk that provides the basis for these claims are understanding the interaction in these terms.⁹

Finally, given point (r) and this last point, one may conjecture that parties to a putative interrupting, mindful of the possible interactional consequences of 'other-correction,' of

claiming to have been interrupted, prefer to manage such incipient 'contests' in other ways, perhaps utilizing those manifold procedures for handling overlap and for retrieving its possibly lost contents laid out by Jefferson and Schegloff (1975, etc). This may account for why interruption seems such a rare event, at least why I have such difficulty discovering where the interruptions are.

Endnotes

¹ This first part of the paper critiquing some analyses of Coulthard and Ashby (1976), Scheff (1968), Lacoste (1981) and West (various studies cited below in the text) is adapted and slightly revised from Eglin and Wideman (1986: 344-345). The paper was presented at the Eighth International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis, Boston, August 27-30, 1987. I have not sought to accommodate the literature published since that time, but readers should consult at the very least the work of Stephen O. Murray who had come to similar conclusions around that time if not earlier (Murray 1985, 1987; Murray and Covelli 1988). For an elegant analysis of a non-interrupting 'interruption' see Cuff and Francis (1978: 112).

² What would French and Local (1986) make of this? It is like their cases (4) and (6) in which turn-occupant's prosody does not change through the overlap: in (4) an affiliation is done by turn-claimant, in (6) a 'heckle.'

³ Compare American television talk show host Donahue, on the show of August 23, 1987, trying via little prompts and insertions to get a panel member to say the relevant things in telling her story. Curiously it was a tale about racial discrimination in which the white moderator, Donahue, was clearly on the side of the black panel member, who was the victim in the story. See also Cuff's (1994) organizational analysis of the sequential-interactional consequences of the radio talk show host's mandate to produce a lively and entertaining programme, and the related paper by Hester and Fitzgerald (1999).

⁴ This call is analyzed in detail in Eglin (1979). The corpus itself is considered in Eglin and Wideman (1986).

⁵ It is from this paper of Wilson's that I have taken this application of the concept of insertion sequence for use here.

⁶ I should mention that the transcript is only a second draft. It does not yet contain details of micro pauses, sound stretches, latching and so on. However, I believe it adequate to the level of analytic phenomena with which I am here concerned.

⁷ It reminds me of a frequent first police response to a caller's formulation of the reason for the call ("he's outside and he's got a gun"), namely a request for caller's address.

⁸ I am talking cricket here, not baseball. Notice, also, that it sounds odd to say that the innings was interrupted by lunch, or by tea.

⁹ Granted that Bennett's panel members from the racial minorities walked out at the end of this discussion, nevertheless a basis for this in the data provided is not demonstrated – there were at least 45 minutes of discussion (of which Bennett provides [admittedly, necessarily] just a fragment).

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