

A Comparative Study of Turn-Taking in Arabic and English Conversations: Implications for Language Learners

Samar Ali Aldhahri

Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, Department of Languages and Translation, College of Arts and Humanities, Taibah University, Saudi Arabia
sdhahri@taibahu.edu.sa

Abstract

Early work in conversation analysis focused primarily on English conversations. During the past 20 years, conversation analysts started to investigate informal verbal interaction within communities with a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Sidnell, 2007). Although comparative studies have examined a wide range of languages, there seems to be no emphasis on Arabic conversations. This study aims to explore whether there are differences between informal Arabic and English conversations turn-taking system. Six participants, three native Arabic speakers and three native speakers of English, took place in this study. Data were collected through audio recording; seventeen minutes for Arabic conversations and 20 minutes for the English conversation. The study revealed that there were no major differences between Arabic and English informal conversations in terms of the turn-taking system. While English speakers used more filling words such as “mm”, “yeh”, and “so” to keep the conversation going, both Arabic and English speakers aimed to minimize the gap and overlap. The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of cross-cultural interactions and offer implications for language teaching and learning.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, Turn-Taking, Comparative Analysis, Arabic Conversation, English Conversation

1. Introduction

Conversation Analysis (CA) is a methodological approach to studying social interaction that originated in the 1960s through the collaborative work of Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson (Sidnell, 2007). Although the early development of CA drew on the sociological frameworks of Goffman and Garfinkel, it quickly established its own methods and analytical focus, targeting the organization of talk-in-interaction (Heritage 1984; Levinson 1983; Schegloff 1995a, b; Silverman 1998).

The original work of CA focuses on the organization of social activities among individuals and examines how these interactions are structured (Hutchby & Wooffit 2008; Al-Gahtani & Roever 2015). Within this framework, conversational talk is regarded as a specific form of social activity, referred to as talk-in-interaction. When humans are engaged in interactions, they normally take turns speaking, whether in interviews, debates, ceremonies, or informal conversations (Sacks et al., 1974; Sidnell, 2001).

Early work in CA drew analysis and conclusions primarily from English conversations, however, conversation analysts started to examine conversations in other languages and cultures during the past 20 years which led to the emergence of comparative studies (Sidnell, 2007). These studies examined the linguistic and cultural differences and whether they affect human interaction in conversations. While one perspective claims that taking turns in a conversation is a universal system (Sacks et al., 1974; Heritage, 2008; Stivers et al., 2009), another perspective argues that it is culturally variable (Berry, 1994; Sidnell, 2001; Evans & Levinson, 2009; Tannen, 2012). Although previous studies have examined turn-taking in

conversations in various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, a little is known about Arabic conversations. This study aims to explore whether there are differences between informal Arabic and English conversations in turn-taking system.

2. Literature Review

Ordinary casual conversations are the most common human language activities that have been investigated for decades in CA (Heritage, 2008; Wardhaugh, 2010). Heritage (2005) defined the term “ordinary conversations” as: “Forms of interaction that are not confined to specialized settings or to the execution of particular tasks” (P. 104). They are usually unplanned and informal (Wardhaugh, 2010). One of the topics that has received high attention from conversation analysts who worked within the ethnomethodological tradition was the organization of taking turns in a conversation (Wardhaugh, 2010). Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) described the concept of turn-taking as a “speech exchange system” (P. 696). In addition, the turn-taking system concerns how conversations are managed and organized. In other words, it addresses who should speak next and when (Heritage, 2008; Stivers et al., 2009).

In their landmark analysis, Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson (1974) created a model for turn-taking system which was consisted of fourteen rules: 1) speakers change frequently or at least sometimes, 2) one speaker talks at a time, 3) more than one speaker talk at the same time, 4) transitions from one turn to another occur with no gap and no overlap or with minimal gap and minimal overlap, 5) turn order is varied, 6) turn size is not fixed, 7) length of conversation is not specified in advance, 8) what parties say cannot be predicted, 9) distribution of turns is not specified in advance, 10) the number of speakers can vary, 11) talk can be either continuous or discontinuous, 12) turn-allocation techniques are used where the current speaker may select the next speaker or parties may self-select in starting to talk, 13) a variety of turn units are employed; sentential, clausal, phrasal, and lexical constructions, and

14) repair mechanisms are used to deal with turn-taking errors and violations; one speaker stops and let the other one continue. This model depicts the most common general characteristics of conversations that are not specified to a particular context or speakers (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974).

In an attempt to explain how turn-taking in a conversation flows smoothly and naturally, Duncan (1974) proposed six “turn-yielding signals” which demonstrate when the current speaker is yielding to the other speaker. Those cues were: intonation, paralanguage (drawl), body motion (hand gestures and movements), sociocentric sequences (expressions such as but uh, you know, etc.), paralanguage (pitch or loudness), and syntax (completion of a grammatical clause). In their article, Wilson, M. & Wilson, T. (2005) explained how turn-taking functions in conversations. They proposed an oscillator model that suggests that speakers have an innate sense of timing allowing them to predict the right moment to take a turn in speaking without awkward pauses or overlaps.

One important question investigated by previous research was: “Is turn-taking system universal or language/culture specific?” In their article, Stivers et al. (2009) discussed two hypotheses regarding this issue. The first view claims that the turn-taking system is culturally variable. While English speakers do not wait for pauses to begin their turn, Finland and the North of Sweden prefer long delays between one turn and the next (Stivers et al., 2009). Another example was given to support the cultural variability hypothesis: New York Jewish conversations where fast rate of turn-taking and simultaneous speech are considered to be the norms (Stivers et al., 2009). In the same vein, Sidnell (2007) explained how the average gap between turns differs across languages, suggesting that while English recipients use grammatical formats as cues, Japanese speakers tend to wait and see how the utterance develops. An example was given by the author: “asking questions in both English and Japanese languages”. In English, from the beginning of a sentence, the recipient is able to

figure out whether it is a question or a statement. In the Japanese language, on the other hand, a word that signals a question comes at the end of the sentence.

In contrast to these arguments, the second view suggests that taking turns in a conversation is a universal system. Heritage (2008) asserted that Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson's (1974) model of turn-taking can be generalized across numerous languages. He also noted, "There is an interaction order for all of humankind" (P. 314). Moreover, Stivers et al. (2009) examined turn-taking in 10 different languages and concluded that "turn-taking in informal conversation is universally organized so as to minimize gap and overlap, and that consequently, there is a universal semiotics of delayed response" (Pg. 10591).

3. Research Questions

The present study tests these two hypotheses focusing on Arabic and English ordinary conversations. The research questions are as follows:

- 1) Is the turn-taking system in Arabic conversation similar to that in English conversation?
- 2) Do there exist differences in the turn-taking system in Arabic and English informal conversations?

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

The study involved 6 participants. Three native speakers of Arabic participated in the Arabic conversation, and they were all females; two sisters and their friend. For the English conversation, three native speakers of English participated; two females and one male who were a husband and a wife and their friend. In addition, the participants' ages ranged from early twenties to mid-thirties and most of them

were students in the university level. All participants were engaged in informal/casual conversations in which they talked about a variety of topics.

4.2. Data Collection

The data were collected through audio recordings. In the Arabic conversation, 17 minutes were recorded. On the other hand, 20 minutes were recorded for the English conversation. While the English conversation was recorded at one participant's home, the Arabic conversation was recorded at the university.

5. Data Analysis

In this section, Arabic and English conversations are analyzed, respectively.

5.1. Arabic Conversation

In the following excerpt, the main topic was “Lamia’s exam”. Because it was her exam, it can be noticed that she was speaking more than the other participants. Furthermore, the other participants’ role was simply asking questions about the exam and using some back-channel cues as a response to Lamia’s talk. The main function of these back-channel responses was to show Lamia that they were listening, interested, and supporting her.

Segment 1

- 01 Nada: You had a test today, ri:ght? ((Looking at Lamia))
02 Lamia: Yeh I had a test a::h but I didn't do well
03 Nada: W::hy:?
04 Lamia: a:::h the test was so so so long: [a:nd
05 Sara: [Which class?
06 Lamia: biochemistry
07 Sara: um
08 Lamia: a::nd mmm and the questions were so difficult (.)
09 you need to read them more than one time to:: to
10 see:(.) to understand them before you answer
11 Nada: ooh (.) you did not fee::l::?

- 12 Lamia: For the last ten questions, I ju::st breezed through
13 them [just like A B C
14 Nada: [ooh
15 Sara: °oh°
16 Nada: Was the time short?
17 Lamia: Too: Yeh (.) fifty-five minutes (.) [too short=
18 Nada: [°God helps you°
19 Lamia: =And there were sixty questions

One of the turn-taking techniques described by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) was “turn-allocation technique” where the current speaker selects the next speaker using “adjacency pairs”. The speakers used this technique in lines 1, 3, 5, and 16, where the speaker asked questions to another speaker. The answers came immediately, in lines 2, 4, 6, and 17, after the questions have been stated. Lines 4, 5, 13, 14, 17, and 18 show overlapping talk but are brief, just like Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson’s (1974) described in their model. The overlap was non-interruptive. Instead, it was used by the listener to show to the speaker that she was intently listening; line 5 when the listener asked “which class?” to show that she was engaged in the conversation and interested in knowing which course that the speaker was talking about, and lines 14 and 18 when the listener used expressions such as “ooh” or “God helps you” to show support.

Another cues such as intonation, drawl, and pitch were used by the speaker in this excerpt to indicate that she was about to finish and that the listener may begin speaking. These signals can be seen in lines 1, 3, 11, and 16, where the speakers used a combination of those cues where the final syllable was stressed in line 1 “right?” and line 16 “short?” and the final syllable was prolonged at line 3 “W::hy:?” and line 11 “fee::l::?”. Intonation was one of the key principles that govern turn-taking, as outlined by Stephens (1987), in addition to other clues such as the roles of pauses and cues from previous speakers.

In the next segment, the participants talked about their families back home. In addition, Nada was asking the two sisters “Sara and Lamia” about the ways they keep in touch with their families. After they finish talking about this topic, there was a period of silence until Nada came up with another topic that was somehow related to the first one “the weather back home” in order to keep the conversation going.

Segment 2

- 01 Sara: The last time I talked to them was last week
02 Nada: mm (.) do you use skype o::r?
03 Sara: Tango
04 Lamia: Tango
05 Nada: So: video?
06 Lamia: Ye:h (.) no sometimes video
07 Sara: Sometimes video sometimes audio
08 Nada: mm
09 Lamia: Depends on the network [hhh
10 Nada: [hhh
11 Sara: And also, if there is something important
12 Nada: mm
13 Lamia: (0.3) Yeh
14 Nada: (0.5) I wonder if is getting cold their like here:?
15 Lamia: (0.2) Ye:h I guess (.) whe:n I talk (.) talked to
16 them, they said it is getting a little colder bu:t
17 I don't think (.) I think it is like (.) there, it
18 Is like one day cold and the [next day hot
19 Nada: [mm right

Lines 2, 5, and 14 demonstrate using questions as a turn-yielding technique, which were combined with paralinguistic cues (drawl, pitch), such as “o::r?”, “video?”, and “here:?”. The “turn-allocation technique” was also clear as the speaker who asked the questions, Nada, was a self-selector, and the speakers who answered, Sara and Lamia, were selected by the first speaker. The questions in lines 2, 5, and 14 were addressed to Sara and Lamia, and then the answers in lines 3, 4, 6, 7, and 15 came after the first speaker asked the questions. After Sara and lamia answered

Nada's questions, she responded using back-channel cues "mm" in lines 2, 8, and 12 to show that she was listening.

Stivers et al. (2009) suggested that conversations across cultures reflect "a target of minimal overlap and minimal gap between turns" (P. 10589). That was clear in lines 13, 14, and 15 when the silence occurred but was quickly recovered. After Nada responded at line 12 by saying "mm", (0.3) seconds of silence occurred, and then the other speaker "Lamia" tried to break that silence by saying "yeh", and then another (0.5) seconds of silence appeared, and finally, the first speaker "Nada" tried to come up with a new topic to talk about, which was "the weather". Filling the conversation with "mm" and "yeh" and initiating a new topic were some strategies that were used in this segment to break and recover silence.

5.2. English Conversation

The main theme of the following conversation was "preparing for friends party". It can be clearly seen that Ashly was asking Jenifer questions. The questions were addressed to Jenifer, not vice versa because Jenifer was the one who planned for the party and had all the information. Additionally, there was a period of silence that was filled with words such as "okay", "so", "ya", etc.

Segment 1

01 Ashly: So: everyone is doing appetize::rs?=
02 Jenifer: Yes
03 Ashly: =Were're not worry about desse::rt?
04 Jenifer: I'll probably like (.) prop up a desse::rt[but
05 Ashly: [°okay°
06 Jenifer: Ya (.) so: (0.2)
07 Ashly: Okay
08 Jenifer: That's fine (0.3)
09 Ashly: Cool (.) and then what time we're meeting them?
10 Jenifer: Seven

- 11 Ashly: okay (.) u::mm (.) do you wanna do it here or do
12 you wanna do it in your house?
13 Jenifer: u:m we can just do it in our place (.) it's fine
14 Ashly: °Okay°

In lines 1, 3, 9, and 11, “adjacency pairs, questions” were used as a transition from one turn to another. Lines 2, 4, 10, and 13 show the answers which came immediately after the questions. In lines 1 and 3, there was a long intonation when asking questions that helped the listener to start speaking immediately after the questions have been stated with no gap and no overlap. However, the same intonation “drawl” was used at line 4 when the speaker said “desse:rt” but then a slight overlap occurred because the next speaker probably assumed that the first speaker finished talking and that he could begin. Lines 6, 7, 8 and the beginning of line 9 show how speakers tried to keep the conversation going and minimize the gap by saying “ya”, “so”, “okay”, “that’s fine” and “cool”.

In the next excerpt, Ashly and Jenifer are still talking about their plans for the party. Words such as “ok”, “so”, and “ya” were also used to break the silence and keep the conversation going.

Segment 2

- 01 Ashly: That's so funny:
02 Jenifer: but (.) that was the mixed up (.) we're fine
03 Ashly: Ok
04 Jenifer: so (.) ya
05 Ashly: gurrait
06 Jenifer: so (0.5) [ah: ((sight))
07 Ashly: [do you have stuff to do:: to cook your
08 desse:rt? I ask you like since I am clearly
09 here all day long [if (.)
10 Jenifer: [ya (.)
11 Ashly: (° °) so::=
12 Jenifer: = we::ll (.) I:: had looked up a dessert that is
13 not super lo:ng

Lines 4, 5, and the beginning of line 6 also show how speakers kept the conversation going and minimized the gap by saying “so”, “ya”, “great”, and saying “so” again. In lines 6 and 7, overlap occurred because both participants attempted to recover (0.5) seconds of silence. In addition, one speaker stopped and the other continued, which Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson’s (1974) described as “repair mechanisms”. At lines 9 and 10, there was another slight overlap because “Jenifer” wanted to answer Ashly’s question, and she answered briefly “ya”. At line 11, a combination of sociocentric sequence and drawl was used as “turn-yielding cues” by saying “so::” and that indicated to the listener that she may take a turn in speaking.

In the following segment, Ashly’s husband joined the conversation, and he was talking about some facts related to some chocolate companies that he was familiar with. He initiated this topic because Ashly and Jenifer were talking about desserts and chocolate. It can be seen that Jenifer mistakenly interrupted him. Even though Jenifer realized that she interrupted Josh, she apologized and continued, “I was just gonna say that..”. After she had finished her story, she apologized to Josh again and asked him to continue what he intended to say.

Segment 3

- 01 Jenifer: right
02 Josh: °Another° [fun fact
03 Jenifer: [a::nd (0.2)
04 Jenifer: oh sorry I was just gonna say that to ()
that’s where we got our five dollar human go
pumpkin(.)
05 Ashly: ni::ce
06 Jenifer: it was like (.) it was like the Amish farmer just
07 like settin to [hhhh
08 Ashly: [oh ya::

09 Jenifer: it was so:: funny that these two ladies were like
10 walking up toward and Semi and I were trying to get
11 a picture together (.) and uh these two ladies come
12 by and says would you like to take a picture with
13 hi:m? and she is like pointing hhh at him hhhh
14 [like that
15 Ashly: [((screaming))
16 Josh: hhhh
17 Ashly: oh my God that's awesome
18 Jenifer: sorry (.) continue
19 Josh: oh (.) one fun fact that...

In lines 2 and 3, there was an overlap. It seems that the interruption happened accidentally because Josh's voice was low when he said "Another". Thus, Jenifer probably did not hear him and then she realized that she interrupted him at the end of lines 2 and 3. After (0.2) seconds of silence, it seems that Josh stopped and allowed Jenifer to continue as the repair mechanism. Then, Jenifer continues in line 4 where she said "oh sorry, I was just gonna say that...". As a repair mechanism to the interruption that occurred and after she finished her story, she apologized again and asked Josh to continue what he was going to say in line 18. In addition to this interruption, a slight overlap was observed in lines 7, 8, 14, and 15. The purpose of this overlap, however, was to show interest and that the listener was intently listening.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

While a number of previous comparative studies claimed that turn-taking system is culturally variable, other studies argued that it is universal. This study investigated whether there are differences between Arabic and English informal conversations in turn-taking system. The study revealed that there were no major differences between Arabic and English informal conversations in terms of the turn-taking system. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson's (1974) model of turn-taking was found in both Arabic and English conversations where speakers in both conversations used "adjacency pairs"

as a turn-taking technique. In addition, “turn-allocation technique” was also implemented in both conversations where participants chose the next speaker or they were self-selected when starting to talk. There was also a slight overlap in both conversations, mostly as a back-channel form to show interest and support. Although it seems that English speakers used more filling words such as “mm”, “yeh”, and “so” to keep the conversation going, both Arabic and English speakers aimed to minimize the gap and overlap. The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of cross-cultural interactions and offer implications for language teaching and learning. They demonstrate the need for learning turn-taking system in English and Arabic conversations that would result in smooth intercultural communication. In conclusion, the results of this study provide additional support for the universal turn-taking system hypothesis. It should be acknowledged, however, that the sample size is a limitation to this study. There has been also limited research on Arabic conversations. Therefore, further research is required to confirm the results of this study and examine Arabic conversations in depth by analyzing a wide range of samples.

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Appendix A

The Arabic Conversation:

Segment 1

- 01 Nada: You had a test today, ri:ght? ((Looking at Lamia))
02 Lamia: Yeh I had a test a::h but I didn't do well
03 Nada: W::hy:?
04 Lamia: a::h the test was so so so long: [a:nd
05 Sara: [Which class?
06 Lamia: biochemistry
07 Sara: um
08 Lamia: a:nd mmm and the questions were so difficult (.)
09 you need to read them more than one time to:: to
10 see:(.) to understand them before you answer
11 Nada: ooh (.) you did not fee::l::?

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06 Lamia: Ye:h (.) no sometimes video
07 Sara: Sometimes video sometimes audio
08 Nada: mm
09 Lamia: Depends on the network [hhh
10 Nada: [hhh
11 Sara: And also, if there is something important
12 Nada: mm
13 Lamia: (0.3) Yeh
14 Nada: (0.5) I wonder if is getting cold their like here:?
15 Lamia: (0.2) Ye:h I guess (.) whe:n I talk (.) talked to
16 them, they said it is getting a little colder bu:t
17 I don't think (.) I think it is like (.) there, it
18 Is like one day cold and the [next day hot
19 Nada: [mm right

Appendix B

The English Conversation:

Segment 1

01 Ashly: So: everyone is doing appetize::rs?=
02 Jenifer: Yes
03 Ashly: =Were're not worry about desse::rt?
04 Jenifer: I'll probably like (.) prop up a desse::rt[but
05 Ashly: [°okay°
06 Jenifer: Ya (.) so: (0.2)
07 Ashly: Okay
08 Jenifer: That's fine (0.3)
09 Ashly: Cool (.) and then what time we're meeting them?
10 Jenifer: Seven

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12 you wanna do it in your house?
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05 Ashly: ni::ce
06 Jenifer: it was like (.) it was like the Amish farmer just
07 like settin to [hhhh
08 Ashly: [oh ya::
- 09 Jenifer: it was so:: funny that these two ladies were like
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13 hi:m? and she is like pointing hhh at him hhhh
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15 Ashly: [((screaming))
16 Josh: hhhh
17 Ashly: oh my God that's awesome
18 Jenifer: sorry (.) continue
19 Josh: oh (.) one fun fact that...