

TURN-HOLDING CUES IN MULTI-PARTICIPANT CONVERSATIONS IN *DOWNTON ABBEY* TELEVISION SERIES

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify the turn-holding cues in Downton Abbey television series and describe the factors contributing to the effective use of them. This study used a descriptive qualitative method. The data were multi-participant conversations in the television series, specifically the first three episodes of the first season. The procedures for conducting the study were collecting the data, completing them with their context, setting, and then analyzing them. The result shows that to hold a turn, speakers use cues such as filled pause, verbal filler, tactically placed silent pause, new start, grammatical incompleteness, and rush-through. The speakers' attempt to hold the turn are successfully accomplished as they can continue finishing their utterances without any interruption from other participants. The factors contributing to the effective use of turn-holding cues are putting the cues at strategic places, and most importantly, cooperation among participants.

Keywords: *turn-holding cues, multi-participant conversation, Downton Abbey*

INTRODUCTION

People are basically *homo loquens* which means social creatures that are good at speaking and communicating. As the need to communicate is one of the basic needs of human, they always want to have conversations with others to talk about many things, starting from trivial to serious matters. This is an activity of exchanging information which involves two parties, the speaker and the hearer.

As language is very contextual, defining a conversation is not always easy and simple as sometimes there are some utterances that cannot be interpreted literally. Mey (2009) has stated that when meanings are interpreted based on the sentence structure or the literal meaning, the linguistic analysis which can be employed is syntax or semantic analysis. However, when the one to be revealed is the meaning intended by a speaker, which may be different from the literal meaning, then pragmatic analysis will be more appropriate. Mey (2009) has further explained that pragmatics is the study of the relationship between sign and the language users interpreting it. In doing a pragmatic analysis, one should also consider the context. It is related to who is involved and where, when, and in what situation the communication occurs. As the focus of this study is on conversation structure, the area of pragmatics that fits the scope is conversation analysis.

Mazeland (2009) has stated that conversation

analysis is a systematic study of the ways, specifically the principles and practices, that participants use when they organize a conversation in everyday interaction. The conversation meant here is one that happens unplanned in a natural situation, not in a language laboratory. Here, both the analysis and the conversation are systematic in the sense that they are conducted in an organized way. Nevertheless, the organized nature of conversation does not necessarily happen. Clark (2007) has proposed that face-to-face conversation have rules and structures which vary depending on several factors. Thus, in having a conversation, the speakers are actually applying the rules in structuring the conversation smoothly and efficiently. In this case, conversation analysis is meant to obtain a picture of the sequence of conversation procedures; how utterances are produced, and how a participant understands and responds to another.

One fundamental unit in conversation analysis is turn-taking, which refers to a collaborative process of the changing of speakership (Clarks in Adolphs, 2008). It is an essential part of the conversation basic system (Stivers et al., 2009). The elements which make up a turn is called Turn Constructional Unit (TCU). This is the basic unit of utterance recognized from its grammatical construction such as in the form of a sentence, clause, phrase or even word, its intonational packaging, and completed action(s) (Schegloff, 2007). In completed actions, specifically, the end of TCU

may mean an opportunity for other speakers to take the turn in interaction (Napitupulu & Siahaan, 2014). Schegloff (2007) has further stated that the organization of turn-taking is the most essential organizations of practice for talk-in-interaction. This is because there is a possibility of being responsive where a participant would show that what he/she is saying and doing, is the response to what the other has said and done, and where one participant should talk after the other, one speaker at a time. Therefore, it is an important part of a conversation as it enables participants to exchange roles as speaker and hearer, which makes information exchange happen. Unlike the structure, sound, or meaning of languages which tend to be different, something which is almost the same in conversations in all languages is that there is turn-taking (Levinson, 2016). This implies that turn-taking is an integral part of the conversation in all languages.

Although turn-taking is universal, it is also culturally specific at the same time. The principles on how a good or appropriate conversation should be may vary across cultures (Liddicoat, 2007; Sidnell, 2009; Stivers et al., 2009). In addition, Sidnell (2009) further argues that turn-taking varies in different periods of time as well. Therefore, the speakers need to take into account the local customs on when one should take a turn in a conversation. This also implies that conversation analyst conducting studies on turn-taking in different places and periods of time may find different results.

In line with him, Clark (2007) has proposed that the three basic strategies of turn-taking are taking a turn, holding a turn, and yielding a turn. Taking a turn is done by a speaker who wants to speak, whether to initiate a conversation, give a response, or interrupt the current speaker. Holding a turn, meaning to keep on talking, is done when the speaker cannot continue speaking which prompts him/her to stop to reformulate what he/she is going to say. Meanwhile, yielding a turn is a moment when a speaker willingly gives the coming turn to another participant. To apply those strategies, a speaker may employ certain linguistic devices or give some signals to other participants for the changing roles to occur smoothly.

To hold a turn, a speaker may sometimes use signals called turn-holding cues in order to prevent other participants to take the turn while the speaker is thinking of his/her next statement. Gravano and Hirschberg (2011) have defined turn-holding cue as a means to prevent the hearers from making turn-taking attempts. In other words, these are linguistic devices used by a speaker to maintain his/her speaking turn. McLaughlin in Anderson, Beard, and Walther (2010) have provided some turn-holding cues, such as incomplete grammatical element, maintenance of intonation contours, and filled pauses. Schegloff (2007) has proposed the cue of rush-through, while Pipek (2007) has added tactically placed silent pause, stalling, lexical repetitions, and new starts as other cues for holding the turn.

Since good management of turn-taking is the key to successful information exchange, all conversation participants should be aware of their roles by which they can apply the turn-taking strategies appropriately. Among the three turn-taking strategies, holding the turn may seem to be the most difficult one. This is due to the fact that a speaker often cannot control or hold the turn during the conversation since sometimes it is hard to think of what to be said while still talking at the same time. Thus, sometimes the speaker needs to stop talking for a while then rethink of what to say next. However, this is also risky because the pause can sometimes be interpreted by other participants as

an opportunity to take the turn. Therefore, the turn-holding cue is chosen as the field to investigate within this study. The research questions of this study are; (1) what are the turn-holding cues employed by the characters in multi-participant conversations in *Downton Abbey* television series? (2) What factors contribute to the effective use of the cues?

Considering that, there are fewer studies on turn-holding cues compare to turn-taking and turn-yielding signals. The researchers believe that this study will reveal many interesting findings, especially those related to language usage in the past.

METHODS

The data of the study are multi-participant conversations in *Downton Abbey* television series. Unlike multi-participant conversations, the turn-taking strategies in two-participant conversations are quite predictable. Hence, the multi-participant ones are more preferable as it involves many participants and may result in more dynamic turn-taking. *Downton Abbey*, a popular television series in 2016 which tells the life of aristocrats in 1900s, is chosen as the object of analysis for its historical and cultural background. When the data of most studies on conversational analysis are taken from present language usage in everyday interactions, the series set in the British Kingdom from 1912 to 1925 may provide different findings as the data come from the language used by the noble family in the past.

This is a descriptive qualitative study as the data are in the form of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences rather than numbers. The results are shown in description or explanation of the observed phenomena. The data are collected by watching the television series and recording the relevant data by making the transcript. They are then documented with their context or setting to get a thorough understanding of the situation. After the data are collected, the next step is to analyze them. Since the focus of this study is on the turn-holding strategies, the first step is to investigate the cues given by speakers to hold their turns. After that, the data are analyzed to decide whether the strategies applied are effective or not. Then, the researchers observe factors that may lead to this effectiveness or ineffectiveness, conducted as the last step in the data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In a conversation, a speaker surely wants to deliver the information smoothly for the information exchange to be accomplished clearly and effectively. However, in a certain condition sometimes there is something that is blocking the speaker's mind that he/she is not able to convey the information well. When such situation happens, and he/she feels that there is still something left to say, he/she will try to hold the turn. However, since to keep talking while thinking of what to say next is not easy, the speaker needs to employ some strategies. To let other participants know that the current speaker wants to hold the floor, he/she may give some cues (Levinson & Torreira, 2015). These are meant to prevent other conversation participants from making turn-taking attempts (Gravano & Hirschberg, 2011).

This study has found some turn-holding cues that are employed by the characters, the first of which is filled pause. While a silent pause may indicate that a speaker has finished

speaking, a speaker who still wants to hold the floor may use a filled pause to avoid others from taking the turn. It can be done in two ways; by pronouncing the vowel of a syllable in a longer duration or by using some commonly filled pauses, such as *uh*, *um*, and *hm*. To hold the floor, the speaker uses this filled pause while thinking of what to say next. The use of this cue is seen in the following dialogue.

- 1 Carson : The Dowager Countess is in the drawing room.
 2 Robert : I'll come now.
 3 Carson : She asked for Lady Grantham.
 4 Cora : I wonder what I've done wrong this time.
 5 Carson : **A:::nd** the new valet has arrived, my Lord.
 6 Robert : Has he? Hm... Thank you, Carson.

After Carson announces where The Dowager Countess is, in turn 5, he uses a conjunction 'and' pronounced in a longer duration as a signal that he wants to add more information. By giving that signal, he can make other participants stay silent while paying attention to what he is going to say. Besides, other than becoming a cue of holding the turn, the long duration of 'and' may imply something else. He does this because he feels uneasy to tell the next information as he thinks that the new valet, the one proposed by Robert, does not have the capability to be a good valet as he is crippled.

In turn 6, Robert also uses a turn-holding cue by using the filled pause 'hm'. This is a common expression used by people when they think about what they are going to say. However, the 'hm' spoken by Robert, in this case, is not a turn-holding cue but a backchannel or sign of acknowledgment. He says so to inform that he understands the information that Carson has conveyed.

Besides a filled pause, the second cue used by a speaker to hold the turn is a verbal filler. By employing a verbal filler, other participants may wait for the speaker's next utterance. Some common verbal fillers are 'well', 'you know', and 'I mean'. The data analysis shows that the characters in *Downton Abbey* frequently use the verbal filler 'well' compared to other verbal fillers as shown in the example following.

- 1 Robert : You don't have to worry - she may be President, but I am the Patron so you're quite safe with me.
 2 Matthew : My mother was right, then. The man's life was saved.
 3 Clarkson : **Well**, . . . I like to think we were both right. But I'm not sure Lady Grantham will be so easily convinced.
 4 Robert : Then we must strengthen the argument. Cousin Isobel wants something to do? Very well. Let's make her Chairman of the Board. She'd like that, wouldn't she?
 5 Matthew : Certainly she would.
 6 Robert : Then my mother will have to listen to her. She's been an absolute ruler there for long enough. It's time for some loyal opposition.

- 7 Clarkson : **Well**, . . . if you're quite certain, my lord.
 8 Robert : What were you going to say?
 9 Clarkson : **Well**, . . . at the risk of being impertinent, on your own head be it.

In this conversation, all utterances that are spoken by Clarkson begin with 'well'. In turn 3, after Matthew praises his mother who has successfully saved Drake's life, Clarkson begins his response with 'well'. In turn 7, after Robert says that Violet should share the power with Isobel and listen to Isobel, Clarkson responds by starting his utterance with 'well' again. In the last turn, after Robert urges him to honestly explain what he means, he once again uses 'well' at the beginning of his response.

In turn 2 and 6, at the end of their utterances, Matthew and Robert do not specifically yield the floor to Clarkson. It means that anyone involved in the conversation may give a response. Clarkson wants to take the turn but also needs some time to think of what to say which is why he starts his utterances with the verbal filler 'well', followed with a pause, in turns 3 and 7. Robert then specifically gives the next turn to Clarkson in turn 8, but he keeps responding in the same way. Knowing that Clarkson wants to say something, albeit the pause after each 'well', other participants wait for what he is going to say.

Other than functioning as a turn-holding cue, those verbal fillers are employed by Clarkson because he is a bit hesitant about what he says as it is contradictory from what is spoken by other participants. This implies that, other than giving the signal to other participants that a speaker is not done with the utterance, the verbal filler may also indicate that a speaker is a bit hesitant about what he/she is going to express.

The third cue employed by the characters in holding their turn is a silent pause. A silent pause generally indicates that a speaker is done in delivering the information which marks it as the right time for other participants to take the turn. However, when the silent pause is placed at a strategic place, other participants will know that it is a signal to for them to not take the turn and instead wait for the speaker to finish the utterance. This can be seen in the dialogue below.

- 1 Cora : There was a letter from Mr. Napier in the evening post.
 2 Mary : Umm.. Did he accept?
 3 Cora : Not yet.
 4 Edith : Perhaps he thought it was too obvious.
 5 Cora : Apparently he's bringing a friend with him, an attache at the Turkish Embassy. **A(- - -) Mr. (- - -) Kemal Pamuk.** He's the son of one of the sultan's ministers and he's here for the Albanian talks.

Cora, the mother of Mary and Edith, tells Mary that her close friend, Mr. Evelyn Napier has sent a letter informing his plan to visit Downton Abbey. Then, in turn 5, when she conveys in detail that Napier is bringing a friend and she cannot remember his name, she uses a silent pause after 'a' and 'Mr'. The silent pause after 'Mr' is quite long as Cora needs to open and read the letter she is holding. However, other participants still wait for her to finish her utterance. In this case, Cora puts the silent pause at strategic places by tactically putting the silent pause after mentioning

'Mr'. It is because her daughters must be curious about the name of Mr. Napier's friend, so they will patiently wait for her to mention the man's name.

The fourth cue used by a speaker to hold a turn is by speaking a new start. This is usually done by a speaker who cannot continue what he is saying. Thus, before finishing one TCU to hold the floor, he/she conveys another TCU. This is presented in the following dialogue.

- 1 Charles : You think you're such a big man, don't you? Just cos you're a lord, you think you can do what you like with me.
 2 Robert : I think it...
 3 : **..because it is true.**

After Charles comments about Lord Grantham's power, in turn 3, Robert can only say 'I think it...' and he cannot continue what he is saying. However, as he still wants to hold the floor, he takes back the turn with a new start. Usually, when a speaker seems not to be able to continue his/her utterance which is indicated by a pause, other participants will take the turn in order to keep the conversation going. However, although Robert has stopped his utterance because he is unable to continue it, there are no other participants to take the turn in this situation. This is caused by the social background among them. Other participants do not dare to take the turn when Lord Grantham has not finished his utterance because among all the participants, he is the one with the highest social rank. When there is a participant taking the turn before the 'man in power' finishes his turn, it is regarded as an impolite behavior.

This study also finds that grammatical incompleteness is the fifth turn-holding cue given by the characters in *Downton Abbey*. It is usually done by a speaker mentioning conjunction followed by a pause. It can be a turn-holding cue because conjunction is a grammatical element that needs to be followed by a subordinate clause. The use of grammatical incompleteness as a turn-holding cue is illustrated in the following dialogue.

- 1 Hughes : Can I help your ladyship?
 2 Cora : This is the button we're missing from my new evening coat. I found it lying on the gravel. **But...** I was shocked at the talk I heard as I came in. Mr Crawley is his lordship's cousin and heir. You will, therefore, please accord him the respect he is entitled to.
 3 O'Brien : But you don't like him yourself, m'lady. You never wanted him...

In the second line, Cora, who is looking for O'Brien, finds that he is talking about Matthew Crawley. Cora thinks that it is not appropriate for a servant to talk about any member of his master's family with no respect. Cora starts her utterance by saying what she originally has intended to do by coming downstairs to the servants' dining room to give the missing button from her evening coat. Then she continues her turn by commenting on what she has just heard. However, she does not say the comment directly in one stretch of utterance. She rather starts by mentioning a conjunction 'but' to hold the turn, then gives a pause after this. Knowing that Cora wants to continue her statement, other participants keep waiting in silence until she finishes

her turn. Besides functioning as a cue that a speaker wants to hold the turn, Cora's choice to use the conjunction 'but' enables other participants to notice that something wrong must be happening because 'but' here indicates that Cora's next statement is something contradictory.

The last cue employed by the characters in *Downton Abbey* to hold the turn is by doing a rush-through. It is done by shortening the pause duration between two TCUs. As a pause may indicate that a speaker has finished his turn and other participants may take over the turn. This very short pause is meant to avoid other participants taking the turn as what can be seen in the following conversation.

- 1 Mary : Edith, what are you thinking?
 2 Edith : You know, I don't dislike him as much as you do.
 3 Mary : Perhaps you don't dislike him at all.
 4 Edith : Perhaps I don't.
 5 Mary : Well, it's nothing to me. I've bigger fish to fry.
 6 Sybil : What fish?
 7 Edith : Are we talking about E-N?
 8 Mary : **How do you know that? Have you been poking around in my things?**

Noticing that Edith knows the name of a man that Mary is in love with, bursting with anger, Mary asks two questions at once with a very short pause between them in turn 8. She does this in order to avoid others to hold the turn when she has not finished interrogating Edith. Here, Mary uses the cue of rush-through between her first and second TCU. With a very short pause between two utterances, other participants do not have any opportunity to take over the turn.

Those six cues are the signals given by speakers in *Downton Abbey* to warn other participants not to take the turn when they feel that they are unable to deliver the utterance smoothly. When they finally can continue their turn without any interruption or turn transition after giving the cues, the speakers may have effective use of cues to hold the turn. In the data analyzed within this study, all turn-holding cues given by speakers make the hearers in multi-participant conversations avoid taking the turn and keep waiting until the speakers have completely finished their utterance.

The effectiveness of these turn-holding cues is supported by several factors, of which place the cues at strategic places is one of them. However, one which seems to be the most significant factor is cooperation among participants. A turn-holding cue works well when the hearers, who have noticed that the speaker is going to hold the floor, willingly wait until the speaker finishes his/her utterance. Considering the object of the study, which is conversations in a television series set in the British Kingdom in the past era, all turn-holding cues may indicate that politeness and respect among conversation participants are highly valued. This is due to the fact that all of the cues have successfully made the speakers hold the floor and continue to completely finish their utterances without any interruption.

CONCLUSIONS

Communicating is the basic need of human and having the conversation is a way of doing that. The conversation actually contains rules and structures that

most participants are not aware of. Among those structures, taking the turn is one of which that makes up a conversation sequence, making changing roles between a speaker and hearer possible. Turn-taking has three basic strategies; taking a turn, holding a turn, and yielding a turn. Among the three, holding a turn seems to be the most difficult one. In spite of the speaker's effort to think of what to say next while giving a signal to the hearers not to take the floor, the signal put in the wrong places may make an effort useless.

In relation to the first research question, this study has found that in *Downton Abbey* television series, there are six turn-holding cues used by the speakers in multi-participant conversations. They are; filled pause, verbal filler, tactically placed silent pause, new start, grammatical incompleteness, and rush-through. All efforts done by the speakers to hold the floor by using those cues are successfully accomplished, indicated by their ability to finish their utterance without any interruption from other participants. Meanwhile, for the second research question, it is found that the factors contributing to the effective use of those cues are putting the cues at strategic places and cooperation among participants. The way the people speak and behave in the past era, as what is set in the television series under study, which highly values politeness and respect is an important factor making the cooperation work well.

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