

An International Multidisciplinary Journal

Official Journal of the Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA)

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Submission of manuscripts – Einreichung von Manuskripten:

Dr. Bettina Turi-Ostheim, Salesianergasse 3/4/1, A-1030 Wien. E-mail: journal@gestalttheory.net

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CONVERSATIONS AS GESTALTEN: THE USE OF PRE TERM INSERTIONS (PTI)

Ramona Bongelli

1. Conversations as Gestalten. Conversation Analysis and Gestalt Theory

Of all the numerous contemporary research models and analysis devoted to the study of conversation, I consider the Conversation Analysis (CA)¹ model to be that which is closest to Gestalt theory, both in its basic assumptions - totality is seen as a complex result and not as a simple summary - and in its methodology - analysis of the parts against a background of global analysis.

CA:

- a. considers *every conversation* as the *result of a complex interaction* taking place between two or more people²;
- b. it also focuses attention on small conversational *details* such as pauses, overlapping, interruptions etc. not considered as fortuitous phenomena, but conversely as *being constituent parts of the conversation* and
- c. aims principally to demonstrate that *conversations are characterized by a certain order and regularity* resulting from the choices made by the interlocutors.

In my opinion, the points made above qualify CA as a model for the analysis of *conversational Gestalten*. CA considers a **conversation** as a complex and organised **totality**³, a whole, ranging from global qualities, which differ from those recognised individually, to its constituent parts. Each conversation, according to the CA model, assumes a particular format depending on:

- the **roles** taken on by the interlocutors, roles which are constantly (re)-negotiated in the course of the interaction;
- the **linguistic⁴, intonational and paraverbal choices**, (long pauses, stutters, yawns etc.) and alternatively non verbal choices made by the interlocutors (and reflexively linked to the above roles). The *smallest units of meaning*⁵ (TCU = Turn Constructional Units) and *conversational turns* are created based on these choices;

¹ For a complete exposition of the basic assumptions of CA, see Levinson 1983, Psathas 1995.

² The conversants, as members of a small *group*, can be considered as a *dynamic whole* within which each occupies a precise *position*, takes on a certain *role*, wields and /or is subjected to a certain type of *power* and *changes* (or simply adapts) his/her behaviour (in this case mainly by communicating) in relation to the changes in the other speakers.

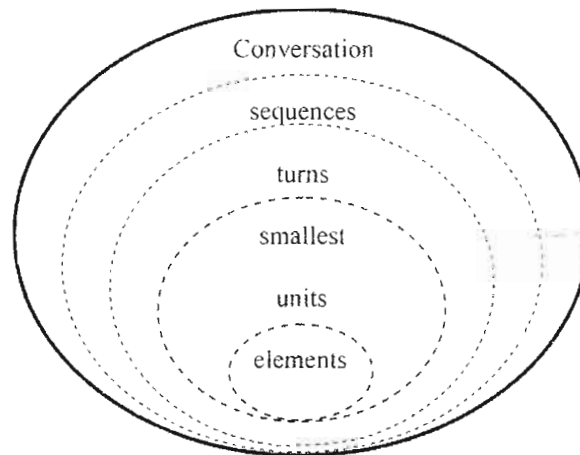
³ Conversations are usually organized in three parts: the opening made up of greetings and reciprocal recognition of the interlocutors, the central part and the closing part.

⁴ See Austin 1962.

⁵ For conversation analysts the *smallest units of meaning* are the constituent units of a *conversational turn* (basic units) which is made up of one or more of these units (see Selting 2000, 480); a conversational sequence is made up of two or more turns by different speakers linked by relations of co-reference; a *conversation* is made up of one or more conversational sequences.

- the relations (of syntactic-semantic co-reference) between the various conversational turns of different speakers, on the basis of which *conversational sequences* are structured, and to conclude
- the specific **relations between sequences**.

We can represent the complex structure of a *conversation* graphically by making use of a diagram of concentric circles in which every *circumference* stands for the relations between the parts which are usually recursive. Based on these parts we proceed from levels of minor to levels of major complexity. The *content of the rings* represents the components of the whole-conversation, but also the totality (microstructures) within broader and more complex totalities (macrostructures):



Therefore if we were to change, move or eliminate even one of these numerous constituent parts we would obtain *different conversational Gestalten*, in accordance with the Gestalt principle of **dependence of the parts on the whole** which maintains that the whole changes according to the change in one important part.

Since I have been studying overlapping and dialogical interruptions (Bongelli & Zuczkowski 2003; Bongelli 2005) for some years, in this paper I would like to focus on the role-function that these conversational details play in the whole.

2. Pre Term Insertions (PTI)

As native speakers of a language we spend a great deal of our time conversing with people. Yet only rarely do our conversations examples strictly respect the rules of *turn-taking*⁶; these rules:

- *describe* the orderly progress of the conversations, and
- function as *norms* for the interlocutors, inviting them to talk one after the other, thus respecting conversational politeness.

⁶ See Sack, Schegloff et al. 1974.

Real speakers hesitate frequently, talk over the words of another, interrupt each other, repeat themselves, dither, start off again etc. In many Italian conversations of natural speech, the speakers seem to inhabit a chaotic conversational world, although they give the impression that they understand each other well enough.

Although many Conversation Analysis researchers in the past have maintained that on average only 5% of the total dialogic flow of every conversation is uttered in a non-linear way, thus breaking the "one at a time"⁷ rule, the results of my research show that this percentage is often notably higher, reaching the 30%⁸ level. This occurs particularly in cases like arguments and convivial conversations between several people. The results of earlier research by Carla Bazzanella (1995) show similar results.

In everyday conversations, there is an alternation of longish periods of repetitions, silences, conversational confusion etc. with conversational fluidity. These phenomena follow or occur simultaneously with Insertions which I have called Pre Term (PTI). With this term I refer to a vast, heterogeneous category of *speech acts*: a) performed by the person who takes on, at that given moment, the *role* of addressee or listener (S2); b) performed earlier at the end of the current speaker's turn (S1) (Bongelli 2005); c) the *conversational consequences* of which can be:

1. overlapping of the interlocutors (the current speaker, S1, and the overrapper, S2, end up speaking over the words of the other for a considerable length of time, or long enough to recognize it as overlapping);
2. interruptions by S1;
3. interruptions by S2;
4. interruptions by S1 and S2.

To sum up, I think it is possible to affirm that for every PTI there follows an *overlapping* or *interrupting effect* with the exception of speakers starting simultaneously.

PTI with the interrupting effect is a sub-category of PTI, the result of which, in conversational terms, is represented by an interruption in the dialogical flow of one or both of the conversants, as is clearly evident in 3F's turn and 4M's intervention in the following fragment from an argument:

(1)

1F: You are pushing me into the background, not even, actually out of the picture.

2M: Not into the background.

3F: Oh yes [inst+

4M:[The fact is if I want to have a career I have to follow,

⁷ Moving from one turn to the next with no gap and no overlap is common. (Sacks, Schegloff, et al. 1974, 708).

⁸ My research differed from that of Bazzanella in that I also analysed twenty doctor-patient conversations. Although these show epistemic and role asymmetry, to which can be added gender asymmetry, the percentage of words uttered in non linear fashion was still above 5%.

Obviously, fragments of conversation are not easy to interpret, so very often the analyst is limited to giving plausible hypotheses uncertain as to whether the silence and/or the breaking off of the dialogue depend on the PTI or on a totally independent event occurring at the same time or afterwards. The speaker whose turn it is may interrupt his/her discourse simultaneously making a PTI, because he/she cannot find the right words to continue, as seems to occur in fragment (2), taken from a conversation between two friends:

(2)

1F: A great bra the [sort,

2K: [because, at the end of the day, among other things,
Andrea's mother deceived me.

In the case of the **overlapping effect PTI**, unlike that of the interrupting effect PTI, we are dealing with a descriptive category which is certainly less interpretative than the latter. In this case, S1 and S2:

- a. speak over each others words;
- b. keep the role of legitimate speaker distinct from that of intruder;
- c. very often bring to an end the smallest unit of meaning that they had started.

After a variable period of time both the interlocutors interrupt what they are saying, either simultaneously or at different times.

2.1 Results and Conversational Roles

Expressions such as "he/she has butted in", "don't interrupt me!", "what he was saying was interrupted", "you're not letting me finish" etc. are commonly used and interpreted as being exact descriptions of the events: *someone is capable of silencing someone else*. If we follow this reasoning, S2, who begins talking before S1 has finished, is thus able to **intrude into** S1's words, even to the point of **blocking** their flow. In my opinion, what is paradoxical in this explanation is the attribution of responsibility for a conversational result (in this case S1's silence) to someone other than the person who becomes silent, that is the person who actually *interrupts him/herself*. If we accept this attribution it means, therefore, ignoring the role and dialogical force of the current speaker.

In both the ingenuous theory of emotional causality (see Zuczkowski 1995, 1999), and in the case of PTI the paradox lies in holding others responsible for our feelings ("you've made me angry"), in holding ourselves responsible for the feelings of others, but no one capable of being in charge of their own emotional world. Others then, would be able to cause my silence; in the same way, I would be able to cause others to be silent, but not one of us would be personally responsible for the action of silencing ourselves. If we consider the *interruption* in a different light, as a *conversational result*, in my opinion, it is a way out of the causal paradox referred to above, as it recognises **roles and functions** as the responsibility of each of the participants. Thus it is no longer the case of *someone interrupting someone else* but *someone who interrupts themselves when someone else speaks*. As with the interruptions, overlapping can also be described and interpreted in terms of conversational results, in other words effects determined by the co-occurrence of a **multiplicity of factors**.

2.2 Why the Rules of Turn-Taking are Broken: Phenomenological Analysis

What are the reasons for speakers breaking the rules of turn-taking? Although I am aware of the great many causes that can be held responsible in any given conversation for this violation, in the conversations studied, I noticed the persistency of some factors which seem to act as macro-variables:

1. **The conversational characteristics (style) of each of the participants.** These characteristics often escape direct control, since it is rare to have more than one conversation⁹ with the same speaker at one's disposal. However, in the case of the obstetric consultations in which there were several exchanges with just the one doctor-protagonist, I was able to observe the conversational style which was not very intrusive and showed a willingness to listen. This style remained constant throughout the course of several conversations. In one case, however, the pressing need to defend himself against the accusations of a patient, therefore the very subject of the conversation, caused the doctor to repeatedly intervene outside his own conversational space;
2. **Familiarity**, that is the level of acquaintance between the interlocutors. In order to gauge familiarity we often only have evidence gleaned from the conversations such as the use in Italian of the second person pronoun "tu", which is used exclusively when addressing people with whom we have a close emotional relationship or with whom we are quite intimate. From the analysis of the linguistic indices of this variable it appears to increase or be re-established even in the course of the same interaction, thus determining important conversational changes. In some of the obstetric consultations I noticed, for example, that there was not only a gradual passage from the use of mainly formal expressions to less formal ones, but also a certain increase in the percentage of simultaneous talk between the first and last phase of the meeting;
3. **Type of subject undertaken.** The more the real interlocutors of the conversations studied feel *involved*, *interested* or *competent* with regard to the subjects under discussion, the greater is their participation¹⁰. For example, I have noticed that frequently, even typically, in the course of arguments, the interlocutors who are being attacked react, by defending themselves, even before the other speaker has finished his/her accusation;
4. the particular **emotive and psychological situation of the interlocutors** at a given moment. This variable, perhaps more than others, possibly influences the particular ways in which the people participate but is less subject to observation and analysis.

In brief, it could be said in Gestalt theory terms, that the PTI are phenomena:

⁹ Jefferson (1984a) noted emergence of some *individual constants* as regards the different use of these signals.

¹⁰ In the case of the obstetric consultations, one patient in her third pregnancy intervenes much more often, both in a linear way and through PTI, when compared to a very young patient in her first pregnancy.

- which depend on the context¹¹, (field or reference system) and are at the same time responsible for its creation¹²;
- which depend on the interlocutors (i.e. on the phenomenological¹³ I) and on the relationships between the interlocutors¹⁴.

Waiting for S1 to finish his/her intervention and become silent before beginning to speak does not seem to be the usual conversational rule observed by S2. As Gail Jefferson (1986) maintained, the *utterance + pause* form is not part of the model used by S2 to monitor the speech in progress and decide when to intervene. The analysis of the conversations has confirmed the reverse hypothesis regarding the frequent violation of the politeness rule.

The reason why the *principle of dialogical co-operation* (see Grice 1975) has monopolised contemporary multidisciplinary studies on the *use* of the language is in part due, I believe, to the lack of consideration given to a *complementary* but not antithetical principle, in other words, what I would call the **dialogical self-affirmation principle**¹⁵. In my opinion, the conversations demonstrate that the interlocutors not only pursue common aims but *also* wish to achieve their personal¹⁶ ones. When the interlocutors pay attention to what is being said and reply coherently, we have an example of common aims but to quote Marina Mizzau 2002, 121: "Parlare è autorappresentarsi, imporre la propria immagine [...]. Lo spazio di parola [...] è conteso nel tentativo di strapparsi l'un l'altro il tempo dell'affermazione della propria identità".

Speaking and trying to affirm oneself in conversation by using PTI are, for me, just two sides of the same coin, or rather, two different ways of claiming a conversational space for one's self-expression and the pursuance of one's aims.

3. The Multi-Functional Qualities of PTI: Beyond the Supportive-Competitive Dichotomy

In the conversations analysed, there seems to be **reciprocal adaptation**¹⁷ by the interlocutors, so that the violation of conversational space by one invites the other to do the same. However, one of the clearest facts to emerge concerns evidence of an *inversely proportional relation* between the quantity of words uttered, on the one hand, and the number of PTI made on the other. The less talkative conversant is usually also

¹¹ For context I obviously do not mean to refer solely to the spatial and temporal dimensions in which a conversation takes place but, in the broad sense, to the whole field situation. "In the behavioural sphere a sequence of actions acquires different meanings depending on the situation in which it takes place" (see Galli 2007, 16).

¹² See Gee 2005, concerning the concept of *reflexivity of the context*; a conflictual context can lead to overlapping and dialogical interruptions by the conversants, but in the same way, it can be the overlapping and dialogical interruptions which lead to the onset of the conflict.

¹³ See Galli 1991, 65, regarding the intrinsic and situational qualities of the phenomenological I.

¹⁴ See Galli 2007, 18, regarding the phenomenological category of "we"

¹⁵ See Castelfranchi 1998.

¹⁶ Castelfranchi 1998, 147, using a comparison with the world of sport affirms that from the co-operativist viewpoint, we should maintain that in a tennis match the players do not respect the *rules to play and win* but rather they play to demonstrate that they are respecting the rules.

¹⁷ See White 1989.

the one who makes the greater number of PTI; conversely, the conversant who is more talkative usually makes fewer PTI. The regularity with which this relation appears, has led me to surmise that PTI very often function as **compensatory mechanisms** for the dialogical disparity between interlocutors, that is as mechanisms employed in the attempt to re-balance situations which are in some way unequal. Nevertheless, there are not infrequent cases in which an interlocutor, though the more talkative speaker and thus making fewer PTI, intrudes into the other's discourse more often as a consequence of the notable difference in the quantity of words uttered compared with his/her conversational partner. In these cases, it seems more correct to talk of the use of the PTI, not only in terms of compensatory mechanisms on the part of the less talkative interlocutor, but also in terms of **reinforcing mechanisms** aimed at emphasizing the role and dialogical presence of the other.

If from the meta-linguistic viewpoint, the PTI work mainly as compensatory and/or reinforcing mechanisms, from the view of the speech acts performed, I noticed that the interlocutors make them:

- Not only in the attempt *to support* what their partner is saying. This is often made clear to him/her by the use of particular discourse markers, which are thought by some authors (e.g. Jefferson 1984a) to show the interlocutor's intention of staying in the receptive position of listener, and consequently, his/her wish that the other retain the speakership;

- Not only in the attempt *to compete* with what the current speaker is saying. Often they also try to take over the speakership to their advantage, using specific linguistic and paralinguistic signals¹⁸, as above

- But also with other objectives. Some S2 speakers use PTI to *ask*¹⁹ or *define more clearly*:

(4)²⁰

1P: You could subscribe to Money for at least two years.
That would be [di-

2D: [Money or Automoney?

(5)

1G: No, it wasn't there, there was nothing [there was only,

2V: [So, you waited a bit, did you?

but also *to reply before time*

¹⁸See French & Local 1983, for the onset of competitive turns.

¹⁹ In a turn where there are several speakers, which is proceeding towards new subjects, the addressee might ask for clarification of the sense of the first part of the intervention, the part which the speaker is leaving behind. In cases like these there seems to be no sense in applying the distinction between a supportive or competitive intervention.

²⁰ Fragment taken from a telephone conversation between a woman selling subscriptions for monthly magazines and a potential buyer.

(6)

1P: Good afternoon [doctor

2D: [Good afternoon.

as well as to *be pressing*, to *infer completion* and to perform *innumerable* other *speech acts* which seem to have little or nothing to do with support and competition.

It does not seem possible, therefore, to attribute interventions performed outside their conversational space to simply showing agreement or disagreement with what the current speaker has said or to simple clues by the speaker about their intention to give up their turn or to let the other speaker continue his/hers. On the contrary, PTI seem to be characterised by an intrinsic multi-functionality, capable of having an effect on the whole *movement* of a conversation. They are also capable of making clear, not just the sense of the successive/linear co-construction, but also the sense of the combined co-construction. In reality, conversations rarely fall neatly into one or other type as they are very often a mixture of the two.

4. Conclusions

In the conversations that I have studied, I have found the non linear structure or rather the mixed type to be the most recurrent. This structure was typical both of dysfunctional (quarrels) and convivial conversations. This is probably a sign, as Jefferson points out (1984b), of the meticulous attention which every single interlocutor pays to the over-all course of the in-interactive event. In my opinion, the most interesting results of the research appear to be the following:

- Frequent breaking of turn-taking rules;
- Percentage of speech uttered of the non linear type over 5%;
- Active and decision-making role recognised by each of the participants, not just in the phases produced in a linear way (i.e. in the periods of speakership), but also in the non linear phases;
- The principle of dialogic self-affirmation and;
- The multi-functional qualities of PTI.

Summary

The study of overlapping and conversational interruptions has captured the interest of many researchers since the seventies. Although a great number of interpretations have been given and numerous taxonomic proposals put forward in order to classify these events²¹, the debate on this subject can, as of today, be basically summed up as follows: a) the consideration of these events in terms of anomalies with regard to the normal course of conversations; b) the evaluation of the interruptions as phenomena solely attributable to the interlocutor; c) recognition of the dichotomy between supportive and competitive interventions.

My work sets out to present the most important results of a research conducted on a corpus²² of about 50 natural ordinary conversations between friends and family members

²¹ For a brief exposition of the most important taxonomic theories see Bongelli 2005.

²² The corpus of conversations I refer to was gathered at the Centre for Research in Communication Psychology (University of Macerata) beginning in 2000. The interlocutors in these conversations all come from the centre-south of Italy. The conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed using the conven-

as well as doctor (an obstetrician) – patient conversations. The research was conducted using the *phenomenological method of observation* (analytical-global). The re-reading of the conversational phenomena in question led me to introduce the concept of Pre Term Insertions (PTI). I try to give a brief outline of this concept in the course of the second section of this work, following some methodological notes. After presenting what I believe constitutes the basic conditions for the use of PTI, I conclude with examples of their many functions.

Keywords: Overlapping, interruptions, Pre Term Insertion.

Zusammenfassung

Die Untersuchung von Überschneidungen und Unterbrechungen innerhalb einer Konversation hat seit den 70iger Jahren die Aufmerksamkeit vieler Forscher auf sich gezogen. Obwohl es eine Vielzahl an Interpretationen gibt und zahlreiche taxonomische Anregungen vorgebracht wurden, um diese Begebenheit zu klassifizieren, kann die Debatte darüber gegenwärtig grundsätzlich wie folgt zusammengefasst werden: a) die Berücksichtigung dieser Begebenheiten als Anomalien mit Verweis auf den normalen Ablauf einer Konversation; b) die Evaluation der Unterbrechung einzig als Phänomen, das dem Gesprächspartner zuordenbar ist; c) die Anerkennung der Dichotomie zwischen unterstützender und konkurrenzbetonter Intervention.

Meine Studie stellt die wichtigsten Ergebnisse einer Forschungsarbeit dar, die anhand einer Sammlung von 50 gewöhnlichen Konversationen zwischen Freunden und Familienmitgliedern sowie zwischen Arzt (Gynäkologe) und Patienten, durchgeführt wurde. Die Untersuchung wurde mit Hilfe der phänomenologischen Methode der Beobachtung (analytisch-umfassend) durchgeführt. Die Lesewiederholung des fraglichen Konversationsphänomens brachte mich dazu, das Konzept der Pre Term Insertion (PTI) einzuführen. Im zweiten Teil dieser Arbeit wird versucht, einen kurzen Überblick über dieses Konzept, mit anschließenden methodologischen Anmerkungen, zu geben. Nach der Darstellung der - wie ich glaube - Grundbedingungen für den Einsatz der PTI schließe ich mit Beispielen ihrer vielfältigen Funktionen.

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Address of the Author:

Ramona Bongelli
Department of Sciences of Education, University of Macerata
Piazzale L.Bertelli 1,
62100 Macerata, Italy.
EMail: ramona.bongelli@unimc.it