

Assessment of Interruption and Overlapping among Igbo and Sesotho people in Intercultural Discourse

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Abstract

This study investigates the discourse style – interruption between the Igbo and the Sesotho residing in Bloemfontein, South Africa. The study was motivated by the way in which people from different linguistic background engage in interactions and observable differences in accent, interpretation of meanings and misunderstanding, code-switching, competition for the floor based on individual linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This study explores interruption and overlapping among the Igbo and Sesotho in interactions. The theoretical framework employed is that of conversational analysis as established by Garfinkel (1967), and developed by Sachs, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974). The data for the study was collected through recordings of interactions in different contexts (shop, hospital, church, home and among friends). The results from the study show that during the intercultural communication between the Igbo and the Sesotho people, interruptions and overlapping are not determined by age, educational background, gender, but by the relationships between the interactants, and the context of the interaction.

Keywords: Conversation analysis, turn-taking, interaction, interruption, and overlapping.

Introduction

A turn in conversation is usually defined as uninterrupted sequence of speech by one speaker. It is the time when a speaker is talking, and there tends to be an avoidance of silence between speaking turns (Yule, 1985:108). In conversation, there is no limit to the length of a turn, but follows the principle of the adjacency pair. However, according to Grice (1975) with regards to cooperative principle, the speaker rather should not talk too much. Each move in a conversation is essentially a response to the preceding talk or what has been discussed earlier and an anticipation of the kind of talk which is to follow. In formulating the present turn, speaker shows understanding of the speech of previous turn and reveals expectations about the next turn to come. A knowledge of the previous talk leads to correct reactions and this actually shows that the interactants maintain an awareness of the turn exchange.

Turn-taking is the skill of knowing when to start and finish a turn in a conversation and when to allow others to take their turns. However, interruption is viewed as an unsuccessful turn transition, which results in a breakdown in the turn exchange system (Livingston, Flowers, Hoder & Ryan, 2000: 236).

According to Coates (1986:99), interruption is a violation of the turn-taking rules of conversation. That is, the next speaker begins to speak while the current speaker is still speaking, at a point in the current speaker's turn that could not be defined as the last word. Bonvillain (2003:201) asserts that interruption is the violation of a current speaker's rights, right to hold floor. Interruption breaks the symmetry of the conversational model. It prevents the current speaker from finishing his or her turn or gaining the subsequent turn for himself. In the words of Tannen (1991:189), "interruption is a hostile act, a kind of conversational bullying, where the interrupter is seen as a malevolent aggressor, and the interruption of an innocent victim, as well as an intrusion, trampling on someone else's right to floor, and an attempt to dominate the other". Overlapping on the other hand is a breach of turn in conversation. It is a simultaneous talking by participants which may include sentence initial overlap or simultaneous starts wherein both participants begin talking at the same time (Livingston *et al*, 2000:236). Bonvillain (2003:201) notes that overlapping is an error of judgement in transition and timing to the next turn. However, overlapping is not always disruptive like interruption, as the addressee can



laugh, which shows that it did not in any way interfere with the current speaker's turn. It is disruptive only when it interferes and stops the current speaker's turn (Holmes, 2008:386).

According to Tannen (1985:207), one function of overlap is that it enables a listener to show understanding by talking at the same time as the speaker: by loud exclamations of understanding, by finishing sentences with or instead of the speaker, which shows that the listener knows where the sentence is going; hence, has been a good listener. In formal settings, such as seminars, meetings or conferences, the occurrence of interruption and overlapping is very minimal because, in these kinds of contexts, the turns are often organised in such a way that everybody is allowed to speak only with the permission from a moderator, who allocates, monitors and control turns. This minimises the frequency of interruption and overlapping.

For the purposes of this paper, "interruption" implies violation of the interrupted party's speaking rights, or at least an attempt at such violation. If there is no such (attempted) violation, there is no interruption. The problem of identifying actual occurrences of interruption can be illustrated by examining the data. The primary aim of this study is to examine conversational environment in which interruption and overlapping responses occur, and attempt to show evidence indicating the critical function of these responses in naturally occurring conversation, as well as revealing the reasons why people interrupt or overlap in interaction.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed by this study is conversational analysis (C.A). It grew out of the ethnomethodological approach established mainly by Garfinkel (1967), and which was developed by Sachs, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), who argued that the activities of daily life and ordinary interactions of speech were important to study. Conversational analysis is the study of talk in interaction, both in formal and informal contexts. It studies natural conversations, especially with a view to determine the participants' methods of turn-

taking, constructing sequences of utterances across turns, identifying and repairing problems in conversation, and how conversation works in different conventional settings. Conversational analyst attempts to describe the orderliness, structures and sequential patterns of interaction in both institutional and casual conversations. A sociolinguistic study of C.A is however, interested in analysing the structure of talk, explaining how people manage the rules of ordinary everyday conversation at each level of their talk. Conversational analysis equally studies the structure and organisation of human interactions, with a more specific focus on conversational interactions. One of the strengths of C.A is that it works with extended samples of real conversation (Fairclough, 1989:11). In other words, conversation analysts study natural interaction on the assumption that spoken interaction is characterised with turn-taking, conversation dominance, interruption and overlapping. According to Wilson (1991:22), the concern of conversation analysts' is with the way participants construct their interaction turn by turn over its course to accomplish an accountably coherent exchange. The human interactants continually display their ideas to one another in the course of interaction and their own understanding of the topic of interaction.

Conversational analysis has focused on the organisation of conversational interactions on the analysis of its endogenously generated sequential opportunities and constraints. These are observed to operate turn by turn within conversations across diverse occasions, different participants and distinct languages (Boden & Zimmerman, 1991:8). The analysis of conversation is made possible and easier by transcriptions of recorded conversations or interactions (Tannen, 1984:36). This implies that, the analysis of verbal interactions requires a method of written representation (a transcription system). Regular spelling conventions are often not sufficient for representing conversation, although intonation can be partly reproduced using punctuation and stress mark (Renkema, 2004:161). In the transcriptions, words are written as they are pronounced to be analysable



with focus on different conversational styles (Tracy, 2002:86).

Previous Studies

Various scholars have worked on conversation analysis. Among them are; Livingston et al (2000), Bilmes (1997), Cerný (2010), and Zhao (2010). Interruption and overlapping are all form of simultaneous talk during conversation. Livingston et al (2000) did experimental analysis of interruption during conversation for three children who stutter. Their purpose was to analyze the effects of interruption on stuttered speech. Using three participants, a clinician experimenter interrupted the participant's fluent speech or stuttered speech; and simultaneously began speaking with the participant; instructed the participant to interrupt the clinician-experimenter; and finally, controlled the conversation so that there was no interruption. Pre-, post-, and continual base rate measures were collected with both the clinician-experimenter and the participants' mother. The major finding was that only 2 of the 11 (18%) conditions of increased interruption, actually slightly increased any of the three participants' stuttering. The results show that all three participants demonstrated at least one decrease in stuttering with these manipulations. The study relates to the present study with focus on interruption. However, Livingston et al's study varies from the present study because their study was experimental, the participant had speech defect and the study involved only one context, while the present study was not only intercultural but assessed varied contexts.

Cerný (2010)'s research was on interruptions and overlaps in doctor-patient interaction. The study made use of transcribed and annotated medical interviews of selected 50 medical interactions, with the total extent of text amounting to 34,376 words from the *British National Corpus* of 2007. Out of 50 medical encounters, comprising 5525 turns (34,376 words), 290 interruptions was recorded. 168 (58%) instances could be classified as doctor-initiated, 122 (42%) as patient-initiated. 34 (12%) cases belong to the category of neutral interruptions, 199 (68%) interruptions display

relational rapport, 43 (15%) are competitive interruptions, and 14 (5%) interruptions display relational power. The study revealed that both interactants are very active interrupters, with slight dominance on the part of the doctor. This study and the present work studied interruptions made by medical personnel and their patients. However, while Cerný's study focus only on doctor patient interactions, and the data used was retrieved from *British National Corpus*, the present study made use of interaction in five different contexts, and the data was gotten from the researcher herself.

In another study, Zhao (2010) conducted a study focusing on the analysis of gender differences in interruption based on the American TV series *Friends*. The aim of the study was to find out the different conversational styles among male and female speakers, based on the six protagonists in the American TV series *Friends*. The focus of the study was on the phenomenon of interruption, its frequency and function in same-sex conversations compared to mixed-sex conversations. The video materials and transcripts were used for the analysis, to be able to account for every word, and sentence, the gestures, facial expressions, body languages and some other signals which are necessary to identify the interruptions and their functions. The duration of all male conversations, all female conversations and mixed-sex conversations are calculated, as well as all useful numbers of interruptions. There are thirty-one cases of interruptions identified in the nine episodes randomly chosen. The cases are analyzed based on the three functional categories of interruption - competitive, cooperative and neutral. The study shows that men initiate more interruptions than women; men interrupt women more than reverse; both men and women are more inclined to interrupt women and both of them are more inclined to be interrupted by men. The results also show that the interruptions are more initiated between opposite sex speakers than between same-sex speakers. The study further shows that men and women use the equal numbers of competitive interruptions. In the aspect of gender difference in cooperative interruptions, the results



show that men initiate more such cases than women. Power and domination were shown in the findings, but with minimal difference in number because the characters in the study according to the author were friends. This study like the present work studied interruption with focus on same-sex conversations compared to mixed-sex conversations. Zhao (2010) study differs from the present study in that the present study went further in assessing interruption between two groups (Igbo and Sesotho) with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Similar to Zhao (2010) is the study of Chera (2014), who investigates interruptions presented in *Modern Family* Season 1 series using conversation analysis approach. The objectives of the research were to identify the types and functions of interruptions spoken by the characters in the series. The sources of the data were the videos of the six episodes of *Modern Family* Season 1 and their transcript. The data were collected by selecting dialogues conveying interruptions after the author had watched the video and matched the transcript with the video carefully. The results show four types of interruption: simple, overlap, butting-in, and silent interruption. From 57 interruptions found in the chosen series, simple interruption has the biggest number of occurrence. The smallest number of interruption's type is butting-in interruption. The characters seldom do butting-in interruption because they give a chance to the interrupter to deliver his/her message. From the study, there exist three functions of interruption: Cooperative, intrusive, and neutral interruption. Cooperative interruption is divided into agreement, assistance, and clarification, while intrusive interruption consists of disagreement, floor taking, topic change, and tangentialization. The most appeared function is disagreement and the last is clarification. Most of the characters take turns immediately and interrupt to show rejection, contradiction, or disagreement. Clarification only occurs once because the characters understand the speaker's intention most of the time. Chera (2014)'s work was on interruption just like the present study, but focused on the types and functions of

interruptions spoken by the characters in the series. The present study however made use of real life interactions and identify the occurrences of interruptions and the motivations for them.

Nwoye (1998) studied mix gender interactions of participants who are fluent speakers of Igbo and English. The study focused more on gender issues. The data of the study was recorded conversation of two groups (one group are co-workers in a grocery shop, and another group are three professional couples connected as friends and neighbours). The results revealed that Igbo men interrupt women more and at the same time successfully maintain new topics than woman. Nwoye illustrates the dominance of men in interruption with an example, where an attempt by a woman to change a topic was unsuccessful; her attempt was resisted by the man with interruption (Nwoye, 1998:101). Nwoye's work is more close to the present study in that it assessed interruption among Igbo mix gender interactions. However, while Nwoye focus was on only the Igbo (male and female) who were fluent both in Igbo and English, the present study made intercultural assessment of interruption.

The literature reviewed so far indicate that not much has been done in interruption among the Igbo people. More so, none of the reviewed works focused on the Igbo and another language group showing that no scholarly work has been done with focus on this topic to the best of the researcher's knowledge. It is this gap that the present study intends to fill to stimulate further research in other areas of discourse style.

The Methodology

The data for the study was collected through recording of natural interactions in five different contexts: shop, a hospital, and a church, among friends and at a family dinner. The recorded interactions was used to assess the occurrence of interruption and overlapping in the interaction of Igbo and Sesotho people, the gender that interrupt more, as well as the reasons for interruptions. The recordings were fully transcribed and the relevant information are extracted and presented in this paper. According to Tannen (1984:36), transcriptions of recorded interaction or conversation make the data easier to study. The study was conducted in Bloemfontein, South Africa. The



target population of the study was the Igbo and Sesotho people. A total of seventeen (17) people participated in the study (three at the shop, four in the church, four at home, two at the hospital, and four with friends). Ten were female while seven were male. With regards to their age, the participants were between twenty four to forty five years of age, with exception of two children (between the ages of five and eight) who participated in the home interaction.

The research site is Bloemfontein. It is the provincial capital of the Free State, and a home to two tertiary institutions: University of the Free State and Central University of Technology, Free State. Until 1994, the city was the sole Judicial Capital of South Africa. It remains the seat for the Supreme Court of Appeal (formerly the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court) and is, therefore, generally regarded as the Judicial Capital. These institutions attract people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds of South Africa and beyond to Bloemfontein (which include Igbo people).

Data presentation and analysis

The data for the study which were collected through recorded interaction were presented in this section, and the analysis of the data follow.

The results show that the Igbo people interrupt the Sesotho people more than the reverse during communication. For instance, in the church recording¹, a total of 89 interruptions were recorded, with the Igbo participants interrupting 72 times in comparison with 17 times of interruption by the Sesotho participants. But there is need to point out here that while the Igbo man was represented in this context (church), the Sesotho man was not represented.

On the gender that interrupts more, although the gender of the participants is not well represented, the results show that men interrupt women more. Using the church recording as an example, the man (the Igbo) has a total of 45 interruptions in

comparison to 44 interruptions recorded by the three women participants. On who interrupts more among the Igbo and the Sesotho women, the results are a bit tricky. If the church recording is used for assessment, the results show Igbo woman interrupting more, with a total of 27 interruptions in comparison to 17 interruptions by the two Sesotho participants. The reason for the Igbo woman interrupting more than the two Sesotho participants may be attributed to the level of her education (she was a post-graduate student), the first Sesotho lady, referred to as “B”, was an undergraduate student, while the other Sesotho lady, referred to as “D” was a sale’s girl. In addition, the Igbo lady’s exposure to English was more (as English was the only means of communication she used often with different people around her) than those of the Sesotho participants, who use their language (Sesotho, a dominant language in Bloemfontein) on a daily basis and only use English when they meet people who do not share a common language with them.

From the five recordings, it was discovered that the participants rarely interrupt one another during interactions. For example, in the recorded interaction in the hospital context (between the patient and the nurse), the researcher recorded only eight interruptions out of a total of 78 turns. “A”, an Igbo female patient interrupted “B” just twice, while “B”, a Sesotho female nurse interrupted the patient (A) six times. This was probably because the nurse was the authority in that context, and she used her position as a nurse to take charge of the interaction: to make inquiry and to give suggestions and advice. The examples of these interruptions in the hospital context are shown in the extract below (see transcription keys for the symbols used):

¹ Most of our examples are taken from the church recording. This is because, the duration of the recording is longer than other recordings; it has different discourse features explored by this study, and more participants are involved. However, it has its limitation; the Sesotho man is not represented.



Example 1

- A: Am fine ... [hei ...but am not really fine.
B: [Mnh I am sister Hat ... I am sister Hatane mme.
A: [OK.
B: [I work at mutual hour clinic mme

Example 2

- B: Do you have [any other pain?
A: [eh! Not only that one, you know, ... the joints, my ... all my joints. To climb the stair-case ... is difficult for me. I struggle a lot to climb the stair ... steps.
The reasons for interruption vary from one scene to another, and from one person to another. The interruption in example one comes from the nurse who may probably think that they (the nurse and the patient) have not done proper (or enough) introduction of each other before the main business (medical check-up). "A" thinks that "B" has finished her turn and so she wants to take over, meanwhile "B" continues talking, which results in the overlap, but "A" drops-out for "B", probably because of B's position as a nurse and the person in authority. In example 2, another interruption is noticed, this time from "A". Here, the nurse (B), with her position asks the patient if she has other pains apart from the one she has in her chests, but before she finishes the question, the Igbo patient interrupts her. The interruption here shows that the Igbo patient knows what the nurse wants to ask her before the nurse finishes because she is attentive and follows their previous dialogue or what Chera (2014) calls co-operative interruption (specifically assistance).

In the church recording, the interaction starts with a leader of the programme, taking turn to read the daily scripture reading to be discussed afterwards. The discussion has 89 interruptions and 14 overlappings among the participants out of 681 turns. In most cases, before one person finishes his or her turn, another person interrupts. Each of the four participants in the church interaction interrupts at one point or the other. The four people that participated in the Bible studies' rate of interruptions differ. The person that interrupted most was the Igbo man, with a total of 45 interruptions. The reason for interrupting more than other participants could be his role as "co-ordinator", his age (the oldest among the interactants) and probably his gender (male). The motives of the interruption vary: to support the current speaker, to object to the current speaker's opinion, to ask or to answer questions, as well as to give an example on the issue at hand. The extracts below show examples of interruptions that occurred during the church activity:

Example 3

- A: But, tell mm! Just ... tactically understand it. It is very easy to tell a lie, but it is ... very ...very hard not to tell another lie on [top.
C: [Yes, that is what I was saying, that is what I was saying that lies [multiply
A: [Mm, Mm! ... yes that is what I was saying, mm.
C: And, once you tell one lie [you try to tell another one to [cover.
A: [mm! [To cover that [one
B: [And, and another one to cover the former one.
C: So, ee ... when you want to tell a second lie, it is ... easier, it is easier because you, you want to cover that, you can now you know say

Example 4

- C: That ... all the ... miracle ... all the things that Jesus done in this world was not recorded, that these things are record for us to belief.
A: You can never record [everything.
C: [Everything that is [what I'm saying



A: [Is John that went [even further
C: [Yeah ... You cannot record
everything not how he breath, how he slept, how he woke up, how he ate
D: Yeah

Example 5

B: My understanding ... we are ... gods because we are from [God ...

A: [Because that is what

Example 6

A: But, tell mm! Just ... tactically understand it. It is very easy to tell a lie, but it is ... very ... : very hard not to tell another lie on [top.

Am: [Yes, that is what I was saying, [that is what I was saying that lies multiply

A: [Mm, Mm! ... yes that is what I was saying, mm.

C: And, once you tell one lie [you try to tell another one to [cover.

A: [mm! [To cover that [one

B: [And, and another one to cover the former one.

Sometimes, people interrupt a person as is shown in the examples below:

Example 7

B: Whatever you do

D: What you are doing

C: The feature of born again in [you

B: [Mm

A: [Mm

Example 8

C: They don't believe. They know Jesus but they don't believe that Jesus is the son of God [that Jesus is God.

B: [OK

A: [Mm

All the interruptions as observed from the extracts above occurred as the listener either wanted to support the current speaker on the issue at hand; or to complete what the speaker was saying. This shows the cohesion in the interaction as well as the attentiveness of the listeners in responding accordingly. In interaction, if the first part of a saying or a proverb is said by a current speaker, it is expected that the listeners should finish or complete it if s/he is attentive and knows it. In addition, the extracts show that interruptions are not always disruptive; supporting or completing what current speaker is saying or about to say is not meant to be negative, but encouraging the person and showing that s/he has the same opinion with you.

In the recording among friends, the discourse feature identified is more of turn-taking than interruptions. The interactants took their different turns to talk, one at a time. The study recorded only five interruptions from 98 turns in the interactions. The Igbo man interrupted twice, while the Sesotho lady interrupted three times. One of the interruptions noted in the conversation is shown below:

Example 9

A: Now, is gonna² give me problem. I don't want problem here.

B: Bring him is a problem? No, [problem

² Gonna means "going to"

A: No, [is a big problem! When he comes here, he will want this and that.
Then, I don't like that.

From the above extract, it is observed that "A" is telling "B" that bringing her child to the shop is a problem; while "B" is trying to convince her that it is not a problem, but she interrupts, showing how she opposed her child being in the shop. During interaction, especially among friends, the turns at talk and how the participants interrupt are not pre-meditated.

During the conversation in the shop context, the researcher noticed both interruption and overlapping, although, the interruption in this context is minimal, compared to the church recording. The pattern of talk here is that one person speaks at a time. In this context (shop), a total of 39 turns, one interruption and one overlap were recorded. The cases of interruption and overlapping are shown in the example below:

Example 10

B: Charger or [what?

A: [Face face³

B: [Charger?

A: [Face

During the transaction, there seem to be a mutual interaction which was more of turn than interruption between Sesotho lady and the Igbo man. Example 11 shows the only two places in which interruption and overlapping occurred in the short interaction recorded in the shop context.

Interruptions were also recorded during the conversation in the home context. A total of nine interruptions were recorded by different members of the family from 77 turns. Examples of such interruptions are shown in the extracts below:

Example 11

A: The thing ... I ask for the ... that part I didn't understand [(?)

D: [is keeper?

A: For me it was good. The people that sponsor us came...

D: They did?

A: Yes, the people that sponsor us, the people that pay your daddy

D: [Daddy!

A: [They came, look at our work and they were very happy.

Example 12

A: This [is

B: [Eh

A: Design something

B: (?)

A: What you should have done is ...

D: Oh!

A ... by the time they come back, you would have ... because I don't know what, what solvent they use in ... to dissolve it

D: I forgot to wash it [in the school

A: OK [in the water ... for the allowing it (?)

³ "Face" is a part of a cell phone. If the body of the cell phone wears-off, this part is used to replace the original part.

Conclusion

Interruption is not always negative or disruptive according to Coates (1986:99). It is negative if it disrupts the conversation, or when the interrupter is strongly against the opinion of the current speaker and interrupts with aggression. But from the recorded interactions, especially from the church recording, it is evident that interruption is a common discourse feature among the interactants, and most of the interruptions recorded are positive, in the sense that it supported the current speaker's opinion, or and helped to complete the statement of the speaker. The interruptions were not pre-meditated and their frequencies differed from one participant to another and from one context to

another. The way the participants are involved in interruption are not, in any way, peculiar to one group.

As for the gender that interrupts more, the study shows that men interrupt more (that is, Igbo men interrupt Igbo women more, the same was also obtained from Sesotho participants). This confirms the study conducted earlier by Nwoye (1998). In intercultural discourse, where one group's gender interrupts more than the other group's gender, effective communication between the people involved might be affected, especially when the two groups involved are in inter-marriage. Lastly, the study reveals that the issue of dominance in interaction cannot be attributed to any group or gender.

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Appendix: Key to transcription conventions

[Bracket connecting lines show overlapping or interruption speech. Two people [talking at the same time. Taking over speech when the speaker has not finished.

... Pause

(.....) Silence

[?] Indicates transcription impossible, or inaudible segment

/word(s)/ within slashes indicates uncertain transcription

Word(s) underline indicates emphatic stress.

CAPS mark very emphatic stress

.Marks sentence final falling intonation (end of the sentence)

, Marks phrase-final intonation (more to come)

? Yes/No question, rising intonation

(brackets) words in brackets are used for comments on quality of speech and context.

!Marks high pitch on word

! Marks low pitch on word

“ ” quotation opens and closes.