

Turn-taking: Early planning & Late cues

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Conversation is the most important ecological niche for language use. Whereas conversation is indeed the focus of a large part of observational (e.g., CA) and corpus research, experimental studies of language have so far stayed rather far away from it. Apart from complicating generalization of the results to real life language use, this situation moreover has led to the neglect of truly conversational topics, such as turn-taking. Interlocutors in conversation take turns at an amazing speed (with ~200 ms gaps), considering estimates of the much longer time needed for speech planning (> 600 ms). In the last years, I have tried to unravel this psycholinguistic puzzle, using different experimental approaches (e.g., reaction time and EEG studies). In a first series of experiments, I have shown that listeners appear to start planning their response to ongoing questions as soon as they have enough information. However, those listeners that focus on response planning, and can give a quick response, appear to pay less attention to the end of the ongoing turn, whereas late responders show no effect on comprehension. A second series of experiments showed that the fact that interlocutors can respond exactly on time cannot be solely due to long-range (lexical) prediction, but that it also crucially depends on late, mostly prosodic, cues in the ongoing question. In all, these results support a model in which listeners start planning their response early during the previous turn, but rely on late (prosodic) cues to deliver that response on time.