

# An Analysis of Interruption in an Interview from the Perspective of Conversation Analysis

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**Abstract**—As a very natural and common language phenomenon, conversation interruption appears to disrupt the complete turn-taking structure. However, the use of interruption can also promote the smooth progress of conversations in some special conversation situations. This paper is aimed to analyze the interruption modes adopted by the host in an interview, and ultimately summarize the interruption strategies applied in the interview based on conversation analysis to explore turn design and sequential organization. The corpus of this paper is from a well-known CNN interview program *Larry King Special* on March 28, 2000. The 40 minutes and 35 seconds interview video was transcribed into a total of 525 turns and 32 interruptions. The analysis indicates that the interruption modes adopted by the host are inquiry, assistance, guidance, and dominance, and the interruption strategies applied in the interview are assuasive, direct, and reminder interruption, and also proper timing. In addition, through this study, it is expected to contribute from a linguistic perspective to effectively enhancing the effectiveness of such interview programs.

**Keywords**—conversation analysis, interruption modes, interruption strategies

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, the emergence of conversation analysis has exerted great influence on the understanding of everyday utterance by people who ever believed it to be disorderly. As a main focus of study in the field of linguistics, sociology and psychology, interruption has caught the attention of some scholars who have presented different understandings on interruption. In the past few years, the study of conversation interruption has broadened the horizon of people's understanding of conversation and its structure [1]. However, there are still some problems, such as less research on interruption in institutional discourse like interviews, and few analyses on different kinds of interruption patterns and strategies. The article is based on a real corpus, and the reason why it is chosen can be explained as there is no pause or accident.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. History of Conversation Analysis

In the 1960s, the emergence of Conversational Analysis broke the traditional understanding of everyday language, which was believed to be disorderly and unable to conduct academic research. There are three scholars who have had a significant impact on the formation of conversation analysis theory—Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Goffman Goffman. Currently, it is understood that conversations can also be negotiations, court speeches, doctor-patient

communication, and so on. According to Drew and Heritage [2], the institutional nature of conversation is not determined by the context in which the conversation takes place. Dai [3] proposed that the ethnic methodology scholar Sacks first utilized telephone recordings from the Los Angeles Suicide Research Center. It can also be applied to recreational conversation like interviews.

### B. Research on Conversation Interruption

Schegloff first proposed the definition of interruption and distinguished between interruption and overlap based on the location of turn breaking [4]. Famous American sociologists Zimmerman and West [5] first began to systematically study the phenomenon of interruption. They defined interruption as a behavior of interrupting the current speaker's turn without following the turn replacement rule, disrupting the current speaker's construction of the conversation topic. This definition was borrowed and developed by most scholars later on. Coates [6] defines interruption as an act that while one did not stop talking or finish their turn, another begins to talk. Kollock *et al.* [7] argue that interruption is the act of starting to speak before the end of another person's turn. Further expand the research corpus through interviews. Murata [8] ever divided conversation interruptions into cooperative interruptions and intrusive interruptions, and according to their different functions, intrusive interruptions were subdivided into topic switching, floor taking, and disagreement. Cooperative interruptions were divided into assistance, identification, and clarification.

## III. MODES AND PURPOSES OF INTERRUPTION

The corpus in this article is derived from an interview on CNN's *Larry King Live*. The interviewer takes advantage of his own interruption strategies to achieve good effects, that is, to make the whole interview march forward successfully. By watching the video several times, the author records the clips when the interviewer interrupts the interviewee to accomplish some purpose. Based on the transcription rules postulated by Gail Jefferson in 1978 [9], according to the feature of this interview, the detailed marks are as follows.

"=" means continuous utterance. "[]" means the place where the overlap begins. "]" means the place where the overlap ends. "(.)" means the seconds for pausing. "(O)" means the transcriber's inability to hear what was said, and the length of the parenthesized space indicates the length of the untranscribed talk. "... " means ellipsis.

### A. Modes of Interruption

From the point of function, Murata divided interruption

into cooperative interruption and intrusive interruption, and the former can be subdivided into assistance, agreement and clarification, and the latter can be subdivided into topic-change, floor-taking and disagreement. By observing the video and taking the features of it into consideration, more than half of the interruptions in this interview belong to the cooperative type which can be sub-classified into more detailed ones, namely, inquiry, assistance, and guidance. The rest can be labeled as dominance that is inclined to be intrusive.

1) Inquiry

To be more precise, here, inquiry is referred to another question that is presented by the interviewer on the basis of the current answer from the interviewee, and it should be relevant to the last question. For example (1):

Depp: ...=it's like a=[it's just]

Larry: =[What do they] get out of it? I mean, they take your picture=...

Depp: =And it's not any different than the year before, [or the year before that]

2) Assistance

Assistance is defined as a complement or repair by the interviewer to help the interviewee make it more precise. This kind of interruption is a verbal tool to make the answer more easily understood by the audience and to avoid some unnecessary misunderstanding. For example (2):

Depp: ...You know to the point where Disney wanted to...wanted to fire [me]

Larry: =[They]wanted to fire you from "Pirates"?

Depp: =Yes....

3) Guidance

Guidance means the host interrupts the interviewee to present a question to guide him to talk about something about the topic, that is, to help him give a meaningful or more important answer. For example (3):

Depp: ...you know, [just to me]

Larry: =[Would you] rather have been a musician?

(.)

Depp: =In retrospect, no....

4) Dominance

Throughout the interview, it is not difficult to find the attitude of the host is kind and friendly. Dominance refers to forcefully take the floor before the current speaker finishes his turn-taking. For example (4):

Depp: ...And I was hungry enough to keep running. And I'm still running. So, [Ah]

Larry: =[Now] what do you think makes you good at what you do?

To sum up, through the whole interview, the number of interruptions can be calculated according to different modes. The result will be shown in the chart below (Table 1).

Table 1. Modes of interruption

| Mode   | Inquiry | Assistance | Guidance | Dominance |
|--------|---------|------------|----------|-----------|
| Number | 9       | 12         | 8        | 3         |

B. Purposes of Interruption

Li and Fan [9] claims that in the conversational interaction,

the speaker's purpose is reflected and realized by their speech act. Each speech act such as each interruption in the interview indicates a different target. Obviously, in the interview, each interruption is attached to a certain purpose, that is the effect that the host wants to make.

1) Inquiry

As a kind of cooperative interruption, inquiry is the second most used in this interview and it happens nine times. The example below is taken from the video at 20:27, for the topic here maybe sensitive and the interviewee stutters.

Example (5):

Larry: =Shelved it?

Depp: =Yeah, I didn't shelve it. I don't want to( )my right. And I just though, you know what? I mean, what's the point? You [know.]

Larry: =[Might] you release it?

Depp: =Yes, maybe. I tell you why. For one reason only....

In this clip, the gambit goes to something sensitive and unhappy. The interviewee states that he is insulted by some of the press and he thinks it is ridiculous and unreasonable.

2) Assistance

Assistance, as the name suggests, is referred to as help from the interviewer to complement and repair the present answer of the interviewee. The example is taken from the interview at 27:24, for it is clear here that the interviewer does not directly ask questions. Example (6):

Depp: =Yes. There is a part of me.=

(.)

=There is a part of me that wants to do it, [you know. I'm]

Larry: =[I mean] to have the audience and get the reaction.

In this clip, the interview goes to another topic—theater. As an actor, the interviewee seldom performs in front of the audience and acquires direct reaction, and obviously he wants to try it.

3) Guidance

Guidance is another typical type of cooperative interruption, and it appears eight times in the interview. It should be noticed that the host keeps a good balance of it, this dialogue is at 29:03, here the interviewee is relaxed and can not helping talking jokes. The host needs to interrupt him to bring him back to the topic. Example (7):

Depp: =you know, before I'm too long in the tooth to play Hamlet. [It's just]

Larry: =[Have you felt down?]

Depp: =Have I? Yeah....

In this part, the interviewee states his experience that one of his old friends persuaded him to star in Hamlet, and he expresses his ambition to have it done with badinage.

4) Dominance

As a kind of rare interruption in this interview, dominance appears three times in the first half of the video, and almost in the beginning of the interview. Critical linguistics stresses the power of speech. This clip is at 21:28. Here the host may want to calm the interviewee down and forcefully take the turn to prompt the interviewee to talk about his close friend.

Example (8):

Depp: =Yes, very much...And that's where we got

very(.)we got close doing “Don Juan”, [and I]

Larry: =[WHAT]did he do that others in the perform.=

Here, it should be noticed that by observing the video, the last topic is not relaxing, and the interviewee stresses his angry and also his friendship with his friend, so the host firstly mentions a movie which both of the star and his friend starred in.

#### IV. INTERRUPTION STRATEGIES

This part will particularly analyze interruption effects and strategies on the basis of the calculation of the success rate. Li and Fan [9] claim that the standard to judge the success rate is that once the interviewer succeeds in interrupting for the first time, it can be regarded as a successful interruption. By observing the whole video, there are totally thirty-two times of interruption, but three failures. The chart below (Table 2) can help analyze the interruption effects and conclude the strategies used by the host [10].

Table 2. Success rate

| Strategies   | Assuasive | Direct | Remindful |
|--------------|-----------|--------|-----------|
| Number       | 8         | 16     | 8         |
| Success Rate | 100%      | 93.75% | 75%       |

##### A. Assuasive

From the chart above, the most used ways of interruption are assuasive, direct and reminder interruption. In terms of success rate, assuasive interruption is the highest and it reaches 100%, for it is the kindest and the most friendly way to provide a comfortable vibe for the interviewee. As a result, it is more like a daily chat between friends. Example (9):

Larry: ...when you get very well known is they're observing you=

Depp: That becomes the [problem]

Larry: [You can't]=

(.)

=you're not observing them really...

In this example, the topic being discussed is a little bit aggressive or sensitive. It's about the bombardment of paparazzi, which makes Depp angry and wants to complain about this problem, which disturbs him a lot.

##### B. Direct

Then there is the direct interruption, which is 93.75%. After all, it is an interview, so the host should accomplish his prepared seventy-eights questions, though the quality of it is entertainment, not politics. Example (10):

Depp: ...that was 1984?

(.) Three or [four, or]

Larry: [Did you] like it right away?

In this example, it is easy to find that the interviewee may deviate and tend to say something that has nothing to do with himself, so the host interrupts him directly to ask about his feeling for the main idea of this interview is about him. Direct interruption here can help pull back the topic.

##### C. Remindful

The third one is remindful interruption, which is the lowest—75%. The host uses this strategy to keep the high quality of the current answer of the interviewee and the

length of the turn. It is also used to control and coordinate the switch of the role and the content and process of each procedure. In this interview, the host often creates some interruptions to remind the interviewee of something based on what has been mentioned before. Example (11):

Depp: ...He's monu[mental]

Larry: [He said] you're nuts...

In this example, it can be found that this kind of interruption strategy may help create a good vibe for communication. In a way, it can help erase the nervousness of the interviewee.

##### D. Proper Timing

By observing different kinds of interviews, it can be found that sometimes the timing the host chooses to interrupt is close to the “Transition Relevance Place” (TRP for short) [11], which is referred to as the place at the end of a turn at which the switch of the turn is possible, while sometimes it is further from the TRP. In this interview, the host tends to interrupt when it gets close to TRP. Example (12):

Larry: =Are you going to do more?

(.) hh

Depp: =You know, it depends. [It is]

Larry: =[DOES] it ever become maybe too much?

Depp: =Not yet...

Here the last topic is about one movie which becomes a great success for the interview, and the question here is what does the interviewee think about making more series.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis on an interview from CNN, it is found that the tempo direction, and length of each procedure are of significant importance for the efficiency of such an interview. This article concludes the patterns and specific purpose of each interruption, the calculation of interruption and its success rate, and also the strategies applied by the host to make it a success. It is hoped that through this article, the content above can become a reference to help the host take advantage of different interruption patterns and witty interruption methods to take control of an interview and to adjust topics, questions, and even the answers of the interviewee. Moreover, there are still some downsides in this article. Firstly, the chosen corpus is restricted to just one type of interview and is absolutely deficient, so more corpora are needed to make the results of the study secure and convincing—interruption is a good verbal tool. Secondly, due to the limitation of the corpus, this article focuses on four types of interruption patterns and three ways of interruption, which are restricted.

##### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

##### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yi Zhang supervised and instructed the whole research; Yueqi Ma conducted the research and wrote the paper; both authors had approved the final version.

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