

## TURN-TAKING STRATEGIES IN INTERNET CHATROOMS

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### Abstract

The language of the Internet Relay Chat (further IRC), which means instant synchronous conversation on the Internet, attracts attention of linguists thanks to its world-wide usage and massive development. The article briefly evaluates and discusses the language of this media from the point of view of turn-taking strategies. A major concern is how chat participants use the language that is determined by specific conditions of an Internet chatroom. These conditions are anonymity, exclusively text-based interaction and the absence of audio-visual cues. A model of turn-taking in a spoken conversation is used and applied to the Internet chatting. Various strategies are investigated and compared, qualitative and quantitative analyses are carried out to determine the relationship between individual turn-taking strategies. In conclusion, the findings with respect to the distinctive character of the medium are summarized.

### Keywords

IRC; Conversation analysis; Turn-taking strategies; Corpus; Turn; Internet chatroom.

### Introduction

The analysis draws on models of turn-allocation developed by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson [1]. It suggests three strategies for change of speaker turns in face-to-face conversation. In the case of turn-taking on IRC, specific features appear to govern its system. The preferred turn-taking strategies are discussed and investigations including quantitative and qualitative analyses are made. At the same time, some approaches to examine turn-taking in computer-mediated conversations are considered and compared, for example McKinlay et al. [2]; Cherny [3]; Herring [4], [5]; Greenfield, P.M. et al. [6] and Lunsford [9].

### 1 Research Objectives

This work evaluates and analyses with the help of conversation analysis how chat participants use the language that is determined by the specific conditions of an Internet chat room. The specific conditions are anonymity, exclusively text-based interaction, the absence of visual and audio cues. The IRC conversation is achieved through a series of turns. The question arises as to how and where the turns usually occur in this particular environment. A model applied to face-to-face conversation is used in the corpus and various strategies are investigated and compared. The following research question is defined: *How do specific conditions on Internet Relay Chat affect conversation techniques and strategies in this medium?* It is supposed that turn-taking mechanisms will be infringed by numerous overlaps and chat participants will have to make a big effort to keep the conversation flow running within reasonable limits and clarity. Due to the absence of audio-visual cues, it is further assumed that everyone is in principle free to self-select and so the chat room will have more

self-selecting conversational floors (Strategies B and C further explained in the article) than face-to-face communication.

## **2 Research Methodology**

The following research methods were proved to be the most functional for this work:

*Qualitative:* In the qualitative phase, the corpus was used in order to explore what methods of conversation and interactional relationships look like among chat participants.

*Quantitative:* In the quantitative phase, focus groups were used to identify how frequent, or what percentage of occurrences is attributed to each phenomenon under investigation.

In order to conduct research in the field of IRC, a considerable database of Internet chatting taken from public chatrooms had to be collected. The most useful website for this purpose appeared to be [www.hotmail.com](http://www.hotmail.com). The flow of conversation was not interrupted anyhow. The main aim was to capture the speech situation in the chat room as naturally as possible. Overall, the analysis was conducted on a corpus containing 793 IRC messages, which appears to be an adequate amount for the research when compared to other surveys [5], [6] and [7]. Individual messages in the corpus are numbered for a better orientation.

## **3 Theoretical Framework**

In this part the review of literature and theories relevant to turn-taking strategies on IRC are briefly introduced.

### **3.1 Turn-Taking on IRC**

Three turn-allocation strategies adapted from the Sacks et al. [1] model and Panyametheekul and Herring's [7] classification were used to position each turn in the structure of conversation. The current speaker may use names, gaze or gestures to select the next speaker (*Strategy A*). Speakers may select themselves (*Strategy B*). In case no one self-selects, then the current speaker may continue speaking (*Strategy C*). This model is characterized as 'locally managed, party-administered, interactionally controlled, and sensitive to recipient design' Sacks et al. [1], where strategy A is preferred over B and strategy B over C.

The definition of a message and a turn in IRC context must be given here. The message might be instantly communicated written information sent by one participant of a chat room and delimited by the moment when it is conveyed to the monitors of other chat participants. The turn in the IRC sense refers to all the information that senders intended to send as a whole unit but were not able to because their flow was interrupted by other received messages or they were intentionally divided, usually for an emphasis. One turn usually equals one message.

In the case of turn-taking on IRC, specific features seem to govern its system. The absence of verbal cues and text-only communication are one of the reasons for disrupted adjacency, a situation where juxtaposed turns are not related to each other in meaning. Instead, they usually appear in a strict linear order, which results in incomplete or interleaved exchange sequences, Herring [4]. All IRC participants are, in fact, free to self-select and turns are placed "democratically" in the order received by the system, Panyametheekul, Herring [7]. Hence, especially in larger groups the assumption is that there can be a competition, McKinlay et al. [2] and Cherny [3], for the next turn, and in this case participants could show a tendency towards selecting strategies B and C. Sometimes, it occurs, for example, that the answer to the question appears before the question itself, or a response to saying good-bye appears after the person already left the chatroom as will be shown later.

Herring [5] points out that synchronous messages may contain less than a turn, when a sender has more to say than fits in a single message or for an emphasis and continues his or her turn in an immediately following message as in Example 1 from the corpus:

**Example 1**

634. LINDSAY: *awww*

635. LINDSAY: *but makeup is fun*

636. LINDSAY: *and sellin it is even more fun*

In addition to the above strategies, Cherny [3] emphasizes the use of the third person present tense describing actions to stimulate other participants to take the conversation floor. This phenomenon called ‘non-verbal action displays’, Werry [8], is plausible only in text-based Internet media. Six instances were found in the corpus. Here are some of them: 274. ‘SpecialEd kicks the edge of the room’, 751. ‘Lindsay screams’.

## 4 Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Turn-Taking Strategies on IRC

### 4.1 Qualitative Analysis

In this chapter, individual turn-taking strategies adopted by Sacks et al. [1] will be shortly introduced and the examples from the IRC corpus will be given.

#### 4.1.1 Strategy A: The Current Speaker Selects the Next Speaker

This technique is the one most employed in a spoken conversation. The aim of this analysis is to show what methods IRC participants use to start conversation in a chatroom. In Example 2 chat participants use the affiliation of an address term, which means a nickname or a collective noun, term of endearment and other addressing techniques. The relevant linguistic structures are underlined and interpretative commentary is placed next to it.

**Example 2**

308. *watcher\_of\_souls: hello to all (general address)*

309. *heartbroken has LEFT the conversation.*

310. *james6: hello watcher (nickname)*

It is also common not to use any addressing, however clearly directing the utterance to a particular person or a group. This technique is more challenging from the point of view of attention-paying and coherence maintaining on IRC. Non-addressed initial questions, such as “How are you?” are also included (Example 3, lines 514 and 515) together with a rather impolite response in line 516 to demonstrate what an anonymous environment of a chatroom allows participants to write.

**Example 3**

514. *blueeyez : hey room whats up (initial opening question)*

515. *blueeyez : how is everyone (initial opening question)*

516. *SpecialED : everyone is suck go away (impolite reply)*

A final technique that will be mentioned here is greeting when opening or closing conversation on IRC. It is believed that opening and closing greetings on IRC are not really *the current-speaker-self-selects-next-speaker* technique in the real sense of the word and oscillate between this technique and *speaker-self-selects* strategies. A noteworthy phenomenon of a delayed reply to a closing discussed in Chapter 3.1 can be found in the corpus, Example 4. The second pair part of saying good-bye appeared on the screen just after the chat participant woogywoogywoo left the conversation, lines 56 and 57.

#### **Example 4**

- 49. *woogywoogywoo : I'm going to leave you bitches now*
- 50. *Belle: everybody needs a booty call*
- 51. *FatalisticHomeRun : airborne booty call*
- 52. *Belle: lol*
- 53. *Im Trendy : bye woogy woogy woo*
- 54. *FatalisticHomeRun : bye bye*
- 55. *volkswagenracing: ciao*
- 56. *woogywoogywoo has LEFT the conversation.*
- 57. *Belle: bye woogy gooer*

#### **4.1.2 Strategy B: The Next Speaker Self-Selects**

This strategy is supposed to be the second most used turn-taking strategy in face-to-face conversation and also on IRC. Two possibilities how chat participants employ this strategy in chatrooms were observed. The first is “jumping in” and joining a conversation in a relevant way as in Example 5.

#### **Example 5**

- 308. *watcher\_of\_souls : hello to all*
- 309. *heartbroken has LEFT the conversation.*
- 310. *james6 : hello watcher*
- 311. *LINDSAY : i know how*
- 312. *watcher\_of\_souls : so.....what have i missed ???*
- 313. *james6 : trust me,nothing*

...

Another method how to self-select is to change the topic and initiate a new conversation. This strategy mainly includes contact advertisements as in Example 6. They are similar to newspaper advertisements. They are a typical feature of IRC and are hard to imagine in face-to-face conversation or on the phone. These types of contact advertisements were distinguished in the corpus:

1. Looking for people of the same nationality or from the same town or region;
2. On-line dating or soul mates, as it is sometimes called; they are similar to newspaper advertisements, “lonely hearts” columns.

#### **Example 6**

- 290. *Hart9779 : Hi room, any females around Norfolk, VA????*
- 292. *james6 : lots of females around norfolk virginia*

Other ways how to self-select is to use pre-closing sequences and interrogatives such as opening phrases, in many cases without any question mark, or with multiple question marks. On IRC the topic may change rapidly, though, without the help of any of the above mentioned forms. Moreover, sometimes there is no topic at all and the discourse constitutes only messages without any coherence. Some of them are possibly and unsuccessfully trying to develop another topic and are similar to “shout-outs”.

#### **4.1.3 Strategy C: The Current Speaker Continues Speaking**

Two methods how to continue in conversation were observed in the corpus. Participants either continue speaking so that their turns appear adjacent and divide one turn into more messages as in Example 1, Chapter 3.1, or they stop contributing to a further conversation. This can be for various reasons, for example technical or personal. The use of external legitimizers is also quite frequent, such as “brb” and “bb” (be right back, be back). However, in majority of cases

in the corpus chat participants do not inform others that they are leaving and will come back, they just join or leave a chatroom.

Before any further analysis is made, it is essential to highlight the fact that individual strategies may in some cases co-occur, that means Strategy A can simultaneously work with either Strategy B or C. Thus, when self-selecting or continuing to take a turn, a participant may select the next speaker as well. This is to stress that one turn can serve multiple turn-allocation strategies. The quantitative analysis of turn-taking conducted in this work takes this fact into account.

## 4.2 Quantitative Analysis

This chapter supplies brief quantitative analysis of turn-allocation strategies in the corpus with regards to the research question set in Chapter 1. From a mere look at Table 1, it is worth noting that contrary to the assumption, Strategy A, current speaker selects the next speaker, appears to be the most used and dominant strategy, 70.5%. It is then followed by Strategy C, current speaker continues speaking, 19%, and Strategy B, next speaker self-selects with an occurrence of 7.5%.

Table 1 also indicates a very apparent tendency towards the methods utilized in spoken conversation. This condition is the most similar to the circumstances in face-to-face conversation and seems to prove that chat participants probably unconsciously bring into IRC the elements of spoken conversation.

*Tab. 1: Turn-allocation strategies on IRC in the corpus and their frequency in %*

Strategy	Corpus	%
<b>A. Current speaker selects the next speaker</b>		
1. by addressing a particular person or a group	34	
2. unaddressed but clearly directed to a person or people	314	
3.greeting (opening and closing)	36	
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>70.5</b>
<b>B. The next speaker self-selects</b>		
1. interrupting current conversation in a relevant way	19	
2. interrupting current conversation in an irrelevant way (see failures, unclear turns)	-	
3. changing the topic or initiating new conversation	21	
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>7.5</b>
<b>C. Current speaker continues speaking</b>		
1. immediately	79	
2. after a pause	27	
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>19.0</b>
<b>D. Failures (unclear turns)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>3.0</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>545</b>	

Source: Own

Overall high numbers in Strategy A2 (N = 314) together with little occurrence of address forms may prove that IRC participants mastered coordinated performance in IRC conversation without the help of audio-visual cues. It seems that participants know each other from a previous interaction, or even from a personal contact. Messages usually equal one turn; sometimes it is divided into two messages. The coherence of the text is maintained, though.

Despite the fact that the data of Strategy C indicate that it is the second most used method of turn-allocation, they are also the most problematic to tackle. On IRC the current speaker

continues speaking immediately (N = 79) for various reasons that include technical abilities of a computer, the speed of writing, the number of participants currently chatting, the topic being discussed. Chat participants also try various ways how to initiate a new conversation, provoke or just send peculiar messages.

## Conclusion

The analysis revealed that Strategy A, *current speaker selects the next speaker*, (N = 384, 70.5%) is the most used turn-taking technique on IRC. Strategies B and C, despite the previous assumption, the so called free-for-all condition, do not seem to bear such importance in IRC turn-taking. Strategy C is the second most used strategy even if the occurrence rate is rather low compared to Strategy A. At the same time, the low occurrence rate of Strategy C might be caused by a disrupted adjacency when a participant continues speaking and for a better and clearer conversation flow divides the turn into shorter messages which are often disrupted by other unrelated messages. Strategy B, *the next speaker self-selects*, is the least used with a mere 7.5% of occurrence rate. Apart from the use of turn-taking strategies, other significant features of IRC turn-allocation were noted in the corpus. The results have shown that with a larger group, IRC participants tend to subdivide into smaller discussion groups, at least three members and more, whose membership changed spontaneously. It was also confirmed that using forms of address is the best way to avoid, or at least limit, misunderstanding and a lack of feedback.

Finally, there is no doubt that a more detailed study must be done on other issues such as determining strategies of face-threatening acts, negative and positive politeness, repair work or floor-holding that have not been stressed in this article.

## Literature

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## STRATEGIE STŘÍDÁNÍ REPLIK MLUVČÍCH PŘI CHATOVÁNÍ NA INTERNETU

Jazyk internetového chatování, což znamená bezprostřední synchronní psaná komunikace na internetu, přitahuje pozornost lingvistů díky svému celosvětovému využití a masivnímu vývoji. Tento článek stručně hodnotí a analyzuje jazyk tohoto média z hlediska strategií střídání replik mluvčích. Hlavním problémem je to, jak účastníci chatu používají jazyk, který je určen specifickými podmínkami internetové místnosti chatu. Tyto podmínky zahrnují anonymitu, výlučně textovou interakci a absenci audiovizuálních podnětů. Při analýze je použit model střídání replik v mluvené konverzaci, Sacks a Schegloff, a aplikuje se na chatování na internetu. Různé strategie jsou zkoumány a porovnávány, provádějí se kvalitativní a kvantitativní analýzy, aby se určil vztah mezi jednotlivými strategiemi. Závěrem jsou shrnuty závěry s ohledem na charakteristické vlastnosti tohoto média.

## SPRECHERWECHSELSTRATEGIES IN CHATRÄUMEN

Die Sprache des „Internet-Plauschdienste“ alias Internet Relay Chat, im Weiteren kurz IRC genannt, welcher eine zur selben Zeit verlaufende Konversation im Internet bezeichnet, zieht Auf Grund des weltweiten Gebrauchs und dessen massiver Entwicklung auch die Aufmerksamkeit der Linguisten auf sich. Dieser Artikel bewertet und diskutiert die Sprache dieser Medien im Hinblick auf die Strategien des Sprechertauschs. Eine besondere Beachtung gilt der Frage, wie die Teilnehmer diese Sprache verwenden, welche durch ganz spezifische Chatroom-Bedingungen determiniert ist. Diese Bedingungen bestehen in Anonymität, ausschließlich textueller Interaktion sowie im Fehlen von Audio- und Videoverweisen. Ein Modell des Sprecherwechsels in einer gesprochenen Konversation wird im Internetchatten angewendet. Es werden verschiedene Strategien betrachtet und verglichen. Es werden qualitative und quantitative Analysen zur Determinierung der Beziehung zwischen individuellen Sprecherwechselstrategien durchgeführt. Die Zusammenfassung berücksichtigt die im Hinblick auf den distinktiven Charakter dieses Mediums erstellten Ergebnisse.

## STRATEGIE WYMIANY REPLIK POMIĘDZY UCZESTNIKAMI CZATU INTERNETOWEGO

Język czatowy czyli Internet Relay Chat, w skrócie IRC, który oznacza konwersacje w internecie przebiegające w tym samym czasie, zaczyna coraz bardziej interesować językoznawców głównie ze względu na jego globalny zakres stosowania oraz silny rozwój. W niniejszym artykule ocenie i analizie poddano język tych mediów z punktu widzenia strategii wymiany replik pomiędzy uczestnikami czatu. Szczególną kwestią jest to, jak rozmówcy korzystają z języka, który jest zdeterminowany przez specyficzne warunki chatroomu. Owe warunki obejmują anonimowość, wyłącznie tekstową interakcję oraz brak bodźców audiowizualnych. W ramach analizy zastosowano model wymiany replik w konwersacji mówionej, Sacks i Schegloff, który odniesiono do czatu internetowego. W celu określenia zależności pomiędzy poszczególnymi strategiami zbadano i porównano różne strategie oraz przeprowadzono analizy jakościowe oraz ilościowe. W podsumowaniu przedstawiono wnioski uwzględniające specyficzne cechy tego medium.