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Everyday Talk
Building and Reflecting Identities

KAREN TRACY

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Interaction Structures

In the vice presidential debate that occurred as part of the 1992 U.S. presidential election a new interaction format was tried. In response to citizen complaints that political debates were nothing more than displays of canned positions that did not require candidates to think on their feet and deal with the other candidates, the vice presidential debate was redesigned to involve back-and-forth exchanges. Rather than consisting of a panel of reporters who posed a question to a candidate, who then gave a timed answer, the debate format would have a single moderator who posed questions, with multiple opportunities for free-flowing discussion among the candidates. This new format posed significant challenges to the candidates. As communication researcher Beck noted, the candidates now were responsible for "obtaining and maintaining control of the floor during the open discussion while simultaneously appearing to be 'assertive' but not 'rude' or 'indifferent' as behooves a vice presidential contender."¹

In this context the stakes were high: citizen judgments about each man's interactional and personal identities ("Is this man going to be a good vice president?"; "Is he assertive or is he rude?") mattered, both for the candidates and for the voting public. Although vice presidential debates are events few individuals face, controlling the conversational floor—the place and space for talk—in an appropriate manner is a task everybody must manage. In ordinary conversations with friends, as well as in the routine exchanges at work and during public meetings, the way a person handles the structures of interaction affects whether she is seen to be shy and insecure, overbearing, rude, self-absorbed, or poised and competent (i.e., appropriately assertive and appropriately other-responsive).

What are the structures of interaction? How do they operate? How do they connect with the identities communicators both desire and wish
to avoid? I begin this chapter by describing adjacency pairs, a main format in which talk is sequenced. Then I provide an overview of the turn-taking system in which I make visible how people’s use of the turn system contributes to positive and negative identity assessments. In the next section I take a close look at talk in two institutional settings and examine the remedial interchange, a much-used sequence to manage relational trouble. I conclude this chapter by identifying several important ways that speech communities do interaction structuring differently.

**ADJACENCY PAIRS**

Talk involves more than people performing random acts. We, as talkers, have strong expectation that certain kinds of speech acts will be followed by selected others. A greeting (e.g., “Hi,” “How ya doing?”), for instance, will usually be followed by a second greeting. That pairs of acts are usually found together is part of the meaning of **adjacency pair**, a concept developed by Schegloff and Sacks to explain the orderliness of conversation. There are many kinds of adjacency pairs. Some pairs involve similar acts, as is the case with greetings or goodbyes, while others involve different acts. Examples of pairs that involve different actions include invitations or offers, followed by acceptances (or refusals), and questions followed by answers. Example 7.1 offers an instance of a common adjacency pair that might occur between coworkers.

Example 7.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARYN: How bout some lunch?</th>
<th>Invitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JAY: Sounds good. ((stands up))</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Example 7.1, then, the invitation is the first part of a pair, or first pair part, and the acceptance is the second pair part. Equally possible as a second pair part to an invitation is a refusal, shown in Example 7.2.

Example 7.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARYN: How bout some lunch?</th>
<th>Invitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JAY: (pause) Uhh, better not. I’ve got to get this done by 2:00. Thanks though. How’s tomorrow?</td>
<td>Refusal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adjacency pairs may be expanded in two ways. If a speaker were going to request borrowing a piece of equipment, for instance, a logical prerequisite would be that the requestee actually has the equipment. For a lunch invitation, it is most reasonable to make one if the person being invited has not already eaten. For this reason, communicators often do a **presequence**, an adjacency pair (usually in question-answer format) whose purpose is to determine if the conditions are reasonable for the focal first pair part. Example 7.3 illustrates such a presequence.

Example 7.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARYN: You eaten yet?</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JAY: No.</td>
<td>Answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TARYN: How bout some lunch?</td>
<td>Invitation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because presequences are recognizable structures that point to a next act pair, communicators can, if they wish, jump the gun and respond to what they assume is coming next. In response to Taryn saying, “You eaten yet?”, Jay may shake his head no, stand up, and say, “Where do you want to go?” Or he might respond, “Sorry, I have to finish this report by 2:00.”

A second way adjacency pairs may be expanded is through **insertion sequences**. Similar to presequences, insertion sequences involve an inserted adjacency pair to determine if some condition applies that would make the conversationally preferred option possible. Consider Example 7.4 to see how this applied to our invitation example.

Example 7.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARYN: How bout some lunch?</th>
<th>Invitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JAY: You got $5 to lend me?</td>
<td>Request</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TARYN: Yeah.</td>
<td>Grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAY: Sounds good.</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The notion of adjacency pairs is not merely describing the most usual sequences. It is possible for questions not to be followed by answers, greetings by greetings, and so on. However, if an expected second pair part is
not forthcoming, it will be noticeably absent—and communicators will give social meaning to its absence. The absence of a second greeting or goodbye, for instance, is often taken to mean that the greeted party is feeling irritated or mad unless the greeter decides that the absence is a sign of the greeted party’s preoccupation. In other words, one conversational practice used to enact the identity I’m a person who’s mad at you right now! is to refrain from doing a speech act where it would be expected.

### Conversational Preference

A related concept that has the potential to generate powerful inferences is known as **conversational preference**.\(^3\) Conversational preference refers to the structurally preferred second act for adjacency pairs that may take one of two forms. For instance, statements prefer agreement,\(^4\) and following an offer, an invitation, or a request, accepts are conversationally preferred to refusals. To describe an act as “conversationally preferred” is to say that it can be done straightforwardly and simply; in contrast, a nonpreferred act is always longer, more conversationally marked, and elaborated. Consider, for example, the difference between Jay’s acceptance of Taryn’s invitation to lunch (Example 7.1) and his refusal (Example 7.2). Of note is that Jay did not refuse by simply saying “No” or “No thanks,” but instead paused briefly, started his response with an extended “Uhhh” to suggest that he was thinking about the offer, and explained why he was saying no rather than yes.

Jay’s response illustrates the conversational clothing of dispreferred acts. They (1) are not immediately adjacent but begin after a pause; (2) they start with “well,” “uhh,” or other markers; (3) they include an expression of appreciation, apology, or token agreement (“thanks,” “yes but”), and (4) they include accounts (explanations for the dispreferred act). To say that acceptance acts are conversationally preferred to refusals is by no means to imply that speakers desire or want to accept. This may be completely untrue. But it is to say that speakers routinely do not, nor are they expected to, do a dispreferred act in the same simple way as a conversationally preferred one can be done. That everyday communicators are aware of the meaning of this conversational structuring principle is cued by the frequency with which pauses before responding to an invitation are often followed immediately by different invitations or requests, as Example 7.5 demonstrates.

### Example 7.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARYN: How bout some lunch?</th>
<th>Invitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### TURN TAKING

In everyday situations outside of school, work, or public settings, there are rarely formal rules about who can talk, when, and about what. Rather, who gets a turn in a conversation, and how frequently, is something that gets negotiated within the local moment. This local negotiation leads to what Sacks\(^5\) identifies as two “grossly apparent facts” about conversation. The facts are that in a small group (three to five people) usually (1) only one person speaks at a time and (2) speaker changes recur. Moreover, how long any person will speak is not predictable; turns may be very short (e.g., single words—“Yes”—or short phrases—“You hetcha” or “Around 7:00 tomorrow”) or could be quite lengthy (multiple sentences). Put together, these facts create a puzzle.
How is it that conversationalists are generally able to accomplish smooth exchanges in which overlapping speech is infrequent and brief?

**Transition Relevance Places**

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson argued that the orderliness of conversations could be accounted for by a simple set of sequential procedures. From their participation in speech communities, people develop expectations about places where it is appropriate for speaker change to occur and others where it is not. Transition relevance places, or TRPs, are those conversational places where speaker turns could occur. Such places are cued by the use of grammatical forms (ends of questions and statements), the drawing out of a syllable on a final word (so), rising or falling intonation, hand gestures coming to rest at the body, or engaging someone's gaze. At a TRP, Sacks suggests,

1. The current speaker may select the next speaker. Speakers may nominate who is to be the next speaker by name (“I'm not going, how bout you Rick?”) or cue who the selected other is through gaze or body orientation, or through the mention of a topic that might only be appropriate to one party.

2. If the current speaker does not select a next speaker, then any of the present persons may self-select and start talking.

3. If no one self-selects, then the current speaker may continue speaking.

In lively multiperson conversations, people often do considerable work to show that they want to talk next. Cues that a person does want to claim a turn include such actions as leaning forward, opening one's mouth, starting a hand gesture, and looking toward the current speaker. At the same time a speaker may attempt to hold on to the opportunity to talk and keep control of the floor by speeding up speech and rushing through potential TRPs, avoiding the other's gaze, or doing hand gestures that metaphorically push another away.

As mentioned, although most instances of overlapping speech involve no more than a couple of syllables and usually occur at a TRP, there are exceptions. Overlaps may occur in the middle of a turn when one person is interjecting small tokens of attention and listening (“Uhmmmm” “I see”) or when a recipient acts to help a speaker who is trying to remember the name of a person or place. Another kind of overlapping speech that may be more than several syllables is what Schegloff calls choral talk: segments where several people murmur congratulations, say goodbye, or laugh at the same time. In both of these cases, the overlapping talk is understood as having a cooperative or supportive purpose and is not interactionally troublesome.

The last type of overlapping talk is, perhaps, the most interesting for identity issues. Repeated stretches of simultaneous talking occasionally do occur that are not seen as serving cooperative purposes. At these junctures two people seem to be competing for the floor. Typically the talk of at least one party gets louder, it moves higher in pitch, and its pace becomes either faster or slower. In addition, a person's talk may be suddenly cut off, a sound may be prolonged, or a person may recycle and repeat part of what she is saying. Eventually these segments of overlapping talk conclude with one person dropping out. Sometimes explicit accusations are made that the other interrupted, always interrupts, or is rude, or that the other never listens or is selfish. Other times, nothing explicit is said in the moment but one or another party walks away and talks to others about the other's rude, overbearing, or self-preoccupied personality. We all know that people “will get angry at, or feel con- trite or guilty about doing such a thing as intruding on X's time, speaking while he is speaking, interrupting him.” In other words, built into conversational practice is an emotional motor that helps to keep most people in line most of the time. From how one manages turns, consequential personal judgments will be developed.

**INTERRUPTION**

Interrupting is not the only feature of the turn-taking system that is implicated for identity. The sheer number of turns one takes and the talk content of the turns also shapes identity. By and large, people who take more turns and who take longer ones will be judged as being more expert, influential, or assertive and, in institutional situations, will be assumed to be higher in status than less frequently speaking parties (senior doctor vs. intern or boss vs. secretary). In addition, introducing a new topic for talk is usually regarded as a more assertive act than responding to an ongoing topic; this is especially the case if the new topic is focused on self's interests rather than the other's interests.

Although generalizations abound as to what kinds of moves generally go with what kinds of identities, the picture is quite complex and dependent on how the particular persons and practices come together in a specific situation. For instance, while talk is typically seen as the way a person establishes himself as powerful, under certain conditions silence may be the more powerful tool. Once we move outside of ordinary conversation, though, the rules change.

**TURN TAKING IN INSTITUTIONAL ENCOUNTERS**

Turn taking in ordinary conversation is locally managed—there are no prespecified rules. In institutional settings, although local management does occur for some activities—for example, a few people chatting about a project—many occasions have formal turn-taking rules that restrict
who may speak, when, and on what topic. At one extreme are situations in which the turn system is entirely preallocated. A good example would be the courtroom, where the rights to talk are highly restricted. Not only are parties restricted to speaking in particular slots, their turns are format- and content-restricted. Attorneys, for instance, may not make statements to witnesses but must pose questions, and witnesses must limit what they say to answers to the questions they are asked.

Many institutional encounters have turn-taking systems that are a hybrid between the two extremes of locally managed and preallocated. In business meetings, for instance, there is often an agenda that orders topics of talk and the person who is the meeting chair gets to decide when to close down one topic and start the next topic, as well as decide whether a member’s comment is on- or off-topic. However, within the confines of a meeting, discussion may resemble that of ordinary conversation where people do a lot of self-nominating and ad hoc introduction. Let’s now consider how turn taking links to identities in two important institutional sites.

**Turn Taking in Job Interviews**

There is no adjacency pair quite so common in institutional settings as that of question–answer pairs. Through long strings of question–answer sequences, participants in a setting enact themselves as one or another party of a discernible pair of interactional identities (e.g., doctor–patient, counselor–client, reporter–interviewee, personnel manager–job candidate). Consider Example 7.6.

---

**EXAMPLE 7.6**

1. A: What was your major in college?
2. B: Business administration.
3. A: And did that prepare you for a managerial position?
4a. B: Yes, I think my management courses were excellent.

If asked what was going on in Example 7.6, most readers would make an immediate assignment of meaning: it’s a job interview. Moreover, it is unlikely that people would have difficulty figuring out who’s who. Speaker A appears to be the interviewer and speaker B the interviewee. The self-evidence of these identity attributions flows from the way three particular communicative practices combine in their occurrence. First, A and B perform different speech acts in a recognizable ad-

jacency pair; A asks B for information and B answers A’s questions. If in line 2 B had said, “Business administration, and what’s yours?,” our guess about A’s and B’s identities would be much less certain. The lack of symmetry in the adjacency pairs that each person initiates cue us that A and B are likely to be in institutional roles where each has different rights and obligations with regard to question asking and question answering. That one person gets to ask most of the questions and the other does most of the answering is a feature of many pairs of institutional identities.

To be sure, our judgment that Example 7.6 comes from a job interview rests on more than this adjacency pair structure. The topical focus and the evaluative stance displayed by B toward the topic of discussion provide further clues. That B is being asked whether her educational training links to preparation for a certain kind of work is just the kind of topical focus to be expected in a job interview, and it is also a subject of talk that is less likely in other situations and relationships. This does not mean that this topic is unimaginable elsewhere: friends and acquaintances in informal conversation do talk about majors and job preparation. If, instead of how B actually responded to being asked as to how her major prepared her, she had responded with the answer in Example 7.7, consider what we would infer.

---

**EXAMPLE 7.7**

4b. In certain ways it did; in other ways it didn’t. I had other things that were more important to me than school at that time. I think if I were doing it now, I would be getting more out of my college classes.

If the content of B’s answer were 4b rather than 4a, we would guess that she was talking to a friend rather than to a job interviewer. In 4a it is the sense that the speaker appears to be putting her best foot forward and seeking to show her suitability for the position that further cues us that this is a job interview. In contrast, 4b implicates a more personally reflective and complex evaluation of an experience, a kind of evaluation that might occur between people who have some level of intimacy and trust where one is not performing for the other. Stated a bit differently, the response in 4a suggests that B is operating in a persuasive frame rather than simply in an information-giving one. She is responding to each interview question as if its purpose were narrower than the utterance content would suggest. Such a frame, in fact, is the one that job interviewers expect. At recruiting centers on college campuses, the adop-
tion of a persuasive frame was a key practice that distinguished interviewees who received second interviews at the company from those who did not. Interviewees who did not learn about the company in advance and did not do conversational work to display their high level of interest in working for that particular company were much less likely to receive a second interview.16

Recently Scheuer17 taped and studied 12 job interviews where five of the applicants received offers and seven did not. The available jobs were highly desirable professional positions in medium-size corporations. The positions required at least a college degree. The interview was conducted by a single interviewer but by a three-person committee; two of the interviewers held positions that would make them roughly peers to the position being hired for and one of the interviewers was quite a bit more senior. The 12 people selected for interviews were already among an elite group; they had been chosen from more than 100 applicants. In her study Scheuer wanted to find out if there were conversational differences between successful and unsuccessful candidates in the interviews.

Interesting differences were found between the two groups in how turns were managed. Although in both groups the interviewers talked more than the interviewees, for successful candidates, the amount of talk, as measured by number of words, was closer to equal (46% vs. 34%). This difference was accounted for (1) by successful interviewees giving longer answers to questions, and (2) by turning patches of the interview into conversational episodes in which they took on the role of a storyteller and the interviewers assumed the role of listeners. In the unsuccessful interviews, there were more question-short answer sequences and fewer conversational kinds of exchanges. What might be the significance of these conversational storytelling moments?

Scheuer suggests that these moments were interpreted by the interviewers as evidence that a candidate had good potential to assume peer relationships with others in the organization and fit in. These conversational moments were treated as “talk evidence” that a person was capable of being someone with whom others would feel comfortable. This fitting-in potential was made visible both through the interviewee’s ability to create a relatively equal relational identity in the interview moment, as seen in the close-to-equal amounts of talk, and through enactment of the professionally preferred attitude about work, an important personal identity in job interviews.

Employees in a particular workplace are likely to have similar attitudes about the meaning of work and how it connects to life. Work can be treated “as means” or “as ends.”18 In the work-as-means philosophy, work is treated as the means to make money in order to live. Development of self is not done through work but primarily outside of the job.

This view is the dominant one held by people in working-class occupations. Work and personal life are seen as highly distinct categories. A contrasting view, work-as-ends, sees work as the primary place for articulating the self. This view, the common one held by people with professional occupations, sees work and the everyday lifeworld as deeply connected. One’s work is a crucial part of one’s identity. Who a person is is strongly connected to what that person does. Decisions about work and personal life issues are interconnected.

The conversational moments in the successful job interviews often involved the candidate linking some activity in his or her personal life to his or her work interest, as happened, for instance, when an interviewee offered an account of why he went to a business school quite a distance from family and friends. Scheuer found that although the education level and on-paper credentials of unsuccessful and successful candidates were similar, more of the unsuccessful candidates came from working-class families. It is within family communities that teens first observe what are usual and normal ways for adults to talk about (or refrain from discussing) work with friends. These conversational practices are not taught in university but are carried to it, strongly shaped by each person’s communities of origin. Successful candidates, then, were more likely to come from middle-class professional families where they had had extensive opportunity to observe and participate in these kinds of conversations. It is mastery of these subtle, non-spoken-about, and class-linked practices that are part of what leads to interview judgments that one person will fit in and make a good colleague and another person will not.

**Turn Practices in the 1992 Vice Presidential Debate**

Political debates are another type of relatively preallocated turn system. How much a debate is preallocated versus locally managed is something that varies with the political debate. In the 1992 vice presidential (VP) debate, as I previously noted, there was a moderate amount of local management in which some of the time the parties could speak directly to each other. Consider how the identities of the three contenders (Gore, Quayle, and Stockdale) were shaped by their own and the other candidates’ very particular choices and patterns of turn taking.

Let us begin with the media assessments of what the VP debates were taken to show about each candidate. Beck19 summarized the mainstream public opinion of the three men after the debate as the following:

> Gore established himself as more “vice presidential” than the other two candidates; displaying himself as a man of “composed dignity.”

> Quayle gave an “attack-dog performance.” “He didn’t look stupid,
merely possessed—by an Urkel-like urge to say ‘Liar, liar, pants on fire.’ Quayle displayed himself to be “a fighter” but failed to support that he was a “calm, assertive, and presidential” kind of person.20

Stockdale failed to present himself as “presidential.” Postdebate polls revealed that voters saw him as “sincere” and “intelligent” but, at the same time, did not regard him to be a “serious” candidate for the office.

Consider, now, how each candidate’s management of turns contributed to these widely held impressions. In the 1992 VP debate the format involved a single moderator who raised topics. Each candidate was given 75 seconds to make his response on that topic; then there was a 5-minute open discussion. During the open discussion, there were no rules about length of comments, order for speakers, or how frequently each could speak. In other words, the discussion period was a free-for-all where much each candidate talked, about what issues, and at what junctures was dependent on the unfolding interaction. Of interest is that in this situation the turn taking itself frequently became a topic of explicit focus. Candidates accused each other of hogging the floor, interrupting, changing the topic at inappropriate spots, and so on. An example of this is seen in Example 7.8, in which we find Gore rebuking Quayle for trying to take the floor. When reading the following examples, remember that brackets indicate overlapping talk and parentheses indicate speech that could be heard but not all the words were understandable. Also note that G = Gore, Q = Quayle, S = Stockdale, and M = moderator.

**EXAMPLE 7.8**

1G: Yeah I, I wanna, I wanna talk about this because the question was not about free trade or education [the question was about, let me finish
2Q: [talk
3G: [now I let you talk
4Q: [the one who brought up the issue of waffling
5G: DaIn let, I let you talk, lemmeh talk now
6Q: [And he’s waffled on the abortion issue
7G: It’s gonna be a long evening if ya’ if you’re like this now because22

In this instance, Gore’s comments altercast Quayle as unfair. In describing Quayle as not letting him finish (1G) and himself as having let Quayle have his turn to talk (3G, 5G), Gore strongly implies that Quayle is being unfair by interrupting him. Consider, though, another exchange where Gore is the person who is attempting to claim the floor. In Example 7.9 Quayle is wrapping up an answer to a prior Gore criticism about the Republican position on the family leave act.

**EXAMPLE 7.9**

1Q: Pass, pass our family leave act and (pause) because it goes to small businesses where the major problem is, your proposal excluded small businesses that’s that’s the problem. Now let me talk about health care and I’m glad
2G: [did you require it? (pause)
3Q: excuse (pause) my, (my turn my turn
4G: [Did you require it? (pause)
5Q: [)
6G: [Did you require it?
7M: [ ]
8Q: [Lighten up Al (pause) my turn
8G: It’s a free discussion4
10Q: Take a breath Al, inhale ([Audience laughter and applause])
11G: It’s a free discussion (pause) did you require it (pause) did you require family leave in that legislation yes or no
12Q: we’re we offered incentives to small businesses (pause) yes or no were small
13G: [yes or no
14Q: Were small businesses exempted under your proposal
15G: yes
16Q: yes and that’s where the biggest [problem exists
17G: [did you require it of anyone?
18Q: I’m gonna get back to that topic at hand because
19G: Did you require it of anyone?23

At the end of his opening comment (1Q) Quayle is seeking to change the topic from family leave to health care. This juncture is a TRP—it’s a place where another could enter to say more on the family leave topic. Gore in fact does so; he pursues information about Quayle’s position. This pursuit occurs across the entire exchange and is marked by multiple repetitions of several questions and many spates of overlap-
ping competitive talk. Two possible negative identities are made relevant by this exchange. A first is that Gore could be seen as interrupting, being unfair to Quayle, not letting him finish, and doing more or less what he accused Quayle of doing earlier. On the other hand, Quayle might be seen as trying to evade the question and change the topic, and he could be seen as accusing Gore of not letting him talk just to move attention away from this particular, unpopular Republican position on this issue. Although each interpretation was probably made by at least some viewers, the more frequent one, based on media commentaries, appears to have been the one favoring Gore.

Noteworthy in Example 7.9 is the conversational environment in which Quayle’s accusation of unfairness occurred compared to Gore’s accusation in Example 7.8: Quayle raised his accusation in response to a question Gore posed to him on the officially sanctioned debate topic; Gore raised his to an off-topic aside (“talk about waffling”). Stated simply, complex and consequential interpersonal assessments are tied to very small differences in use of the turn-taking system.

Thus far I have said nothing about Admiral Stockdale and how his debate performance contributed to a sense that he was not a credible VP candidate. The answer, though, is already implicated in these brief excerpts. Stockdale was invisible in the debate. His comments in the preallocated comment periods rarely took the full 75 seconds, and he had little to say in the open discussion time, mostly standing by and watching Quayle and Gore go after each other. His limited talking, then, became evidence for debate viewers that Stockdale lacked knowledge, political assertiveness, or both—two personal-level identities that made him a nonserious, questionable VP candidate.

**THE REMEDIAL INTERCHANGE**

In Chapter 4 I examined a set of face-sensitive speech acts (e.g., accounts, reproaches, and apologies). Although these speech acts do not fit into the right structure of an adjacency pair format, they frequently occur in a more loosely organized structure. In everyday life when an offense occurs, whether it is as small as one person requiring another to move in a crowded airport, or as significant as an accusation that a person’s relational partner is self-centered or dishonest, then there is a need for a remedial interchange. The *remedial interchange*[^25] is a four-part sequence designed to remedy the feelings of discomfort caused by an offense. The sequence begins with a remedy, an act that attempts to solve the trouble. The remedy could be an apology (“Sorry”), a request (“May I get through to get to the plane?”), or some combination of these. The remedy is then followed by an expression of relief (“Sure,” “Okay”), which in turn is followed by an expression of appreciation by the person who had caused the offense (“Thanks”). The interchange concludes with a final move in which the offended party makes a comment that is a *minimization* of the offense (“Yeah, no big deal”). The four-part sequence does not always occur in its elaborated form. For relatively small offenses it may occur in a truncated version that involves only the remedy and the relief. Nonetheless, whether the remedial interchange involves the full or truncated version, it is a powerful, frequently occurring ritual. As Goffman[^26] observed, the reason it is so pervasive is that it allows conversational participants to go on their way satisfied that a moment of possible trouble with another person has been managed satisfactorily. Communicators’ abilities to participate in remedial interchanges appropriately affect whether they will be seen to possess valued personal identities such as *tactful, sensitive, and considerate*. Not initiating a remedial exchange where one is expected or responding inappropriately to another person’s initiation is likely to accomplish the reverse: having self written off as *prickly, insconsiderate*, and *not a good person*.

**SPEECH COMMUNITY DIFFERENCES**

As with other aspects of everyday talk, interaction-structuring processes are culturally inflected. Somewhat different meanings may be attached to a given segment of talk, and, for some occasions, what is taken to be normal will differ. I have already noted how this applies in job interviews. Now let’s consider two other differences.

The notion of adjacency pair is cross-culturally relevant. In Chinese, Swahili, and English, speakers are expected to return a first greeting with a second one. However, what counts as an acceptable greeting varies. Spencer-Oatley[^27] notes that in Hong Kong “Hello, have you had lunch?” is used by many Chinese speakers as an initiating greeting much like “Hello, a bit colder today?” British English speakers new to Hong Kong routinely hear this greeting as an invitation. In addition, when running into an acquaintance on the street, a usual Chinese way to greet someone is to say “Where are you going?” To British English speakers this greeting seems inappropriate and intrusive—“That’s my own personal business, why is this person asking me this?” Yet, from the Chinese point of view, not only is this a legitimate greeting, but it demands no more than a vague response such as “I’m going over there” or “I’m going into town.” Thus, for Hong Kong English speakers, the question “Where are you going?” is meant not to solicit information but to build
rapport, much as the American English greeting “How you doing?”
functions.

A second speech community difference in interaction structuring is
to be found in the cues a group uses to request a turn and to signal
attention. As illustrated in Chapter 2, the length of a pause that is seen as
normal before a new speaker claims the floor varies across Anglo and Na-
tive American communities. By and large, Anglo speakers assume
shorter pauses at a TRP to be what is normal and as the signal that a
speaker is done. Native Americans regard the normal polite pause to be
a bit longer. The upshot of this very small difference is consequen-
tial, leading to conversations where an Anglo partner keeps self-selecting
to continue talking, inferring that her Native American partner has nothing
to say since he did not come in after a presumably normal pause.

Another difference between Native Americans and Anglos involves
the use of visual cues to give attention. From their earliest years children
raised in many Native American communities are taught to make fine vis-
ual discriminations. Children will be taught how to identify a person at
a distance. On family occasions, infants will be kept in a noisy family
gathering room but will have a sheet draped over their cradle to block
them from seeing others. In contrast, Anglo families are likely to take a
child out of a noisy room to a quiet one. That is, Anglo families train
their children to attend to auditory cues whereas Indians put more
weight on the visual. In signaling attention, a Native American speaker
is likely to use subtle movements around the mouth in the lower region
of the face. These movements are much less typically used or attended to
among Anglo speakers. Given that Indian children are also likely to
avert their gaze as a way of showing respect, it is quite likely that an An-
glo partner will not recognize that a Native American is being attentive.
Phillips, for instance, documented that Native American children in
mainstream American classes are reprimanded for not paying attention
far more often than their Anglo peers. Thus, a small, largely out-of-
awareness, difference in turn-taking systems, especially when power
relations are unequal, may be part of the way well-intentioned members of
the dominant speech community (middle-class Americans) produce un-
fair treatment of ethnic minorities.

SUMMARY

In this chapter I described a set of conversational structures that varied
from two utterance sequences (adjacency pairs) to somewhat longer
units (the remedial interchange). For each sequence I considered how it
did identity-work. In addition, I examined how turn taking works in or-
dinary conversation when it is locally managed, as well as how it oper-
ates in institutional encounters, such as debates and job interviews, in
which the situation has prespecified rules about who can talk when and
about what. Interaction structures, more than other features of talk, oc-
cur across languages and cultures. Nonetheless, we saw that these struc-
tures have a cultural dimension: what counts as a greeting, the length of
a pause that is judged reasonable, and the function of gaze in giving atten-
tion all vary across speech communities.
About the Author

Karen Tracy, PhD, is Professor of Communication at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where she regularly teaches a course on how everyday talk builds and reflects identities. She also teaches classes on discourse analysis and ethnographic methods, as well as special topic seminars that examine communicative trouble in the justice system and in educational sites. Dr. Tracy is the author of Colloquium: Dilemmas of Academic Discourse (1997, Ablex) and more than 40 articles and book chapters. She is especially fond of writing methodological reflection pieces about how communication research ought to be conducted. Currently, she is at work on a book exploring the interactional challenges of democracy in school board meetings. Dr. Tracy received her PhD in communication from the University of Wisconsin and is past editor of the journal Research on Language and Social Interaction.