

Section 2

Timing in turn-taking

- Timing is very important in the flow of conversations.
- Some researchers believe that good timing results in little gap and overlap between turns while bad timing may result in “errors” -- overlaps and interruptions (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998: 52).
- Such "errors" are often due to poor timing - wrong judgment of turn cues. So “learning how to use these possible completion points is part of developmental communication” (Ellis, 1999:131).

Gaps & pauses

A pause is intra-turn silence.

A gap is silence after a transition
relevance place.

[CST1:1:4]

4 B: Mm (0.6) pz (0.4) in fact (.) I like all kinds of books (.)

5 just like (0.2) fictiona:l story (0.2) anda some (1.4) mm

6 (0.5) roman(h)tic love s- story.

7 (.)

8 A: Ehm.

9 → (1.5)

10 B: So (2.4) but now, (0.3) mm (2.7) erm,

11 → (3.6)

12 A: Can you say something abou:t hh (0.6) the book you

13 have read?

14 → (1.8)

In this example, there are many pauses in speaker B's first turn (line 4-6) and there are three gaps (line 9, line 11 and line 14).

Long gaps – possible causes of confusion

- ❑ There is a lack of definition for gap length in previous research, making it difficult to compare.
- ❑ There are often long gaps in Chinese learners' conversations.
- ❑ Native speakers, in contrast, tend to have no gap or very short gaps.
- ❑ Native speakers often find long gaps confusing – is there just a language barrier or something is wrong?

Lack of gap fillers

- ◆ Native speakers tend to use gap fillers to avoid skillfully embarrassing silent moments.
- ◆ Chinese learners, in contrast, are weak in using gap fillers, e.g. “let me see”, “well”, “the thing is ...”.
- ◆ As a result, there is disfluency on the Chinese speaker’s side, leaving the native speaker puzzled.

Overlaps

An **overlap**, according to Zimmerman & West, is "simultaneous speech where a speaker other than the current speaker begins to speak at or very close to a possible transition place in a current speaker's utterance (i.e., within the boundaries of the last word)"

(cited in Bonvillain, 1997: 180-181).

[CST4:6:228]

233 A: So: I justa think of my: (.) homework.

234 (0.3)

235 B: **In the evening, (0.2) // I mean in the evening what do you want to do?**

236→A: Buta (0.3) in the evening=

237 A: =I will make up myself. (.) Make up my self // becau:se

238→B: Really?

In this example there are two overlaps – one by speaker A (line 236) and one by speaker B (line 238).

Relative high occurrence of overlaps

- The amount of overlapped speech in American English is less than 5% in general
(Levinson, 1983)
- The results show that in six out of ten pairs the percentage of overlaps is 5% or more.

Percentage of overlaps

Pair No.	Overlaps	Turns	Percentage
1	4	86	5%
2	2	33	6 %
3	5	125	4 %
4	14	135	10 %
5	4	95	4 %
6	0	112	0 %
7	7	89	8 %
8	2	18	6 %
9	2	35	6 %
10	0	33	0 %

One explanation of more overlaps

Many Chinese speakers worry about running out of things to say and are often busy thinking of what to say next during the other speaker's turn. As a result, they are not very sensitive to TRP signals and overlaps thus occur.

Another explanation of more overlaps

Another possibility is that Chinese speakers have not developed a good sense of timing. They still need to learn to be more sensitive to turn cues.

Effects of overlaps on speakers

- ❑ Overlaps often cause uneasiness or embarrassment in Chinese speakers who worry that they might appear impatient, therefore, impolite.
- ❑ As many Chinese speakers fail to focus on the other speaker's message – either busy with their own ideas or preoccupied with uneasiness, miscommunication thus occurs.