CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTION IN CENTRAL THAI

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Conversation is an activity which is engaged in by speakers of every known language. While conversational strategies may differ from culture to culture, there are basic organizing principles which are immutable. One of these principles, I will claim, concerns felicitous topic shift. In this paper, I first present an overview of conversational interaction involving principles of speaker turn-taking. Then, I focus on one aspect of conversational activity, the change of topic, and present data from Central Thai conversational interaction which, on the surface, appear to violate the standard canons of topic shift conventions. On deeper analysis, however, it will be seen that the data do not violate these standard conventions, given access to socio-cultural information relevant to Thai society in particular. The results may be extrapolated without distortion to other cultures as well, although the details, of course, will differ.

I. CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTION

In some respects, conversational interaction may be likened to traffic patterns, and this is the analogy I shall pursue in this paper. In fact, researchers such as Duncan 1974 and Sacks et al 1974, among others, have focused attention on an interesting aspect of conversational interaction. They have focused on how it is that conversations can flow smoothly, one person at a time, with so few collisions; that is, how it is that there are so few instances of simultaneous speaking. They are not talking about certain well-known American Indian conversational interaction, such as that reported by Philips 1976, in which there is an obligatory pause after the speech of one person and before the beginning of the speech of the next. Rather, they are talking about normal American English conversational interaction. What Sacks et al claim is that, “Overwhelmingly, one party talks at a time,” and “Occurrences of more than one speaker at a time are common, but brief.” The question for us today is, how is it that interactants know who is permitted to talk at any given point in a conversation?

What these researchers have found is that there are specific “traffic signals” which either give the other person permission to speak or which tell the other person not to speak. These signals operate much the way traffic lights or traffic signs do in regulating against potential collisions.

As a point of reference, I will summarize some of the major signals in both English and Japanese conversational interaction for giving permission to the other person to speak. These are presented in [1].

[1]

AMERICAN ENGLISH
(1) use of rising or falling pitch at the end of a clause
(2) lengthening of final syllable in a clause
(3) end of a hand gesture
(4) use of a stereotyped expression such as but uh
(5) sharp drop in pitch
(6) completion of a clause with subject and predicate
[from Duncan 1974]

JAPANESE
(1) drop in intonation at clause boundaries, accompanied by
(2) gaze toward hearer or head nod
[from Hinds 1978]
Preliminary investigation into vocal turn signals in Thai conversational interaction carried out by myself and two graduate students in linguistics at Thammasat University, Supaporn Chutikanon and Khannita Ratanabhayone, has shown, as might be expected, that change in pitch plays no role in turn taking signals since tone in Thai carries meaning. Rather, if the speaker pauses at the completion of a potentially complete grammatical unit, this licenses the addressee to become the speaker. Lengthening of a syllable, or the immediate start of another utterance at such grammatically complete units, function as turn suppression signals.

What is of interest about Thai conversational interaction, however, is the degree to which simultaneous talking occurs. The following segment of conversation transcribed and translated by the same two students mentioned above is typical of conversational interactions among friends, and it shows a considerable amount of simultaneous speaking, represented as overlapped lines.

[1]

1 A: phê ðêt lúcâk ðâtsenîi ka wâsân lû pà
Add, do you know Asnee and Wasan?

2 B: lûu lûu lû pà phê tuy lû pà
Yes, yes. Do you know them Tuy?

3 C: dâyyîn tê chêw tê nây lû khon nây ña
I've heard their names, but I don't know who they are.

4 lû tê wâ ñây bôk tôn tông [laugh]
I know about "book tong toong"

5 lê man kô yök mew ñalay kô nât lû
and they raise their hands.

6 A: ñaray ñây bôk tôn tông
What about "book tong toong?"

7 C: man lôn pêên bôk tôn tông lû
They sing the song "Book tong toong" or something else I don't know

8 lêw man kô yök mew nà
and they raise their hands.

9. B: thê wannàn nà kadîi dây nám nà
It's that day, it's "kadi day nam."

10 C: ñêe lû tê wâ mât mi khon welaa chia lêw man yök mew yö yê thê wâ
Uhm, I know that there's someone to cheer them and raise their hands

11 lôk don'tii nà
in the "look dontri" concert.

12 tê wâ may may may dây ñê tît taam pen pêcam yêñ nân nà
But I don't follow their songs all the time, there's something like that.

13 A: lêe
Is that right?

14 C: ñêe thê thêp kô phûak bêet ñalay lâ kô ñâtsenîi dâyyîn tê chêw
Uh, if I compare them to Bird, I only know their names

15 B: mèa lôn mèa kôn yu wôñ ñâtsen
In the past they played in the "Isn't" band.
A: 16
Is that right?

C: 17
thî wanân thî pay lê ?êt chîchêp duu màak
It's that day that I went, and Add liked watching them.

B: 18
?ee thî lòng pen nèn mít chît klây nay thûng ?aw mà lŏcng dâay
Um, they sing a song “Neung mit chit klây” that we can sing.

A: 19
lê phî nôn lúcâk pà ... hên رّnâp
And Nong, do you know them? You're not saying anything.

D: 20
rûu ...hâ ...cingcing lêew nîi ?âtsenii nî dan kwâa nà tê wà
Yes I do. In fact, Asnee is rather famous, but I prefer Wasan

B: 21
phî chôp wasăn màk kwâa pô sînkhâw ...
because of his voice, a lovely voice,

C: 22
khû nâlâk nà kéem yûy lê sînkhâw lôn pen nèn mít chît klây
he has fat cheeks, and when he sings “Neung mit chit klây”

D: 23
man ...man man pî di nà
it ...it's it's melodious.

C: 24
khâw mây lôn dûay kàn lêe
Don't they sing together?

D: 25
mây . khâw .. ?êe . . khâw cá lèn dontlîi dûay kàn lê suân yày ?âtsenii cá lôn
No ...they .. they will play together, mostly Asnee sings.

B: 26
pen tròn sînkh
The beginner

C: 27
câ lôn .. ?êe ..
He will sing ... oh ..

D: 28
lê sînkh mân cá nêk nêk kwâ wasăn
And his voice is stronger than Wasan.

C: 29
lê wasăn thâm ?elay là ..dîit ?elay pay lêe .. ?êe ..
And what does Wasan do? Play the guitar? Oh I see ..

D: 30
lê wasăn cá lôn pen .. nîm nîm ?êe nîm nîm kéem yûy yûy
And Wasan will sing ...a very soft song, and his cheeks inflate.

B: 31
?âat cá . . pen ..
It may be ..

D: 32
khû mô ka kha lêk tê khâw
It fits him perfectly.

A: 33
tê khâw kô lèn dontlîi thôn sôn khôn mây chây lêe
But they play together, don't they?

D: 34
lên .. ?êe ..
They do .. um ..

C: 35
tê khôn thî lôn màk thîsût khû ?âtsenii
But Asnee always sing.

D: 36
tê khôn dan khû ?âtsenii
But the famous one is Asnee.
37 B: wasän cà pen sǐŋ ?ay nán nà .. khāw iak .. sǐŋ ?elay ná
Wasan will be a .. they call .. it's called the
38 thī man mìi chēw .. ?ee sǐŋ kholas ?ee sǐŋ kholas
It's called .. um .. the group .. um .. group.
39 C: sǐŋ klo⁵ c na
Supplement?
40 D: to be moist?

41 A: lēe
Is that right?
42 B: sùan yày mān tham sǐŋ kholas
He always sings in a group.
43 D: lē man dāŋ khonāat thī wā ?aw pay pen ?ee ..
And he's so famous that Coke wants him to be ..
44 ?elay ná .. naay bēep
uh what .. the model for
45 khōok nā chāy mā pen khōtsēna khōok chāy mā kō ?aw pay khon diaw
Coke, isn't that it? It's the Coke ad, isn't it? He's the one.
46 hēn mā sādēŋ wā ?ātsēnii dāŋ kwāa
That means that Asnee's more famous.
47 C: ?aw tē ?ātsēnii pay
They only wanted Asnee?
48 A: lē phī chōp ?elay pen ?elay khōn mān là
And what is his song that you like?
49 C: ?ee phī ..
Uh, I ..
50 D: phī chōp mēn mīt chīt kīlāy
I like "Neung mit chit klay."
51 C: lōŋ nāy wā mīt chīt kīlāy thī bāan ?ēt thī wannān pēet dūu chāy māy
How do you sing it? That day, in Add's house, she watched on TV, right?
52 B: [sings] chēun chii wan ..
"Chuun chii wan .."
53 D: [sings] leem tē wan .. ?ee chēun chii wan chāy chāy khēn chīt khēn phīt ..
"Leen tae wan .." uh "chuun chii wan" yeah, I can't sing it right.
54 B: ?ee ?ee
Yeah yeah.
55 A: lēe
Is that right?
56 C: māy lū chē peŋ lōk tē nī kō chōp
I don't know the song, but I like the contents.
57 A: tham may thēŋ chōp peŋ nī là
Why do you like it?