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From Sparks to Symphony: Analyzing the Defiance of the Turn-Taking Principle in the Indian Parliamentary Discourse

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Abstract: Just as conversations are integral to social life, parliamentary discourse is essential to sustain the life of democracy. Parliament is often regarded as a site for orderly discourses, with structured dialogues. However, the discourses in parliaments don't always operate within the set framework. This leads to disorderly speech patterns, resulting in a chasm between the created framework and reality. The study in the paper aims to analyze the possible reasons for this chasm by focusing on the turn-taking principle—an element that contributes to creating orderly conversations. The study is supplemented with two YouTube videos.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Conversation Analysis, Turn-taking, Parliamentary discourse

Parliamentary discourses are unique when compared to other texts because in parliamentary interactions “...topic drifts occur more radically than in written genres, and interpersonal and pragmatic content appears more frequently” (qtd. in Sakala 5). From a pragmalinguistic perspective, parliamentary discourse exhibits various institutionalized discursive features along with several specific rules and conventions to conduct discourses and conversations in an uninterrupted and organized manner. It is in this context that the analysis of turn-taking becomes particularly important.

The turn-taking principle can be described as one of the major concepts explored in Conversation Analysis (CA). Developed primarily by sociologist Harvey Sacks in the 1960s, Conversation Analysis focuses on how people manage turn-taking in conversations. “Turn-taking refers to a change of speaker in ordinary situations” (Zhu-Boxer), and it can also be defined as “a type of organization in conversation and discourse where the participants speak one at a time in alternating turns. In practice, it involves processes for constructing contributions, responding to previous comments, and transitioning to a different speaker, using a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic cues” (Drew–Heritage xxxiv).

A turn may be constructed from various syntactic units: it may, for instance, consist of a word, a phrase, a clause, or a sentence. Once an utterance is underway, it might be possible for the observers to guess which unit the speaker plans to use, thereby being able to judge when the utterance is complete. It becomes significant to note that the “...possible completion point of an utterance is called a ‘transition-relevance place’ and ...when this point is reached, the turn is reallocated and may pass to a new speaker” (qtd. in Power–Martello 2). Amongst the turn-taking mechanisms, what is most relevant to this study is the mechanism that states “people tend to follow the rule of one speaker at a time to avoid overlapping” (qtd. in Zhu–Boxer). According to Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, “Brief overlaps may occur at a transition-relevance place unintentionally and are considered to be errors and violations”.



However, of particular significance is the fact that in parliamentary discourses, overlapping does not always occur at a 'transition-relevance place' unintentionally. This can be attributed to the nature of parliamentary discourses that not only reflect political, social, and cultural configurations in an ever-changing world, but they also contribute to shaping these configurations discursively and cross-culturally" (qtd. in Ilie 1).

Simultaneous speech, also known as overlapping speech, is a relatively common phenomenon in spontaneous conversation. People may talk at the same time for various reasons. Usually, a distinction is made between overlaps that are 'cooperative' or 'competitive' in their nature. "Cooperative overlaps are more supportive of the main speaker's point. Competitive overlaps, on the other hand, are disruptive and pose threats to the current speaker's territory by disrupting the process and/or content of the ongoing conversation" (qtd. in Troung 1).

The Indian Parliament functions as a platform that facilitates discussions and debates between the ruling party and the opposition on diverse governmental policies and legislative measures. Hence, it is characterised by the simultaneous presence of cooperative and competitive overlaps. Cooperative overlaps occur when members of the same political party as the speaker collectively intervene or interject simultaneously during the discourse to reinforce and support the speaker's position. This cooperative overlap is apparent at 00:04:33 in the video entitled "*Amit Shah VS Sashi Tharoor In Lok Sabha*," wherein other members in support of Mr. Tharoor start speaking at the same time, thus resulting in a cooperative overlap.

From a pragmatic perspective, it is natural for people to express opinions in a conversation, and possible responses to this include either silence, agreement, or disagreement. Since the Indian Parliament comprises members representing diverse political parties, each with distinct ideological orientations and roles—such as the ruling party and the opposition—it inevitably fosters debates arising from differences in perspective and opinion. This leads to the formation of 'competitive' overlaps in the parliamentary discourse.

The occurrence of the competitive overlaps can also be attributed to factors such as "the demand for new information or clarification, the expression of strong opinions or disagreement, shifting topic, or the intent to steal the floor" (qtd. in Troung 1). Some of the features of the 'competitive' overlap are evident in the select video, which contains the parliamentary discourse based on the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. The interruption that takes place during Mr. Tharoor's speech at 00:04:33 and the resulting overlap between opposition members and Mr. Shah at 00:05:09 exemplify a competitive form of overlap. The overlap is competitive in nature, as it reflects Mr. Shah's interruption of Mr. Tharoor, motivated by his disagreement with the latter's assertion, hence reinforcing the fact that 'competitive' overlap is caused by interruptions to showcase strong disagreement, which disrupts the turn-taking principle.

"Parliamentary debates are meant to achieve a number of institutionally specific purposes, namely, position-claiming, persuading, negotiating, agenda-setting, and opinion building, usually along ideological or party lines" (qtd. in Ilie 3). Parliaments provide public arenas that instantiate the polarization of political power, wherein this power is disputed among political representatives who are expected to comply with the particular institutional constraints involving procedural regulations and debating rules. "Parliamentary conventions represent both a prerequisite and a challenge for the members of the parliament, who are expected to comply with institutional norms (i.e. parliamentary order)..." (qtd. in Ilie 8). It is significant to note that "parliamentary order is primarily associated with the turn-taking structure of



parliamentary interaction, which shows linguistic constraints are paralleled by institutional constraints” (qtd. in Ilie 8).

In the Indian Parliament, it is the individual appointed as the Hon’ble ‘Speaker’ who is given the responsibility of monitoring the turn assignment to maintain the parliamentary order. This particular phenomenon or feature of the parliamentary discourse is apparent in the second video chosen for the analysis. At 00:00:04 in the video, the Hon’ble Speaker, Mr. Om Birla, underscores and asserts the institutional limitation by reminding Congress MP Mr. Rahul Gandhi that the authority to grant permission rests solely with the Speaker. This reminder came when Mr. Gandhi paused during his speech to “allow” intervention from the other party member, Mr. Kamlesh Paswan. The instance in the video reinforces the fact that both linguistic and institutional constraints parallel the turn-taking structure of parliamentary interactions.

Although in parliamentary discourses the turn-taking sequences are rule-regulated, it is precisely the norm deviations, rule violations, and verbal disruptions that can most clearly reveal various peculiarities of a parliamentary system. The defiance of the turn-taking principle takes place “...through verbal and non-verbal expressions of interpersonal arguments, through individual and collective displays of emotions, and generally through explicit or implicit rule-infringement in order to seek support or popularity” (Ilie 8). It is important to recognize that parliamentary dialogic confrontation represents a continuous co-performance by the debating parliamentarians, characterized by the dynamic interplay of orderly and disorderly discourses. The orderly discourse includes speeches, interpellations, oral/written questions, and question time sessions that take place in the parliament, whereas disorderly discourse includes disruptive actions such as interruptions, heckling, and laughter. The actions leading to disruptive instances such as interruptions and laughter are visible in the video entitled “*Amit Shah VS Shashi Tharoor In Lok Sabha*” from 00:04:33–00:05:38. In a democratic framework, parliament is a platform meant for conducting discussions in a formal manner so that the parliamentary proceedings aren’t marred by frequent disruptions. Nonetheless, the Indian Parliament has frequently experienced disruptions during debates, and the instances drawn from the videos selected for the study substantiate this observation.

The disruptions, which in turn lead to the breach of the turn-taking principle in parliamentary discourse, can be ascribed to several underlying factors outlined below:

- Discussions on controversial matters and public importance, such as the topic of discussion shown in the chosen video, which deals with the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution.
- Dissatisfaction among members of parliament due to inadequate allotment of time for airing grievances and opinions. This is substantiated in the video “*Amit Shah VS Shashi Tharoor In Lok Sabha*”, where Mr. Tharoor at 00:00:35 states that he needs a few more minutes to put forth his point. The subsequent overlap reinforces the fact that lack of time results in defiance and parliamentary disruptions.
- Power dynamics between the ruling party and opposition parties, since parliamentarians are “...committed to the struggle over language as a concrete manifestation of the struggle for power” (Ilie 2).
- Structural reasons, including the scarce resort to disciplinary powers by the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha.

The analyses in the paper underscore that, while parliamentary discourse is conventionally conceived as a formal and orderly exchange of viewpoints, in practice it frequently assumes the form of contentious and heated exchanges. However, irrespective of the defiance that takes



place, democracy exists and is judged by the debate it encourages and sustains. The strength of parliamentary debate lies in the necessity of confrontation and in the existence of opposing ideas.

Nevertheless, the effective strengthening of Parliament depends on the adoption of suitable measures and the implementation of adequate solutions to curb disruptions in its proceedings. As a result, the turn-taking structure in parliamentary interactions is regulated by institutional rules and constraints. However, the extent to which these rules are adhered to or defied is influenced by the ways in which relevant factors are managed. The study investigates the defiance of the turn-taking principle in Indian parliamentary discourse and the conditions that give rise to such defiance, highlighting the flexibility with which the principle is approached in parliamentary practice.

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