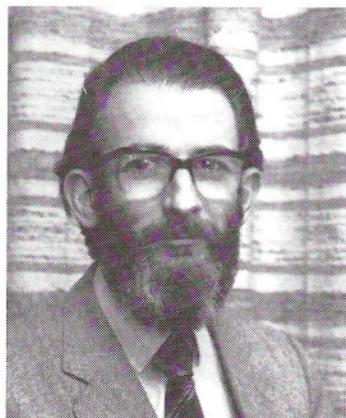


Your turn

DAVID CRYSTAL



Ned: It's quite simple, really. In a conversation, I speak, then you do, then I do, and so on. We take turns. In fact, in the linguistics literature these days, "turns" is actually, what could I call it –

Ed: A technical term.

Ned: Yeah, that's right, even though it isn't a very technical-sounding term. But the notion has produced quite a bit of research.

Ed: Hardly sounds like a fruitful research topic. I mean, obviously in a conversation we take turns to speak. Surely it's pretty well self-evident that when people are talking to each other

Ned: They don't talk at the same time, I know that. No, but there are some interesting angles. Take this one I was reading about the other day in *Language in Society*. There's a paper by Gene Lerner of the University of California at Santa Barbara on what he calls sentences-in-progress.

Ed: Sentences in?

Ned: Progress. His basic interest is in looking at a sentence which one person starts, and another

Ed: Oh yes, I see, chips in and finishes it off. I know what you mean. I've got a friend who's always doing it. You're happily making a point, and then he comes in and finishes it off for you. Uncanny, sometimes, how he's able to anticipate exactly

Ned: What you're going to say. I know. Some people are almost – almost –

Ed: Obsessive.

Ned: Yes, obsessive about it. It's as if they can't stop. I must say I find it very irritating. But Lerner's paper isn't about the obsessive types. He's suggesting that joint sentence formulation is quite common in everyday informal conversation, and that there are certain syntactic strategies which promote this kind of collaboration between speakers.

Ed: Such as?

Ned: Well, he points out that if you start a sentence with an *if*-clause, as well as some other types of adverbial clause, and I imagine especially if you're being a bit hesitant, thinking something out as you go along

Ed: The other speaker is likely to chip in and finish it off.

Ned: Exactly. And the first speaker is happy enough for this to happen, because the point is made, and

Ed: Even better, the other person is making the point for him.

Ned: Which is what any conversationalist is happy to have happen. After all, what's a conversation about otherwise, if it isn't about getting your point of view across?

Ed: And rapport.

Ned: And?

Ed: Rapport. R - A - P - P

Ned: O, R, T – oh, yes, rapport, of course.

Ed: Because when you're in an informal situation like that, I imagine this kind of thing isn't by any means restricted to just one pair of utterances. I guess you could keep on going more or less

Ned: More or less indefinitely.

Ed: Indefinitely, with people overlapping with each other all the time, too. But are there any other structures which prompt this kind of thing?

Ned: Apart from the *if*-clauses and the *like*, you mean? Yes, a quotation is another trigger, it seems. Imagine I'm telling you a story, and reporting a dialogue. I get to the point where I say, "So Joan says", and

pause. That can act as a cue for the listener to chip in with something purporting to be spoken by Joan.

Ed: Often to great effect, with laughter all round.

Ned: With laughter all round, indeed. Another example is when you're spelling something out, letter by letter.

Ed: Or number by number, I suppose

Ned: As in a telephone number, exactly, you're catching on. So, if I ask you what your telephone number is, I know you live in the same town as me, so I might begin "That's 0407"

Ed: And I finish off with 777999

Ned: Or whatever it is. Oh, and a particularly interesting one is when people are jointly making a list, such as a shopping list. There's a lot of collaborative sentence construction involved there, with first one person suggesting something, such as "beans"

Ed: And then another says "eggs".

Ned: And the first says "bread"

Ed: And so on.

Ned: With any number of people able to be involved. Difficult to know how to punctuate it all, I imagine, if you were writing it down. I mean, would you put a full-stop at the end of each contribution?

Ed: I've no idea.

Ned: Nor have I.

Ed: I wonder if there are any constraints on this kind of phenomenon – stylistic constraints, I mean.

Ned: I'm sure there are. I doubt whether you'll find very much in formal speech situations – or, at least, you'd run the risk of strong disapproval there. Can you imagine one executive finishing off another's sentences at a board meeting?

Ed: Or an interviewee finishing off an interviewer's questions.

Ned: Though in that case, there's an interesting asymmetry, as the interviewer is able to finish off the interviewee's response, if it's inadequate.

Ed: It would be interesting too to see how far

dramatic dialogue in scripted writing reflected this aspect of natural conversation.

Ned: I suspect it's not around very much, apart from the occasional bit of characterization.

Ed: When it tends to be exaggerated, I suppose.

Ned: One thing you can be sure of, you'd never find it in the pages of a serious journal. Apart from anything else, articles just aren't written in dialogue form, and even if they were the editor would never tolerate sentences-in-progress. Not unless, I suppose,

Ed: You were trying to make some kind of

Ned: Point. □

Reference

G H Lerner, 'On the syntax of sentences-in-progress', *Language in Society* 20 (3), 1991, pp. 441–58.

