

An emergence account of linguistic turn-taking?

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Turn-taking is fundamental to linguistically-mediated human interaction. Certain of its key properties are now understood, based on data in English and a few other languages. Current research is increasingly comparative, both across languages and across species. These new comparative perspectives have led to the suggestion that there may be an evolved, innate capacity for turn-taking in humans. I consider an alternative account, by which the turn-taking system emerges from a specific combination of more general aspects of human sociality.

In this paper, I explore implications for an emergence account of linguistic turn-taking arising from the following four independent observations: 1. The core unit of syntactic organization in language, and thus a core unit for the turn-constructive component, is the clause, with a predicate-argument structure grounded in a primitive cognitive tendency to focus one's attention on a thing and characterize it in some way (Hurford 2003; 2007); 2. Goal-directed behavior in humans occurs in the form of units with an average duration of a few seconds (Pöppel 1971; Schleidt and Kien 1997); 3. Events that are maximally contiguous are most likely to be interpreted as causally-conditionally related (Michotte 1963), hence the tendency toward contiguity—but not gaps or overlaps—between moves (Sacks 1992); 4. In joint activity, one's agency (both flexibility and accountability) is oriented to, and bound up in, the agency of others (Clark 1996; Bratman 1999).