



## Turns, Topics and Tyranny: Conversation Analysis and Power in Alan Ayckbourn's *Absurd Person Singular*

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**D**rawing primarily on the framework of turn management described by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), the aim of this essay is to explore the use of turn-taking and topic management strategies to demonstrate power relationships in *Absurd Person Singular* by Alan Ayckbourn. In particular, the different ways in which these strategies are employed by the characters Sidney and Ronald demonstrate the conflict between them as they struggle to gain power in the form of interactional control, all the while maintaining a veneer of conversational politeness.

### Background

According to Sacks et al (1974), all conversation is organised into turns, and these turns form the basic analytic unit in conversation analysis (Carter and Simpson, 1989). Whenever a participant begins to speak, they take a turn - if they are able to finish speaking without being interrupted, the turn ends and either the floor - the right to speak - is passed to another participant, or the conversation finishes. It is "overwhelmingly" observed that "one party talks at a time" (Sacks et al 1974: 700). The parties in a conversation deliberately enforce this rule by alternating between "active speakership" and "active listenership" in order to manage the conversation on a turn-by-turn basis and achieve their "preferred organisation" of the interaction (Zimmerman and West, 1975: 108, 111).

A turn itself is comprised of at least one turn-constructive unit, or TCU. Sacks et al (1974) describe the TCU as the smallest complete unit which could fully constitute a turn, its boundaries understood through the interpretation of syntactic and prosodic features which allow the addressee to accurately predict the unit's end. A TCU can only be described as complete when all participants recognise it as so (Coulthard, 1985). When a TCU is complete but another one is not yet initiated, there is a potential transition-relevance place (hereafter abbreviated to TRP) in the conversation where it could be possible to change speaker without interrupting a TCU (Sacks et al, 1974). Most TRPs are "natural breaks" in the conversation ranging from simple pauses to declarations of conclusion, and are places at which transition to a next speaker becomes relevant regardless of whether such change occurs (Mey, 2001: 139). At a TRP, speaker change operates hierarchically: firstly, the current speaker can select the next one directly. Should this not occur, the next speaker can self-select, and should this not occur, then the current one can leave a silence accountable to another participant, effectively selecting them non-overtly. Should this interlocutor fail to take the floor during this silence, the current speaker may continue (Sacks et al, 1974). Alternatively, a speaker can leave a silence accountable to all participants, or ignore a TRP completely and "hurry past it" (Mey, 2001: 139).

A principal method of selecting the next speaker is to introduce an adjacency pair - a ritualised structure of turns in which, after one speaker utters the first pair-part, the other is

obliged to respond with the second as it is the preferred response (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). In the case of the question-answer adjacency pair, the asker of the question has a “reserved right” to talk again immediately following the giving of the answer – if this right is used to ask another question, a “chaining” results in which question turns and answer turns could alternate indefinitely (Sacks, 1995: 264). The behaviour of a participant at a TRP is closely associated with power: “powerful speakers in conversations have the most turns, have the longest turns, initiate conversational exchanges, control what is talked about and who talks when, and interrupt others” (Short, 1996: 206-7). The introduction of an adjacency pair, which both selects a speaker and limits their choice of topic, could therefore, in some contexts, be considered an act of power. Sacks et al describe conversation as an economy, with “turns [...] being valued” (1974: 696). Negative reactions to a selection strategy can therefore demonstrate that the conversation is seen as lacking value, or act as a rebellion against displays of power: “Consistent turn-lapses on the part of a targeted other who is addressed by a speaker can signal indifference, boredom, hostility [...] even in silence.” (Herman 1998: 24) Indeed, a refusal to take the floor in response to an accountable silence can create a series of silences, indicating that the targeted speaker finds the current topic unsatisfactory and wishes to either change it or leave the conversation (Maynard, 1980). Interruptions – that is, when one participant begins speaking while the other is midway through a TCU – are a more explicit method of signalling aversion to the current speaker. An interruption is a hostile act, a “violation” which ignores the current speaker’s “right” to the floor and seizes it for another (Zimmerman and West, 1975: 123).

Within a dramatic text, therefore, it is possible to infer much information regarding a character’s status and conversational intentions from their turn-taking and topic management, particularly their behaviour at TRPs. In *Absurd Person Singular*, although the content of the characters’ utterances is mostly polite, their turn structures and topic control strategies reveal their true antagonism toward each other: it is this disjunct between explicit tolerance and implicit dislike that creates both comic irony and dramatic tension, and has led to reviewers calling the play “marvellous, excruciating” (Letts, 2007) and referring to Ayckbourn as a “shrewd social observer” (Billington, 2007).

## Analysis

The extracts I will be examining are taken from the third act, set in the kitchen of Ronald and Marion Brewster-Wright. Their friends Geoffrey and Eva Jackson are visiting them on Christmas Day, and all are morose: Geoffrey’s career as an architect is failing, while Ronald’s marriage is being strained by Marion’s alcoholism. These problems have left both couples in some way financially dependent on Sidney and Jane Hopcroft, who make a surprise visit to the house. Chagrined by the Hopcrofts’ ceaseless jollity, the others attempt to deter them by turning off the lights, hiding and pretending to be out. Nevertheless, Sidney and Jane find a way in through the back door.

*[The light goes on. SIDNEY and JANE are by the separate doors. The other four are in various absurd frozen postures obviously caught in the act of trying to find a hiding-place. JANE gives a short squeak of alarm. A long pause.]*

1 - MARION: *[eventually]*: Boo.

2 - SIDNEY: Good gracious.

3 - RONALD: *[as if seeing them for the first time]*: Ah, hallo there. It’s you.

4 - SIDNEY: Well, you had us fooled. They had us fooled there, didn’t they?

5- JANE: Yes, they had us fooled.

6 - SIDNEY: Playing a game on us, weren't you?

7 - ALL: Yes.

8 - EVA: Yes, we were playing a game.

9 - SIDNEY: Completely fooled. Walked right into that. Well, Happy Christmas, all.

10 - ALL [*lamely, variously*]: Happy Christmas.

11 - SIDNEY [*after a pause*]: Well.

12 - JANE: Well.

[*A pause.*]

13 - RONALD: Would you like a drink? Now you're here.

Although both Marion and Ron's initial utterances attempt to indicate surprise and distract the Hopcrofts from the truth, Ron's utterance at turn 3 is the first time that topic and turn-management strategies are engaged. "It's you" introduces the topic of Sidney and Jane's arrival, while "Hello there" functions as the first pair part of a greeting-greeting adjacency pair (Sacks et al, 1974). These two strategies serve to restrict Sidney's response options by encouraging him both to produce the second pair part and engage with the topic of his own arrival, allowing Ronald to evade the difficulty of having to explain why everyone was hiding. Ronald, as topic-initiator and selector of next speaker, would appear to be the most powerful speaker according to Short (1996). However, Sidney's reaction at turn 4 ignores Ron's introduction of this topic and also refuses to provide the preferred response of a reciprocal greeting. Schiffrin (1987: 125) states that the particle "Well" acts as "a response marker which anchors the speaker in an exchange [...] when options proposed by the first part of [a] pair (for idea completion, for compliance with a request) are not actualised by the second part of the pair." According to this proposal, Sidney's topic-initial "Well" can be seen as deliberately marking his refusal of Ronald's conversational power.

In this manner, Sidney acts quickly to seize control of the conversation and not only introduces the topic of the others hiding, but also advocates how that topic should be perceived and discussed by framing their actions as a prank which has "fooled" him and Jane. Tag questions are typically used by powerful speakers to dominate other participants (Coates, 1986); Sidney uses one at turn 4 to select Jane as next speaker and therefore prevents the others from taking the floor to offer any correction to his interpretation of events. Furthermore, the preferred response to the tag question is one of agreement – which Jane readily provides by repeating Sidney's words exactly. Jane does not add to the topic herself or select another speaker, implying that as far as this interaction is concerned, she is Sidney's subordinate: both of her turns simply repeat and reinforce what has already been said by her husband. Having ensured Jane's support, Sidney addresses the rest of the group in turn 6 using the same device of following a statement with a tag question. This move from discussing himself ("Completely fooled") to discussing the others ("Playing a game on us, weren't you?") could be interpreted according to Laver's framework of phatic communion (1975), which suggests that self-orientated speech is used when addressing those of higher power or status, while other-orientated speech is typical of an interaction in which a social superior addresses an inferior. Sidney wants everyone to accept his "game" interpretation of their hiding, a version of events which does not portray Sidney and Jane as the unwanted intruders which they actually are, but as cheerful and appreciated friends: this great desire to frame events as friendly rather than malicious is evident in his dedication of three separate

turns to the topic, his use of tag questions to force agreement and his self-repetition. Sidney's progression from self- to other-orientated topics could, therefore, demonstrate his increased confidence in his own status following the group's grudging acceptance that it was all, as Sidney claims, a "game".

Eva's response (turn 8) is structurally identical to Jane's at turn 5: a yes-prefaced repetition of Sidney's statement. This structural similarity indicates that, like Jane, Eva wishes to reinforce Sidney's interpretation in order to avoid offence: since she and the other characters have need of Sidney's money, they need to be polite. However, Eva's statement may also have another purpose: to encourage topic closure. Repetitions "underline what was said previously, and thus turn this into a point or a conclusion. [They] may be a signal that the speaker is not willing or able to expand on the current matters" (Svennevig, 2000: 190). By repeating Sidney, therefore, Eva may be exercising a subtle form of topic control designed to encourage closure of this potentially embarrassing topic without overtly threatening Sidney's power. In this way, topic management reveals that the characters are attempting to tolerate and even flatter Sidney without revealing that they are doing so for purely selfish reasons. Eva's technique seems effective, as Sidney closes the topic himself in the next turn and moves to that of Christmas, using well-prefacing to indicate a shift toward a topic of mutual concern (Labov and Fanshal, 1977). Wishing the others "Happy Christmas" (turn 9) initiates another adjacency pair, and Sidney again shows power by choosing who speaks next - in this case, the entire group. They are evidently reluctant to match the Hopcrofts' jollity, responding "lamely", but nevertheless give the preferred response. The polite nature of this response is however undermined by the subsequent silence between turns 10 and 11 - this "extended gap displays a lack of progressivity" (Svennevig, 2000: 190) and further demonstrates the group's lack of enthusiasm for this topic.

Schank and Abelson (1977: 248) use the term "scripts" to describe "frequently recurring social situations involving strongly stereotyped conduct" which become ritualised in the minds of their participants. Accordingly, Sidney's utterance of "Happy Christmas" could be seen as an attempt to move away from the unusual beginning of the conversation by guiding it along the stereotypical course of the Christmas script, leading to rituals such as the taking of drinks and exchange of presents. In this way, although he apparently opens up the floor to the others by giving them time to speak between turns 10 and 11, Sidney nonetheless places constraints on the form and topic of these potential turns by making them adhere to this script. His expectations are made all the more evident by his response of "Well" in turn 11: since his previous uses of this particle have marked changes in topic and "well" typically conveys a relationship between previous and upcoming topics (Heritage, 2002), his decision to employ it here is could be meant as a prompt to the others, demonstrating his will that the accountable silence which immediately follows should be filled by a Christmas-related topic: that is, a progression along the Christmas script.

In a further demonstration of Sidney's high status among the group, Ronald instigates this progression by introducing the expected topic of drinks. This script-adherence, combined with the essentially servile nature of the question, show that although he is introducing a topic and selecting a next speaker, he is again ceding power to Sidney. The justification "Now you're here" also demonstrates that the topic of drinks is only introduced for Sidney's benefit and as an expected post-arrival ritual.

The overall structure of turns in the extract provides further information on the underlying power relations. Sidney takes the majority of the turns (38%) while Eva and Jane's repetitions account for a further 26%. He also has the most average words per turn, at 6.4. Furthermore, with the possible exception of Jane's repetition in turn 12, all the other turns in the extract are directed towards him. These are all strong indicators that Sidney is the driving force behind this conversation: this control is achieved by a combination of his own

active displays of power with the obsequiousness of the others, as the next extract – which immediately follows the first – demonstrates.

13 - RONALD: Would you like a drink? Now that you're here.

14 - SIDNEY: Oh, thank you.

15 - JANE: Thank you very much.

16 - SIDNEY: Since we're here.

17 - RONALD: Well. What'll it be? [*He goes to the trolley.*]

18 - SIDNEY: Sherry please.

19 - JANE: Yes, a sherry.

20 - SIDNEY: Yes, we'd better stick to sherry.

21 - RONALD: Sherry... [*He starts to pour.*]

In this extract, Sidney's command of the conversation is further evidenced by his insistence on taking the floor whenever any other speaker makes it available. While his turns following Ronald (turns 14 and 18) are expected responses to questions, his turns following Jane (16 and 20) are not. Since these turns merely repeat that which has been said earlier, their intended purpose cannot be informative: their proximity to Jane's turns suggests that Sidney sees himself as speaking for both of them, as evidenced by the pronoun "we" in turn 16. These turns communicate nothing but this power role.

Ronald seems to be attempting to progress the script as quickly as possible, saying only as much as is necessary to provide the Hopcrofts with drinks. Turns 13 and 17 are entirely interrogative: at turn 17, Ronald uses his "reserved right" to chain questions together (Sacks et al, 1974) rather than engage in topic elaboration or phatic discourse, showing that his only goal is to serve the drinks quickly and presumably cause the Hopcrofts to leave as soon as possible. This is further reinforced by his utterance of "Sherry..." at turn 21: having received the drinks orders, this "third move" could be meant as a demonstration of understanding (Tsui, 1989: 505). However, as well as this polite function, it also acts as a "minimal token", an attempt to halt the topic by refusing to contribute to its development (Svennevig 200: 189). While Sidney has become more explicit in his demonstrations of conversational power by seizing the floor, Ronald uses the opposite strategy and rebels against this control by refusing the floor in order to shut down Sidney's topics. However, Ronald also uses direct interruption to combat Sidney, as in the following:

38 – SIDNEY [*to GEOFFREY*] Oh, yes, of course. Asking if you know old Harrison. I should think you do know old Harrison. He certainly remembers you. In fact he was saying this evening...

39 – RONALD: Two sherries.

40 – SIDNEY: Oh, thank you.

Sidney's discussion of Harrison is problematic: as Harrison contracted Geoffrey to design a building which later collapsed, wrecking Geoffrey's career, the others are keen to avoid this topic. Ronald, therefore, disrupts the topic while trying to remain civil. When he interjects at turn 39, Sidney is midway through a TCU – the interrupted sentence does not fulfil its "action potential" as it fails to report Harrison's speech (Have, 2007: 129). Since Ronald is not the

addressee, his interruption of Sidney's TCU certainly appears to be a hostile violation of Sidney's rights as a speaker (Zimmerman and West, 1975). However, Ronald is able to mask this hostility by reintroducing Sidney's earlier topic of sherry, in response to his request at turn 18. In this way, Ronald is able to change the topic while making such change appear to be a consequence of Sidney's own actions earlier. As Ronald has completed the second-pair part of the request-fulfilment adjacency pair, Sidney is obliged to produce a follow-up move of thanks (Berry, 1981) and abandon the topic of Harrison.

Since Ronald has disguised his motives for interruption as being for Sidney's benefit, Sidney cannot explicitly object. Yet a "signal of violation [...] need not be verbal or explicit" (Bilmes, 1997: 511), and at turn 40 Sidney's use of "oh" in turn-initial position conveys a shift in attention, inexplicitly demonstrating that the previous turn was inappropriate and unsatisfactory (Heritage, 1998). Though Ronald's interruption successfully draws Sidney away from discussing Harrison, he nevertheless maintains interactional control.

### **Conclusion**

The extracts examined here demonstrate that Sidney dominates this section of the play by taking the floor most often, speaking the most, and controlling not just what is discussed, but how such topics are perceived. Ronald first tries to combat this power using subtle topic-refusal but, as the struggle intensifies, he turns to less easily concealed strategies such as interruption. Yet despite these efforts, Sidney remains the dominant speaker throughout, centralised by a turn structure which forces almost everyone else to constantly address him and him alone. The futility of these challenges to Sidney's authority presages the end of the play in which his control becomes so complete that the others cannot interact with each other - they only dance, to Sidney's commands. The inability of the other couples to verbalise the conflict demonstrates their utter lack of power - what is said remains civil, respectable and ordinary, but the management of this saying reveals the characters' antagonism, ruthlessness and hapless constriction by social mores and self-interest.

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