

## A CONVERSATION ANALYSIS OF INTERRUPTION IN *SHERLOCK* SEASON 3 TV SERIES

By:

Rifadiyah Nur Maksumah  
Yogyakarta State University  
farnm29@gmail.com

### *Abstract*

This research aims to identify the types and functions of interruption in *Sherlock* Season 3 TV series. To answer the objectives of the research, the researcher used conversation analysis approach. The research employed a descriptive-qualitative method using textual analysis. The main source of the data was the video of *Sherlock* Season 3 series. The data were utterances containing interruption produced by the characters. The trustworthiness of the data was achieved through conducting triangulation via investigators. The findings of the research show that there are three types of interruption employed by the characters, i.e. simple interruption, overlap interruption, and silent interruption. Simple interruption emerges as the most dominant type of interruption while silent interruption is least employed by the characters. Three functions of interruption which consist of cooperative, intrusive, and neutral interruption appear in the data. Cooperative interruption consists of agreement, assistance, and request for clarification, while intrusive interruption is divided into disagreement, floor-taking, topic change, and tangentialization. Disagreement is the most dominant function of interruption while agreement, assistance, request for clarification and tangentialization are the least dominant functions in the series. From the analysis, it can be concluded that simple interruption is the most dominant type since the characters tend to discontinue their utterance and relinquish the floor after being interrupted. Based on the findings, it can also be concluded that the interruption in the series is highly intrusive rather than cooperative. Disagreement is the most frequently employed function since the characters are more inclined to express their disagreement immediately instead of showing support by expressing agreement or assistance to other participants' speech.

*Keywords: Conversation Analysis, Interruption, Sherlock Season 3*

### **BACKGROUND**

Talking is the primary form of interaction that people, regardless of any social groups, use the most in everyday life. Human beings engage in conversational interaction to socialize, develop and sustain relationships with each other.

Despite the vital role of conversation in social life, most early approaches to conversation did not address the importance of conversation as an ordinary and orderly instance of social

interaction. The focus of the early approaches to conversation is to determine what should or should not be done in a conversation normatively. The idea to study conversation as a social interaction which has its own structures and orders emerges in 1960s, and it leads to the development of Conversation Analysis as a field of study (Liddicoat, 2007: 2).

In conversation, it is noticeable that a change of speaker always occurs. The switch of a

speaker in conversation is known as turn. The current speaker finishes his/her talk, and s/he listens to the next speaker as the conversation progresses. The situation in which the change of speaker occurs during a conversation is called turn-taking. Turn-taking is related to the attempt of the participants to have the opportunity to speak at some point in conversation (Yule, 1996: 72).

A conversation can progress smoothly if all participants cooperate in conversation. Cooperation in conversation is managed by participants through turn-taking (Cutting, 2002: 29). Turn-taking system is designed to achieve the common code of conduct in conversation: "one speaker at a time" (Schegloff, 2000: 1). Normally, only a participant of a conversation speaks at a time, while other participants wait for their turns. The code of one speaker at a time requires the participants to recognize the appropriate time for them to take the floor.

In spite of the establishment of turn-taking principles, a violation to the turn taking principles, namely interruption, can be found frequently in a daily conversation, especially in non-formal settings. West and Zimmerman (1983: 105) state that a violation to the turn taking principles presents disruption of turns as well as a violation to the current speaker's right to speak on their turn.

Despite the naturally negative view on interruption, further studies on interruption have proven that interruption can present a positive effect in conversation. James and Clarke (1993:

239) present the idea that interruption indicates the involvement of participants in conversation. Interruption is sometimes performed by participants to contribute to the current idea discussed by the current speaker. Tannen via James and Clarke (1993: 239) concurs that interruption has cooperative function since it can be used to signal the participants' interest, enthusiasm and high involvement in conversation.

Interruption occurs frequently, not only in naturally occurred conversation in real life, but also in scripted dialogues or conversation in films, TV series, and talk shows. Although the dialogues in the previously mentioned media are not naturally produced, they are often a representation of language use in real life. Television dramas are often chosen to be objects of observations on conversation or other language studies. In this case, *Sherlock* TV series is selected by the researcher as the focus of the research.

Several aspects of interruption which should be investigated to understand the nature of interruption in conversation are its types and functions. In executing interruption, there are several ways that people possibly use. Since the occurrence of interruption varies in its execution, it can be assumed that there are several types of interruption. Accordingly, examining how interruption takes place in conversation is necessary in the analysis of interruption.

Different cases of interruption may convey different purposes in talk. Interruption is

not done arbitrarily, but it has certain intention that the interrupter wants to accomplish while doing it. There are cases of interruption which are performed by the participants in conversation which is supportive to the interrupted speaker. On the other hand, interruption can also be highly disruptive to the interruptee's speech, for example interruption that ignores another speaker's utterance by introducing a new unrelated topic. In addition to the supportive and disruptive function of interruption, an additional function which is called neutral interruption is also propounded by some literatures in interruption. In this case, analyzing interruption based on its functions is important to understand the impact of interruption in the dynamics of conversation.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The research employed a descriptive qualitative method since the data were in the form of words and texts rather than numbers. However, quantitative method is also used as an additional method to present the data in the form of numbers and percentage to create a clearer explanation about the relation between the types and the functions of interruption in the series. To analyze the data, the researcher used textual analysis to interpret the data which were in the form of verbal signs.

The data of this research were in the form of utterances containing interruption produced by the characters. Then, the main source of data is *Sherlock* Season 3. The researcher selected the

three episodes of the third season of *Sherlock* TV series.

This research also used the secondary data in the form of the transcript of the video taken from an internet source.

The researcher used some steps to analyze the data as described below:

1. Organizing and identifying the data from the video.
2. Re-watching the video and re-reading the transcript to gain more information about the data.
3. Categorizing the data by classifying them into their respective types and functions based on the relevant theories.
4. Interpreting the result by giving an explanation in the form of narrative description based on the theoretical framework.
5. Reporting the findings and the discussion and adding points of conclusion.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The total data collected in this research are 53 data. Among the four types of interruption, butting-in interruption does not appear in the conversation in the series. Simple interruption, overlap interruption, and silent interruption appear in the data with different frequencies. The most dominant type of interruption is simple interruption, which appears 37 times in the three episodes of the series, and it has a large difference in its frequency compared to other types of interruption. Overlap interruption is the second

rank which constitutes 10 data. The last rank is silent interruption which emerges 6 times in conversation. The results show that the characters in *Sherlock* Season 3 practice simple interruption most frequently in their conversation.

All functions of interruption are found in the conversation in the series, but each of them has different frequency of occurrence. From the three functions, intrusive interruption occurs in the data much more frequently than other functions of interruption. It happens 38 times from 53 occurrences of interruption.. It is followed by cooperative interruption and neutral interruption respectively. Cooperative interruption is performed by the characters in 9 cases, while neutral interruption appears 6 times.

In terms of the subcategories of the functions of interruption, disagreement has the highest number in frequency with 14 occurrences. Topic-change is in the second rank with 13 occurrences. The third position is occupied by floor-taking which constitutes 8 data. Tangentialization appears the least among the subcategories of intrusive interruption with 3 occurrences. In cooperative interruption, all subcategories which consist of agreement, assistance and request for clarification show equal results which constitute 3 data for each. It can be inferred from the research findings that the interruptions performed by the characters in *Sherlock* Season 3 TV series are more intrusive to the conversation than cooperative or neutral.

Some excerpts of dialogues which contain interruption are provided as examples to attain comprehensive descriptions of the interruption phenomena in *Sherlock* Season 3. The examples are accompanied with some explanation about the dialogues.

Simple interruption is the most commonly occurring interruption in conversation. When a speaker interrupts another speaker who is still talking, the interrupted speaker may feel distracted by the interruption. As a result, the interrupted speaker stops talking before the completion of the utterance, and he/she cannot complete the utterance since the floor has been taken by the interrupter. In the case of simple interruption, a simultaneous speech occurs as the interrupter initiates their turn while the current speaker is still talking. An example of simple interruption is presented in the following dialogue.

Anderson : Look, if you're not going to take it seriously, Laura, [**you can-**  
 Laura : **I do**] take it seriously.  
 (10/1/29:55-29:58)

The dialogue above contains simple interruption. Laura successfully takes the floor from Anderson while he is still talking. A simultaneous speech occurs during the time Anderson utters "you can" and Laura starts her utterance with "I do". After the occurrence of the simultaneous speech, Anderson gives up his turn and Laura completes her utterance.

Anderson and Laura's dialogue happens in a gathering which is set up by Anderson for

fans of Sherlock Holmes. The club is discussing theories regarding Sherlock's trick to fake his death. Laura offers her theory which includes Sherlock and Moriarty conspiring together to fake Sherlock's suicide. Anderson thinks her theory is not plausible since Moriarty is the one who schemes Sherlock and threatens him to kill himself. Thus, he assumes that she does not take the discussion seriously. Laura refutes his assumption strongly as she interrupts him to say that she takes the discussion seriously. Laura's interruption serves to show her disagreement.

Overlap interruption occurs when the interrupted speaker succeeds in finishing his/her utterance despite the interrupter's disruption in the middle of the interruptee's speech. In the case of overlap interruption, simultaneous speech and speaker switch occurs.

John : But I'm not meant to have a problem, no because Sherlock thinks it's a perfectly okay thing [to do.

Sherlock : **Shut up**] John! I don't want everyone knowing I'm still alive.

(16/1/00:37:56-00:38:04)

The dialogue displays that Sherlock performs overlap interruption when he interrupts John. It can be noticed that Sherlock initiates his speech while John is still talking. However, the simultaneous speech that occurs as John utters "to do" and Sherlock says "shut up" does not lead to a break in John's utterance because John manages to finish it. The turn exchange happens as

Sherlock continues his utterance after John's utterance reaches completion.

John and Sherlock have arguments after Sherlock surprises John with his appearance in a restaurant. John feels betrayed because Sherlock tricks him with his staged suicide while there are other people who know that Sherlock is not really dead. Sherlock tells John pointedly that he overreacts about being tricked. John yells that it is unfair that he is not even allowed to feel mad when Sherlock is the one who lies to him. Sherlock tries to hush him but John is too angry to care about his volume so Sherlock interrupts him to inform him that he does not want people to know that he is alive. Since Sherlock's interruption does not particularly aim to show support to John's utterance, and it is not intended to disrupt John's turn, the interruption belongs to neutral function of interruption.

Silent interruption is distinguished from other types of interruption by the absence of simultaneous speech. In other types of interruption, simultaneous speech always occurs when the interrupter begins his/her turn while the current speaker is still talking so they talk simultaneously. In the case of silent interruption, the interrupter initiates his/her speech when the current speaker pauses before s/he finishes his/her utterance, hence no simultaneous speech at all.

Silent interruption is the least dominant type of interruption to occur in the series. The following dialogue presents an example of silent interruption.

John : If you could see your way to (.)

Sherlock : Sir, I think you'll find this vintage exceptionally to your liking.

(4/1/00:20:23-00:20:30)

The datum above shows that Sherlock starts talking when John pauses before his utterance is completed. Accordingly, there is no simultaneous speech that occurs in the dialogue when Sherlock interrupts John. Sherlock succeeds in taking the floor from John because John does not continue his utterance after the pause, and he is able to finish his utterance.

The dialogue takes place in a restaurant. John and Mary have a dinner there and John plans to make a marriage proposal to Mary. John feels nervous so he pauses quite often as he proposes to Mary, but suddenly Sherlock who disguises himself as a waiter interrupts him. Sherlock pretends to offer wine to John without any regard to John who is in the middle of a serious talk with Mary. Sherlock's interruption aims to take the floor from John as Sherlock wants to attain his turn to speak so he can surprise John with his appearance.

The types and functions of interruptions in the series appear to be connected. Certain functions of interruption are performed using a certain type of interruption more frequently than using other types of interruption. The most dominant functions of interruption in the series, namely disagreement and topic-change, emerge more often in simple interruption. It implies that simple interruption is considered to be more effective in achieving the interrupter's intention to shift the current topic to a new one and to

express disagreement or rejection to the current speaker. The characters in the series convey their disagreement and wish for topic change using simple interruption more frequently since they feel urged to do it immediately. Thus, they tend to cut the speaker's utterance without waiting for the current speaker to pause or to reach the possible completion point in his/her utterance such as in silent interruption and overlap interruption

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

### Conclusion

There are two points of conclusion based on the findings and discussion. The first point is concerning the first research problem, i.e. the types of interruption performed by the characters in *Sherlock* Season 3. The second point of conclusion is related to the second research problem, i.e. the functions of interruption in *Sherlock* Season 3 series.

In relation to the first research problem, which is the types of interruption in *Sherlock* Season 3 series, the result displays that three types of interruption are identified. From the three types of interruption identified in the series, simple interruption is the first rank in term of the frequency. On the other hand, silent interruption records the lowest number of data.

Simple interruption is the most frequently used type of interruption in the conversation among the characters in *Sherlock* Season 3. Simple interruption is typically performed immediately as soon as the listener feels the need to convey an idea related to the ongoing topic of

conversation. Since the characters in *Sherlock* TV series are people who have close relationship and the conversation occurs mostly in non-formal setting, they usually do not hesitate to express their idea immediately without waiting for the current speaker to finish their utterance. In addition, the characters in the series tend to end their utterance prematurely when they are interrupted since they seem to prefer the conversation to follow the norm in which only a speaker speaks at a time in conversation.

Silent interruption, on the other hand, has the fewest number of occurrences in the series. Silent interruption may be infrequently performed by the characters in the series since the interrupters typically wish to address their idea related to the discussion immediately.

Regarding the second problem of the research, which is the functions of interruption in *Sherlock* Season 3 series, three functions of interruption, consisting of cooperative, intrusive, and neutral functions are discovered in the series.

The researcher learns from the result of the study that the characters frequently employ interruption with the intention of expressing disagreement. The characters in the series have different personalities, therefore disagreement frequently occurs within their conversation. In addition, since the characters have known each other for a long time, and they mostly engage in a casual conversation, the characters do not usually feel hesitant to show their disagreement or opposition openly to other participants' opinion.

In contrast, agreement interruption is among the lowest ranks. The characters in the series rarely perform interruption to show support or understanding when they share similar ideas with the speaker in conversation. The participants of the conversation in the series are more inclined in expressing opposing opinion to the current speaker's idea.

Assistance interruption emerges when a speaker experiences difficulties in articulating their idea. The characters rarely feel that they need to offer help to the speaker to express their idea. Furthermore, the characters are more likely to interrupt the current speaker to express their own ideas instead of assisting the current speaker in stating their opinion.

Request for clarification also has the lowest frequency of occurrence in the series. The characters in the series have known each other for a long time, so they are familiar with other characters' habits, speech styles, traits and behaviors. As a result, they are able to comprehend what the characters intend to convey through their utterance.

Tangentialization is another function of interruption which is least frequently used in the series. Tangentialization occurs when a listener minimizes the information which they are already aware of while it is still being discussed by the speaker. Tangentialization is also used to make light of the information which is stated by the previous speaker. The characters in *Sherlock* Season 3 rarely reiterate the information which is already known by the listeners. As a result,

the listeners rarely perform interruption to prevent the speaker from repeating the already known information.

### Suggestions

Considering the results of the research, the researcher offers some suggestions especially to the following parties. First, to readers in general, the researcher suggests the readers to examine interruption as a common phenomenon in conversation and focus on the functions of interruption. As stated by the result of this research, interruption is not always necessarily disruptive, but it can also serve cooperative functions in conversation which may create a positive impact to the conversation and personal relationships of the participants.

For the future researchers, the researcher hopes that they explore other aspects other than the types and functions of interruption, for instance, the characteristics of interruption through the analysis of prosodic features or the relationship between interruption and other variables, such as gender, social status, and personalities. Future researchers are also expected to employ other sources of data for investigation, such as talk shows, political interviews, medical consultations, classroom interactions, and so on.

### REFERENCES

- Cutting, J. 2002. *Pragmatics and Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Liddicoat, A. J. 2007. *An Introduction to Conversational Analysis*. London: Continuum.
- Schegloff. 2000. "Overlapping Talk and the Organization of Turn-taking for Conversation". *Language in Society*, 29(1), pp. 1-63.
- James, D. and Clarke, S. 1993. "Women, Men, and Interruptions: A Critical Review", in Tannen Deborah (Ed.). *Gender and Conversational Interaction*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 231-80.
- Marche, T. A. and Peterson, C. 1993. "The Development and Sex-Related Use of Interruption Behaviour", *Human Communication Research*, 19, III, International Communication Association,
- Tannen, D. 1994. *Gender and Discourse*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press. *Approaches*. San Francisco, California: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1983). "Small insults: A study of interruptions in cross-sex conversations between unacquainted persons". In B. Thorne, C. Kramarae, & N. Henley (Eds) *Language, Gender and Society* pp. 102-117. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.