

## REVIEW

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**Theresa Neumaier**, *Conversation in World Englishes: Turn-taking and cultural variation in Southeast Asian and Caribbean English* (Studies in English Language). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, Pp. xvi + 290. ISBN: 9781108838023 (e-book).

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The monograph *Conversation in World Englishes: Turn-Taking and Cultural Variation in Southeast Asian and Caribbean English* by Theresa Neumaier provides a comprehensive and detailed description of the interactional styles of two varieties of English. It clearly outlines and addresses a research gap that involves two linguistic disciplines, namely World Englishes and Conversation Analysis. While research in World Englishes has so far largely neglected interactional practices, such as turn-taking conventions, when studying and comparing varieties, previous research in Conversation Analysis has established its frameworks and findings based almost exclusively on individual varieties and languages without addressing cultural variation. Neumaier discusses the benefits of integrating research objectives and approaches from these two fields to achieve a better understanding of the extent to which communicative practices are culturally shaped across varieties of the same language, and she convincingly showcases the interplay of language, culture and interaction in two geographically remote World Englishes, namely Southeast Asian and Caribbean English.

The book includes eight chapters, starting with an introduction in chapter 1 and ending with a conclusion and outlook in chapter 8. The second chapter, ‘Investigating talk-in-interaction in culture’, provides theoretical background on Conversation Analysis and World Englishes. Chapter 3, ‘Codifying patterns of interaction’, outlines the methodology for the study whose results are presented in chapters 4, 5 and 6. Chapter 7, ‘Cooperation or fights for the floor’, discusses the dichotomy between cooperation and competition according to which interactional styles are often characterised. The book’s structure is straightforward and comprehensible, which facilitates localising points of interest for readers within the monograph. In the following, I will provide a brief summary and review of the individual chapters before commenting on the general contribution of the study and implications for future research in linguistics from a theoretical and methodological point of view.

Chapter 1, ‘Introduction’ (pp. 1–5), provides an overview of the role of World Englishes research in Asian (and African) contexts where English can be a second or

foreign language, but also a first language, to account for diverse patterns of acquisition and resulting variation in language use. Neumaier argues that variation is not restricted to structural patterns, for instance on the level of phonology or morphosyntax, but extends to broader discursive and interactional practices, such as turn-taking. Based on this, one broad and four fine-grained research questions are formulated, which generally address the extent to which conventions and norms of talk-in-interaction are universal or culture specific. A convincing case is made for integrating approaches from the two largely separate disciplines Conversation Analysis and World Englishes to answer these questions, and for conceptualising turn-taking practices in Southeast Asian and Caribbean Englishes not as deviation from standardised norms but as variation. Finally, the structure of the book is introduced.

In chapter 2, 'Investigating talk-in-interaction in culture' (pp. 6–17), Conversation Analysis and World Englishes are introduced separately as 'two scientific traditions that have not had much contact' (p. 6), before a combined discussion of theoretical and methodological differences and potentials for integration is provided. It becomes clear that Conversation Analysis is a qualitatively oriented, bottom-up field of investigation, while World Englishes takes comparative, thus often quantitative, top-down approaches to the identification and investigation of (structural) linguistic features. Neumaier outlines that these epistemological differences arise from theoretical underpinnings about conceptualising the impact of contextual and social factors, which necessarily have to emerge from the interaction in Conversation Analysis but are often predetermined in World Englishes. Nevertheless, the chapter convincingly shows that both fields share an interest in the dynamics of grammar to 'do interacting' and can thus be complementary. Since variation across World Englishes is often not a matter of categorical differences but of preference patterns that show quantitatively in relative frequencies and distribution, or qualitatively in specific contexts whose composition is, however, too complex to be quantified to the smallest detail, the suggested integration of both fields also makes sense from a methodological perspective. It is argued on the basis of previous research that comparative approaches to language use can reveal universal patterns that are realised in variety-specific ways due to structural differences and cultural impacts. In this sense, the chapter presents World Englishes as providing the overall motivation and theoretical embedding for the study at hand, while Conversation Analysis contributes the necessary frameworks and methodological tools to approach talk-in-interaction.

Chapter 3, 'Codifying patterns of interaction' (pp. 18–55), first outlines differences that in the past have been identified between the interactional styles of Southeast Asian and Caribbean speech communities and interpreted as culturally induced. Neumaier argues that culture is emergent as it is made relevant in interaction and encompasses individual and collective aspects as well as attitudinal, emotional and behavioural components. She introduces the concept of a supra-national cultural group based on empirically derived clusters which are representative of different interactional styles and proposes a cross-

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cultural instead of an intercultural approach in her study to make culturally sensitive features more apparent. In the description of her data collection and processing, issues of comparability between the used corpora are transparently discussed. In this regard, it is important to note that the conversations that are analysed for both the Southeast Asian and Caribbean groups are conducted in English, which would not normally be the language chosen by interactants in conversations among friends who do not require a lingua franca. The chosen corpora, i.e. the *Asian Corpus of English* (ACE) and two Caribbean components of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE), namely from Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, are suitable in that the data stem from similar compilation periods in the 2000s and feature face-to-face conversations that represent naturally occurring everyday interactions among proficient speakers of English. They differ, however, in so far as ACE is representative of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) diversity and not compiled for comparative studies, while the ICE components depict only the most populous Caribbean islands. For the selection of interactions to be analysed, Neumaier provides a carefully thought-out and comprehensible set of requirements to avoid imbalances and biases in the data collection as far as possible. Nevertheless, these criteria naturally restrict the amount of data and potentially introduce limitations to the comparability of the interactions considering the many factors that may cause variation, such as the number of speakers, their relationship and frequency of interaction, the length and topic of the conversation, and the role that individual interactional styles might play, and thus to the extent to which they represent the two cultural communities.

The rigour behind Neumaier's methodological decisions is, however, further corroborated in the description of the transcription and data analysis which ensues. The transcription system is sensibly chosen in line with conventions from Conversation Analysis, includes phonetic and prosodic features as far as they are conducive to the analysis, and is manually applied to the verbal transcripts provided in the corpora. Here, a useful discussion is also provided of the transcription process as necessarily selective and inseparable from the analysis, which is largely qualitative and involves nuanced decisions on coding. Neumaier discusses issues of mapping form with function to conceptualise turn-taking practices and the challenges for their quantification. She provides a detailed description of how transition relevance places (TRPs) and turn-constructional units (TCUs) are identified and treated in the analysis, including feature-based and interactional approaches and some case-by-case decisions which take the respective context into consideration. She convincingly argues that attempts 'to analyse the manifestation of culturally sensitive or variety-specific preferences in talk-in-interaction' (p. 37) from a quantitative perspective need to be combined with a qualitative analysis to avoid oversimplification or overgeneralisation. Finally, Neumaier presents an iterative and data-driven coding scheme comprehensibly justifying her choices for quantification which ensures reliability and validity and can be applied and refined in future research. From a methodological perspective, this chapter constitutes a key contribution to the integration of more qualitatively and more quantitatively oriented linguistic fields.

The findings of the study are presented and discussed in the following three chapters. Chapter 4, 'Turn allocation in Southeast Asian and Caribbean English conversations: Forms, contexts, and frequencies' (pp. 56–105), focuses on the results for answering the first two research questions about types of turn allocation and concrete realisation strategies for both cultural contexts. Some forms are found to be particularly conducive to showing functional variation, such as question tags, which are employed more frequently among Caribbeans to yield a turn to a next speaker and more frequently to hold a turn among Southeast Asian interactants. The quantitative comparison relies on a sensible integration of different types of information to contextualise types of speaker change, e.g. TRPs per minute as indication of interactional tempo, and on descriptive statistics. Neumaier critically reflects the identified group differences in light of the fact that they could not be confirmed by statistical tests.

Chapter 5, 'Turn-claiming and turn-holding in Southeast Asian and Caribbean English conversations' (pp. 106–221), focuses on concrete strategies used in two scenarios of turn allocation, namely turn-claiming as a strategy of speaker self-selection and turn-holding as a strategy of continuation. Neumaier provides a comprehensive analysis of latching and overlap, phonetic resources (i.e. clicks, volume upsteps, changes in pace, rising intonation), lexical resources (i.e. planners, address terms, particles) and syntactic resources (i.e. recycles, syntactic expansion, macro-level resources) to investigate similarities and differences in the interactional patterns of Caribbean and Southeast Asian speakers of English. The analysed forms and structures are defined, and their functions described first on the basis of the literature which mostly relates to British and American English, then outlined within the data set and illustrated with examples from the corpora which are further explained. Thereby, Neumaier provides a comparative perspective, contrasting the two varieties with each other as well as with other varieties studied in previous research. In general, most turn-claiming and turn-holding mechanisms are recognised as universal with the acknowledgement that concrete structures, i.e. realisation forms, may differ between (cultural) groups. The chapter further emphasises the importance of a qualitative analysis to avoid mislabelling where transcription conventions are ambiguous and misinterpretations based on form–function mapping may occur. These pitfalls are nicely illustrated with the example of recognitional overlaps that are potentially indicative of a competitive interactional style but do collaborative work, thus indicating cooperation, at the same time.

Chapter 6, 'Turn-claiming and turn-holding: Strategy clusters' (pp. 222–33), provides a broader quantitative comparison of complex TRPs and individual turn-taking resources. This involves a sensible restriction of focus to the main strategies for turn-claiming and turn-holding and the development of a more fine-grained coding system. Neumaier provides a transparent statistical analysis that outlines similarities and differences pointing to tendencies for both groups and cautioning the reader to view the results with a grain of salt when absolute numbers are low. The analysis is descriptive and does not include any test of significance or multi-factorial modelling,

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which is, however, understandable considering the complexity of strategies and situational factors that are carefully outlined. In general, the quantification, while simplifying and abstracting to main strategies, corroborates the qualitative findings from the previous two chapters and thus provides validation of cultural variation showing in talk-in-interaction. All three result chapters are comprehensibly structured, supported by examples from the corpora and tables of frequencies, and provide interim summaries of the main findings.

In chapter 7, 'Cooperation or fights for the floor?' (pp. 234–66), Neumaier discusses the interactional work that is done by the two speaker groups when employing the analysed strategies for turn-taking, thereby questioning and reframing cooperation and competition as main and dichotomous notions. The finding that interruptions, which are here defined according to clear parameters, are very rare among both groups, meaning that speakers generally start to speak at TRPs, seems at odds with reports and metacommunicative comments, especially about the alleged competitiveness in Caribbean speech styles. Considering that both groups behave largely cooperatively and in an orderly manner in interaction indicates a potential mismatch between a first- and second-order perspective, i.e. between how language users and the outside community perceive interactional styles and the results stemming from a systematic scientific analysis that relies on potentially unintuitive conceptualisations and categories. To analyse the use of strategies and interactional styles of the two speaker groups, Neumaier also accounts for non-occurrence, which involves the search for potential strategy initiators, and thus provides a reliable and valid illustration of how variationist sociolinguistic methodology can be applied to an analysis of talk-in-interaction. The chapter includes a comprehensible and convincing argumentation for the fact that variation on this level is a matter of realisation forms and frequency, and does not undermine the universality of turn-taking mechanisms. To address the question of whether Caribbean and Southeast Asian speakers of English show different interactional styles, Neumaier introduces a distinction between more direct and more indirect turn-claiming and turn-holding strategies which are essentially context-dependent. She points to a continuum between these strategies and thus problematises the dichotomous association of strategies with competition or cooperation, which, while being theoretically possible from an analytical perspective, conceals their co-occurrence and interplay. Her discussion of cultural variation along such a continuum cautions against misinterpreting more direct interactional strategies as competitive speech styles and thereby reiterates similar points regarding form-and-function mapping that have been made in other studies, for instance in relation to (in)directness and (im)politeness. Neumaier convincingly argues that the notion of co-competition is well suited to capture the duality between competitive and cooperative turn-taking strategies.

The last chapter, 'Conclusion and outlook' (pp. 267–71), provides a concise and useful summary of the findings that answer the research questions and of the methodological approach which involved the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods and the development of a formal coding system for turn-

taking strategies. Neumaier outlines again how language, culture and interaction are intertwined, emphasising how both World Englishes and Conversation Analysis research can be advanced by analysing cultural variation in talk-in-interaction, and provides an outlook on future research.

To summarise, *Conversation in World Englishes: Turn-Taking and Cultural Variation in Southeast Asian and Caribbean English* shows that speaker change in both cultures is systematic and orderly, following systems that have been identified for British and American English. Concretely, three types of speaker change are commonly found across interactions. However, some group preferences – for instance that Southeast Asian speakers opt more for next speaker-selection and continuation, while Caribbeans prefer to self-select – and variation in the distribution of fine-grained strategies for turn-allocation as well as for specific turn-taking strategies – i.e. turn-claiming, turn-holding and turn-yielding strategies – could be identified. Moreover, speakers generally behave cooperatively but show partly differing tendencies towards one end of the continuum between more competitive and more cooperative strategies, which might have caused more categorial perceptions and potentially misleading interpretations of cultural-specific speaking styles in the past. From a methodological perspective, Neumaier's sensible use of a mixed-method approach corroborates the necessity to combine qualitative and quantitative methods for providing a holistic understanding of cultural orientation on the level of interaction in a World Englishes paradigm. The analysis is thorough and comprehensible and can be applied to further varieties of English provided that comparable and, ideally, multimodal data are available and accessible. The study underlines the benefits of integrating two seemingly incompatible research strands in linguistics, i.e. World Englishes and Conversation Analysis, and the extent to which they can complement each other.

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