

## Mi'kmaq / Non-Mi'kmaq Conversational Turn-Taking

**Stephanie Inglis**

**ABSTRACT** Turn-taking during verbal interactions is a linguistic and cultural pattern that regulates who is to speak during a conversation and when. Conversational turn-taking includes the length of time that occurs after the speaker says something and before the person spoken to responds (Ryan & Forrest, 2019). Within the academy at this current time of 2020, diverse knowledge holders, both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous, are actively trying to share and merge knowledge epistemologies across culture and across language. Though sharing is now actively taking place much more frequently between these two groups of scholars within Canadian universities, full comprehension of what is being communicated is not always realized by both parties. This is not due to any fault on the researchers' part, but because many times two turn-taking paradigms are being used in a conversation instead of one.

**KEYWORDS** Mi'kmaq, conversation, turn-taking, Indigenous, cross-cultural, academic discourse

I am a non-L'nu, first-language English speaking linguist with a research focus on the structure of the Mi'kmaw language. I have been teaching Mi'kmaq Studies courses in Mi'kmaw linguistics at Cape Breton University for thirty years. Cape Breton University is located in Sydney, Nova Scotia, on Cape Breton Island (Unama'ki). Most of my students are L'nu<sup>1</sup> and drive to the university daily from one of the five Mi'kmaw First Nations located in Unama'ki. During the thirty years that I have been teaching L'nu and Non-L'nu students and working collaboratively with L'nu colleagues, I have been struck by what happens when two turn-taking paradigms are used in a conversation instead of one.

### **The L'nu/Cape Breton University Initiative**

For over forty years, there has been a partnership between the L'nu of Unama'ki and Cape Breton University (CBU).<sup>2</sup> The L'nu/Cape Breton University relationship began in the early

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1 L'nu is the word used by the Mi'kmaq to refer to themselves in their language. Mi'kma'ki is the nation territory of the L'nu and includes, in Canada, the provinces of Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and parts of Newfoundland. Mi'kma'ki goes as far as the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec, the north shore of New Brunswick and inland to the Saint John River watershed. Mi'kmaw unceded territory extends into eastern Maine in the United States and incorporates the French islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon (Johnson, 1996, p. 376-8).

2 Cape Breton University was formerly known as the University College of Cape Breton and before that the College of Cape Breton.

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1980s and was grounded in a vision to create for Mi'kmaw students a robust and rigorous university experience. The objective was to create an academic environment where Mi'kmaw students would be challenged, excited, invigorated, and empowered by learning linguistic and historical details relevant to their history and Indigenous knowledge. The educational goal was to create Mi'kmaw thinkers and innovators who would be able to research, study, and engage in debate about Mi'kmaw Indigenous knowledge and to be able to enter into discussions as equal players with Non-Indigenous academic researchers and Canadian governmental bodies concerning a vision for what would come next for Mi'kmaw children. The key to the success of the integration of Mi'kmaw scholarship at Cape Breton University was the focus on the Indigenous knowledge of one nation, the L'nu of Mi'kma'ki. Forty years ago, this was unique within Canada.

More than one thousand Mi'kmaw university graduates have left the doors of Cape Breton University with degrees in arts, business, science, nursing, hospitality and engineering (Indigenous Affairs — Cape Breton University, 2020). These CBU graduates have gone on to further study in law, social work, and education, as well as other graduate studies in Masters and Ph.D. programs. This has happened over a forty-year period, during which these graduates have returned to their communities. It is their children and grandchildren who we are now welcoming as students to CBU.

### **The point of my story**

I have shared the above with you so that you can position the following story of a recent CBU teaching experience. Thought this is a recent experience, it is one that I have had over and over during the last 30 years.

I was supervising a research collaboration with two colleagues from another Maritime university. We partnered two senior CBU students fluent in Mi'kmaq and who needed to do a final senior undergraduate project with three English-speaking Non-L'nu graduate students from my colleagues' university who also needed a final graduate project. Both groups of students were interested in the comparative linguistics of Mi'kmaq and English child language acquisition. The two student teams worked as a collaborative group using a research methodology based on talking circles to gather information from each other about child language acquisition in Mi'kmaq and English. The research collaboration was very successful with the five students doing a poster presentation of their work at a graduate seminar (Alex et al., 2018).

When the teams were doing their talking circles and synthesizing the information they had collected, communication took place through different mediums: in-person talking circles, video conferencing research meetings and Facebook chats. The Facebook page was a closed working group which the students set up among themselves. As one of the supervisors, communication seemed to me to flow most coherently when the students exchanged their research findings on their Facebook page. The five students were all female, with the graduate students being a bit older than the undergraduate students. The CBU research team members were first-language Mi'kmaw speakers who had grown up in Mi'kmaw speaking households with parents and several grandparents who held university degrees. The graduate student

research team members were all first-language English speakers who had a least one university degree. One might think that there would not have been too much of an impediment for these two groups to work together. There was, however, one noticeable thing that occurred: the length of time it took for a person to begin to speak after another person had just spoken varied within the two groups of researchers. The first-language English speaking student researchers exhibited a faster conversational turn-taking time than the turn-taking time being used by the first-language speaking Mi'kmaw student researchers. The conversational turn-taking time employed when all the researchers talked together as one group was not in sync.

### **Conversational Turn-Taking**

Conversation is an everyday process, and one about which we seldom think. It is governed by several principles, one being turn-taking (DeVido, 2014, p. 123). During verbal interactions, turn-taking is a linguistic and cultural pattern that regulates who is to speak during a conversation and when. Turn-taking refers to the length of time that occurs after the speaker says something and before the person spoken to responds (Ryan & Forrest, 2019).

Stivers et al. (2009, p. 5), in their comparative study of turn-taking in ten very diverse languages found “that turn-taking in informal conversations is universally organized so as to minimize gap and overlap...” However, they also found that “the regimentation of [turn-taking] tempo within a culture is tight, and that we come to expect a particular interactional rhythm...” Slight departures from the expected turn-taking creates an emotional unease in the speaker. “Speakers become hypersensitive to perturbations in timing of responses, measured in 100 ms or less” (Stivers et al., p. 5).

Returning to the senior CBU L'nu speaking students who teamed with the non-L'nu graduate students to do research, what happened was that the conversational turn transition speed for the Non-L'nu students was faster than that of the L'nu students. It was only a slight difference in response time, and as the students were not researching conversational turn-taking, quantitative measurements of turn-taking gaps were not taken. None the less, the difference was observable within the dynamics of face-to-face conversations. There was a subtle enough difference in conversational response timing that the L'nu students felt as if they were being cut off just as they were about to respond to a non-L'nu speaker. Once we had a group discussion with all the student researchers about conversational turn-taking theory, it was interesting how quickly the information-sharing became more balanced. It was only by discussing conversational turn-taking transition speed and making what had hither to been unconscious conscious that more in-depth information sharing began to emerge between the research teams. The L'nu students realized that the Non-L'nu students were not trying to cut them off but were only trying to ease what they perceived to be conversational tension. After our discussion on turn-taking the Non-L'nu students tried to wait a little longer after they had spoken before beginning to speak again, thus, giving their L'nu research colleagues time to respond and engage.

Suppose we as L'nu and Non-L'nu scholars learn from each other's knowledge epistemologies and work as team academics. In that case, we have to be sensitive to each other's conversational

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turn-taking rules. Some of us might have to force ourselves to “wait a little bit longer,” perhaps to the point of emotional discomfort, to allow the person addressed to respond before we, the speakers, begin to speak again. Some of us need to be aware that our colleagues are not consciously trying to cut us out of the conversation by seemingly cutting us off just as we are about to respond. Perhaps this is why Indigenous information sharing was often grounded in a talking circle which, in actuality, is a listening circle; while keeping a “speakers list” during Euro-centric academic meetings was developed as a way to avoid “over talk,” i.e. conversations with zero turn-taking transitions. In zero turn-taking transitions, the next speaker starts talking before the first speaker has finished.

## **Conclusion**

As we begin to decolonize the academy, it allows for academics from many different cultures, language backgrounds, and epistemological positions to be heard within the same “research conversation.” As academics, we first have to consciously become aware of the sociolinguistic patterning that each of us brings to the “act of having a conversation.” The rules of verbal discourse used to transmit Indigenous versus Euro-centrally framed knowledge are not the same.

To share information verbally within a group so that all in the group understand the content of the information, speakers within the group need to be following the same conversational paradigms. As we strive in academia toward creating a trans-systemic Indigenous knowledge system that will stand on its own as a recognized epistemology and will take the best of both Indigenous and Euro-centric thought, we have to learn to communicate effectively; otherwise not all voices are heard. Little Bear (2009) states that, “epistemology speaks to theories of knowledge: how we come to know. How we come to know, in essence, is a methodology or a validation process. For Aboriginal peoples, knowledge is validated through actual experience...” (p. 10).

It is the experiential process of face-to-face dialogue that occurs between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous academics, in real-time, that will create trans-systemic Indigenous knowledge. The challenge then becomes how to make one set of conversational turn-taking rules which can be used to ground our real-time, face-to-face conversations.

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## About the Author

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