



**Identifying the Register Demolishing Hierarchy in American Discourse through Transition  
Relevance Place: *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

In discourse, Transition Relevance Place (TRP), which transpires when the speaker changes in turn-taking, indicates numerous issues about participants' relationships, intentions, and roles in that conversation. For example, silence has the power to signal various concerns, ranging from comfort to awkwardness. Overlapping might mean cooperation or challenge depending on the context. Besides, etiquette in a conversation is scrupulously observed in formal exchanges, and interrupting the speaker is considered a severe violation of etiquette in conversations. Interlocutors tend to obey the sequences of transition in conversations, and exceptions are functional as participants of a conversation perceive them as divergent from the expected flow. In this sense, TRP is rather observable in a register regarding the possible effects it might contribute to it. As an area of sociolinguistics, register defines language use proper to a particular function in a context. Therefore, this study will argue that in an American comedy sitcom, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, the interlocutors reconstruct the usual formal register by demolishing hierarchy through TRP.

**Keywords:** Register, Discourse, Transition Relevance Place.

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## **Literature Review**

Discourse is defined as the study of "any aspect of language use" (Fasold, 1990: 65). As language use in either spoken or written form, discourse is a social practice (Fairclough, 1992). Taking into account the variables related to this practice, discourse and its analysis, therefore, incorporate a wide range of phenomena and "it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs" (Brown & Yule, 1983:1). Discourse as language use in human affairs constitutes the social aspect of communication and is shaped by "relations of power, and invested with ideologies" (Fairclough, 1992: 8). As sister disciplines, both discourse and pragmatics focus on language use, and discourse processes cannot be detached from pragmatics (Campo, 2008). Therefore, in terms of power relations, the impact of context on discourse is highlighted via pragmatics as a social phenomenon. Pragmatics is "the study of how context affects meaning" (Fromkin et al., 2007: 175). Trask (2007) highlights that "outside the USA, the term pragmatics is often used in a much broader sense, so as to include a great number of phenomena that American linguists would regard as belonging strictly to sociolinguistics: such as politeness, narrativity, and the signalling of power relations" (227). It is seen that "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, 1997: 206-207). Trask (2007) also states that "the operation of turn-taking and the different ways in which keeping a turn, giving up a turn and interrupting indicate power dynamics have generated interest from discourse analysts and sociolinguists" (309).

In a conversation, Transition Relevance Place (TRP), which transpires when the speaker changes, indicates numerous issues about participants' relationships. For example, "silence can signal familiarity and comfort, or awkwardness. Overlaps can be supportive and cooperative, or challenging" (Gibbons & Whiteley, 2018: 83). Besides, conversational etiquette is scrupulously observed in formal exchanges, and interrupting the speaker is considered a severe violation of etiquette (Ardila, 2004). Interlocutors tend to obey the sequences of transition in conversations, and exceptions are functional as participants perceive them as divergent from the expected flow (Enfiled & Sidnell, 2014). In this sense, TRP is pretty observable in a register regarding the possible effects it might contribute to it. Register, a part of sociolinguistics, "describes the kind of language use appropriate to a particular function in a context" (Carter &

Simpson, 1989: 287). This study will argue that the interlocutors in an American comedy sitcom reconstruct the usual formal register by demolishing hierarchy through TRP.

## **Methodology**

In this study, a section from season 1 and episode 3 from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, an American sitcom, is analyzed with regard to transition relevance place (TRP). In the 4.25-minute video taken from the sitcom, the venue is a police department in New York, where social relations are expected to be established by a strict hierarchal system. There are eight interlocutors in total, and the active speaking time is 3.1 minutes, which allows observing and recording the pragmatic features of discourse with multi-participants from different hierarchical statuses. The results are logged in a table displaying the quantitative data, and in order to ease the interpretation, the interlocutors are listed regarding their ranks align with the hierarchy most commonly found in police organizations.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The selected section for analysis displays the context of a superior-subordinate relationship of officers at a police station where different interlocutors (n=8) are observed. The section lasts for 3.1 minutes and the highest share of speaking time (f=1.58) belongs to the main character, a police officer, Jack Peralta. The table below displays the interlocutors' names and ranks, as well as the data on the speaking time, turn-taking, and initiation:

**Table 1:** Speaking time, turn-taking and initiation

Names	Raymond Holt	Terry Jeffords	Amy Santiago	Jack Peralta	Rosa Diaz	Charles Boyle	Norm Scully	Gina Linetti	Total
Ranks	Captain	Sergeant	Police Officer	Police Officer	Police Officer	Police Officer	Police Officer	Secretary	∞
Speaking Time	0.30	0.21	0.47	1.58	0.11	0.17	0.15	0.11	3.1
Turn-taking	8	2	7	12	6	5	1	1	42
Initiation	1	1	2	4	-	1	-	1	10

The second highest speaking time (0.47 sec.) belongs to another police officer, Amy Santiago. Contrary to the expectations from a formal context, these two officers talk longer than the higher status officers, and when these two participants are excluded, the rest of the data indicates that the speaking timeshare follows a parallel pattern with the ranks and the highest rank has the highest timeshare in the conversations. In addition, the questions are asked by the superiors in general and replied by police officers in lower ranks, as given in the example extract below:

Sergeant Jeffords: "All right, let's get started. Scully, where are you on digitizing the old case files?"

Scully: "As of yesterday, I'm officially 1% done."

Initially, it seems that the higher ranks are the power holders of conversations. The Sergeant also proves that he has the authority to start and end the conversation by only saying "dismissed." Nevertheless, examining the speaking time of characters, in the total number of turn-taking (f=42) and initiation (f=10), Jack Peralta, the police officer, has the most significant role in both turn-takings (f=12) and initiation (f=4). He speaks for almost two minutes, takes turns twelve times. He is the one who starts the conversations mostly. As an example of Peralta's initiation; when the Captain comes next to Peralta's desk to warn him about his unsolved cases, Peralta initiates; "Wait...before you say anything, I want to guess what happened, based on your face. Someone died...No! you won a prize! I'm not getting better at this". Thus, he also slightly ironizes the Captain's nonreactive face while maintaining control by initiating the conversation. Although he

is in a lower position in the hierarchy when compared to Captain Holt and Sergeant Jeffords, it is seen that he controls the conversations in the context of American comedy and foregrounds as the starring character.

In terms of other features of TRP, overlapping, interruption, and silence signal the dynamic power relations. The turn-taking paradigm demonstrates that people avoid overlapping in a proper conversation (Enfield & Sidnell, 2014). Thus, there is no overlapping recorded in the analysed section since the conversations are more likely in question and answer structure. In this context, it is seen that the interruptions (f=4) are made mainly by the most titled people, such as Captain Raymond Hold (f=2), as displayed in the table below:

**Table 2:** Overlapping, Interruption, and Silence

Names	Raymond Holt	Terry Jeffords	Amy Santiago	Jack Peralta	Rosa Diaz	Charles Boyle	Norm Scully	Gina Linetti	Total
Rank	Captain	Sergeant	Police Officer	Police Officer	Police Officer	Police Officer	Police Officer	Secretary	∞
Overlapping	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Interruption	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	4
Silence	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	4

In accordance with his rank, the Sergeant also has the power to interrupt (f=1) police officers' conversations. When the police officers are in the middle of their conversation, the Sergeant interrupts the conversation and utters, "All right, let's get started."

Interruption (f=4) is also used to emphasize reducing superior-subordinate communication by Gina Linetti (f=1). Even though she, as the secretary, takes place at the bottom of the hierarchal system in the police department, she recklessly interrupts the conversation between Amy Santiago and Rosa Diaz to ask if they need help. However, it does not entirely bring her a powerful position in the conversation since Amy Santiago, the senior police officer, declines Gina Linetti's interruption (f=1) by saying, "I don't need your help, it's nothing personal, it's just...you're not a cop". Although

her interruption fails, this circumstance illustrates how it is possible to attempt to diminish the hierarchal system in the subordinate role in the context of the American register.

Another case that points out diminishing the hierarchy is the function of silence. The silence is used twice by Captain as a response to Peralta's disrespectful attitude towards the Captain. A dialogue between Captain Holt and police officer Peralta is given in the context of silence below:

Peralta [imitating old lady]: "That's my grandson."

Captain: "What did I say about doing voices?"

Peralta: "I'm a storyteller, sir. It's my craft. Anyways, grandson's coming in. They reunite, and I throw another case on the old "solved it" pile...

Hey, my croissant.

[heavy thuds]

[crunch]

Captain [keeps silence]

It is seen that silence is Captain Holt's only reaction to Peralta's unprofessional attitude while mentioning an old lady and the croissant in his messy desk with the falling case folders. Another silence ( f=1) coming up in the conversation between the Captain and another police officer is when Santiago diminishes the formality of the conversation. After the Captain gives her the duty of encouraging children to be police officers within a community outreach program, she utters nonsense sentences that do not sound formal because of her excitement:

Santiago: "I won't just head it up, I will head and shoulders it up. I will dive in, swim around it, and just be altogether good with it."

Captain: "Be more articulate when you speak to the children."

Santiago: "Yes, sir, I will make better mouth."

Since Santiago's maintaining informal sentences do not end after the Captain's reaction, he keeps silent to show her awkwardness. Moreover, Captain Holt might notice the diminishing hierarchal system in this police department that he is just appointed, yet he cannot sharply interfere with the existing system.

This sitcom displays an Americanized register in which the hierarchal structure is reduced. The expected formal register, which comes with the superior-subordinate relationship in a police department, is broken down. That is, the role of the subordinate comes closer to the superior one.

In return, Captain Raymond Holt comes with a strategy that he withdraws from the conversations by his silence (f=2) to indicate the awkwardness of the irrelevant attitudes of the police officers. Although this strategy works for Santiago, it does not change Peralta's behaviors towards the Captain. As the most irresponsible person who does not like and accept to obey formality, Peralta has a function to threaten the formal hierarchical system through American comedy. Therefore, he becomes as powerful as the Captain in the conversion process.

## **Conclusion**

Since discourse analysis through TRP enables "to examine the linkage between the social structures" and shows how "the distribution of power relations" may appear (Douifi, 2018: 29), the elements of TRP in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* reveal the increasing power of lower ranks in the conversation and the reducing power of higher positions in the context of the police department through sitcom genre. The elements of conversational exchanges such as turn-taking, interruption, and initiation function to expose how hierarchy is diminished through discourse in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. The hierarchal structure, which is expected to be strict in a police department, is demolished. Thus, as the titled person in this context, the Captain only reacts to such cases with his 'silence.' As Short (1997) also indicates, the most extended turns and initiations signal power relations. The Captain, the expected power holder, still has the authority to interrupt others as he has the highest rank in the police department. It is seen that Jack Peralta, as the police officer, becomes a power holder since he is the one who has the most extended turns and initiations. Therefore, the Captain's control is reduced in the dialogues. In other words, power is revealed in a dynamic structure in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. *Even though the Captain is the authority in that community, he cannot keep absolute control over his police officers and only reacts by keeping silent.* As Douifi (2018) also argues, TRP (Transition Relevance Place) enables us to examine power relations and how these relations are distributed.

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