

Conversational Repair Strategies in Managing Gaps and Overlaps among Selected Characters in Sidney Sheldon's "If Tomorrow Comes"

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Abstract

The qualitative content analysis paper examined the conversational repair strategies of three main characters to resolve interactional gaps and overlaps in Sidney Sheldon's novel *If Tomorrow Comes*. In particular, the analysis was based on the conversations of Tracy Whitney, Charles Stanhope, and Jeff Stevens, which were evaluated with the Conversation Analysis (CA) framework by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). An inspection of selected conversations in chapters 1-5 and 30-34 demonstrated that the sources of trouble were mainly pragmatic non-cooperation and control of information. Information gaps (34.00%) were the most common, followed by comprehension gaps (32.00%). Interpretation overlaps (38.24%) were the most common type of overlap. The primary type was other-initiated other-repairs (OIOR). Self-initiated other-repairs (SIOR) were absent. The strategies of turn-taking shifted from imposing interactional control on the character under emotional stress in Chapter 1 to more sophisticated management in Chapter 34. These results indicate that conversational repair is employed as a stylistic feature to represent character interaction, power dynamics, and plot progression. The coding demonstrated high inter-coder reliability with 90% agreement for both gaps and overlaps. Overall, the analysis showed that conversational repairs are key to the novel's depiction of interaction, power, and narrative progression.

Keywords: *Conversation analysis, strategic communication, repair strategies, conversational gaps and overlaps, self-initiated, self-repair (sisr), self-initiated, other-repair (sior), other-initiated self-repair (oisr), other-initiated other-repair (oior).*

Bio-profiles

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Introduction

Rationale

Communication is central to human interaction, but conversations often involve pauses, interruptions, misunderstandings, gaps, and overlaps. Turn-taking helps speakers manage these issues, while conversational repair lets them correct errors, seek clarification, and restore understanding (Khademi, 2022; Sidnell & Stivers, 2022; Liddicoat, 2021).

Although researchers have widely studied conversational repair in natural speech, they have paid less attention to literary dialogue. This study examines Sidney Sheldon's *If Tomorrow Comes*, focusing on Chapters 1–5 and 30–34 and on three key characters: Tracy Whitney, Charles Stanhope, and Jeff Stevens. Using Conversation Analysis, the study examines how gaps, overlaps, and repairs reflect conflict, power, and changing relationships. It also explores how features of written dialogue, such as punctuation and reporting clauses, represent interactional patterns in fiction (Paltridge, 2021).

This study explores the conversational breakdown and repair in Sidney Sheldon's novel *If Tomorrow Comes*. By taking the example of the three main characters- Tracy Whitney, Charles Stanhope, and Jeff Stevens- and ten chapters, the present paper gives a detailed illustration of how conversations may be interrupted and resolved in real life.

Literature Review

This section presents the body of knowledge on conversational repair strategies, with emphasis on narrative and fictional discourse. This combination of skills, also known as strategic competence, becomes more relevant because it addresses communication breakdowns caused by conversational gaps and overlaps.

Turn-Taking Mechanics and Repair Preference Order

Turn-taking is fundamental because it shapes how we organize conversations. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) describe turn-taking as a locally organized process, managed in interaction and responsive to participants' needs. Moreover, they point out that speakers must design their turns so that they provide a point of departure for someone else to speak, and those turns may contain gaps before the next participant speaks or overlap with it. Sacks et al. (1974)



argue that gaps and overlaps are part of the organizing mechanisms of conversation, not deviations from them.

Repair is closely related to the notion of turn-taking because difficulties with speaking, hearing, or understanding interfere with the conversation's flow; Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977) note that repair is a systematic process, and self-repair is preferred to other-repair. In other words, if there are problems in communication, these are usually resolved by one of the participants who has an issue, as opposed to a third party. Either the speaker or the recipient has the ability to repair the turn, and either of the two may complete it. Repair is used to maintain intersubjectivity: Schegloff (1992) showed that speakers have opportunities to deal with misinterpretations while this process takes place.

Preference organization also plays a role in explaining how the speakers deal with responses and social relations. Preferred responses tend to be direct and require less interactional effort, while dispreferred responses usually entail some form of delaying, hesitation, explanations, and other mitigating devices. Moreover, more recent studies in conversation analysis have also demonstrated that preference organization may also be found in fictional interaction as well as in conversational ones. For instance, Lee (2018) illustrated how preferred and dispreferred responses in a television sitcom were used to construct character personalities and relationships. This suggests that turn-taking and repair mechanisms can have representational functions as well as interactional ones in fictional discourse.

Narrative and Fictional Discourse in Conversational Analysis

CA was initially developed from the study of naturally occurring talk. However, it is increasingly common for its concepts to be applied to fictional dialogue. Research on fictional discourse takes into account that literary conversations are not spontaneous but constructed. Nevertheless, authors use recognizable patterns of turn-taking, sequence, repair, and response to create the impression of meaningful interaction and social plausibility. Fictional dialogue is not merely a representation of interaction; it is a narrative device that shapes characterization, relationships, and the larger design of a literary work (Koivisto & Nykänen, 2016).

The value of examining these patterns at the interactional level is illustrated in studies that apply CA to fictional discourse. For example, Kim (2010) showed how dialogue is instrumental in constructing narrative structure through turn-taking, adjacency pairs, and repair. More recently, Okazawa (2024) showed that repair practices in fictional interaction can build character attributes and reveal relationships between characters. These studies suggest that gaps, overlaps, repair, and response patterns can be studied not only as imitations of real conversation but also as deliberate resources through which authors construct character, conflict, identity, and narrative movement.



Synthesis

Turn-taking and repair are systematic interactional features in the literature. The first manages access to the floor (turn-taking), whereas the second represents possible ways that speakers seek to manage problems of speaking, hearing, or understanding; self-initiated repair is preferred. Preference organization principles can be identified by focusing on response shape and timing, which, by their turn-taking properties, reflect social relations and expectations.

Work on fictional discourse extends these insights, demonstrating that conversational mechanisms can be literary resources. Fictional dialog is the product of an author, but its interactional patterns can still reveal information about character relationships, power, identity, conflict, and narrative development. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the combined analysis of gaps, overlaps, and repair in extended novelistic dialog. This gap justifies using CA in this study of conversational breakdown and repair practices in *If Tomorrow Comes* and how they function to develop the novel's characters and plot.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study builds upon the framework of Conversation Analysis (CA). Specifically, this paper draws on the seminal work by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) entitled *A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation* and the repair framework proposed by Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977). The CA approach is premised on the notion of conversation as an orderly social institution in which speakers take turns, respond to each other's utterances, and implement repair mechanisms when problems occur. The turn-taking organization of conversation provides the foundation for investigating the phenomena of gaps and overlaps by which the speakers signal their intentions to gain control of the floor.

The repair framework also describes how speakers identify and repair problems in speaking, hearing, or understanding. It distinguishes repair by who initiates and who completes it: self-initiated self-repair, other-initiated self-repair, self-initiated other-repair, and other-initiated other-repair. This study adopts these categories as a basis for identifying and analyzing the repair strategies used by Tracy Whitney, Charles Stanhope, and Jeff Stevens when interactional gaps and speaker overlap occur.

Applied to Sheldon's *If Tomorrow Comes*, CA enables the study of fictional dialogue at the level of interaction. While the conversations are the author's, the turns, gaps, overlaps, and repair sequences of the characters may reveal how they cope with misunderstanding, manage information, negotiate relationships, and respond to interactional trouble. The framework, therefore, offers a systematic basis for exploring how conversational repair facilitates character interaction, power relations, and the unfolding of narrative.



Objectives

This study aimed to analyze the conversational repair strategies used in managing gaps and overlaps among selected characters in Sidney Sheldon's "If Tomorrow Comes." Specifically, it sought to determine: 1) the conversational gaps evident among the selected characters in Chapters 1-5 and 30-34; 2) the conversational overlaps evident among selected characters in the selected chapters of the novel; 3) the conversational repair strategies used by the selected characters (Tracy Whitney, Charles Stanhope, and Jeff Stevens) to manage conversational gaps; and 4) the conversational repair strategies used by the selected characters to manage conversational overlaps.

Methodology

This section describes the study design, participants, data sources, instruments, and procedures. The systematic collection and analysis of data shows the credibility, rigor, and reproducibility of the research.

Research Design

The study is qualitative and employs content analysis and quantitative frequency coding of text elements. The written literary dialogues were analyzed using the CA coding framework proposed by Schegloff et al. (1977). Specifically, the DDA analysis examined turn-taking structure, trouble sources, and repair preferences.

Corpus and Data Sources

The main database for this study was formed by 84 particular events extracted from the ten chapters of Sidney Sheldon's If Tomorrow Comes. These chapters were selected based on their content and the presence of multiple interactions within them. For example, chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 illustrate early interactions characterized by severe stress, institutional conflicts, and vulnerability. At the same time, chapters 30, 31, 32, 33, and 34 present events with late interactions marked by modified relationships, strategic deceptions, and empowered parties.

Because the source materials to be analyzed were printed literature, not audio recordings, the Jeffersonian transcription conventions (such as indicating specific pause lengths, measured in milliseconds, and loudness levels of the speaker's voice) were unavailable. The researchers determined breaks in narration using punctuation marks (such as em dashes or ellipses), narrative attributions, and descriptive clauses.



Table 1

Analytical Framework & Coding Matrix

Code	Repair Strategy	Operational Definition	Coding Indicators
SISR	Self-Initiated Self-Repair	Speaker identifies and resolves trouble in their own utterance without assistance.	Self-correction, re-starts, reformulations, hesitation pauses followed by correction.
SIOR	Self-Initiated Other-Repair	Speaker recognizes difficulty and explicitly prompts the listener for help.	Prompts like "What's the word?" are direct requests for help.
OISR	Other-Initiated Self-Repair	The listener flags a problem in the utterance; the original speaker provides the repair.	Clarification requests ("What?", "Who?"), confirmation checks.
OIOR	Other-Initiated Other-Repair	The listener identifies the problem and directly supplies the correction/completion.	Direct corrections, supplying missing facts, finishing another's statement.

Rigors and Reliability

To establish analytical trustworthiness, inter-coder validation was conducted. Randomly selected dialogue excerpts were reviewed by three independent English language majors. Inter-coder agreement reached 90.00%, yielding a Fleiss' Kappa of 0.82, indicating "Almost Perfect Agreement" under the Landis and Koch scale.

The research was conducted using census sampling for all conversational exchanges of three main characters: Tracy Whitney (the protagonist, whose conversations shift from distress to strategic control), Charles Stanhope (a major player in early institutional and personal exchanges), and Jeff Stevens (whose exchanges with Tracy include trust, romance, and deception). The analysis was focused on the micro level of core conflicts and opposing modes of talking. All the dialogues of these characters from the ten selected chapters were analyzed for this purpose.

Results and Discussion

This section presents, analyzes, and interprets the data gathered to carry out the predetermined objectives of this study. To recall, this paper aimed to determine the conversational repair strategies used to manage gaps and overlaps between interlocutors in the novel *If Tomorrow Comes*. Across the ten analyzed chapters, 84 total interactional events were identified and coded. There were 50 conversational gap events and 34 conversational overlap events.



Conversational Gaps and Overlaps

Table 2

Conversational Gaps

Gap	Events	Percentage
Information	17	34
Comprehension	16	32
Grammatical	14	28
Lexical	3	6

Table 2 shows information and comprehension gaps predominated, proving that conversational troubles in the text stemmed primarily from strategic withholding, misinterpretation, or knowledge asymmetry rather than language acquisition deficits. This interpretation is in line with studies that have shown that asymmetries in knowledge can affect interaction and that misunderstandings may emerge due to differences in the way interlocutors access, interpret, and negotiate information (Kim, 2019; Yus, 1999).

Up next is Table 3, illustrating conversational overlaps observed in the novel *If Tomorrow Comes*.

Table 3

Conversational Overlaps

Overlap	Events	Percentage
Interpretation	13	38.24
Turn-taking	10	29.41
Topic	8	23.53
Semantic	3	8.82



Table 3 summarizes the conversational overlaps in Seldon's novel *If Tomorrow Comes*. As illustrated, interpretation overlaps were most common, showing that character conflicts centered on competing meanings assigned to statements, actions, and events. This means that character conflicts often revolved around competing interpretations of statements, actions, and events. This finding aligns with studies suggesting that conversational participants negotiate situated meanings when they have different interpretations, which may result in interactional misalignment or misunderstanding (Myrendal, 2019; Robles, 2017).

This section now brings the spotlight to the repair strategies used to manage conversational gaps.

Repair Strategies Deployed

Table 4

Repair Strategies Used to Manage Gaps

Repair	Events	Percentage
Other-Initiated Other-Repair (OIOR)	23	46
Self-Initiated Self-Repair (SISR)	19	38
Other-Initiated Self-Repair (OISR)	8	16
Self-Initiated Other-Repair (SIOR)	0	0

Table 5

Repair Strategies Used to Manage Overlaps

Repair	Events	Percentage
Other-Initiated Other-Repair (OIOR)	21	61.76
Self-Initiated Self-Repair (SISR)	8	23.53
Other-Initiated Self-Repair (OISR)	5	14.71
Self-Initiated Other-Repair (SIOR)	0	0



Dominance of Other-Initiated Other-Repair (OIOR)

Classical Conversation Analysis asserts a baseline structural preference for self-repair (SISR) to preserve social solidarity and avoid face-threatening acts. However, the corpus results show that OIOR was the dominant repair mechanism for both gaps (46.00%) and overlaps (61.76%).

The difference between the two categories is due to the context in which fictional suspense dialogues take place. The speakers who are in the dominant positions in the conversation (judge, warden, doctor) use OIOR to impose their will on others and get direct compliance from the other party, which establishes control over the institution. Tracy and Jeff use this strategy in the following chapters to mislead and redirect the conversation to retain the dominant position.

Complete Absence of Self-Initiated Other-Repair (SIOR)

The total absence of SIOR (0.00%) across all chapters can be explained by the phenomenon found in the research. Cases where a character asks for help/facts/translation lead to admitting a lack of knowledge/assumptions. Such situations seem unacceptable in the setting of rivalry and hostility. Instead, the characters want to cover their weaknesses and protect themselves so the competitor does not gain an advantage.

A comparison of the Language used in Chapters 1-5 and 30-34 reveals Tracy Whitney's progress in achieving interactive competence: Early Block (Chapters 1-5): gaps and overlaps are filled with emotions of trauma, powerlessness, and disenfranchisement. Tracy talks with false starts, being cut off, and cutting others off in favor of the upper authorities. Later Block (Chapters 30-34): gaps and overlaps are generally more frequent, yet different in nature, signifying Tracy's tactical use of avoidance to allow another, or be allowed by another, to monopolize the floor, conduct repair of floors, guide overhearing groups, and carry out complicated operations.

Conclusion

Literary breakdowns in *If Tomorrow Comes* are pragmatic in nature, focusing primarily on information management, dominance, and differences in interpretation rather than on grammatical or lexical issues. In addition, these conversations illustrate the reverse of the CA preference for self-repair, as goals or expectations take priority over maintenance. Moreover, the high-stakes fictional conversations use OIOR (other-initiated other-repair) to assert dominance, pursue deceptive goals, and achieve other secondary objectives. Finally, it should be noted that conversations are used extensively to develop character, as the changing patterns of repair within different chapter divisions are directly correlated with the character's learning process in communication. Overall, the study suggests that Conversation Analysis can be useful for strategic language learning, English teaching, literary writing, and discourse research by giving practical



insights into how speakers and characters manage conversational breakdowns and negotiate meaning.

Acknowledgment

This article is a token of sincere gratitude and appreciation to the people who were a great help to the researcher throughout the research and writing of this study. In particular, the researchers would like to extend their deepest gratitude to Dr. Lilybeth P. Eslabon, Dr. Renith Guanzon, Dr. Wilfredo O. Hermosura, and Dr. Mary Leanne Laganhon for their invaluable time and effort in reviewing this paper. Above all, thanks to God Almighty for the wisdom and strength to finish this humble work

Authorship Contribution Statement

Abellana-Magalona: Concept and design, literature review, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. **Asistido:** Editing, reviewing, supervision, and material support.

Conflict of Interest

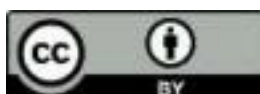
The authors of this article claim that there is a conflict of interest that may have affected the contents and/or conclusions of this paper. They also argue that they have no financial, personal, or professional relationships with other persons or organizations that could have negatively influenced the objectivity, integrity, or impartiality of the research work. Finally, none of the outside parties influenced the study design, data collection, analysis, or the interpretation of results.

AI Declaration Statement

This work was created with the help of artificial intelligence. About 30% of the work in terms of phrasing, structuring statements, and polishing the design was done by the AI. The underlying ideas and concepts, as well as the overall thinking behind the work, are the researchers' work.

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