

The Role of Turn-Taking in Character Portrayal: A Case Study of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

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Abstract: This study reveals how turn-taking patterns systematically encode characterization in literary dialogues through quantitative analysis of conversational features. The findings demonstrate significant correlations between specific turn-taking behaviors and character traits: dominant personalities exhibit higher frequencies of turn initiations and interruptions, while reserved characters display prolonged pauses and minimal overlaps. The data indicates that assertive speakers strategically employ interruptions to control conversations, whereas passive participants yield turns through extended pauses. Notably, power dynamics within social hierarchies are consistently manifested through asymmetrical turn distributions, with authoritative figures maintaining conversational control. These findings collectively prove that turn-taking mechanics serve as a powerful literary device for implicit characterization, allowing authors to convey complex social relationships and personality dimensions without explicit narration.

Keywords: turn-taking; conversation analysis; The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; literary discourse

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1 Introduction

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, published in 1876, is a seminal work in American literature that vividly captures the complexity of childhood in the Pre-Civil War South. The novel intricately showcases themes of adventure, friendship, and the clash of individual desires against societal norms through its engaging narrative and a large number of conversations. A significant aspect of these character interactions lies in the structure of conversation itself.

Conversation analysis, which explores the patterns and mechanics of spoken communication, offers a framework for examining how the conversations reflect characters' personalities. At the theoretical core, Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) established a systematic model of conversational turn-taking, identifying key components such as turn-constructive units (sentential, clausal, phrasal) with projectable completion points and turn-allocation techniques (current speaker selection and self-selection). Their framework highlights transition-relevance places as critical for coordinating speaker transitions, minimizing gaps, and incorporating repair mechanisms, providing a universal basis for understanding orderly communication, though its abstractness may limit direct application to context-specific social hierarchies. Works by Yang Xueyan (1991), Zhang Tingguo (2003), and Yu Wenbo (2025) addressed stylistic, cognitive, and pragmatic dimensions of turn-taking, enriching analytical depth but sometimes lacking empirical rigor.

Applied studies extend this theory to explore social dynamics. Liu Yuting (2023) focused on female characters in *Downton Abbey*, analyzing turn-taking strategies (taking, holding, yielding the turn) across classes via qualitative tagging and quantitative SPSS analysis. Integrating Bourdieu's Social Practice Theory, she linked strategy differences, such as upper-class Violet's frequent holding the turn and lower-class Mrs. Hughes' interrupting, to habitus, field, and capital, offering nuanced class-based insights, though the focus on three seasons limits generalizability.

Other studies apply turn-taking to character and power analysis. Zhang Na (2025) and Li Huandong (2001) explored how turn patterns shape protagonist images and power dynamics in literary and dramatic texts, while Ma Shufen (2023) used *Dream of the Red Chamber* to connect turn strategies to character traits like Wang Xifeng's dominance. Lai Xuanyi (2023) and Zhou Binxue (2024) similarly linked turn control to character shaping in films, demonstrating the method's utility for narrative analysis.

Collectively, these studies underscore turn-taking as a dynamic social practice reflecting power, class, and personality, with strengths in contextual specificity.

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, turn-taking in conversation reveals much about characters such as Tom Sawyer, Becky, Thatcher, and Injun Joe. It sheds light on their motivations and relationships. Analyzing the conversations allows us to understand the individual character traits and the social hierarchies that inform their interactions.

There is little research on the subtleties of turn-taking and conversation. Such an oversight leaves an essential aspect character analysis underexplored, as conversations significantly shape character representation and influence reader interpretation.

Most character studies rely on heavily on narrative summaries rather than examining how conversational structures illustrate character traits and relationships. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by closely analyzing turn-taking in the conversations among characters, providing a nuanced understanding of their identities and roles as shaped through conversation. This study will illuminate how these conversation elements contribute to reader's understanding of character traits and their social hierarchies by investigating speech patterns, interruptions, and responses.

2 Theoretical Foundation

In the 1960s, American sociologist H. Sacks introduced the concept of "turn" based on observations of everyday conversation, defining it as the duration of a speaker's utterance (Hacks, 1974). A turn represents alternating speech between interlocutors and is the basic unit of conversation analysis, essential to daily communication. Edmondson (1981) noted that "turn" has two meanings: the opportunity to speak and

the actual speech produced. While no unified definition exists in academia, research continues to evolve. This study adopts Hacks' definition. Turn-taking is the fundamental organization of conversation (Hacks, 1974), where speakers generally alternate with minimal overlap or silence. Sacks and colleagues developed turn-taking theory and rules, describing two components—turn-construction and turn-allocation (Hacks, 1974). Applying this framework to plays and novels helps reveal linguistic features and character traits. This study focuses on structural turn-taking features to show how they shape personality.

3 Methods of Analysis

I have discussed a number of facts relevant to the turn-taking analysis. Some questions still remain and they are very general ones, not exclusively related to our framework. This study will deal with two research questions:

What characteristics do different characters respectively demonstrate in terms of turn-taking?

What role do these turn-taking characteristics play in shaping characters' images?

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, there are many conversations. The struggle for dominance in turn-taking is a core means of shaping character personalities. Through behaviors such as initiating turns proactively, extending speaking duration, interrupting others' turns, and passively accepting turns, characters reveal their power consciousness, personality traits, and social logic.

The data for this study consists of written dialogues extracted from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain. The selected passages focus on key conversational exchanges between major characters, including Tom, Huck, Aunt Polly, and Becky Thatcher. The primary source for the text was a digitized public-domain version of the novel obtained from *Weread*. Conversations were collected from the entire novel, with particular attention to scenes that reveal significant character interactions. The final dataset comprises 21749 words. The whole excerpt is included in Appendix A for reference.

The analysis employs qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis, grounded in the principles of Conversation Analysis (CA) as established by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). The first step involved extracting and annotating dialogues for features such as speaker turns, interruptions, pauses, and turn length. Next, turn-taking strategies were categorized based on initiatory versus responsive turns, interruptions and overlaps, and pauses or hesitations. These patterns were then mapped onto character traits, allowing for an examination of how conversational behavior reflects personality.

Power dynamics were assessed by analyzing which characters consistently held the conversational floor, with particular attention to asymmetries in dialogue control. A comparative analysis was conducted to contrast the speech styles of different characters, such as Aunt Polly's authoritative tone versus Becky Thatcher's more deferential responses.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

Table 1 Statistics of Different Conversational Behavior

character	Initiation of conversation	Interruption of conversation	Overlap	Pause
Tom Sawyer	90	24	13	20
Huckleberry Finn	50	16	8	21
Aunt Polly	30	10	5	10
Becky Thatcher	25	6	2	5
Sid	12	6	/	3
Injun Joe	13	4	1	3

Dialogue serves as a vehicle for plot advancement and a critical tool for character development. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* exemplifies this principle, with its characters' speech patterns offering profound insights into their personalities. By examining turn-taking behaviors, how Twain constructs distinct identities through dialogue mechanics can be systematically analyzed. The following results interpret quantitative data derived from the novel, linking these conversational patterns to the characters' psychological and social traits. It yielded distinct patterns across six major characters. The data was organized according to four key conversational features: initiation of conversation, interruptions, overlaps, and pauses. These metrics were systematically counted and tabulated to provide an objective foundation for subsequent interpretation.

4.2 Discussion

The interpretation of these quantitative results reveals significant insights into character construction and narrative technique. The discussion will address both research questions by examining how turn-taking patterns correspond to personality traits and contribute to character development within the novel.

Tom Sawyer's dominance in conversation initiation and interruption frequency aligns with his characterization as an energetic, self-assured protagonist. His high overlap count suggests a tendency toward impulsive speech, while his substantial number of pauses may indicate either performative hesitation or genuine moments of reflection. These patterns collectively paint a portrait of a charismatic but undisciplined youth whose speech habits mirror his adventurous spirit. For example, when convincing his friends to whitewash the fence, he interrupts their skepticism with persuasive tactics:

Well, maybe it is, and maybe it ain't. All I know is, it suits Tom Sawyer.

Here, he cuts off Ben Roger's doubts by reframing the chore as a principle. Tom also overlaps in conversations when excited. During

pirate role-playing, where he talks over Joe and Huck to assign dramatic lines. His pauses are strategic – sometimes for dramatic effect such as pretending to ponder a “great law of human action” and other times to feign innocence, for example, when lying to Aunt Polly about the jam.

Huckleberry Finn’s more measured turn-taking behavior presents an instructive contrast. While still an active participant in dialogue, his lower initiation and interruption frequencies coupled with the highest pause count suggest a more deliberate, cautious communication style. He is more reserved and reactive in conversations, often responding to others rather than initiating. This aligns perfectly with his role as the novel’s pragmatic observer, whose survival instincts manifest in careful consideration before speech, reflecting his cautious and superstitious nature. Here is an example. When discussing wart cues with Tom, he slowly processes information:

I don’t know, Tom. I reckon they’ll come after old Hoss Williams tonight.

He rarely interrupts, but when he does, it’s to challenge superstitions or express doubt, such as questioning Tom’s spunk-water cure. His overlaps usually occurring in moments of shared excitement like planning the pirate adventure.

Anut Polly’s turn-taking metrics reflect her structural position within the narrative. Her moderate interruption rate and consistent pause frequency demonstrate the controlled speech patterns of an authority figure, while the absence of extreme values in any category underscores her balanced role as both disciplinarian and nurturer. She dominates exchanges with Tom, cutting him off when he tries to deceive her:

Tom, it was middling warm in school, warn’t it?

Yes’m.

Powerful warm, warn’t it?

Her interrogations leave little room for evasion. She also pauses for emotional effect, particularly when lamenting Tom’s mischief or expressing grief. The data supports her characterization as a stable moral center amidst the children’s antics.

Becky Thatcher’s exceptionally low interruption and overlap counts, combined with minimal pauses, create a speech profile that embodies Victorian ideals of feminine decorum. Her turn-taking patterns serve to highlight the cultural expectations placed upon young women of the period, while simultaneously emphasizing her narrative function as Tom’s romantic counterpart. Her only notable interruption comes when she angrily rejects Tom after learning about Amy Lawrence:

Mf! Some people think they’re mighty smart – always showing off!

The secondary characters’ sparse turn-taking metrics prove equally revealing. Sid’s limited but strategic interruptions reinforce his role as a sneaky antagonist. Sid speaks rarely but uses them to provoke Tom, often tattling in a faux-innocent tone:

Tom, you pitch around and talk in your sleep so much that you keep me awake half the time.

His pauses are deliberate, as when he feigns concern to manipulate Aunt Polly’s sympathy.

While Injun Joe’s minimal engagement creates an appropriately menacing presence through verbal economy rather than volubility. His speech is slow, deliberate, and menacing, with no interruptions – only calculated threats. His pauses heighten tension, as when he coldly blames Muff Potter:

That score is settled – damn you.

The quantitative analysis of turn-taking behaviors yields significant linguistic insights that address the research questions from a conversation analysis perspective. Regarding character-specific turn-taking traits, the data reveals marked differences in conversational dominance through measurable interactional cues. Tom Sawyer’s high frequency of initiation acts (90 instances) and interruptions (24 instances) exemplifies a prototypical dominant speaker in conversation analysis terms, displaying characteristic features such as topic control and floor-holding strategies. In contrast, reserved characters like Huckleberry Finn employ high-involvement cooperative strategies, evidenced by his substantial pause frequency (21 instances) and moderate overlap count (8 instances), reflecting turn-yielding behavior and backchanneling tendencies.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the second research question reveals how Twain manipulates turn-taking systems to construct social identities. The characters’ interactional patterns align with established sociolinguistic findings regarding power and solidarity in discourse. Anut Polly’s balanced interruption frequency (10 instances) and pause duration (10 instances) demonstrate the modulated control strategies typical of institutional authority figures, while Becky Thatcher’s minimal overlaps (2 instances) reflect the constrained linguistic behavior historically associated with female characters in 19th century literature. Injun Joe’s sparse turn-taking metrics constitute what conversation analysts would identify as strategic silence – a powerful interactional resource for constructing threatening personas.

The application of turn-taking analysis to literary dialogue offers valuable methodological contributions to linguistic studies. The systematic quantification of interactional features provides empirical support for pragmatic theories of character construction through discourse. This approach demonstrates how literary dialogue can serve as a rich dataset for examining theoretical constructs like conversational dominance, politeness strategies, and face-work in controlled textual environments. Particularly significant is the revelation that consistent micro-level linguistic patterns, such as pause duration or overlap frequency, can effectively encode macro-level social meanings and power relations.

The study’s linguistic framework bridges the gap between literary dialogue analysis and natural conversation studies, suggesting that fictional discourse follows observable pragmatic principles while allowing for artistic intensification of certain features. This has important implications for the study of stylized dialogue across genres and historical periods, providing a replicable model for examining how authors manipulate linguistic norms for characterization purposes.

5 Conclusion

This study has systematically examined the role of turn-taking patterns in character construction within Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of*

Tom Sawyer, addressing two primary research questions. Through quantitative analysis of conversational features – initiations, interruptions, overlaps, and pauses – the study revealed that Twain strategically employs turn-taking mechanics to reinforce personality traits and social hierarchies.

For discourse analysis, this study demonstrates how fictional dialogue adheres to and amplifies natural conversational principles, offering a framework for analyzing characterization across genres. In language education, these insights could inform the teaching of literary analysis by highlighting how micro-level linguistic features encode macro-level social meanings. Additionally, the methodology bridges literary studies and sociolinguistics, suggesting applications in cross-cultural comparisons of dialogue norms or historical studies of speech representation.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The analysis focused solely on turn-taking frequency, omitting conversational features that might further elucidate character traits. The dataset, while substantial, was limited to one novel, and the manual coding process may introduce subjectivity. Future research could address these gaps by: (1) incorporating multimodal analysis such as gestures in dramatic adaptations. (2) expanding the corpus to include diverse genres or periods to identify typological trends. (3) employing computational tools to automate turn-taking annotation for larger datasets. These efforts would deepen people's understanding of how authors manipulate linguistic systems to craft fictional identities and how these techniques evolve across literary traditions.

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