Projecting the end of a speaker's turn: A cognitive cornerstone of conversation

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A key mechanism in turn-taking during informal conversations is the ability of listeners to anticipate the moment of completion of the current speaker's turn. Some authors suggest that this anticipation is achieved via lexicosyntactic cues, while others argue that it is based on intonational information. We tested these hypotheses in an on-line experiment, manipulating the presence of symbolic (lexicosyntactic) content and intonational information of utterances recorded in natural conversations. When hearing the original recordings, subjects can anticipate turn endings with the same degree of accuracy attested in real conversation. With intonational contour entirely removed (leaving intact words and syntax, with a completely flat melody), there is no change in subjects' accuracy of end-of-turn anticipation. But in the opposite case (with original intonational contour intact, but with no recognizable words), subjects' performance deteriorates significantly. These results establish that the symbolic (i.e. lexicosyntactic) content of an utterance is necessary (and possibly sufficient) for anticipating the moment of its completion, and thus for regulating conversational turn-taking. By contrast, and perhaps surprisingly, intonational contour is neither necessary nor sufficient for end-of-turn anticipation.