

This is to announce a recent publication in PNAS under the 'anthropology' rubric, titled 'Universals and cultural variation in turn-taking in conversation', by Tanya Stivers et al (online June 24, 2009, doi: 10.1073/pnas.0903616106; print PNAS June 30, 2009 vol. 106 no. 26 10587-10592). It should be of interest to anyone looking at variation in patterns of language use, specifically the timing involved in face-to-face interaction. The claim is that patterns of turn-taking across cultures are much more similar than many researchers suppose.

Here's the abstract:

Informal verbal interaction is the core matrix for human social life. A mechanism for coordinating this basic mode of interaction is a system of turn-taking that regulates who is to speak and when. Yet relatively little is known about how this system varies across cultures. The anthropological literature reports significant cultural differences in the timing of turn-taking in ordinary conversation. We test these claims and show that in fact there are striking universals in the underlying pattern of response latency in conversation. Using a worldwide sample of 10 languages drawn from traditional indigenous communities to major world languages, we show that all of the languages tested provide clear evidence for a general avoidance of overlapping talk and a minimization of silence between conversational turns. In addition, all of the languages show the same factors explaining within-language variation in speed of response. We do, however, find differences across the languages in the average gap between turns, within a range of 250 ms from the cross-language mean. We believe that a natural sensitivity to these tempo differences leads to a subjective perception of dramatic or even fundamental differences as offered in ethnographic reports of conversational style. Our empirical evidence suggests robust human universals in this domain, where local variations are quantitative only, pointing to a single shared infrastructure for language use with likely ethological foundations.