A Pragmatics Perspective

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In this conversation, a husband and wife discuss upcoming vacation plans (see Appendix A for the full transcript). It seems that the wife is guiding much of the conversation through attention-getting phrases and by explicitly stating what she hopes the talk will accomplish. The husband, on the other hand, answers the wife and, at times, tries to add his opinion but is not able to get it out because the wife is talking over him or continues talking. Of the three excerpts we are focusing on (see Appendix B), the husband talks most in excerpt B, calculating expenses. There are instances of implicature (Grice, 1975), where one spouse understands unstated or implied meanings, and cases where one or both spouses are attending to negative or positive face needs (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Analysis of Excerpt A, “Nervous”

The wife garners her husband’s attention by speaking loudly and using his name, which are both marked ways of speaking. He responds to her attention bid by acknowledging that he heard her with the response “Mhmm.”

The wife then explains or sets up the discussion they will have by stating that it will be a long-range and open-ended discussion. She also says that she doesn’t want her husband to “feel like [she’s] creating pressure,” thus implying that he may worry about or get upset about the topic. This action shows that she is attending to his negative face needs and the desire not to be bothered. Although the wife did not explicitly mention anything about being nervous, the husband understands her implicature and responds with “Who’s nervous?” using exaggerated hand-waving gestures and laughing. By using laughter here, the husband is attending to the positive face needs of both interactants, because his laughter shows a bid for alignment and solidarity, and the wife responds to his laughter with laughter of her own, also attending to positive face needs.

It seems that the wife is “running” this particular discussion because she initiates the talk with an introductory statement, stating the type of discussion it would be and also warning the husband not to get too worried about it or to be pressured by it.

Analysis of Excerpt B, “Senior Tickets”

Here the husband works out how much airline tickets would cost, doing the calculation verbally. At the end he speculates as to whether the trip includes stopovers and cannot think of the term to use, asking his wife what this is called. She answers him by saying she does not know. Through this answer, she acknowledges that she heard him, which attends to positive face needs; however, her refusal to enter into the discussion by quietly saying, “I don’t know” seems to indicate she is dismissing his talk as not relevant to their prior discussion.

The wife then switches gears and goes back to a topic that they had been discussing previously, signaling this shift back to the other topic with the marker “anyway” and by speaking
The wife then reinforces her point by speaking loudly and saying, “OK now,” after which she talks about plans to go to Europe. Subsequently, she asks her husband what they will want to do after that, and whether he wants to go somewhere in the winter. She uses several pauses and other place-holding discourse markers ("now, uh," “uhm,” “ya know,””) to hedge her speech and is thus attending to negative face by showing she knows this may impede upon the husband’s need not to be imposed upon (lines 7-8). The husband does not answer, and so she reframes her question in more general terms, asking if he has any thoughts about the subject. She also says she is “doing all the…,” which can be inferred to mean “doing all the talking,” thus showing that she realizes that she has been speaking a lot and that he has not participated as much. By doing this, she is also implying that he needs to contribute more to the conversation and answer her questions. This is an explicit bid for positive face attention from him. While she is saying this, the husband hedges his answer by saying “Well I” and then pausing, showing that he is also reluctant to impose upon his wife. He follows this with the response that he does not think they can travel both in the fall and the winter because it is too much money, thus giving a justification for his negative answer.

The wife then prompts him to tell her what he would like to do. She asks him several questions, never giving him time to answer her. The husband tries to answer, signaling that he has something to say by using the response-initiation marker “well,” but the wife continues asking the question in several different ways. She stutters and repeats herself several times (“what wouldjoo… How wouldjoo-what wouldja,” “the otha, the otha,” “I wanted, I wanted”), which mitigates her speech somewhat and demonstrates her awareness of his negative face needs. She finally asks him very specifically if he is serious about going to Asia and then he answers with “Yeah, but maybe” and is ready to give his opinion, but she interrupts him again, saying she does not think they should “put those things off.” She restarts (“if that, if that’s”) to soften her speech, again deferring to his negative face wants. Then the husband does not answer, and so the wife adds on two more phrases. Finally, the husband says that he thinks they ought to look at Elderhostel for information later at home.

It seems in this section that the wife asks the husband several questions, but in fact wants to give him her thoughts and ideas more than hear his because she does not actually give him enough time to answer her in most instances. The husband tries to answer or signals that he has something to say (with repeated “well”s) but is not able to get a word in edgewise. In this case, the surface function is that the wife is asking questions which would necessitate an answer from the husband, but her underlying functional goal is to set up a forum in which she can give her
opinions on the topic. In spoken interaction, questions are often posed not to elicit another’s opinion, but rather to open a discussion on a particular topic in order to share one’s own opinion. In this way, there is an apparent, “surface” illocutionary force (requesting answers to questions), but there is also an inferred illocutionary force of offering one’s own opinions that comes about via the way that the wife asks her husband for his opinions.

Discussion

In all three excerpts, the wife is steering the conversation in directions she wants it to go. In both Excerpts A and C, she does metadiscourse – explicitly mentioning something about talking. In A, she says that the discussion is long-range and open-ended and even cautions her husband not to feel pressure. In C, she says that she wants to talk about other potential trips: “I also wanna take into consideration… what we wanna do after that.” In B, she also mentions that their prior travel discussion is something she would like to “factor into the total scheme of things.” In addition to explicit metadiscourse, the wife uses paralinguistic cues to signal a shift in topic or to gain attention as she is steering the conversation in a particular direction. She speaks louder when using transitional phrases and attention-garnering sentences as in, “>ANYWAY< SO THAT’S” (line 44).

Both the husband and wife have a fairly high-involvement conversation style. However, the husband struggles to insert his own responses to his wife’s questions on several occasions, and this may indicate that her style is more high-involvement than his. On the other hand, it may be that in this particular situation, she feels that the topic is important and tries to air all of her opinions about it, to the detriment of her husband being able to share his ideas.

By answering her own questions and by not allowing her husband to voice his opinion, the wife is breaking the Maxim of Manner in Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle regarding its subpoint “be orderly.” Grice’s maxims do not necessarily pertain to people who are very familiar with one another. The Cooperative Principle (CP) speaks more to negative face needs (the need not to be imposed upon by others) rather than to positive face needs (the need to be accepted and liked by others) (cf. Brown & Levinson, 1987). Individuals familiar with one another who have something emotional or personal at stake are likely to be more interested in facilitating camaraderie through talk than formal politeness (Grice’s CP). Brown and Levinson (1987) posit that politeness levels remain fairly consistent in ongoing relationships, with negative politeness being used more in situations where a less powerful person is talking to a more powerful one, and positive politeness signifying social closeness. It is interesting that both positive politeness (mainly in the form of laughter) and negative politeness (primarily through mitigation) emerge from this data.

In addition, there are a few clear patterns that emerge within the conversation signaling the roles the husband and wife might have. The wife is prompting the husband to discuss travel plans with her and to hear her desires and ideas about places to go. The husband, on the other hand, is clearly in charge of finances and thus views the travel planning through the frame of feasibility. In Excerpt B, he focuses on the costs of the particular trip they are discussing at the time and future, in Excerpt C, his first response to his wife’s questions about later trips is that he does not think they have enough money to travel both in the fall and in the winter. He later suggests looking at Elderhostel, a magazine with information on places for seniors to stay, at discounted rates. Without explicitly stating it, the wife may be implying when she suggests discussing travel plans and tells her husband not to feel “pressure” that she understands his
feelings of financial responsibility (see Excerpt A). In this way, the wife is taking the role of activity planner, while the husband is taking the role of financial planner.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Full Transcript

1  Husband:  Rosilyn, ((cough)) what are we gonna have a discussion about?
2  Wife:   Alright, you wanna talk about our upcoming vacations –
3       for next year?
4        (.4)
5  Husband:  OK, ((cough))
6  Wife:    Let’s see, – do we have a calendar?
7        (.3)
8  Husband:  Ah=
9  Wife:    I’m not sure, – I don’t=
10 Husband:  Can we borrow your calendar? There you go,
11        (.3)
12 Wife:    Just in case we need it, we’re not=
13 Linda:   =I’m NO:t=
14 Wife:    =OK-just in case we need it now. I’m not sure,
15        (.hhh) ALRIGHT (.1) HOWARD?,
16 Husband:  Yeah=
17 Wife:    =This is a longrange – discussion, =
18 Husband:  =OK=
19 Wife:    Which is O:PENDed (.1) and (.1) I don’t want you to fee:l
20        (.1) pressure. We’re just talk:ing about long-range planning,
21        O[K]?
22 Husband:  [Who’s] NE:R!vous? ((laughter))=
23 Wife:    =(laughing)
24 Husband:  Go ahead
25 Wife:    Alright, (.1) uhm. One of the things that I – I just wanna talk
26 about (.1) uhm (.2) mention (.4) that should be I:n the.
27 considerA:tion is that – uhm (.1) the Green’s – Marsha
28 Schwartz=
29 Linda:   =The coffee’s ready,
30        (.05)
Wife: Uh, Marsha Schwartz’s son is going to be b’nai:tvahed in Minnesota –
Husband: Yeah
Wife: And that’s gonna be – I think that data is August eighth
(1)
Husband: ((cough))
Wife: And I would like to go to the b’nai:tvah (2) and at the same
time – I would like to travel around Minnesota – and show
you the HI:gh spots.
(2)
To visit some people that we – you, know that I know in
Rochester and Deluth – and go up to the – northern shore of Lake Superior – and – uh – cuz I think
that would be interesting,
Husband: Besides the – visiting people there, is it an interesting place to
visit? Aside from the people? I mean – beautiful or
interesting things=
Wife: I think the uhm – north shore of Lake Superior – is – is very
beautiful, it’s – uhm – What is it? What’s it called – the – uhm
– boundary taws between – uh – Canada and – uhm – the
United States – it’s a big place for camping and HI:king
and it’s VERY Wild – and very nice – now – that might even
have Elder HOSTels that take place up there – one of the
couples that was on our Tour
Husband: [Yeah?]
Wife: [key trip? What was their name –
the couple – the guy worked for uh – he’s retired from working
for one of the – flour companies?, the uhm –
Husband: Oh=
Wife: =THEY THEY [
Husband: [Rals]ton or one of those
Wife: [hava]
Husband: [Rals]ton or one of those=
Wife: =Huh? Yeah,
Anyway, they have a a vacation house up there – and it’s –
it’s a very interesting area.
Husband: ((blows nose))
(1)
Wife: HO:WARD, I MEAN – I mean it would be interesting from a –
just from a (.1) very E:very point of view to visit – De –
Deluth is an interesting ci:ty – it’s very – it’s (.05) I don’t say
it’s BEAU:tifull but it’s very I:nteresting. (.05) A:nd – uhm
(0.5) if you’ve never been there – I I think it would be fU:n to
do something like that,=
Husband: =How long udju – uh – (.1) propose – that we[ 
Wife: ]OH! Eight or ten 
(.3) 
Husband: Ok,= 
Wife: It depends what we’re gonna do. 
Husband: Yeah, 
(.3) 
So?, but the 
Wife: I MEAN I thi:nk it would be a SHA:me to GO[ 
Husband: ]I know, the one 
problem there is if we’re going to go THE:re (.5) and – we’re 
contemplating a trip to [Europe 
Wife: [I KNOW – HOWARD – I – I 
Understand that and I’m thinking that if we wanna DO 
SOMETHing like that – uh you want to be able to get the – uhm 
– cheapest fare (.1) and uhm – (.1) I dunno – we have to – we 
ought to try to think about how we can DO it, so it’s-uhm – not 
too expensive. 
(.2) 
Then there’s ALSO the possibility of DRI:ving?, 
(.5) 
Husband: Driving ou:t there? 
Wife: Uhm. 
Husband: How longzit take?= 
Wife: =Oh, it’s a lo:ng ri:de,= 
Howard: =How lo:ng? 
Wife: I, I dunno – Howard. 
Husband: How many MI:les is it? 
(.4) 
Wife: I – can’t s- I don’t have any A:Nswer for you on tha:t – I never 
drO:ve. 
(.6) 
Husband: Well - what would be the advantage of dri:ving?= 
Wife: =Well= 
Husband: =The only thing is saves is the – uh= 
Wife: =car rental, 
Husband: Cah rental. 
(.5) 
Well! I suppose if ya make it a tri:p and pla:n things goin out 
and coming ba:ck – as path of the trip – maybe – uh – (.2) it’s a 
possibility. 
Wife: OK. THAT’S= 
Husband: =Yeah= 
Wife: =Ya know like for exa:mple – you know those senior uh – 
tickets?= 

Husband: =Mmm,
Wife: That you get – that might be a good time for us to buy those
senior tickets.=
Husband: Yeah, - it comes to (.2) so your senior tickets would come to a
hundred and thirty fih dollars – each way – per person –
you’ve got two seventy – you’ve got fih hundred and forty
dollars air fare (.2) which isn’t tE:rrible. It’s pretty chea:p (.2)
– but I wonda if those – I wonda if those trips envisage – uh
wait – what do they call it? Where you stop at one place and
continue on a day or two later?
Wife: I dunno.
ANYWAY, - SO THAT’S – THAT’S I WOULD LIKE TO
factor that into the – total scheme of things=
Husband: =Ok=
Wife: =We’re talking about GR:A:ND STRA:tegy – Howard
((laughter))
Husband: =((laughter))=
Wife:  =Gr:and strategy. Alright?=  
Husband: =Ok
Wife: UH – OK – NOW – we’ve been talking about going ta –
France and Switzerland in the fall (.1) Now, I – I a:lso wanna
take into consideration – uhm – what we wa:nna do A:fter
that
Ya know, - are we gonna go away in the WI:nter ti:me?,
What? Have you got any THOU:ghts about – thoughts about
any of this? Howard – I’d like to=
Husband:              [Well]
Wife: =instead of doing all the (talking)
Husband: [Well – I]
I really don think it’s gonna be po:ssible to go away this
vacation, go away in the all and this vacation – it’s much –
much too much money.
Wife: So – what wouldjoo like to do?
Husband: Well [  
Wife: [How wouldjoo – how wouldja – what wouldja like to do?
Husband: [Well
Wife: Were you serious about considering going to – to A: sia?
Husband: Yeah, I think [  
Wife: [Because maybe – maybe
Husband: [Maybe after a while
Wife: [ NO? I don’t think we
should put those THINGS OFF

I think that – uh – uh – I’d rather put off a trip to go to Pa:ris

if that’s if that’s a se:rious considerA:tion

Husband: Well, you know what I think we ought to do

When we get home, let’s take a look at what the Elderhostel –

uh – uh (what do you call it) =

Wife: I think there must be a NEw issue coming out=

Husband: =We just got one before we – uh – [we=

Wife: =Ya, but that’s

Husband: =We went on vacation. What will be in there’ll give us an idea.

They don’t change [too much.]

Wife: =Alright. Marion Hidercorn has our –

Husband: [our uh international=

Wife: =I think there must be a NEw issue coming out=

Husband: [Ya, but that’s

Wife: =I tO:ld her that at thA:t time I didn’t have any U:se for it

but- uh [\

Husband: [If she ha:s it

Wife: Yeah, if she sti [II]

Husband: [If she still ha:s [it]

Wife: [Yeah – if she doesn’t=

Husband: If not, we can get another one (.1) I’m sure=

Wife: =Cuz, I mean – if you’re – if you’re interested in – in going –

uh – to southeast A:sier or A:sia (.1) I think that’s something

we should consider for next – wI:nter.

Husband: Yeah

Wife: And I think we oughtta consider thA:t now.

(.1)

Husband: And

Wife: I mea:n I DON’T WANT TO GO ta FRA:nce – AND THEN

SAY WE’RE NOT GONNA – GO –

Husband: Yeah. I know whatcha mean. You’d rather – if =

Wife: [I wanna pla:n

the whO:le thing

Husband: =if it’s O:ne or the O:ther – you’d rather go –

Wife: YEAH – I’d rather go ta –

Husband: Yeah – the A:sia trip – well I think that’s a – that ma:kes sense

(.1)

((laughter))
We never do seem to get in that a – European trip in
(.2)
BUT – if we didn’t have ta – ya know if we don’t have –
another thing like this (.1) ta Minnesota
Wife: HM?

APPENDIX B

Transcript Excerpts

Excerpt A: “Nervous”

15 Wife: (.hhh) ALRIGHT (.8) this is (.8) Howard, ((looking at H))
16 Husband: ((looking at calendar, looks up)) Mhmm, ((looks back at calendar))
17 Wife: This is a LONG-range (.6) discussion.
18 Husband: OK.
19 Wife: Which is OPENended, (.4) and (.4) I don’t want you to fee::l (.6)
like I’m, creating pressure. (1.0) °We’re just talking about long-
range planning O[K]°
20 Husband: [Who’s NE:R!vous?] ((laughing and waving
21 hands))
22 Wife: °I dunno.°
23 (1.0)
24 >ANYWAY< SO THAT (.2) I, (.2) I WOULD
25 like to factor that into the, the total scheme of things.

Excerpt B: “Senior Tickets”

35 Husband: Yeah, it comes to (1.2) so your senior tickets would come to a
36 hundred and thirty fh dollars (.6) each way (.4) per person (.8) so
37 you’ve got two seventy >you’ve got fh< hundred and forty dollahs
38 for the air fare (1.8) which isn’t tE:rrible. (.4) It’s pretty chea:p I
39 think (1.2) but >I wonda if they, I wonda if those trips< envisage,
40 uh (2.0) wait what do they call it? when you can stop at one place
41 and then continue on a day or two later?
42 Wife: °I dunno.°
43 (1.0)
44 >ANYWAY< SO THAT’S (1.0) THAT (.2) I, (.2) I WOULD
45 Like to factor that into the, the total scheme of things.

Excerpt C: “Put Off”

2 Wife: We’re talking about GRAND strategy Howard ((laughter))
3 Husband: Ohh[Kh] ((laughter, looking down at table))
4 Wife: [Grand strategy. (1.0) Alright?
5 Husband: OK
6 Wife: ((playing with napkin)) UH (.6) OK (.6) NOW we’ve been talking
about going ta- (1.) France and Switzerland in the fa:ll (1.4) Now, uh (1.0) I- (1.0) A:ls:o wanna take into consideration uhm (.2) what we wanna do After that (2.2) Ya know, are we gonna go away in the WI:ntertime? (1.2) Wha:-

Husband: (looks up at W))

Husband: instead of doing all [the]

Husband: [Well, I (3.2) I REally don’t think it’s gonna be possible to go away this vacation to go away in the FA:ll and again in the winter. It’s just gonna be (.6) much too much money.

Wife: So what wouldjoo like to do. [How wouldjoo- what wouldja like to do.

Husband: [Well I-

Husband: do.

Husband: We:l[I, since it- it- it- it-]

Wife: [The otha, the otha thing I w]anted, I wanted to throw in (1.4) is, uh, (1.0) were you really serious about considering going t-, to Asia?

Husband: Yeah, but m[aybe after awhile]

Wife: [Because maybe may]be, (.2) NO[, but I don’t think=

Husband: [after a

Wife: =we should put those things off. (2.2) I think that uh, I’d rather put off a trip to go to Paris (2.4) if that, if that’s a serious consideration.

Husband: Well you know what I think we oughta do,

(2.0) when we get home, let’s take a look at what the Elderhostel-

uh (1.2) uh::: (what do you call it)

**APPENDIX C**

**Transcription Conventions**

**Overlaps**

[ ] (brackets) simultaneous or overlapping speech.

[ ] = no interval between two speakers’ utterances (latching). Also links different parts of one speaker’s continuous utterance when the speech goes onto another line due to an intervening line by a different speaker

**Intervals**

(0.0) timed pause
untimed pause, less than .5 seconds

**Delivery**

- self-interruption, halting, or stammering

... a section or sentences has been left out of the transcript

: sound extension (the more, the longer the extension)

.hhhh audible inhale (the more h’s, the longer the inhale)

hhh audible exhale (the more h’s, the longer the exhale)

. stopping fall in tone

? rising inflection

! animated tone

↑ marked rise in intonation on the word that follows

↓ marked fall in intonation on the word that follows

ABC increased volume

°abc° encloses speech at a decreased volume

abc emphasis

$abc$ encloses “smiley” voice

>abc< encloses speech at a faster rate

((abc)) encloses a noise or description

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