

Thin-slicing talk: an exercise in analyzing negotiation Phillip Glenn, Emerson College

Negotiation books and articles are rich with practical wisdom about strategizing, getting to yes, closing a deal, and more. Often underrepresented in our teaching materials, however, is consideration of the actual *interaction* that makes up the give-and-take of negotiation.

Such lack of attention is understandable. Recording negotiations presents challenges, memory and self report are not too reliable, and much of what happens in talk we scarcely notice. Most importantly, one needs analytic tools that open up how talk works.

I study negotiation through a research method known as conversation analysis (CA). In brief, CA involves transcribing and analyzing recordings of naturally-occurring interactions. It's a basic research enterprise devoted to characterizing how people organize everyday social actions such as greeting, ending a phone call, flirting, arguing, storytelling, or negotiating. A couple of features of CA research make it valuable for studying what happens in negotiating. First, we insist on carefully describing *what is going on* rather than speculating about peoples' motives, goals, feelings, or personalities. This disciplined analysis leads to amazing insights about how talk works and how people do what they do. Second, we locate our claims *in the moment*, asking continually, "Why that now?" Talk is always *contextual*: produced at this moment, by this speaker, to someone else, following some specific action, and setting up some specific next one. Its meaning--the action it is doing--can only be interpreted by coming to grips with its sequential placement. Understanding that makes one a better student of communication and a better negotiator.

Conversation analytic research requires years of training, but some of the methods of CA work quite well as a learning activity for beginning negotiators. Here are two variations of an exercise I use with undergraduate and master's students in classes on conflict and negotiation.

I select a video recording of a conflict or negotiation. Almost any interaction will give you something interesting to study, but I prefer naturalistic (rather than role-played or fictional), two-party (rather than multi-party) interactions. I select a one- to two- minute interesting portion and create a detailed transcript that shows words spoken as well as timing, pauses, overlaps, laughs, and other nonverbal features. I ask students to study the video and transcript repeatedly and analyze conflict patterns. They describe the actions getting done and how individual actions fit into larger patterns. Based on this analysis, students examine how the people in the conflict are displaying their identities and relationships.

Consider, for example, the following interchange between a wife and husband, who are arguing over how to make their money stretch.

Husband: I'm gonna give you eighty dollars a week I want the car

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covered.

Wife: Not for trips

The husband's turn at talk contains an offer for a fixed amount of money he will give her with the condition that it cover her auto expenses. By his pronoun usage ("I"), the absence of explanations, and the lack of any softening features (hesitations, uncertainty markers) he makes a strong positional statement: he is presenting her the terms and conditions he is willing to give. His nonverbals (you can't see or hear them, but take my word for it) reinforce this interpretation: he stares at her, unblinking, unsmiling, and speaks firmly. Her quick reply—and it *is* a reply, evident by its syntax—does not challenge the \$80 per week, or that she must cover the car from that—only that "trips" are an exception. Thus she accepts the general framework of his offer while quibbling with one component of it.

This is just one moment, and in this article I can provide only a glimpse of what one might discover through close listening and analysis. Consider, for example, if one sees an extended pattern of one party making strong positional statements and another offering only minor challenges. Consider how one might create and sustain an identity as forceful or passive aggressive. Consider how talk might reflect (and constitute) a relationship characterized by dominance and submission. Consider how teaching might help people envision alternatives: what are other ways the Husband might express his interests, and what responses might they open up? What other options might the Wife have for responding? How could they come to see their conflict in a different way?

A variation on this exercise is to have students videotape themselves in a role-played negotiation. They view the video and select a brief segment (less than two minutes) for microanalysis. Viewing themselves has the obvious advantage that they can reflect on their own behaviors and decide what's working well and what they might try to change. But it challenges the student analysts to avoid hypercriticizing, to remain nonjudgmental, and to stick to what they can see and hear.

Here is an example. Students in my graduate class role played a negotiation between a teachers' union and a school board. The teachers requested a ten percent raise, and the board representatives offered three. The two parties reconvened after caucusing, and a few moments later the following interchange occurred:

Teacher: I think (.) at this point (.) in our negotiation and in an effort to >come to a solution that works for both of us< all of us (.) we um we would like to make an equal concession and come to eight.

(2.0)

Board Member: Now. (0.7) Eight. um

Teacher: Which we feel is equally as generous.

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Board member: I— (1.2) I wouldn't be opposed? to increasing eight percent (.) over the course of two or three years?

The teacher representative proposes an eight percent raise, but before she names the figure she locates it “at this point” in the process, justifies it as motivated by an attempt to reach agreement, and terms it an “equal concession.” Through these prefacing moves she frames the offer as reasonable and responsive to contingencies of the process. The pause that follows we can hear as the *board's* pause, because a response is relevant and expected following an offer. During this pause, the three members of the board negotiating team exchange glances. One begins to answer, and his hesitation displays some difficulty with the proposal. Before he continues, the teacher speaks again, defending the offer as “equally as generous.” Combined with the earlier description of it as an “equal concession,” this further shows the teachers to be engaging in distributive bargaining, rooted in compromise and standards of fairness. The board member's unfolding response (only the beginning is shown here) rejects the offer, but rather than doing so as a flat refusal it begins to recast the offer to being possible over several years.

From this brief description of a small moment one can consider a number of issues related to offers and responses. When should a negotiating party make an offer, and in what form? How are offers packaged, explained, and justified? How should a negotiating party respond to an offer? How might one try to reframe a distributive bargaining move towards win-win negotiating?

Closely analyzing actual negotiation talk serves as a powerful exercise in careful listening, attending to nonverbal as well as verbal signals, understanding how negotiation happens, and recognizing how small moments can trigger big changes in interaction. Students with minimal training do well in such assignments, and they tell me that talk is never quite the same again for them: that pauses, questions, disagreements, and a thousand other actions become objects of curiosity and reflection. Awareness of how talk works makes one a better negotiator and at its best can enrich the human experience.

If you would like to correspond more about these instances, your own materials, or related matters, please get in touch with me at [Phillip_Glenn@Emerson.edu].

For more information about conversation analysis, see:

Atkinson, J. M., & Heritage, J. (Eds). (1984). *Structures of social action; Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge University Press.

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