

## **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

loudly. Without directly saying so, the wife indicates she was not intending to discuss the costs at this time, but the overall plan to travel (to Minnesota, as is shown in the full transcript). The next excerpt follows directly after this one.

### **Analysis of Excerpt C, “Put Off”**

At the beginning of this section, the wife changes gears and returns to the topic of her choice (continuing with the topic change initiated at the end of the previous excerpt). She does this by first by telling the husband that they are “talking about grand strategy,” which implies that his previous contribution to the conversation was off topic. She tries to soften this criticism and appeal to positive face (solidarity) by laughing after saying this. The husband indicates that he has heard her and has understood her implicit criticism by saying, “OK,” and he also attends to positive face needs with reciprocating laughter.

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.

Then the wife 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

- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol. 3. Speech acts* (pp. 41-58). New York: Academic Press.

## APPENDIX A

### Full Transcript

- 1 Husband: Rosilyn, ((cough)) wha:t are we go:nna hava discussion about?  
2 Wife: Alright, ya wanna ta:lk about our upcoming vacations –  
3 for next year?  
4 (.4)  
5 Husband: OK, ((cough))  
6 Wife: Let's see, – do we ha:va ca:lender?  
7 (.3)  
8 Husband: A:h=  
9 Wife: =I'm not sure, - I don't=  
10 Husband: =Can we bo:rrow your ca:lender? There you go,  
11 (.3)  
12 Wife: Just in case we ne:ed 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 longra:nge – discussion, =  
18 Husband: =OK=  
19 Wife: Which is O:PENended (.1) a:nd (.1) I don't want you to fee:l  
20 (.1) pressure. We're just ta:lking about lo:ng-range pla:nnng,  
21 O[K]?  
22 Husband: [Who's] NE:R!vous? ((laughter))=  
23 Wife: =((laughter))  
24 Husband: Go ahead  
25 Wife: Alright, (.1) uhm. One of the things that I – I just wanna ta:lk  
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)

- 31 Wife: Uh, Marsha Schwartz's son is going to be bahmI:tvahed in  
32 MinnesO:ta –  
33 Husband: Yeah  
34 Wife: And that's gonna be – I thi:nk that data is August eighth  
35 (.1)  
36 Husband: ((cough))  
37 Wife: And I would like to go to the bahmi:tzvah (.2) and at the sa:me  
38 tI:me – I would like to tra:vel arou:nd Minneso:ta – and show  
39 you the HI:gh spots.  
40 (.2)  
41 To visit some people that we – you, know that I know in  
42 Rochester and Deluth – and go up to the – no:rthern (.1) sho:re  
43 of the no:rth shore of Lake Superiah – and – uh –cuz I think  
44 that would be in:teresting,  
45 Husband: Besides the – visiting peo:ple there, is it an interesting place to  
46 visit? Asi:de from the people? I mean – beau:tiful or  
47 interesting things=  
48 Wife: [I]  
49 Husband: =to do?  
50 Wife: I think the uhm – north shore of Lake Superiah – is – is ve:ry  
51 beautiful, it's – uhm – What is it? What's it called – the – uhm  
52 – boundary wah:tahs between – uh – Ca:nada and – uhm – the  
53 United Sta:tes – it's a big pla:ce for CA:mping and HI:king  
54 and it's VERY Wild – and ve:ry nice – now – that might even  
55 ha:ve Elder HOS:tel:ts that take place up there – one of the  
56 couples that was on our Tur[  
57 Husband: [Yeah?]  
58 Wife: [key trip? What was their name –  
59 the couple – the guy worked for uh – he's retired from working  
60 for one of the – flou:r co:mpanies?, the uhm –  
61 Husband: Oh=  
62 Wife: =THEY THEY [  
63 Husband: [Ralst]on or one of those  
64 Wife: [hava]  
65 Husband: [Rals]ton or one of those=  
66 Wife: =Huh? Yeah,  
67 Anyway, they have a a vaca:tion house up there – and it's –  
68 it's a ve:ry in:teresting area.  
69 Husband: ((blows nose))  
70 (.1)  
71 Wife: HO:WARD, I MEAN – I mean it would be interesting from a –  
72 just from a (.1) very E:very point of to view to visit – De –  
73 Deluth is an interesting ci:ty – it's very – it's (0.5) I don't say  
74 it's BEAU:tiful but it's very I:nteresting, (.05) A:nd – uhm  
75 (0.5) if you've never bi:n there – I I think it would be fU:n to  
76 do something like that?,,=

- 77 Husband: =How long udju – uh – (.1) propose – that we[  
78 Wife: [OH! Eight or ten  
79 da:ys or something  
80 (.3)  
81 Husband: Ok,=  
82 Wife: It depends what we're gonna do.  
83 Husband: Yeah,  
84 (.3)  
85 So?, but the  
86 Wife: I MEAN I thi:nk it would be a SHA:me to GO[  
87 Husband: [I know, the one  
88 problem there is if we're going to go THE:re (.5) and – we're  
89 contemplating a trip to [Europe  
90 Wife: [I KNOW – HOWARD – I – I  
91 Understand that and I'm thinking that if we wanna DO  
92 SOMething like that – uh you want to be able to get the – uhm  
93 – cheapest fare (.1) and uhm – (.1) I dunno – we have to – we  
94 ought to try to think about how we can DO it, so it's-uhm – not  
95 too expensive.  
96 (.2)  
97 Then there's ALSO the possibility of DRI:ving?,  
98 (.5)  
99 Husband: Driving ou:t there?  
100 Wife: Uhm.  
101 Husband: How longzit take?=  
102 Wife: =Oh, it's a lo:ng ri:de,=  
103 Howard: =How lo:ng?  
104 Wife: I, I dunno – Howard.  
105 Husband: How many MI:les is it?  
106 (.4)  
107 Wife: I – can't s- I don't have any A:Nswer for you on tha:t – I never  
108 drO:ve.  
109 (.6)  
110 Husband: Well - what would be the advantage of dri:ving?=  
111 Wife: =Well=  
112 Husband: =The only thing is saves is the – uh=  
113 Wife: =car rental,  
114 Husband: Cah rental.  
115 (.5)  
116 Well! I suppose if ya make it a tri:p and pla:n things goin out  
117 and coming ba:ck – as path of the trip – maybe – uh – (.2) it's a  
118 possibility.  
119 Wife: OK. THAT'S=  
120 Husband: =Yeah=  
121 Wife: =Ya know like for exa:mple – you know those senior uh –  
122 tickets?=

- 123 Husband: =Mmm,  
124 Wife: That you get – that might be a good time for us to buy those  
125 senior ti:ckets.=  
126 Husband: Yeah, - it comes to (.2) so your senior tickets would come to a  
127 hundred and thirty fi:h dollars – each way – per person –  
128 you’ve got two seventy – you’ve got fi:h hundred and forty  
129 dollahs air fare (.2) which isn’t tE:rrible. It’s pretty chea:p (.2)  
130 – but I wonda if those – I wonda if those trips envisage – uh  
131 wait – what do they call it? Where you stop at one place and  
132 continue on a day or two later?  
133 Wife: I dunno.  
134 (.2)  
135 ANYWAY, - SO THAT’S – THAT’S I WOULD LIKE TO  
136 factor that into the – total scheme of things=  
137 Husband: =Ok=  
138 Wife: =We’re talking about GRA:ND STRA:tegy – Howard  
139 ((laughter))  
140 Husband: =((laughter))=  
141 Wife: =Gra:nd strategy. Alright?=  
142 Husband: =Ok  
143 Wife: UH – OK – NOW – we’ve been talking about going ta –  
144 Fra:nce and Switzerland in the fall (.1) Now, I – I a:lso wanna  
145 ta:ke into consideration – uhm – what we wa:nna do A:fter  
146 that  
147 (.4)  
148 Ya know, - are we gonna go away in the WI:nter ti:me?,  
149 (.3)  
150 What? Have you got any THOU:ghts about – thoughts about  
151 any of this? Howard – I’d like to=  
152 Husband: [Well]  
153 Wife: =instead of doing all the (talking)  
154 Husband: [Well – I]  
155 (.5)  
156 I really don think it’s gonna be po:ssible to go away this  
157 vacation, go away in the all and this vacation – it’s much –  
158 much too much money.  
159 Wife: So – what wouldjoo like to do?  
160 Husband: Well [  
161 Wife: [How wouldjoo – how wouldja – what wouldja like to do?  
162 Husband: [Well  
163 Wife: Were you serious about considering going to – to A:sia?  
164 (.2)  
165 Husband: Yea:h, I think [  
166 Wife: [Because maybe – maybe  
167 Husband: [Maybe after a while  
168 Wife: [ NO? I don’t think we

169 should put those THINGS OFF  
170 (.2)  
171 I think that – uh – uh – I'd ra:ther put off a trip to go to Pa:ris  
172 (.2)  
173 if that's if that's a se:rious considerA:tion  
174 (.1)  
175 Husband: Well, you know what I think we ought to do  
176 (.2)  
177 When we get home, let's take a look at what the Elderhostel –  
178 uh – uh (what do you call it) =  
179 Wife: =I think there must be a NE:w issue coming out=  
180 Husband: =We just got one before we – uh – [we=  
181 Wife: [Ya, but that's  
182 Husband: =We went on vaca:tion. What will be in there'll give us an idea.  
183 They don't change [too much.]  
184 Wife: [Alright. Marion Hidercorn has our –  
185 [our uh international=  
186 Husband: [Oh, really?  
187 Wife: =our international thi[ng,  
188 Husband: [Oh, really.  
189 Wife: I can get it back from her.  
190 Husband: Yeah. Oh, Ok. Did you ask her to kee:p it for u:s?=  
191 Wife: =I tO:ld her that at thA:t time I didn't have any U:se for it  
192 but- uh [  
193 Husband: [If she ha:s it  
194 Wife: Yeah, if she sti [ll]  
195 Husband: [If she still ha:s [it]  
196 Wife: [Yeah – if she doesn't=  
197 Husband: If not, we can get another one (.1) I'm sure=  
198 Wife: =Cuz, I mean – if you're – if you're interested in – in going –  
199 uh – to southeast A:sier or A:sia (.1) I think that's something  
200 we should consider for next – wI:nter.  
201 Husband: Yeah  
202 Wife: And I think we oughtta consider thA:t now.  
203 (.1)  
204 Husband: And  
205 Wife: I mea:n I DON'T WANT TO GO ta FRA:NCE – AND THEN  
206 SAY WE'RE NOT GONNA – GO –  
207 Husband: Yeah. I know whatcha mean. You'd rather – if =  
208 Wife: [I wanna pla:n  
209 the whO:le thing  
210 Husband: =if it's O:ne or the O:ther – you'd rather go –  
211 Wife: YEAH – I'd rather go ta –  
212 Husband: Yeah – the A:sia trip – well I think that's a – that ma:kes sense  
213 (.1)  
214 ((laughter))



215 We never dO seem to get in that a – European trip in  
216 (.2)  
217 BUT – if we didn’t have ta – ya know if we don’t have –  
218 another thing like this (.1) ta Minnesota  
219 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 LO:ng-range (.6) discussion.  
18 Husband: OK.  
19 Wife: Which is O:PENended, (.4) and (.4) I don’t want you to fee:l (.6)  
20 like I’m, creating pressure. (1.0) °We’re just talking about long-  
21 range planning O[K]?°  
22 Husband: [\$Who’s NE:R!vous?\$ ((laughing and waving  
23 hands))  
24 Wife: ((laughter))  
25 Husband: Go ahead

#### Excerpt B: “Senior Tickets”

35 Husband: Yeah, it comes to (1.2) so your senior tickets would come to a  
36 hundred and thirty fih dollars (.6) each way (.4) per person (.8) so  
37 you’ve got two seventy >you’ve got fih< 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

- 7 about going ta- (1.) France and Switzerland in the fa:ll (1.4) Now,  
8 uh (1.0) I- (1.0) A:lso wanna take into consideration uhm (.2) what  
9 we wanna do After that  
10 (2.2)  
11 Ya know, are we gonna go away in the WI:ntertime? (1.2) What-  
12 have you any THOU:ghts about any of this Howard, I'd like to  
13 Husband: ((looks up at W))  
14 Wife: instead of doing all [the  
15 Husband: [Well, I (3.2) I REally don't think it's gonna be  
16 possible to go away this vacation to go away in the FALL and again  
17 in the winter. It's just gonna be (.6) much too much money.  
18 Wife: So what wouldjoo like to do. [How wouldjoo- what wouldja like to  
19 Husband: [Well I-  
20 Wife: do.  
21 Husband: We:l[l, since it- it- it- it-]  
22 Wife: [The otha, the otha thing I w]anted, I wanted to throw in  
23 (1.4) is, uh, (1.0) were you really serious about considering going  
24 t-, to Asia?  
25 (2.4)  
26 Husband: Yeah, but m[aybe after awhile]  
27 Wife: [Because maybe may]be, (.2) NO[, but I don't think=  
28 Husband: [after a  
29 Wife: =we should put those things off. (2.2) I think that uh, I'd rather put  
30 off a trip to go to Paris (2.4) if that, if that's a serious  
31 consideration.  
32 Husband: Well you know what I think we oughta do,  
33 (2.0)  
34 when we get home, let's take a look at what the Elderhostel-  
35 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)

.hhh 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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