

A Conversation Analysis Perspective

Christine Epting

Teachers College, Columbia University

In the following excerpts (see Appendix A), we see a couple having a discussion in which both are orienting to the fact that their talk is dispreferred (Pomerantz, 1984). Wife prefaces her introduction of topics twice using a pre-expansion sequence to delay the start of the talk. Husband gives the go-ahead in both instances, but shows that he disagrees with Wife's ideas for their vacation, prefacing most of his talk with the negative marker, "Well." Wife reacts quickly to Husband's negative markers, continually attempting to rephrase her question in such a way as to affect the response of Husband.

Analysis of Excerpt A, "Nervous"

We can see in this short excerpt that Wife is starting a conversation that she expects Husband to be averse to. The entire segment, from lines 15 to 24, can be considered a pre-expansion sequence for the later talk about a possible trip to Minnesota, and in a larger view, the whole talk about vacations. The marked in-breath in line 15, as well as the pause and upward intonation, mark Wife's speech as dispreferred. If this were a conversation in which she expected no resistance from Husband, there would be no need to preface it with explanations (lines 19-21).

The dispreferred nature of Wife's talk can also be seen in her continual lengthening of words and pausing throughout the entire segment. As seen in the rest of the transcript, Wife does not always lengthen vowels, so we may speculate that her lengthening in this segment has to do with the dispreferred nature of her talk. The second pair part of her pre-expansion sequence can be seen in line 25, when Husband literally gives her the "go ahead" to continue with her talk. The same action could have been performed by something like "OK." Husband says "OK" earlier in the excerpt (line 18), but because Wife continued with her pre-expansion sequence, we may conclude that she at least did not orient to that first "OK" as the second pair part of her pre-expansion. Only when Husband utters "Go ahead" after her sequence is completed does she move into her further talk.

Analysis of Excerpt B, "Senior Tickets"

Husband is furthering the discussion of the senior tickets, speculating on the total cost of their trip, and whether there will be any layovers. Wife answers his question of lines 38-41 in line 42 with "I dunno," and after a brief pause, enters with a turn-entry device, "ANYWAY." Because Wife has been trying to convince Husband about the merits of such a trip, this turn-entry device can be seen as a way to prevent Husband from dwelling on the negative aspects (cost and time). Also, it is important to note that "ANYWAY" is spoken more quickly than the rest of her speech, highlighting her wish to move away from Husband's points. That she wants to turn from small details (which may be unpleasant) to the larger question of whether they will take the trip or not can be seen in her steering the talk back to the "total scheme of things."

Analysis of Excerpt C, “Put Off”

Wife again inserts a pre-expansion sequence in lines 2-5, reminding Husband that they are talking about the big picture, or “grand strategy.” By stating “OK”, Husband can be seen to give her the go ahead again in line 5. This sequence again highlights the dispreferred nature of the talk to follow in lines 6-42.

Wife again starts her dispreferred talk with the pre-starts “UH-OK-NOW” in line 6. The gap in line 9 is preceded by what seems like a rhetorical question, but we may guess that Wife intended Husband to comment on that statement, as she follows the gap with a direct question in line 11. Another gap follows this utterance, and Wife reacts to the missing second pair part (comment/answer) in line 12 by saying, “What-” and then following with another question, and commenting on the fact that she is producing most of the talk. Throughout these seven lines (6-12), Wife pauses at possible completion points (PCPs; cf. Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), but Husband does not take the opportunity that the PCPs give him to jump into the conversation.

In line 15, Husband begins his comment with “Well,” which is a marker of a negative answer, and further marks his speech about to come as dispreferred by pausing for 3.2 seconds. He further hedges his statement by saying that it will “just” be too costly to take two vacations. Husband is disagreeing with Wife’s plans for their vacations, as laid out in earlier talk, an action which is dispreferred. Wife responds in line 18 with a question (first pair part), and when Husband begins to respond with “Well” (again marking that a negative answer will follow), she leaves no room for his second pair part. Wife jumps in with more questions, and then when Husband again begins to answer with “Well” in line 21, she jumps in and persists in speaking until Husband abandons his attempt to speak.

In line 23, Wife asks another question, leaving her earlier questions unanswered. Husband leaves a larger gap after her utterance before responding, perhaps to ensure that she indeed would like an answer. He does not get very far, however, as Wife again jumps in with further reasoning for her question in line 27. Again, it seems that she is reacting to a negative marker in Husband’s speech (“but”), adding information to her earlier question in order to produce a more favorable response from Husband.

In line 32, Husband begins with a cataphoric reference, saying, “Well you know what I think we oughta do,” and is able to pause for 2.0 seconds before finishing. Although Wife has shown her willingness to jump in at non-PCPs earlier in the talk, this turn-buying device is more powerful than that tendency, and she waits until he finishes his talk before jumping in.

REFERENCES

- Pomerantz, A. (1984). Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In J. M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social interaction* (pp. 57-101). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Sacks, H., Schegloff, E., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language* 50, 696-735.

APPENDIX A

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 B

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

Christine Epting is a doctoral student in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include classroom discourse and the acquisition of pragmatics. Christine is currently working on a paper on the display of communicative competence by toddlers.