

Speech acts, moves, and meta-communication in negotiation: three cases of everyday conversation observed among the |Gui former-foragers[☆]

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Abstract

Interactive organizations of three cases of negotiations are systematically analyzed in the contemporary ethnographic context of the |Gui (Khoe-speaking Bushman people) in Botswana. The illocutionary acts that constitute these negotiations are identified, the principal of which is the *requirement* by one party. Another party's response includes two alternatives: *refusal* or *obeying*. When some sequence of speech acts functions as the *move* that affects the course of the negotiation, this *move* usually exerts an accumulative effect that is caused by iterating the same type of act. This hypothesis is well represented by the 'balance model' of speech acts, rather than the 'billiard ball model.' Apparently, a serious negotiation may be experienced as a verbal play-fight by the participants, as well as by the audience. This meta-communicative keying is supported by the convergence of participants' attention onto the shared frame of action-coordination. If the participants hope to 'play' jokingly, they have to continue their interaction beyond the duration necessary for the transactional goal. Linking logically consistent moves and objecting to the opponent's definition of their social relationship are the best strategies for continuing a bout of face-to-face interaction. In this sense, logical consistency of speech acts is contiguous with emotional involvement in interactions.

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1. Introduction

The 'transdisciplinary' framework (see the Introduction of this issue) that the present article follows may be called 'interactionism.' Its theoretical origin can be traced back to Goffmanian micro-sociology that has shed light on the ground rules for face-to-face interactions among city dwellers in various types of 'natural settings' (Goffman, 1963). A number of strands of methodologies also stream into interactionism: Batesonian thinking regarding communication (Bateson, 1972), structural analysis of face-to-face interactions (Kendon, 1982), conversation analysis (Heritage, 1984), speech act theory, and pragmatics. Interactionism assumes that any institution is ultimately grounded on, and

[☆] The original version of this article was presented at the Ninth International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGS), "Hunter-gatherer studies and the reshaping of anthropology," held at the Edinburgh Conference Centre, Heriot-Watt University, Scotland, on 9–13 September 2002. Although the main goal was to re-examine the so-called 'egalitarian principle' in terms of the characteristics of verbal interactions, a slight modification was made to make the present article more relevant for 'emancipatory pragmatics.'

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incessantly realized by, face-to-face interactions, or, borrowing Goffmanian terms, the immediate and embodied co-presence of the participants.

This investigation concentrates on negotiation, which is a particular type of social interaction that is assumed to be the most significant for human ‘struggle for survival’ in every society. Consider the simplest negotiation between two individuals, P and Q. Both of them are pursuing profit, but P’s gain may entail Q’s loss, and vice versa. This situation is very familiar under the headline of ‘prisoners’ dilemma’ in political–economic arguments for which game theory, optimum strategy theory, and the like are the most pertinent. These theories have paid less attention to the interactive process that any negotiation undergoes than to its outcome, which can be measured numerically. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that the “rational-actor model,” which “plays a major role in contemporary economics and international relations” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999:515), is not a neutral description of the world, but is based on complex metaphors that entail implicit moral choices:

Most people most of the time do not reason according to the rational-actor model, nor even according to the traditional philosophical ideal of rationality as literal, formal, conscious, disembodied, and unemotional. Real human reason is embodied, mostly imaginative and metaphorical, largely unconscious, and emotionally engaged. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999:536)

Most researchers of extant/former-foragers might be sympathetic with Lakoff and Johnson’s antipathy against the rational-actor model because they would note that ‘begging’ is the typical pattern of negotiation most frequently encountered in these societies. It is not at all unusual that P simply requires something and Q gives it without hesitation. The classical explanation of a *begging-giving* interaction in terms of ‘balanced reciprocity’ is merely a version of the rational-actor model in that some return from the begging party, P, is expected through a long-term social relationship between P and Q (Sahlins, 1974). The paradigm of ‘reciprocity’ is also restricted by the theoretical bias that puts far more emphasis on the outcome of negotiating interactions, ideally ‘exchange,’ than on their diverse processes.

As an interactionist, I must posit a fundamental question: What are the behavioral constituents of a negotiation? If the wide variation of negotiations encountered in everyday life is considered, ranging from the elaborate processes between nations reported in the media to the much smaller cases between wife and husband within a family, the attempt to answer the above question would be discouraged at the start in the face of so much complexity and an almost infinite extent of variation. According to Japanese folk-knowledge, the essence of negotiation is the ‘compromise’ that is to be achieved through the persistent interchange of statements with subtle nuances and implications. Any attempt to enumerate the behavioral constituents of negotiation would be diffused into an indefinite exploration of the pragmatic devices such as roundabout speaking, euphemism, respecting the other’s face, and so on. To avoid this impasse, and to define the extension of the relevant data to be empirically analyzed, I prefer to reduce the problem to a simple model that was induced from my experience of ‘begging’ during fieldwork.

One morning in September 1994, when I was staying in a |Gui camp at the peripheral part of the settlement, I was asked by an adolescent hunter to help him carry the meat of a male kudu (big antelope) he had killed the last evening. As the animal had been killed near the track used by vehicles, if I would bring my four-wheel-drive car to a point near to the carcass, he and his camp members would be able to avoid the laborious work of walking a long distance with a heavy burden of meat. I *accepted* his *request*, so that several hours later, I drove the car back to our camp, filled with several men and the bloody meat. When the young hunter was unloading the meat from the car, I asked him, “What will the owner [of the meat] give me?” He just smiled but did not answer. I left and engaged myself in some incidental tasks. About half an hour later, when I went to the car to move it to another place, I found a big hind leg left on the back. Afterward, I heard the |Gui research assistants talking about my strange demeanor: they giggled, repeatedly quoting my utterance, “What will the owner give me?” I sensed an implicit criticism of plainly demanding some reward from the owner. I was strongly impressed with the fact that the adolescent hunter merely left a large amount of meat without saying anything. It seemed to me that this simple process revealed the essential features of the typical |Gui way of negotiating.

This transaction was composed of two sequential pairs of addressing and *responding*: (i) The adolescent man *requested* and I *accepted*, and (ii) I *required* (in an indirect way using an interrogative sentence) and he *obeyed*, not with words, but with a nonverbal act. Paying attention to the causal relationship between (i) and (ii), one may argue that this transaction is explicable in terms of balanced reciprocity or, more mundanely, of the give-and-take principle: I offered a service to him and received a reward for this service. Insofar as this is true, both of us behaved according to

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