

# **A marriage of convenience: Ethnography conversation analysis of real-estate negotiation**

Thilagavathi Shanmuganathan  
Dept of English Language  
University of Malaya  
[thilasha@um.edu.my](mailto:thilasha@um.edu.my)

## **Abstract**

Naturally-occurring conversations have always been criticized for being chaotic and incoherent (Givón, 1995). The few who have ventured into analyzing spontaneous speech were concerned with the features of speech or patterns of turn-taking (Fairclough, 1992; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2002). Besides using simulated contexts, the studies relied on a single method or approach to analyse data. This study investigates naturally-occurring conversations in the context of negotiation and highlights the importance of triangulating approaches as a means of complementing the drawbacks of one method – a marriage of convenience.

The need for this marriage is evident if one studies the main thrusts of the methodologies of conversation analysis (CA) with ethnography. CA basically prescribes to the notion of analysing data exclusively on what the 'participants see and hear' (Sacks et al., 1974). However, it does not seek to investigate the hidden meaning behind particular utterances. As a result, there is no attempt to explain why interlocutors say what they say despite the meaning intended and that interpreted by the recipient differing from the obvious linguistic meaning. In view of this need to explicate speaker meaning, ethnographic information was a necessary partner. For instance, CA prescribes that researchers be 'a part of the participants' community to be able to 'see and hear' like them – a stand similar to ethnographic analysis.

This study sets out to investigate, using the CA method, how unacquainted interlocutors construct a systematic procedure of phase structures in negotiation. Based on ethnographic information the study explicates how interlocutors are able to distinguish implied from linguistic meaning. In this study, two negotiation cases were audio recorded and data was later transcribed using Jefferson's (1986) transcription conventions. Findings reveal that this marriage of convenience provides significant results that help establish understanding of the negotiation exchange.

**Keywords:** Conversation analysis, Ethnography, Negotiation, Naturally-occurring conversations

## **Introduction**

Past research has focused on simulated conversations with given contexts where the interlocutors role-played. This emphasis on simulated conversations was usually easier to control where the time and location as well as the purpose of the research were pre-determined. Naturally-occurring conversations on the other hand, had been criticised for being chaotic and incoherent (Givón, 1995).

It is only in the past decade that analysing spontaneous speech has gained popularity. Research on spontaneous speech usually investigated the features of speech or patterns of turn-taking (Fairclough, 1992; Sacks et al., 1974; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2002). This research, which is part of a larger study (Shanmuganathan, 2008), looks at how the interlocutors constructed phases of negotiation that were realised via patterns of turn-taking. The patterns of turn-taking were based on conversation analysis while ethnography provided background knowledge for the interpretation of meanings of utterances.

## **Conversation analysis**

Conversation analysis or CA prescribes the notion of analysing data exclusively on what the 'participants see and hear' (Sacks et al., 1974). The basic premise of CA is the detailed description of transcribed data. CA is not interested in investigating why interlocutors said what they said.

Since CA does not start with an *a priori* theory, it has been criticised for being theoretically unsound. However, data-driven research does not start with an *a priori* theory as it is based entirely on transcript analyses. CA is also concerned with the detailed description of the sequential patterns of turn taking and, while this description is based wholly on transcribed data, what these turn-taking rules mean to the interlocutors is not discussed.

In addition, CA categorises parts of the conversation instead of analysing the entire exchange. For instance, Sacks et al. (1974) analysed the opening sections of calls to an emergency centre while Schegloff and Sacks (1973) analysed how interlocutors opened up closings. How these parts fit together to form a bigger picture of the conversation activity is not investigated, prompting critics to label CA as being meticulous in its description but with a weak interpretation. Finally, CA work in the past has been based on simulated or experimental situations created by the researcher with the interlocutors role-played according to roles assigned by the researcher.

## **Ethnography**

While CA emphasizes meticulous transcript analysis of the data, ethnography is concerned with the provisional interpretations in the course of a particular conversation. Ethnographers interpret particular events, conversation exchanges and/or practices that are deemed important based on ethnographer observations and post-conversation interviews throughout an entire conversation event. However, like CA, ethnographers have no detailed procedures for data collection since research analyses are data driven. Thus, critics have questioned the 'unstructured' data-collection methods of ethnography.

In addition, as ethnographers spend extended periods of time in the field, there is a high possibility of the researchers becoming less reflective about earlier encounters with the community being researched. The community being researched also became comfortable with the ethnographer's presence and assumed that the ethnographer knew better since s/he was able to see and interpret events and practices that they (the community) themselves had taken for granted. With no detailed plans for data collection and analysis, critics wonder what ethnographers are really looking for.

There are also many doubts about the ethnographer's interpretation of a particular conversation event as it is not easy to distinguish between non-intuitive or natural facts and interpreted facts based on the ethnographer's own opinions. Ethnography has been criticised for being non-scientific as it rejects quantification of survey research. The ethnographic approach is purely qualitative and is based on journal entries, observations and post-conversation interviews of real-life cases. There is no simulated or experimental situation and the interlocutors do not role play the parts of the interlocutors. Ethnographers spend time with participants in order to be accepted into the research community so that they will be able to understand and interpret conversation events and practices correctly by consulting key respondents in the community.

### **The marriage**

Although this study has attempted to make some distinctions between CA and ethnography as discussed above, it is difficult to make such distinctions today as more and more studies combine these approaches when analysing naturally-occurring conversations. Some of the earliest CA-based studies on institutional settings that used both CA and ethnography can be traced to the works of Douglas (1952), Gulliver (1979), and Maynard (1984). There are more similarities between the two approaches than differences which enables the approaches to complement each other. Firstly, CA prescribes that the researcher be 'a part of the participants' community to be able to 'see and hear' like them (similar to ethnographic analysis).

CA deals with the more detailed description of the conversation so as to replicate what went on in the naturally-occurring exchange. The sequential patterns of turn taking can be quantified to show the number of turns taken, length of pauses, the points of overlaps, interruptions, turn-construction units as well as simultaneous talk. Ethnographic information is necessary to explicate speaker meaning which is not prescribed by CA. In fact Arminen (2005) states that CA studies do not rely on ethnographic knowledge but that analysis of some institutional settings may require contextual knowledge in order to make sense of realms distinct from everyday life.

Both CA and ethnography investigate ordered sequences and are concerned with the detailed analysis of actual instances of human behaviour. While CA draws upon the fine-grained details of the negotiation via sequential turn-taking patterns, ethnography draws upon observation and detailed field notes for the same purpose of explicating the sequence of regularities.

### **The study**

The purpose of this study is basically to explain why interlocutors say what they say, distinguishing between meaning intended and linguistic meaning. As CA provides a detailed analysis of the conversation, ethnography provides the impetus to determine what the interlocutors intended and what was interpreted by the recipient interlocutors.

This study contributes to the notion that negotiation in Malaysian real estate differs from the practices of other countries. Based on conversations with some citizens of Australia and the United States in December 2006, it was found that there was very little negotiation in these countries as the potential buyers detailed their preferences and budget for the real estate agent to work on. In Malaysia however, real-estate negotiation starts right from the beginning of the first meeting between the two unacquainted parties. There is no pre-set agenda, and goals and expectations are only established during the actual viewing at the property site.

The current research investigates how unacquainted interlocutors construct a systematic procedure of phase structures in negotiation (using the CA approach). Ethnographic enquiry provides the information on how interlocutors distinguish between implied and linguistic meanings.

### **Method of investigation**

Two negotiation cases were audio recorded and transcribed using Jefferson's (1986) transcription conventions. Observations and post-negotiation interviews (as prescribed by ethnography) were used to complement CA in the analyses and discussion of naturally-occurring data. Prior permission was obtained from the interlocutors before recording.

Data 1 comprised four interlocutors. Real estate agent 'R' was a Eurasian in his mid forties and had had 14 years of real-estate experience. He had some training in real estate but said that it was through experience that he had learned the tools of the trade. The potential buyers were 'E', a Malay man in his early thirties, his fiancée 'A' (Malay female in her late twenties) and A's sister 'J' (Malay female in her early thirties). The potential buyers were permanent residents in Malaysia but had spent the greater part of their early years in Singapore. Therefore, the language choice was naturally English for both parties.

Data 2 comprised three interlocutors, namely the real estate agent 'A', who had no formal training in real estate. She was Chinese, in her mid fifties and freelancing for the property owner. The potential buyers were a couple – 'K', a Chinese female in her early thirties, working as a nurse in a private hospital, and 'D', a Chinese businessman in his early thirties. The couple were currently renting an apartment in an exclusive residential area.

### **Main findings**

#### ***a. Phases of negotiation***

Via detailed transcript analyses, six phases of negotiation were identified. Also identified were the intended meaning and ethnic nuances attached to particular exchanges. The excerpt below from Data 1 shows how the phases are realised through the turn-by-turn sequence of adjacency pairs. The six phases are marked '← {P1}' to '← {P6}'.

#### **Excerpt 1: Phases of negotiation**

1 E : Hi a::h are you R?=  
2 R : = E is it?=  
← {P1}

3 E : = yes[s]

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15 E : [A ]A, my fiancée=  
16 R : =[ah ah ok] so (.) so ← {P2}  
17 A : [(muffled)]  
18 E : [ so we gonna view (.) which  
block?

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27 E : How many have come to see this place? ← {P3}  
28 R : Ah, actually the place has been vacant for only a week= ← {P4}  
29 E : = so far how many people have  
30 come and viewed this place?=

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61 E : = yah, because I'm thinking of future (.) I might  
63 not get a good price if I want to sell] ← {P5}  
64 J : [yeh

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263 E : = ok let me discuss with A first ← {P6}  
264 R : [ok, thanks =

Based on the excerpt above, the phases of negotiation were realised via the turn-by-turn construction (CA method). The first phase started with introductions and greetings exchanged between the interlocutors, similar to work by Holmes (1992) and Arminen (2005). Phase two started when the first enquiry was exchanged and responded to. Since question responses were the basis of real-estate negotiations, there were many recurrences of the adjacency pairs throughout the negotiation exchange.

The third phase was where the interlocutors identified a particular strategy in the form of a declarative question or a statement. This tactic was constructed by either the potential buyers or the real-estate agent for the purpose of gathering information. Based on post-negotiation interviews (ethnography), how the interlocutors interpreted the information was established. It was found that if, for instance, the potential buyers wanted to know about the marketability of the property, they would enquire about how long the real-estate agent had been trying to sell the property. By doing so, the potential buyer was able to gauge that if a property had been left unsold for very long, then it could probably be due to a number of reasons such as it being too expensive, in the wrong location, too old or in a traffic congested area.

On the other hand, if the real-estate agent wanted to establish the buying power of the potential buyers, then s/he would enquire where the potential buyers were currently staying. By doing so, the agent was able to establish that if they were currently renting in an exclusive and expensive area, then that would mean that they were capable of securing loans.

Based on these responses from post-negotiation interviews (ethnographic approach) it was clear that the mode of enquiry was indirect and this is very much Malaysian and Asian culture (see Asmah Hj Omar, 1990). The fourth phase is the response given to this tactic. How the recipient interlocutor responded to the earlier tactic can be in two forms, either as a statement or as a counter-inquiry as shown below.

**Excerpt 2:** Statement-form response

27 E: How many have come to see this place? ←{P3}  
 28 R: Ah, actually the place has been vacant for only a week= ← {P4}

**Excerpt 3:** Counter-enquiry form

250 SF: so right now what's the price of this house?= ←{P3}  
 251 A: =one ninety= ←{P4}  
 252 SF: =[one ninety-ah?  
 253 C: [one ninety-lah=  
 254 SF: =exactly?=  
 255 A: =exac[tly

In Excerpt 2, R provides a statement form as response while Excerpt 3 clearly shows the potential buyers posing counter enquiries to the responses provided by the agent A.

Phase 5 is the most important tactic used by either interlocutor as it is a tactic that will finally decide the conclusion of the negotiation phase. This phase is usually about the price offer and counter offer that both parties agree to consider before decisions are made.

**b. Intended meanings**

Excerpt 4 below shows how intended meanings are interpreted by the interlocutors as they constantly co-construct the phases of negotiation.

**Excerpt 4**

507 K: [but its because of the pricing as well-lah (.) I  
 508 suppose ](laughs)  
 509 D: [its stran]ge  
 510 huh? (.) the lady interested three fifty (.)  
 511 another three, (.) fifty three [(muffled)]  
 512 A: [hmm ] the owner  
 513 is very strict one]

In this exchange, K, the wife of D, guesses that the house has not yet sold because of the high price put up for the property. This line of reasoning is further reinforced by K's husband, D who challenges the real estate agent (A) by stating that he was surprised that if a lady was 'interested to buy for three fifty three' (lines 510 – 511) then why was the house not yet sold. This line of query puts the agent in a tight spot and this is seen by the initial position backchannel 'hmm'. The

backchannel 'hmm' is usually used as feedback to prior utterance but in this case it is to initiate the next turn and also to provide a space for the agent to formulate the most reasonable answer possible in response to K's query.

She manages a response, 'the owner is very strict one', which does not carry much relevance to the prior utterance. In the post negotiation interview, the agent admitted she was not aware that her prior utterances were contradictory and only realised her mistake when D pointed out the mistake in the form of a query. As a result, a spontaneous response is provided which appears to be given without much thought.

Another example provides more evidence of the interplay of intended meanings posed by the potential buyer.

### Excerpt 5

- 31 E: = so far how many people have  
32 come and viewed this place?=  
33 R: = ah, ah er, er since last week er it's about  
34 two to three [couples came in-*lah*=  
35 A: [(*coughs*)  
36 E: [two to three-*lah* hmm, I see, [I see=

In this excerpt, E poses the query (lines 31 – 32) 'so far how many people have come and viewed this place?' to the real estate agent, R. Although the query seems genuinely wanting to know how many people had come to view the property, the particular purpose was to gauge the number of interested parties who had come and gone without making a purchase. As if realizing this, R stumbles for words with 'ah, ah, er' at the beginning of his response and quickly manages 'since last week'. If R had responded by saying a small number, this would have indicated an unpopular property, and if R had quoted a big number then this would indicate a high asking price. R's response including the temporal frame seemed to answer E's query, as E seemed convinced that within a week there were already two to three couples who had viewed the property.

### c. Ethnic nuances

Another important finding in this study is the ethnic nuances that were realised via the turn-by-turn sequence (CA). The excerpt below displays inclusion of a commonly shared ethnic nuance.

### Excerpt 6

- 53 R : =yes, er, ok (.) considered (.) its (.) one of the (.) best unit around  
54 R here-*lah*, top floor although it's the fourth storey but er(.) it's quite near  
55 to vicinities[ *lah*]  
56 E : [wah] Block four, fourth storey, er four-[[ four]]  
57 J : [[four ]] er?  
58 E : Chinese say 's'uh 'si' l a bit pantanglah=  
59 R : = Oh is it? I thought  
60 Malays don't have anything=

61 E : = yah, but because why, I'm thinking of  
 62 future (.) if want to sell (.) so I might not get a good price [you see=

In Excerpt 6 above, R, the real estate agent starts to brief the potential buyers (E and J) about the location of the unit which is '...the fourth storey' (lines 54–55) and E overlaps at the tail end of R's utterance by exclaiming ' [wah] Block four, fourth storey, er four-[[ four]]' (line 56). E's concern is echoed by J (his future sister-in-law) by saying '[four er' (line 57). Obviously these exclamations surprise R as seen in Line 59 and this is shown in the stuttered response filled with pauses. As if sensing R's confusion, E offers to explain in lines 61–62.

According to E, he was a 'bit pantang' or superstitious of the number four as the word means 'death' when spoken in Mandarin. In response, the real estate agent displays prior knowledge of the beliefs and superstitions of different ethnic groups and makes it obvious that he was not prepared for the Malay potential buyer E to be as superstitious as the Chinese. Hence, R's reply 'Oh is it? I thought Malays don't have anything' (line 60) prompted E to provide some form of explanation (lines 61–62) for his earlier comment (line 58).

E's response indicated that he was not superstitious but, was aware like R, of different ethnic beliefs and superstitions and if he had plans to sell the property in future, the possible number of potential buyers would be somewhat reduced as Chinese buyers would not be keen to purchase a property that was on Block four and on the fourth storey.

In the following excerpt, Chinese buyers also indicate their preference for the direction in which the house faces the sun. One of the main reasons for having a house that faces the sun is *Feng Shui* and it is the first question posed by the potential buyers below.

### Excerpt 7

3 SF: =so actually  
 4 this house is facing which direction?=  
 5 A: =*Aiyoh* (.) I (.) change my ha:nd ba:g I didn't bring the co:mpass, oh  
 6 dear then I didn't my purse (.) er *yitoh* (*Cantonese*) I can tell you the  
 7 sun is in front one[the sun that means ah]  
 8 C: [and then the (muffled)  
 9 A: [no here the structure is like here is  
 10 no sun can come in here is like my (*Cantonese*) my 3 units here]  
 11 SF: [so]  
 12 A: [(*Cantonese*) *yitoh* north-south *yitoh* (*Cantonese*)  
 13 Ah (.) ok now I'm a bit (..) want to know the direction (laughs). Can you  
 14 remember your direction, I didn't bring my compass to[day ah(.]  
 15 O: [what the sun ah?=  
 16 A: =ah [the sun=

Excerpt 7 above clearly indicates SF's determination to know the direction of the sun. The real estate agent, also Chinese, is aware of the importance of this and, as she is unsure of the direction, she attempts lengthy explanations and finally seeks the house owner O's help.



This finding indicates that while the real estate agents and potential buyers were aware of different ethnic nuances, this shared knowledge could be challenged at any time.

## Conclusion

This study on naturally occurring real-estate negotiation in Malaysia used both CA and ethnography to analyse the data. The first main finding is that spontaneous construction of utterance in the negotiation process has identifiable phases of negotiation.

Other findings showed that in the turn-by-turn sequence of negotiation, the interlocutors constructed intended meanings in their utterances while also displaying ethnic nuances in the exchanges. Shared knowledge ensured the progress of the negotiation exchange. Therefore, this marriage of convenience between CA and ethnography provided significant results that helped establish a better understanding of the negotiation process.

This CA-ethnography combination ensures a more detailed description that includes the interlocutors' interpretations, which were pertinent in the analysis of responses and counter-responses in the negotiation exchange. Furthermore, the methods used in the current study would be useful in analysing other forms of negotiation such as second-hand car deals, trade negotiation and intercultural exchanges.

**Thilagavathi Shanmuganathan** is a lecturer at the Department of English Language, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya. Her research interests include discourse analysis, pragmatics, ethnography and conversation analysis. Her PhD work was on 'Negotiation at the workplace: An ethnography conversation analysis'. Current research includes projects on the Corpus of Spoken English, language maintenance and loss in minority communities and the pragmatics and discourse in specific contexts and communities.

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