

Theme transitions in negotiations

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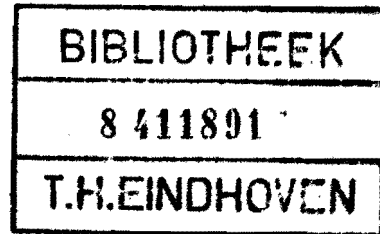
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LCN

Language and Culture in Technical Commercial Negotiations



THEME TRANSITIONS
IN NEGOTIATIONS

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THEME TRANSITIONS IN NEGOTIATIONS

As part of the ongoing research in Foreign Language Teaching, the Tilburg University and the University of Technology Eindhoven are investigating the role of language and culture in international negotiations. The research project is called "Negotiating Technical Business in a Cross-Cultural and Cross-Linguistic Setting".

The results of a survey, conducted among Dutch businessmen last year by our researchgroup, have shown that the lack of knowledge of the language and culture of the partner often results in ineffective negotiations and, in the worst case, results in abandoning further negotiation. Highlighting the problems from a linguistic point of view could contribute to a better understanding of intercultural contact and could result in practical suggestions concerning language courses for specific purposes.

The aim of the research is to arrive at a model of negotiation in linguistic terms, which would make it possible to identify and explain communication problems arising during this type of discourse.

For this project we have chosen the French-Dutch contact situation because, in the Netherlands, commercial contacts with the French have decreased in recent years and, as the negotiators in the above-mentioned survey emphasized, language and culture barrier have contributed to this. Our intention is to compare authentic French-French, Dutch-Dutch and French-Dutch negotiations.

A pre-requisite for doing this type of contrastive work is a basic model of the negotiation process. Such a model would provide answers to questions like: how do participants organize their talk in order to attain their goals. The paper I present today is an attempt towards describing this basic model. I will begin with a definition or rather a brief description of a negotiation. I will also indicate the theoretical background for our study and I will then present our conclusions to date.

During a negotiation the parties involved decide to try to reach an agreement by means of a discussion. To start a negotiation implies that there is not a solution at hand for the problems. In the process of negotiation a number of themes must be discussed, and they occur in a more or less fixed sequence, since agreement or clarity about the prior theme is required before discussing the subsequent one. Broadly speaking, a negotiation comprises the following themes:

<u>Phase</u>	<u>Theme</u>
1. make contact	a. who is who b. the general economic situation c. joint interest d. state of affairs
2. discuss the needs of the client	a. situation now b. desired situation
3. make an offer on the part of the seller	a. technical information b. area of application of the product c. types and number of products available
4. match 2 to 3	
5. bargain about the price	a. cost of material and production b. services c. terms of payment d. conditions of delivery
6. rounding off	a. results b. collaboration c. further appointments

The list is a compilation of the answers of twenty buyers of a Dutch company to the question: what is discussed in a negotiation-meeting and in which order.

In discourse analysis it is usual to speak about the thematic structure of a conversation. Perhaps we could explain thematic structure in the following way: talk is organized around points of attention; as long as people attribute to the same point of attention they work on the same theme. But if one looks in a more abstract way at the material, it can be said that several themes also have a common point of attention, and together they can be considered as a unit. In the literature different names are given to these instances: global theme versus theme (Van Dijk, 1980). Ten Have (1981) uses the term phase and theme. We will talk about phases and themes, but when we are talking about theme-transition and closing a theme, we will also be referring to the transitions and closings of bigger units such as Make Contact.

For the participants it is necessary to know at what stage they are in the discussion: if they have reached an agreement and if they both have the same solution in mind. Because if they have agreed about a theme they can go on to the next theme of the negotiation. What we want to know now is at what point in the theme-treatment do the participants decide to end the discussion about the on going theme, so they can go on to the following theme. The motivation for looking at this problem in depth is the fact that the negotiators we interviewed have themselves stated that they often get irritated because they do not know how to close a theme, or even a whole conversation in an acceptable, that is to say in a quick, polite and diplomatic way. A better knowledge of handling these kinds of discourse problems could contribute to more efficient and maybe more effective negotiation. We now turn to the theoretical background underlying our study.

Our work falls within the scope of discourse analysis à la Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) conversational analysis à la Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) and speech act analysis à la Searle (1969). We see that in conversation, information is conveyed in turns of talk. Our primary concern is to figure out how the turns of participants are related to each other so they form a coherent semantic whole. One of the ways to describe the work people do in their turns is in terms of speech acts. By speech acts we mean verbal acts like asserting, denying, inquiring, acknowledging, greeting etc. In a series of turns patterns of speech act sequences can be discovered which form a distinguishable semantic unit, for example greeting-greeting, question-answer-evaluation. Subsequent sequences of these semantic units can also form a regular pattern and in this way, they form even larger semantic units, for instance in doctor-patient interaction according to Coulthard & Ashby (1975) you

can distinguish three phases. The first phase in such an interaction can be described in eliciting-information giving - follow-up sequences, the next one in directing-action sequences and the third phase in informing-acknowledging sequences. All the units mentioned here: turns, sequences of speech acts, and phases form different types of discourse units. The aim of the analysis we are doing is to describe negotiations in terms of discourse units and to describe how these discourse units are realized so they form a coherent whole.

We have already touched upon thematic units earlier in this paper. These are considered as discourse units. As we mentioned before we are interested in the closing section of thematic units, more specifically how people show each other they want to, and actually do, close a theme.

From the work of different researchers we know that participants in a conversation have at their disposal a variety of devices to mark the transition from one discourse unit to another. Polanyi and Scha (1982) give the following list:

1. discourse particles ('well', 'o.k.')
2. tense shift
3. changes in speech act
4. introduction of explicit vocatives, pronouns, re-nominalization of previously pronominalized antecedents
5. explicit meta-comment
6. entrance and exit talk gambits
7. true starts (repetition of previously interrupted sentences)
8. paralinguistic and extra-linguistic devices

Applied research has been done by Merritt (1978) who shows that the use of 'o.k.' in service-encounters mark the transition from the verbal section to the acting section (for instance paying the bill, or taking the product). The work done by Schegloff and Sacks in their article Opening up Closings (1973) is a classic in the field. They describe that telephone-calls most often end in the following sequence:

- (1) SA 'o.k.' confirmation
- SB 'o.k.' confirmation
- SA 'bye' farewell
- SB 'bye' farewell

Both speakers give a confirmation and both speakers bid farewell. The interesting part of their research concerns the postulation of a pre-closing device. They call the first 'o.k.' pre-closing, which means that it initiates the closing section. The other speaker can accept or reject this initiation. The authors mention other component parts for closing sections, like making arrangements and re-involutions of certain sets of materials talked of earlier in the conversation, but they don't work this out in detail in their article.

We see from the above that theme-transition appears to be a promising area to investigate. In our work at present we are trying to find out if devices similar to those found by Schegloff and Sacks in conversation endings also occur in theme-transitions in business negotiations. Our data so far suggests that they do.

I will illustrate this by taking one example of a negotiation in French between a Dutch chemist who sells medical equipment to a Belgian physician. Other data, one Dutch-Dutch negotiation and one French-French negotiation also support our findings.

Most of the theme-transitions close with a series of confirmations by both participants ("o.k.", "d'accord"). But in a lot of cases these confirmations are preceded by what Schegloff and Sacks called a "re-involution of certain sorts of materials talked of earlier in the conversation" (1973: 256). We prefer to call it a repetition of previous information, expressed by means of a question, a résumé or an aphorism.

- (2) F. oui, il faut choisir il faut choisir son outil en fonction du travail
qu'on a à faire.
→ N. oui c'est ça c'est ça
→ F. c'est ça hein
N. d'accord
(0.6)
O.K. alors e:h, tant qu'on a déjà une coopération j'ai vous e:h envoyé
une une offre
F. oui
N. d'accord peut-être ou peut e:h
(0.6)
discuter l'offre e:h

Whether or not a repetition of previous information works as a pre-closing device, that is to say as the initiation of a closing-section, can only be found out by looking at the occurrence during the course of the whole meeting. Of course, a pre-closing device also allows for the possibility of other participants rejecting this initiation of "closing". Again this is something only to find out by looking at occurrences of this during the course of the negotiation.

Our analyses so far reveals the following:

1. A repetition by the first speaker was followed by a modification of the repeated information by the second speaker and the same theme continued, or
2. a repetition on the part of the first speaker was followed by a confirmation by the second speaker. The first speaker in his turn modified the repeated information and the theme continued, or
3. a repetition by the first speaker is interrupted by a meta-statement by the second speaker to continue the theme, or
4. there is also the instance of the case described by Schegloff and Sacks: a repetition leading to a confirmation by both participants to close the theme.

These four instances can be schematized in the following way:

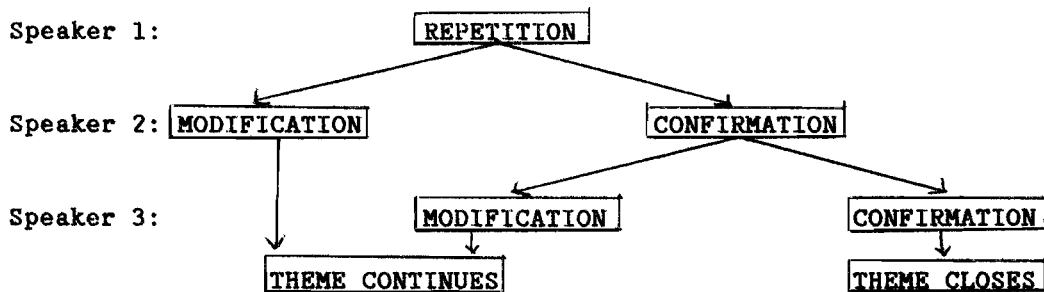


Figure 1: Schema of REPETITION as a pre-closing device.

We will illustrate the instances of repetition just discussed. All these instances deal with one theme - the Needs of the Client

(3) After the greeting sequences N. opens the discussion:

(line 4-5)

N: c'est bon que vous eh vous expliquez encore une fois pourquoi

(0.5)

e:h **** est

F: mm

(0.5)

N: vous pensez alors nécessaire pour cet labora pour pour ce laboratoire

(line 77): interruption + meta-statement

N: oui c'est ça, a:lors O.K. haha .fh bon ehm

(2.1)

je parce que

(0.4)

→ alors vous avez expliqué

(0.8)

→ F: non non encore une chose peut-être pour e:h

N: oui

F: les médicaments une chose, qu'on ne parvient pas à: déterminer avec les techniques classiques (....)

(line 101-104): modification of the repetition first by N, than by F

F: enfin disons idéalement on veut l'avoir comme ça quand même

→ N: oui c'est premièrement pour améliorer l'efficacité

F: c'est ça oui

→ N: e:h et gagner de l'argent

(0.5)

prin princi principalement

→ F: bien sur aussi hein parce que (...)

(line 108): repetition with two confirmations

N: et alors vous pensez eh que que

(0.3)

alors les les

(0.6)

→ les plusieurs piques et les et les la possibilité de mesurer les métabolites sont les eh

(0.5)

→ les raisons principaux pour eh pour acheter une une:

(0.4)

→ une ****

(0.6)

F: ben disons que

(0.4)

→ ç:a ça me motive fortement quoi

→ N: oui d'accord O.K. alors eh

(0.3)

hm

(1.2)

on a déjà discuté ça mai:s me: quand on voit le tout ce que vous voulez (...) je pense que:h

(3.6)

au moins

(2.1)

vous avez besoin, d'une

They then discuss what the seller can offer.

From this evidence it is possible to conclude that a repetition functions as a pre-closing device, since it leaves open the opportunity to reject this initiation and in several cases is actually followed by the closing.

The phenomenon of repetition also demonstrates the high degree of cooperation entered into by both participants. This is what I would like to comment on now.

A theme is ended when people stop adding new information to the theme. This can be done simply starting a new theme, but that is considered impolite. A smoother way is to stop adding new information by repeating previous information. This is polite because it still gives the other participant the opportunity to add more information. When all participants show that they don't want to add something more by confirmation, they start a new theme or close the conversation.

At the same time, repetition also functions as a checkpoint for the participants to confirm whether they share the same solution or the same information, so they can continue with the same presuppositions. This is an important feature of negotiations, since the results of the discussion will finally be confirmed by a juridicial document: the contract.

Repetition in negotiation can be considered as a meaningful cooperative discourse device, since it takes into account politeness rules, it allows for a check on shared presupposition and it contributes to an efficient way of ending themes or even the whole negotiation.

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Appendix**Diacritics for the transcriptions of the text**

F = French native speaker

N = Dutch native speaker

****** = product**

(0.3) = pause (measured in tenths of a second)

: = the sound is 'stretched out'

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- 1 Stalpers, Judith, Verslag Frankrijk; april-mei 1983
- 2 Gorter, Tjerk, et.al., Het taal- en cultuurprobleem van de technisch-commerciële onderhandelaar; een vooronderzoek onder Nederlandse bedrijven, 1983
- 3 Stalpers, Judith en Guust Meijers, The foreign client as an environmental factor in business negotiations, 1983
- 4 Stalpers, Judith, The use of ALORS in French-Dutch negotiations; differences in the presentation of argument, paper presented at the symposium on Intercultural Communication, Essen 1/2 december 1983
- 5 Stalpers, Judith, Jan M. Ulijn, Theme Transitions in Negotiations, augustus 1984