

## LINGUISTIC APPROACHES TO NEGOTIATING ACTIVITY

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**ABSTRACT.** *One of the main concerns we often share as teachers and applied linguists, is how to approach certain conversational activities both as to what refers to their linguistic characterization and as to what concerns the pedagogic side of the teaching/ learning of the activity at issue. What is established then at the outset is an existing link between language description and implementation of method(s). The study of negotiating activity is one such example, where the linguistic approach has undergone a series of shifts, which have largely influenced the learning/ teaching approach to this conversational genre. It is our purpose in this article to review the processes that studies into negotiating activity have undergone, thereby revealing the most outstanding features around which linguistic studies have centred, as well as to refer to the pedagogical implications which stem from isolating those features. The article does also seek to present a comprehensive state-of-the-art view of the linguistic studies into negotiating activity.*

**RESUMEN.** *Una de las preocupaciones que compartimos profesores e investigadores en lingüística aplicada es el modo de abordar ciertas actividades conversacionales, tanto por lo que respecta a su caracterización lingüística como a su implícita vertiente de enseñanza/ aprendizaje. Lo que se establece, en definitiva, es un nexo entre descripción lingüística y aplicación pedagógica. El estudio de la actividad negociadora constituye un buen ejemplo, en la cual la aproximación lingüística ha sufrido una serie de transformaciones que han influido notablemente en la enseñanza/ aprendizaje de este género conversacional. En este artículo nos proponemos revisar el proceso seguido por los estudios de la actividad negociadora para que, de este modo, se revelen sus rasgos lingüísticos más distintivos, así como las implicaciones pedagógicas que derivan del aislamiento de estos rasgos. El artículo asimismo presenta una visión exhaustiva del estado de la cuestión acerca de la actividad negociadora.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A survey of acknowledged sourcebooks for the teaching of English for Occupational Purposes where negotiation skills are given extensive pedagogic coverage<sup>1</sup>, puts us into the picture of the curricular treatment that negotiation behaviour has received so far: most published textbooks do not approach negotiations as a discursal phenomenon; and it is rather discrete communicative functions that are being isolated, focusing on the utterance level and not on the broader text unit.

This takes us back to Widdowson (1983) and Hutchinson (1987), both claiming for a *discursal* approach to the interactive process at issue. While Widdowson (ibid: 52) advocates a type of research that would reveal the very nature of the activity that is being approached, Hutchinson (ibid: 38) makes an interesting observation when he notes with reference to material evaluation and design, "...in evaluating materials, what we really need to know is what view of language learning they are based on".

While from two different angles, the key idea that these authors bring up, referring to the nature of the activity at issue and to the implementation of a method for the teaching/ learning of this activity, is that language description and language pedagogy are very closely related, inasmuch as the latter will influence how the nature of the linguistic activity is conceived, and in turn the descriptive apparatus employed for the characterization of the activity will have important implications for its pedagogical exploitation.

Particularly when approaching negotiating activity, the review of the literature around the concept takes us to interesting insights into the evolution that the linguistic description(s), to which this conversational behaviour has been subjected, has undergone. Interestingly enough, the first linguistic approaches to the concept, to which we can add the conceptualization at that stage of negotiating activity itself, have had a strong and long-standing influence on the educational scene. This is why it is also important to start this article considering how far issues revolving around conceptualization of the concept have proven to be influential.

## 2. CONCEPTUALIZING NEGOTIATING ACTIVITY

The concept of negotiation is certainly a very broad one, which has been approached from different behavioural sciences (see e.g.: Nierenberg 1977 for a review). This type of behaviour has provoked the interest of anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and linguists alike, and it is precisely this fact that makes it difficult to confine the scope to one main scientific discipline. However, despite its extensive coverage, the literature around negotiation behaviour tends to cluster around specific contexts, such as political, legal, social, economics and business areas, which in turn are associated with specific matters, "...among them labour bargaining,

diplomatic negotiations, arms control negotiations, conflict resolution, and market bargaining” (Strauss 1978: 7).

One relevant starting point for our purpose is to take up the distinction between non-linguistic versus linguistic approaches to negotiation, and consider to what extent the first can be said to have contributed to the linguistic scene, whose nature owes much to the non-linguistic approach. In fact insights into negotiating activity are first gained from non-linguistic studies, both from an *economic* and *social-psychological* viewpoint.

For the first, negotiations are conceived as problem-solving activities, which the existence of a problem or any issue requiring a solution triggers off (Lampi 1986: 25). Based on Wittgenstein’s (1958)<sup>2</sup> postulated Game Theory, negotiations are equalled with games, which unfold according to strategic decisions that participants make in the course of interaction. The idea is, that the interactional bases previously established for the conversational behaviour will strongly influence and even shape the process itself, as with the rules of a game which will guide and of course determine the playing process.

Two ways of looking at negotiating activity have derived from this approach, which correspond to two types of implementation of strategic behaviour, and which are typically referred to as *integrative bargaining*, when interactants at least tacitly agree to gear the conversational process towards consensus, versus *distributive bargaining*, where conversationalists on the other hand pursue the satisfaction of their own objectives, thus adopting a competitive attitude towards the interactant<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, the social-psychological view has rendered a description of negotiation behaviour influenced by Need Theory, whereby the unfolding of the conversational process is determined by the existence of needs which interactants seek to satisfy, and which trigger off and shape the ensuing dialogue.

What both approaches have in common is that negotiation activity is paralleled with strategic behaviour. It is precisely when linguists develop an awareness that negotiation behaviour has been largely studied under the shared *pre-conception* that its procedural nature is strategic, that efforts start to be made to arrive at a conceptualization of this conversational behaviour, that would aim at a characterization of the discursive nature of negotiating activity *per se*. The awareness raising matter that would bring about a shift is the fact that viewing negotiations as a strategic type of behaviour implies as well that a competitive type of interaction is a-priorily assumed to take place, and as Putnam & Jones (1982b: 275) claim, “...*communication* is the activity that ultimately defines the conflict (my emphasis)”. In other words, the claim that is being made is that the negotiation process itself will ultimately reveal whether a competitive or cooperative type of negotiation has taken place and this can not be stated beforehand. Walker (1994) claims for the conversational process itself to be accounted for, in terms of a decontextualized conversational activity, with the potential of unfolding differently depending on the context-specific pressures it is subjected to.

Firth's (1991) distinction between *negotiating activity* and *negotiation encounter* implies in this sense a significant step forward towards this effort of conceptualization. The author splits up the notion of negotiation, favouring instead the distinction between activity and encounter, in an attempt to precisely make the concept of negotiation more operational. The author defines a negotiation encounter as "...a single location encounter, formally- and physically-defined, involving parties with potentially conflicting wants and needs...", while "...negotiating activity is interactionally-defined, being contingent on the parties' mutual discourse actions". (Firth 1991: 81). Negotiating activity itself allows for a further more specific characterization:

...[an activity] initiated by one party's display of misalignment with a substantive proposal, offer, request, or suggestion of the opposing party, and terminated when definitive agreement on one or more substantive issues is reached. The demonstrable end-goal orientation for the parties involved in negotiating activity is thus mutual alignment.

(Firth 1991: 145)

The author's contribution is very important, inasmuch as negotiating activity and encounter are no longer regarded as the same thing, and are furthermore not interdependent. The interesting point that Firth makes is that interactants's purpose of conducting negotiations, or behaving conversationally in typical negotiation contexts (as might be a meetings or a sales transaction), does by no means imply that the conversational process that ensues corresponds to a sample of negotiating activity. On the other hand, what turns the interactive behaviour into negotiating activity are particular aspects of the conversational process itself.

### 3. LINGUISTIC APPROACHES

Linguistic studies around negotiating activity allow for the distinction between several areas of linguistic interest, around which they tend to cluster. We will refer to each such approach as to the descriptive criteria the linguistic characterization is based on, and later relate the findings to the pedagogical issues that can be derived from these.

#### *(a) Linguistic studies of negotiation as strategic behaviour.*

The initial non-linguistic characterization of negotiating activity, influenced by an economic and social-psychological approach to this conversational behaviour has had, as we have stated above, an important impact on the educational scene. We should add here that this influence works also vice-versa: the educational requirements have largely influenced the linguistic approach to negotiating activity. The demands for conducting efficient negotiations, especially in the context of economics and

business in order to enhance the possibilities of competing for the interest of the represented company, has led to studies into the strategic components of negotiating activity.

An important body of research has gone into the study of negotiation tactics, whose adequate use is considered the linguistic tool that will eventually guarantee strategic success while conducting negotiations. In other words, "...each utterance represents some tactic that is designed to gain an advantage in the negotiation" (Donohue 1982b: 107). Donohue broadly distinguishes, in an attempt to study "...the extent to which relative tactical use could be used to determine winners and losers in the negotiation" (Donohue 1982a: 273), three blocks of tactical behaviour, whereby every utterance used strategically falls under the heading of defensive, regressive or attacking tactic (ibid: 278).

Other studies into the "manipulative ability" of utterances in negotiating activity have also been undertaken by Donohue & Díez (1985), who consider "...how directives are used to manipulate information in negotiation" (ibid: 315) or Graham (1984), who proposes a tactical choice typology of twelve categories, which are determined as to their adequacy for conducting business negotiations. His is a cross-cultural study, with an endeavour to compare and establish a contrast between negotiation processes, where different negotiation styles are considered based on the tactical choices observed in samples of negotiation behavior between Brazilian, Japanese and North-American interactants respectively.

Experimental studies have led to the elaboration of complex codifying systems of strategic conduct, for which a number of categories are isolated. The Bargaining Process Analysis (BPA), integrates a series of categories to which utterances are ascribed depending on the strategic function they implement, either expressing "substantive behaviors" when they are understood as "...messages that facilitate the negotiation process", or else "persuasive behaviors" when they constitute "...messages that function as arguments and evidence in the support of the claims a negotiator makes". A third category corresponds to "strategic behavior" when "...messages are designed to influence the expectation and actions of the opponent" (Putnam & Jones 1982b: 180). In Putnam & Jones (1982a: 273-274) other category systems are contrasted, with little differences as to the elements they comprise: the Conference Process Analysis (CPA) with three category dimensions or the Interaction Process Analysis (IPA) with twelve elements. In any case the authors would often themselves point at the weaknesses of this descriptive apparatus: "...investigators have proliferated category systems - systems that are generally devoid of firm theoretical grounding" (1982a: 275).

*(b) Cross-cultural studies into negotiating activity*

Cross-cultural studies into negotiating activity have become very important during the last ten years, probably due to the growing relevance of managing

negotiation behaviour at international level, between participants of different cultures, and the consequent development of an awareness that cross-cultural communication can imply potential problems of misunderstanding or of cultural mismatch. Differences and particularities in the linguistic characterization of the conversational behaviour are sought for, so that once spotted they can be taken into account as culture-specific attitudes, which would eventually avoid misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. As Neu (1986: 41) observes, "...in a business setting, cultural-and/ or linguistic misunderstandings can be more than awkward-they can be dangerous both to the negotiator as an individual, and as a representative of his/ her company".

Fant (1989a, 1989b, 1990, 1992a, 1992b) is one of the most recent authors that has set out to study cross-cultural differences in negotiation behavior. His work centres around Spanish and Scandinavian negotiating activity. From the framework of Ethnomethodologists' Conversation Analysis he investigates interactive turn construction, focusing on aspects such as back-channelling, interruptions and overlappings, management of transition relevance points, use of mitigating expressions, body language, and politeness phenomena. Marriott (1993) too foregrounds politeness phenomena in her cross-cultural study between Australian and Japanese speakers, and Bülow-Möller (1993) analyses simulated negotiation samples in English between Dutch speakers on the one hand and between North-American speakers on the other hand, to conclude that North-American speakers construct longer turns, resort to richer vocabulary than the Dutch conducting negotiations in English. De Moraes (1993) spots differences in the negotiation behaviour between North-American buyers and Brazilian manufacturers as to what concerns "point-making styles", whereby the Brazilian participants are found to behave more indirectly than North-American speakers while negotiating in English.

This type of approach to negotiating activity is to a certain extent the response to the requirement of a comprehensive achievement of "negotiation competence" which, as Díez (1986: 223) points out, will allow individuals "...to understand how various types of negotiation proceed...".

*(c) Linguistic studies into negotiations at the workplace*

This approach is a very interesting one, inasmuch as negotiations are studied in terms of discursal phenomena subject to context-specific restrictions, which are determined by conditions at the workplace. While with cross-cultural studies the speakers in terms of culturally specified individuals are foregrounded as a variable influencing negotiating activity, here it is the situational context which is given priority in the way negotiations unfold.

Two related issues are central to this approach: in the first place, that "Negotiation is ubiquitous", meaning that it is "...a discourse-based and situated activity, ...that is interactionally constructed in concrete social settings" (Firth 1995:

3). In the second place, that specific elements of the working environment imply certain restrictions on the negotiation behaviour at issue: the presence or absence of technical means of communication (e.g.: telephone, fax, e.mail), the subjects dealt with in the departmental section, the hierarchical relationship between staff members, are some of the elements that can influence negotiating behaviour.

Firth (1991, 1995), in his study of negotiations through telex, fax and telephone presents examples of how the channel of communication can influence the shape this conversational process takes on. Another representative example is Walker (1995) and her research carried out into the use of formulations in negotiations between labour and management. One example of her findings goes as follows: "In providing a formulation, the speaker is selecting to extract and focus on a particular implication of prior talk, and this interpretative process is understood by the recipient to be tendentiously designed to indicate what the speaker can agree to". (1995: 139). Another interesting analysis is that carried out by Wagner (1995). Starting from the assumption that the negotiation process develops from an initial problem or subject being raised towards its (re-)resolution, in negotiations where complaints about technical problems are dealt with the sequential unfolding of discourse is often the other way round, whereby the process goes from considering the particular solutions towards the starting issue.

*(d) Linguistic studies of negotiation as a discursal phenomenon*

Although the two preceding blocks of linguistic interest derive their findings from a discursal perspective, it is worthwhile considering a paragraph where negotiating activity is approached from a discursal perspective as an end in itself, rather than as a means, as is the case with the two preceding examples. Studies such as Lampi (1986), Mulholland (1991), Bülow-Möller (1992) or Francis (1996) are some examples of this approach.

Lampi's work represents one of the most extensive insights into the nature of negotiating activity, which is analysed from different angles, all of them touching upon some structural element of discourse construction. Broadly speaking, the discourse of negotiation is split up into three conversational phases, which in a sequence represent the structural matrix of the activity at issue. At the local level, the treatment of units ranging from acts, interactive moves, conversational exchanges and topical progression are checked against authentic samples of buying-selling transactions. Mulholland's (1991) work too manages to reveal how discursal aspects unfold in negotiation behaviour, and as Lampi (1986) does, the main emphasis is put on organizational aspects of the interactive process, such as the turn-taking mechanism that conversationalists construct, or the phases that can broadly be distinguished, as well as the distribution of acts at the local level.

Both Lampi and Mulholland have pedagogical implications in mind when providing a discursal approach to negotiating behaviour, starting from the

assumption that when revealing the structural regularities that underlie this conversational practice, isolation of structural elements and awareness of the way these are linked together allow for the development of negotiating competence. As Mulholland (1991: xi) states, “Competence in negotiation cannot be achieved by following a list of rules or using any one particular set of tactics, but rather it comes about when people acquire a sensitivity to the factors in language that affect negotiation, when they develop a personal repertoire of skills”. (Mulholland 1991: xi).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The studies referred to above to exemplify the four approaches to linguistic descriptions that negotiating activity has been subjected to so far, do by no means exhaust the number of single contributions to the different descriptives areas, but they can certainly be said to be a comprehensive representation.

It is interesting to note, that the different approaches centre each around one specific element of communication. So while the studies into negotiating activity as a strategic behaviour focus on the message, cross-cultural studies enhance the speaker, and studies of negotiations at the workplace consider both the situational context and the channel as the key variables of the communicative event at issue. Linguistic studies into negotiating activity as a discorsal phenomenon on the other hand look at the nature of the discourse.

In fact, approaches (a), (b) and (c) are largely influenced by the initial tendency of approaching negotiation as a strategic interactive behaviour, and influenced as well by an important body of pedagogic demand in “in-company” contexts, where linguistic description is put to the service of business executives and their expressed need for negotiation ability, efficiency and appropriacy. What cross-cultural descriptions and studies of negotiations at the workplace have contributed to the first descriptive stage based solely on the establishment of conversational tactics, is to broaden the concept of negotiating competence to include not only message efficiency but cross-cultural and situational appropriacy of language use. Only the approach we refer to as linguistic studies of negotiating activity as a discorsal phenomenon represent an endeavour to arrive at a characterization of the conversational nature of this process, geared towards an interest of approaching the discourse of negotiation generically.

Interestingly enough, the textbook samples we have considered, such as White & Khidayir (1983), Wilberg & Lewis (1990), Knowles & Bailey (1987), Hollett, Carter, Lyon & Tanner (1989), Hollett (1991), Cotton & Robbins (1993), Fletcher & Hargreaves (1986) or Lees (1983) focus on linguistic functions as language learning objectives when dealing with negotiations<sup>4</sup>, while on the other hand the tasks and activities which the textbooks include centre around different aspects of the discorsal



nature of negotiations. This certain mismatch between language *focus* and language *activities* is to some extent the result of a long-standing tradition of looking at negotiating activity in terms of tactical utterance choices.

Studies into the discorsal nature itself of negotiating activity are still quite recent, but we think that the claim that authors such as Firth (1991, 1995) or Walker (1994) make for gaining an insight into the discorsal nature of the conversational process is an important first step that needs to be considered in negotiating pedagogy, and means an important shift as well away from tactical approaches alone. What is called for in the first place is a de-contextualized characterization of the behaviour at issue, as Firth (1991) proposes, to further consider the shape the process takes when unfolding under context-specific variables, for "Negotiation is ubiquitous", as Firth (1995: 3) states.

## NOTES

1. See for instance White & Khidayir (1983), Fletcher & Hargreaves (1986), Hollett, Carter, Lyon & Tanner (1989), Cotton & Robbins (1993), Knowles & Bailey (1987), Wilberg & Lewis (1990), Lees (1983), Hollett (1991).
2. Hierro & Pescador (1986) offer an extensive and precise revision of Wittgenstein's postulates of his Game Theory.
3. Other expressions typically used as an alternative to "distributive strategy" are "competitive negotiation" (Pruitt 1981), "the win-lose mode" (Karass 1970) or "the hard approach" (Nierenberg 1977). On the other hand, "integrative strategy" can also be referred to in terms of "coordinative behaviour" (Pruitt 1981) or "the win-win style" (Nierenberg 1977; Fisher & Ury 1981). Pruitt (1981) includes a third distinction, which he calls "strategy of unilateral concessions", when one participant is completely dominated by his/ her interactant.
4. With the exception of Fletcher & Hargreaves (1986), who take a specific tense (conditional II) as the key linguistic focus of negotiating activity.

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