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Negotiating in a Foreign Language

Abstract

This study examines characteristic features of simulated negotiations between native and non-native speakers. The difficulties encountered by the non-native group are stratified according to *footing*, where five different layers are found: interpersonal, intergroup, intercultural, interlanguage, and game-frame.

Danish businessmen and women are not usually worried about international contacts; they feel confident that their English is adequate. The present pilot study examines the differences that can be noted between foreign and mother tongue negotiations. It opens with comparisons between short extracts from a transcript in which Danish managers talk to Danish managers, and English managers to English managers. These national characteristics carry over with groups consisting of a mixture of native and non-native speakers: the rest of the study examines such clashes in tapes of Danish business school postgraduates talking to American business school counterparts. It seems that the Danes have more cause to worry than they may think.

1. Native / non-native speaker groups

The three following extracts all represent a suggestion that the other party cannot accept as it stands. The first two cases concern the sale of a (fictive) fishing boat; these tapes have been discussed elsewhere, most recently in Andersen (1992) and Bülow-Møller (1992 a). The third set of tapes is a simulation in which two competing American suppliers of dental surgery equipment seek a contract with one out of two competing Danish representatives. The need to select only one company as a partner means that one set of negotiations must end in deadlock.

(1) (*A and B are "sellers", C "buyer"*)

A: *Og den er pæn, det*

B: *den er velholdt*

C: *jæ men der er jo det ved det at vi skal jo ofre nogle tusind før vi kan-*

A: *nåmen der er jo*

C: *-vi kan bruge den*

A: *-men der er jo osse en marginal fra 135 til 180 ikke*

C: *nå ja men jeg synes da 135 i første omgang er højt*

- or approximately in English:

A: *It's a fine boat, that [it is]*

B: *It's in good nick*

C: *Yes, but of course there is the snag that we need to spend a few thousand on it before we can-*

A: *Well, yes, but then of course-*

C: *-we can use it*

A: *-but then of course there is a gap from 135 to 180, isn't there*

C: *Well yes, but you know, I think 135 is high in the first place*

The extract has three characteristic features: the exchanges are *short*, with discussion-type overlaps; the language is *informal*; and it contains a very large number of modal particles (*jo*, *da*), which are semantically lighter than English equivalents like *of course*, but serve the same function: that of marking the contents as “*shared information*”, i.e. as unsurprising and uncontroversial. It is notoriously difficult to contradict a statement or judgement containing *as you know* or *of course*; the effect is a sort of conversational contract to accept a large amount of common ground. With the low level of formality, this creates an ambience of easy-going reasonableness in the Danish/Danish tapes.

(2) (A is “*seller*”, C and D “*buyers*”)

A: *I think probably the real need we have is to resolve what we want to do initially about the boat [C: Yes] ahm .. I mentioned the price earlier on .. I mean, did that erh is that is the boat of interest to you at all at that price?*

C: *Well, I think the problem with it is that it needs a certain amount of refitting, doesn't it*

[the next four turns expanding this subject are left out]

D: *here is no doubt about it, the further off shore you go of course the more dangerous it is and the stronger the equipment has to be, and the better installed it must be .. so it's, there is no point in minimizing what it would cost so erh I mean I think the figure that you were talking about is therefore on the high side when we have to take this into account [cont.]*

The second extract is characterized by much *longer* turns with deeper hypotaxis and stricter apportioning of turns. Much of the extra length is taken up with *buffers*, representing respect for Other's negative face: there are hedges (*I think probably*), qualifiers and minimizers (*at all, initially, a certain amount*), and grounders (*the problem is*). Thirdly, explicit *argumentation* is prevalent, marked with *so* and *therefore*; both Party's own and Other's contributions are used as premises for deductions. The effect is that of a somewhat more formal, courteously tentative and above all logically argued negotiation style.

In both extracts, Party and Other use the same strategies. But in the third extract, the inequality is apparent:

(3)

US 1 *we are not going to try and pressure you to incorporate other elements of our product line into your 'total clinic' . but at least . to have our product line exposed, to have like ONE demonstration model [DK: hm] you know, aside from your 'total clinic' . have our demonstration model, just so that when the dentists see our chair, and they say "wow, I like this chair [DK: mh] can could we maybe see the rest of this PROduct line", and then you'll say, "Yes, it's back here, we have it right over here", rather than having to call the United States and arrange, [you know,-*

DK 2: *yes but-*

US 1: *-later on*

DK 2: *-that would mean we also had to do some more marketing*

The Danes are still using a style of short turns with no particular negative politeness, which, however, looks somewhat denuded now that the inbuilt agreement particles are missing, while the Americans use long turns, with a wider register, including more metalevel talk, more abstract definition, and more rhetoric, in the sense of immediate examples.

The apparent imbalance is complex; one aspect is tied to interpersonal behaviour and face-handling, but an even more obvious problem is found at intergroup level (the Danish woman's utterance is a characteristically feeble response; the Danes are on the defensive). Thirdly, there is a language problem: greater lexical facility might have ensured a defter reply.

Such aspects represent positions, or *roles*, that the situation imposes on the speaker. For example, the tapes contain an episode where a Danish student produces a hard-line position in her "buyer"-guise, then trails off when words fail her and invites assistance as a "foreigner", and then, her

voice flooded with smiles, acknowledges help as “girl to boy”, at which point a member of her team takes over, evidently sensing the weakening position.

These role slides constitute shifts in *footing*. I would like to suggest that an analysis of intercultural negotiations benefits from the divisions that are possible when this phenomenon is taken into account.

2. Participation status and the foreign language speaker

In his paper, “Footing” (1979/81), Goffman uses the term to cover various aspects of *participation status*.

In its macro manifestation, footing equals the roles or layers mentioned above; Goffman gives the example of President Nixon transforming a *journalist* at a press conference into a *woman* by criticizing her trouser outfit. At the other end of the spectrum are the micro manifestations of “the alignment of an individual of a particular utterance” (1981:227) - whether as speaker, where the roles break down into *animator*, *author*, and *principal*, or as *receiver*, which is subdivided into *addressed* and *unaddressed* hearers, plus bystanders and eavesdroppers. Clearly, these two layers are not mutually exclusive - participants can be both “animator” and “author” and “journalist” in the same utterance, but can also choose not to be. Levinson (1988), discussing the manifestations of such divisions, sets up contrasting messages:

(4)

a) *Come in now, Johnny*

b) *Johnny is to come in now*

c) *You are to come in now*

In b), the addressee is not the target recipient, and in c), the speaker/animator is not the source/ principal.

The possibilities of slides in footing is highly useful for negotiators, who may wish to represent the position of their *side*, quite impersonally (i.e. the principal), or their *own* (author) view, which may be more flexible (one symptom to listen for is the use of inclusive *we* (= us around the table) or exclusive *we* (= my party).

Choice of footing is also different according to the speaker’s mandate: s/he may be addressing not only the target hearer (Other), but also indirectly Party’s own side, if they are present at the table.

The personal expression and the side correspond to two layers; in the tapes under review here, five different levels can be distinguished:

- interpersonal
- intergroup
- intercultural
- interlanguage
- and game-frame.

The immediate salience of any one layer waxes and wanes in the situation, more like momentary foregrounding than like mutual exclusion. At the same time, each layer focusses on an aspect of communication that comes with its own body of research.

2.1. The interpersonal layer

The roles analysed in this layer are *conversational*. The participants speak as *fellow students*, i.e. with socially similar standing, except that the Danes are “hosts” to the extent that the session takes place in Copenhagen; each side includes acquaintances, but the sides have not met before. The two American teams are mostly young men, where the Danish teams have a majority of women.

Of the vast body of research in such person-to-person communication, we shall pursue here only two categories borrowed from the psychologically based studies of *attribution theory* and *impression formation*. For negotiators, the crucial impressions are those that can be grouped under “sympathy”, in the sense of likeability or attraction, and “perceived competence” (for underlying notions, see e.g. Bradac et al., 1980, Knapp et al. 1987, O’Keefe, 1990).

Interaction skills are to a large extent tied to the participants’ ability to handle *face* strategies. The two groups of impressions correspond roughly to “fellowship face”, which in Lim and Bower’s terminology represent the participant’s need to be included and addressed with solidarity, and “competence face”, i.e. the need to be respected and addressed with approbation. To this can be added the negative face values (the need to keep one’s distance and preserve one’s territory), where the Danes have already been seen to transgress.

Inadvertent loss of interpersonal *sympathy* can be illustrated with this example of misread politeness:

(5) (DDL is one of the Danish company names)

US 3: something we were very impressed with, with DDL . erh, you have a VERY wide customer base, you have 51 percent of the market [DK: yea] as of last year, and that's very impressive. ah .. and of the five thousand dentists that were active, last year, only three hundred bought equipment. That means, over the next ten to fifteen years, there are at least forty-seven hundred out there [DK: uhum] who are going to be ready and willing . to buy dental units. And we'd REally like to take advantage of your strong connection with your customers [DK: yea] your long history of taking good care of them.

DK 2: and also [clears thr] we have good connections to the schools of dentistry, which also have a great demand for . for .. low cost units. You know erh for the students

The interaction pattern here is roughly as follows: the US team produces a face-enhancing statement, used to buttress 'hope for cooperation'; the invited response is in those terms. But instead of returning the compliment, the Danish speaker reads it as a statement expressing admiration, which he takes up with an agreement expressing further admiration, used to imply 'claim to attractiveness as business partner'. This bid for intergroup advantage is lost in gauche interpersonal failure.

At least part of the hearer's perception of *competence* stems from the speaker's choice of vocabulary: according to Bradac et al. (1980), there is evidence that lexical diversity -i.e. "redundancy vs. lexical richness" - is directly related to message effectiveness, and to judgements of source competence and control, whereas low diversity is associated with low economic status and anxiety.

Needless to say, lexical diversity is a sore point for non-native speakers (NNSs):

(6)

DK 3: but also, we have a very, erh . how can I say .. HUGE target commo- . target group .. I mean there's not only this this this this target group you're interest-we can sell to any kind of target group in the Danish market

These shortcomings are to a certain extent offset by accommodation strategies, to which we shall return below.

2.2. The intergroup layer

Intergroup salience arises whenever a speaker is heard as a *group representative*, be it ethnic, political or even as sides in a marriage. In the

tapes, the sides speak as *buyer and seller* - roles that carry clearly scripted expectations, e.g. for the seller to make a case, and for the buyer to query. If the sides represent an industrial conflict, it will normally be for the union to argue for change and for management to refute and argue for the status quo.

Impression formation is crucially relevant in the second layer. In the negotiation literature, the categories are often referred to as *trust* and *respect* - impressions which are obviously not purely linguistic but founded also on prior interaction, perceived willingness to reciprocate concessions, carry out threats, etc.

Footing changes are, as already mentioned, part of the atmosphere formation in negotiation encounters. Morley and Stephenson's classic study (1977) focussed on naive readers' ability to assign snippets of transcript to the correct side; it transpired that this was most easily done where the intergroup salience was high, i.e. during the early conflict phase (position statements) and the late confirmation stage (expressions of satisfaction from each side).

Freedom to slide between intergroup and interpersonal footings may be determined by the number of participants. Stephenson (1981) describes how in negotiation encounters pairs tend to seek cooperation and compromise, where four or more participants seek confrontation and 'victory'. Stephenson suggests that even the underlying negotiation *norms* are different in the two settings: individuals tend towards equality (and split the difference down the middle) where groups work on the basis of equity (where rights follow input or relative strength).

In the present material, the groups consist of up to five people per side, with two or three speakers; this could go some way to excuse the Danes' seeming bluntness. In terms of negotiation atmosphere and effectiveness, however, there is a noticeable difference in the handling particularly of *challenges* and *suggestions*.

When challenges are issued by the American teams, they are typically buried in the middle of a longer turn, so that a response would not address that particular point; this is what Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) call "camouflaging style":

(7)

US 1: ok [clears thr] not to . strike too sour a note here . but of our entire product line .. we have come into these negotiations erm of the opinion that that the least, we're the LEAST erm we're the most hesitant in our whole product line. in marketing our

chairs. I mean, we're the most eager . in .. arh exposing the other parts of our product line.

DK 1: that's to say the units

US 1: yeah [US various: yes - yeah] the other parts of our product line, the units, [DK: ok] the drills, etc. Arh but we- if there IS obviously you HAVE expressed an interest in our in our-

DK 1: -in the CHAIR

US 1: -the chairs [DK: yeah] .. so I'm thinking perhaps we can extract some sort of compromise.. where [3 seconds] you would you- you can HAVE the chairs, you know we can arrange something with the chairs and you can try and incorporate them [DK: umh] into your 'total clinic', but you have to understand that we are . most arh most eager and.. how shall I say it, exposing the OTHER parts of our product line, and there might be some sort of erh.. I don't know if there's a conflict of INterests .. or how we might .. you see, you have your . entire product line I don't know how how much you know of our other, you know of our other products besides the chair

DK 3: I guess, guess, yeah..

When it is the Danes who use language like “You have to understand”, they take no such precautions:

(8)

US 1: we're providing the merchandise and fifty percent of. whatever . [cost

DK 1: but. you just have to understand the way we do selling here in Denmark. The way THIS company do selling. We don't sell a whole package

US 1: yeah, well-

DK 1: we sell . individually.

US 2: yeah. right.

Again, what is lost here on the sympathy score is not regained on the competence side: as already mentioned, the characteristic Danish contribution is *reaction*, including rebuttal, argumentation and clarifying questions; in this case, the argumentation does not even address the point that was raised by the American side (for a discussion of argumentation in negotiation, see Putnam and Geist, 1985, and Roloff et al. 1987). Conversely, the stocktaking, the formulations, even the querying, and the proposal initiatives come from the Americans. A contributing factor for this imbalance might be found in cultural characteristics.

2.3. The intercultural layer

In this category, we are interested in the language choices that reflect the norms and expectations of cultural groups, which in this case correspond to *nationality*.

The main body of research in this area is concentrated on cultures that differ widely, e.g. along the variables set out by Hall (1976) - high context/low context - and Hofstede (1980) - power distance, individualism, masculinity etc; for a recent overview, see Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988).

Such a comparison is not fruitful for the present material; in fact, the largest differences in scores occur under “masculinity”, with Denmark achieving a low 16 and the United States 62 (with Japan as the top scorer at 95). Although the concept of masculinity includes such matters as the culture’s attachment to material goods as a measure of status, it still runs counter to the language choices observed.

It is arguable that the reason why so many business people think nationality matters hardly at all, at least in the western hemisphere, is that an international MBA culture has developed through mutual exposure.

However, even if it goes unperceived in the situation, cultural differences can be isolated in the material. Briefly, on the sympathy side, the American participants come over as possessing more drive and enthusiasm: they speak more energetically, with more intonation contour to carry both expressiveness and sentence focussing, while on the competence side, they are more directly goal-oriented. This corresponds to shared prejudices: Reardon (1991) mentions the international expectation that Americans want to get to the point. Conversely, Scandinavian negotiation studies have noticed a slower pace and less volubility compared with other nations (Fant, 1989, Grindsted, 1989). Thus the quiet, shrewdly humorous style observed in the Danish/Danish tapes is drowned out.

The perceived goal-orientation surfaces in both the British/British and the present NS/NNS material as logical deductions and conclusions, which are used to carry the negotiation process forward in a coherent manner (cf. text 2).

The Danes do use the logical conjunctions, but they tend to occur turn-internally as part of the spaker’s own argument. The few occasions when a causal link occurs with Other’s statement are weak or even wildly inappropriate:

(9)

US 1: *I'd feel a little reluctant upon .. erh making a deal which is only the chairs*

US 2: *one of our main goals coming into these meetings was . to have some sort of representative .. one of either YOU or the other company . represent our chairs, not necessarily to sell a large volume [DK: umhum] of the whole unit . but to at least get the dentists' reactions in Denmark .. to . you know, to our new product line.*

US 2: *yea*

DK1: *exactly, and therefore .. as you just mentioned before, it's erm [1 second] it's erm equally important that we stress the erm the market, the marketing . erh cooperation .. because it's, I think it's just as important as the actual number of chairs that we are going . to sell or erm . for you. It's erh .. well, I could imagine that your biggest erh [1 second] wish right now is to become known in Denmark, and therefore an intensive marketing in Denmark erh*

There is evidence elsewhere that handling counter-argumentation is particularly difficult to NNSs (Kotthoff 1987). Therefore, with this handicap added to a cultural preference for a quiet life, it looks as if the internationally accepted script for negotiation behaviour requires more adaptation from the Danes than from the Americans.

With so many disadvantages, it should now come as a relief to learn that there is in fact a little recompense to be found when the speakers switch to the footing of foreigners, speaking a foreign language.

2.4. The interlanguage layer

On this level, we examine negotiators in their roles as *NSs or NNSs*. NNSs can normally count on a measure of accommodation from NSs - more so than if both parties use a third language as a lingua franca. On the competence score, the NS may be impressed with the NNS's skill and knowledge of his or her culture; and more importantly, the short, direct expressions are not necessarily heard with the bluntness they would have carried coming from a NS. That means that a NNS can get away with (unconsciously or consciously) following handbook advice that would otherwise take some nerve: Benson et al. (1987) suggest that it is a mistake to use weak language (*we hope, we like, we prefer*) - it should be *we need, we must have, we require* (op.cit. 97-98). Fisher and Davis (1987) recommend short speaking units, to promote good listening

(op.cit.117). Rackham and Carlisle (1978) state that skilled negotiations avoid “defend-attack spirals” and “argument dilution” through listing too many reasons at once. That the NNS’s directness is not heard as rude may be to do with the interspersed apologetic appeal-and-help sequences that occur when the foreign-language footing becomes salient; there is a curious effect whereby the assisting NS who supplies the missing word becomes half-way committed to the statement:

(10)

DK 3: *-and then we can every year .. make an arrangement on . look at
the Danish market and negotiate . the*

US 1: *the market share*

DK 3: *the market share*

US 1: *ok*

This phenomenon, known after Falk (1980) as “duetting”, is not exclusive to NS discourse; it occurs sporadically from NNS and commonly on the Danish/Danish tapes. The feature is noted by Diez (1986) along with overlaps and cognitive verbs such as *I think* as characteristic of cooperative caucus talk (as opposed to the language used in the competitive negotiation sessions themselves).

The NS, then, gets to select a word and have it accepted, which contributes to the sympathy score. The same sort of validation is seen where NNSs show what we can call the “parrot effect”, i.e. when s/he hears a useful word or phrase and latches onto it. The most pronounced example is the phrase “Does that sound agreeable?”, which is picked up by DK 1 and used by her thereafter as synonymous with *fine*, not always felicitously: “OK, that sounds agreeable”.

It would seem, then, that despite the somewhat alarming display of shortcomings that have been demonstrated so far, there is a chance that at the interlanguage layer, at least, the NNS can regain some of the sympathy/solidarity that they need to outweigh strategic language weakness. It is probably this consciousness that underlies the ample anecdotal evidence from business people that they consider that they have often been accommodated to a degree that made it almost an advantage to be the NNS, especially if extra time was needed for a decision, or a tactical ‘misunderstanding’ had to be arranged in order to go back on a decision.

However, the danger remains that the unconscious impression formation mechanism gets in *first*, with the NS perceiving brusque incompeten-

tence, before flashes of 'foreigner footing' provokes the NS's more conscious accommodation urge to reestablish solidarity.

2.5. The game frame

Game-playing footing is made salient whenever the 'frame' becomes visible (in the sense of Goffman, 1974). This happens when participants find that they do not know details like the production cost or delivery time of their own product, or when imposed time limits become a constraint. No particular difference was observed in terms of role-distance and frame-slips between American and Danish players.

It should, however, be born in mind (a) that the lack of factual knowledge is certain to exacerbate the NNSs' difficulties, particularly with vocabulary, and (b) that the game frame may well tempt the students to produce outsize role-images, so that an inexperienced young woman may try to produce a quintessential 'buyer' type, thereby producing much tougher buyer-language than she would have in real life, where more is at stake. This is a serious consideration in assessing the validity of the present study; but it is to some extent offset by the (intuitively correct, by my experience) observation in Donohue et al. (1984), that simulations always produce rather more cooperation and harmony than do corresponding real negotiation sessions.

3. Conclusion

The point of this study was to show what it is the Danes have to worry about when they negotiate in English, and therefore what their teachers have to focus on. I hope to have shown that these considerations differ with the kind of footing employed at any given time, and that it is therefore genuinely helpful to separate the role-carrying layers for heuristic purposes, if only because it allows learners to concentrate on one kind of communication expectations at a time.

The conclusion is therefore that danger-points must be dealt with separately: for layer (1), students should be taught to understand and handle face-giving and face-threatening moves, and to employ a reasonably rich vocabulary; for layer (2), to know their priorities before they enter the room (i.e., where they must be firm and where they have room for flexibility), so that they can use both active and passive speech acts : they should be making half the proposals, and know how to agree, acknowledge, query etc.; for layer (3), students should be warned not to sink into

the well-known trap of digging deeper into one's own style to counter-balance an opponent: the effect when dealing with an enthusiastic culture is a side composed of virtually silent or embattled Danes and a side of manically talking native speakers; for layer (4), they should be made aware of the few advantages of their foreigner status, and encouraged to ask for repetitions and other moves that may remind the NS of his/her obligation to accommodate; and lastly for layer (5), for teachers themselves, devise simulations that are close enough to the students' reality not to show the seams. Or preferably, avoid games altogether.

Above all, students should be taught to listen and take an active interest in Other's position, rather than use too much energy on counterarguments. It would save worry all round to heed the experience of Roloff et al.: "the more bargaining dyads engaged in persuasive argumentation, the more likely they deadlocked" - "the more bargainers communicated signs of agreeability (that is, statements indicating at least tentative acceptance or consideration of the opponent's offer), the greater the integrativeness of their settlement" (op.cit.117). The present pilot study also indicates that accommodation seems to be supplied at all levels for a negotiator that is perceived as actually, actively listening. This skill, of course, is applicable outside both negotiation studies and language learning.

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