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Research Paper

Mutual Face-Maintaining Acts: An Analysis of Talks Between NBA Referees and Players/Coaches

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Abstract

By adopting Goffman's conception of face, this study develops the notion of a *mutual face-maintaining act* (MFMA), with a view to striking a balance between avoiding the risk of making an overgeneralization about politeness and attempting to offer a perspective applicable to real-life interactions. Drawing on a type of sport conversation—talks between NBA referees and players/coaches—this paper elucidates the notion of an MFMA, demonstrating that it is more applicable to current sports data than Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and that it can be a feasible concept for interpreting politeness phenomena. The finding suggests that speakers whose social duty and objective is primarily to reach communicative concord in conversational contexts that involve potential tension and conflict may be more inclined to produce utterances by performing MFMA.

Keywords: Face-Maintaining Act; Face; NBA Referee Talk; Politeness; Speech Act.

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, politeness has drawn increasing attention in pragmatics due to the influential theories developed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and Leech (1983). As a central notion in the most seminal politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), the notion of *face* gained considerable popularity. However, Brown and Levinson's adoption of face in politeness theory was not very well embraced in later research (Arundale, 2006; Chen, He & Hu, 2013; Izadi, 2015, 2016, 2017; Locher & Watts, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2007). Among the critiques, three were outstanding. First, Brown and Levinson assume politeness as synonymous with face-work. Politeness and face-work are related, but they are not necessarily synonymous (Locher & Watts, 2005). Therefore, a distinction should be made between the two concepts (Haugh & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2010). Second, Brown and Levinson present a view to communication that is very pessimistic, by implying that almost every speech act is face threatening and in need of mitigation (Locher & Watts, 2005, Arundale, 2006; Schmidt, 1980). Third, Goffman's original conceptualization of face encompasses both a cognitive and social dimension, but in Brown and Levinson's theory, the cognitive aspect is emphasized by focusing on the individual and his/her wants. Many post-Brown and Levinsonian studies suggest a return to Goffman for the original conceptualization of face. As a response to these three important critiques and calls, this paper develops the notion of *mutual face-maintaining act*.

Furthermore, while many studies in pragmatics have analyzed conversations in everyday contexts, verbal interaction in sports contexts has been somewhat neglected. This paper addresses talks between NBA¹ referees and players/coaches in a game context using the notion of a mutual face-maintaining act, which is originated in the Goffman's conception of face. By drawing on real-life verbal interactions in the NBA context, we hope to expand the contextual vista in which face is mutually negotiated.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 explains Goffman's conception of face and expounds the proposed notion of a mutual face-maintaining act by relating it to Goffman's theory. Section 3 deals with



data collection. By way of illustration, section 4 examines collected conversations between NBA referees and players/coaches in light of mutual face-maintaining acts. Section 5 discusses the findings and concludes with remarks as regards the applicability of the proposed notion to sports contexts and beyond.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Goffman's Conception of Face

Goffman (1955) defines face “as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” and as “an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (p. 222). Face is not a feature of one's body, but an image “located in the flow of events” (Goffman, 1967, p. 7). According to Goffman, face is a public image that is attributed to individuals when they are engaged in face-to-face interaction. His classic definition signifies that face is not related to any negative attribute; conversely, people only make face claims in relation to some positively evaluated social characteristic. Bargiela-Chiappini (2003) highlights Goffman's definition of face in terms of an awareness of other interlocutors' reactions and feelings. In Goffman's (1955) view, a person's face wants need to be considered in order to save that person's face. As a result of self-respect and consideration of the needs of others, a person can save both his own face and that of the addressee during an encounter. Goffman's theory is not devoid of mutuality between interactants, including mutual acceptance and mutual conformity to social norms.

In order to maintain a public image, people perform face-work, which refers to “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face” (Goffman, 1967, p. 12). As Goffman (1967, p. 13) states, speakers of every society are “expected to have some knowledge of face-work and some experience in its use”, and “this kind of capacity is sometimes called tact, savoir-faire, diplomacy, or social skill”. The current study develops the construct of a mutual face-maintaining act, which is underpinned by Goffman's conception of face and face-work.

2.2. Constructing the Notion of a Mutual Face-Maintaining Act

Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory (PT) uses Goffman's notion of face. Nevertheless, as Mao (1994, p. 454) observes, Goffman's notion of face is a public property, but “Brown and Levinson characterize face as an image that intrinsically belongs to the individual”. Critiques of PT (e.g., Buck, 1997; Kasper, 1990; Koutlaki, 2002) have been made by a number of researchers. These critiques indicate that it is not always correct to take certain types of acts to be face-threatening acts (FTAs) or that it is not realistic to view polite acts as serving to redress FTAs. For instance, Buck (1997) conducted an analysis of FTAs in literary dialogue, and suggests that we cannot decide whether an intrinsic FTA should be interpreted as a threat unless we take contextual factors into account. Buck concludes that Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies do not always function to redress FTAs; instead, their strategies may essentially convey a message of solidarity or deference. As stated earlier, Goffman's face emphasizes mutuality. However, in Brown and Levinson's adoption, this mutuality is somehow downplayed, and instead the speaker's intension and motivation is emphasized (Arundale, 2010; Haugh, 2013; Izadi, 2015, 2017). The present study endeavors to make a contribution by elaborating upon mutual face enhancement, a phenomenon in which the speaker's face and the addressee's face can be simultaneously enhanced or saved. The following definition is proposed for the notion of mutual face-maintaining act (hereafter MFMA):

A mutual face-maintaining act is a speech act which, in a specific context or setting, simultaneously satisfies both the speaker's face and the addressee's face, for the purpose of reaching communicative concord and avoiding communicative discord.

The notion of an MFMA counteracts the pessimism of an FTA. The interpretation of an FTA (e.g., reminding) as an MFMA redresses Schmidt's (1980) criticism of Brown and Levinson's (1978) model, in which the notion of an FTA was first introduced: “the theory represents an overly pessimistic, rather paranoid view of human social interaction” (p. 104). Unlike Brown and Levinson's perspective on the performance of polite acts, a view which claims that politeness appears to be only used for redressing FTAs, the notion of an MFMA is more positive-looking and less one-sided, as an MFMA is not necessarily used because of a face threat nor is it performed to attend to only one person's face wants. The notion of MFMA captures a firmer speaker-listener interconnection and inter-shaped relationship in the production and reception of polite acts than has previously been assumed. According to the FTA view, acts such as disagreements,

requests, reminders, etc., are intrinsically face threatening, but as our analyses show, they can be face enhancing, if we use MFMA to explain them. An MFMA has three key features. First, the aim of an MFMA is to attain harmony and to prevent disharmony. An MFMA is performed to achieve communicative concord not only out of the consideration for the speaker's own or the hearer's face needs, but also as a result of their relationship in the context of the verbal interaction. Second, an MFMA allows more than one interlocutor's face to be maintained. For instance, a compliment may be interpreted as an MFMA when it is delivered in the right context and is favorably received by the listener. When delivered appropriately—at the right time (e.g., after the addressee has won an award) and by using words appropriately and in the right context—the speaker's social skills are demonstrated, thus maintaining the speaker's own face. At the same time, a sincere compliment exhibits a high evaluation of the addressee's face, particularly when the act causes no embarrassment to the recipient (the latter does not reject it). That is, the act also attends to the face of the addressee. As such, the compliment maintains the face of both interlocutors at the same time. By contrast, an act of insulting by the speaker, whose intention is far from reaching communicative concord, cannot function as an MFMA as it threatens the speaker's own face and, simultaneously, threatens the addressee's face, and thus does not fall within the definition of an MFMA. Last but not least, the notion of an MFMA is relatively practical and elastic when used to interpret polite speech acts as it takes the social context into account. The term “social context” covers three contextual factors: (i) the speaker's role (i.e., identity, position, and occupation), (ii) the addressee's role, and (iii) both interlocutors' conversational environment (e.g., workplace). An MFMA captures the potential effect of an act on the speaker and the listener. Any of the aforementioned variables could figure prominently in affecting the successful performance of an MFMA.

Our notion of MFMA is in line with Goffman's conception of face and face-work insofar as MFMA is a manifestation of face-work implemented in social interaction to shape the speaker's public image. The notion is also underpinned by Goffman's interactionist view of roles: individuals perform their roles when interacting with others in a social context (role-performing), like actors/actresses acting out their roles on a stage (Goffman, 1959). As the social context of interaction varies, the utterances that can be used to perform the required face-work also vary. An utterance is interpreted as an MFMA not because of the form of the utterance, but as a result of the social context in which the utterance is used. The features of an MFMA, as explained above, are commensurate with the interactional dynamics that underpin Goffman's conception of face and face-work and his social view of conversational interaction. He considers the account of felicity conditions in speech act theory (Austin, 1965; Searle, 1969) “as culture and context free” (Goffman, 1983, p. 25), and he calls for attention to be paid to “social propriety—presuppositions and presumptions [in a social sense]” (p. 30). In order to do this, we need to consider various social factors, including whether the interlocutors are acquainted or not, and whether a state of talk is established or is to be initiated. As Goffman (1983, p. 48) states, we need to examine “who can say what to whom, in what circumstances, with what preamble, in what surface form”, and with what possible interpretations in the given circumstance. Following Goffman's socially-oriented conception of language, the present study aims to shed light on speech acts in terms of MFMA.

3. Methodology

This study draws on talks between NBA referees and players/coaches in a game context. We searched for relevant video clips on YouTube by typing the key term “referee mic'd up” (talks given by referees were made using wireless microphones), which produced a series of 20 public videos with the title “NBA referees wired”. These videos were uploaded between November 2010 and May 2016 by the same YouTube user.²

The 20 videos were then further divided into more than 200 video clips in which “referee talk” was identified. The clips mainly concern conversations between referees and coaches or players. This study is concerned with the way in which politeness works in utterances made in a basketball game setting, which involves the elements of dynamism, hostility, competitiveness, and tension. Therefore, clips that featured the following were excluded: a referee talking (a) to himself, (b) to spectators, (c) to staff, (d) to a fellow referee officiating at the same game,³ (e) to both of the fellow referees officiating at the same game, (f) before the game started, and (g) when his words are mostly unintelligible. Because this study focuses on talks between NBA referees and players/coaches, the above seven types of video clips were ruled out. After excluding the above seven types of clips, 42 clips remained and these were transcribed as our data. Our transcriptions do not include overlapping utterances by two or more interlocutors as the aim of the present study is to analyze polite speech acts, and thus it is unnecessary for our transcriptions to be too detailed (see Appendix for the used transcription conventions).

4. Results

4.1. Reminding as an MFMA

Here, we reinterpret an FTA as an MFMA by using the act of reminding as an example. Example (1) is a case in point. From the scenario in Example (1), we can infer that the NBA player, Mike Bibby, asked the referee, Danny Crawford, to be aware of his opponent's foul action. The referee then decided to remind the players of both teams about the illegal move (1.5–1.8). Acts of reminding, in Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, are intrinsic FTAs due to the fact that the referee indicates that the player should remember not to perform illegal actions, which would impede his freedom of action, thus threatening the player's face wants. However, this FTA can also be understood as signaling the referee's kindness toward the player, as he would impede the player to committing any foul and consequently receiving the respective punishments.

Example (1) A talk between referee Danny Crawford (R) and player Mike Bibby (P): acts of reminding recast as MFMA

- 1.1 R: Yeah I thought I told him
 1.2 to make sure he doesn't pivot.
 {A pivot is a movement in which a player steps in any direction with the same foot, while the other foot, called the pivot foot, is kept at its point of contact with the floor.}
- 1.3 You were out of the play.
 ((Mike Bibby was not there when the referee told the other player not to pivot.))
- 1.4 P: Alright.
- 1.5 R: Hey you guys make sure you do the same [MFMA: Reminding]
 1.6 {i.e., not to pivot} on your pick and roll in the same way. [MFMA: Reminding]
 {Pick and roll is offensive play in which a player sets a screen (i.e., pick) for a teammate handling the ball and then moves toward the basket (i.e., rolls) to receive a pass from the teammate.}
- 1.7 Hey, Dirk.
- 1.8 Remember I told you about that one. [MFMA: Reminding]
 {The referee reminds Mike Bibby's opponent, Dirk, about the same thing.}

The acts of reminding performed by the NBA referee can be characterized as MFMA. In a basketball game, when a referee performs an act of reminding, he may try to create harmonious vibes instead of simply blowing the whistle or calling a foul against a player. In this way, a referee enhances his own face because he would be deemed to have a kind and considerate personality. Acts of reminding also provide the players with room to avoid unnecessary confrontation between themselves and the officiating referees, thus attending to the players' face. Hence, referee Danny Crawford's performance of the acts of reminding may be more appropriately considered to be MFMA instead of a series of FTAs, because his acts of reminding can satisfy or maintain the face wants of both interlocutors if the aim of the talk is to attain interactional harmony.

In Example (1), the referee's act of reminding two players, one from each team, skillfully avoids finding fault on either side, thus maintaining, not necessarily saving, both the referee's and the player's face.

4.2. Small talk as an MFMA

Example (2) A talk between referee Bernie Fryer (R) and player Reggie Miller (P): small talk recast as an MFMA

- 2.1 R: Where're you going for dinner after the game? [MFMA: Small talk]
 ((The referee says this when the game clock is stopped for a short while and everyone on court takes a break.))
- 2.2 P: ((Looks at the referee, then looks away and thinks, then looks at the referee again and says something to him)) <X>.

The question in (2) might appear somewhat unusual to the reader. In a different context, for example when a male referee asks a female player the same question, it could raise speculation regarding the referee's intention and/or the potential relationship between the interlocutors. Nevertheless, in (2), referee Bernie Fryer initiates small talk with the

player standing next to him (2.1) during a dead ball situation. The referee's question would appear to indicate that the interlocutors are friends or know each other well. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), "the value of S's spending time and effort on being with H, as a mark of friendship or interest in him, gives rise to the strategy of redressing an FTA by talking for a while about unrelated topics" (p. 117). Putting aside the idea of redressing an FTA, we can still consider Brown and Levinson's effort to elucidate the value of small talk to be a strategy of solidarity. We treat small talk as an MFMA as long as it has no ulterior motive but builds common ground (Clark, 1996) between the interlocutors, be it about food, weather, current affairs, or the addressee's situation. The referee's performance of small talk can be understood as showing his friendliness and his attempt not to ignore the player who is standing next to him at that particular moment. As such, the referee cares for the player's face wants and produces an ambiance of friendliness, thus maintaining his own and the player's face.

The pragmatic reinterpretation of small talk in Example (2) using the notion of an MFMA enriches the spirit of Brown and Levinson's solidarity strategy. Solidarity serves as a strategy for maintaining the participants' face, thus creating conversational harmony. It may be needed because, in the context of the research data, it can reduce social distance and possible tension between referees and players and can facilitate the smooth running of a game, thus conforming with the duties and objectives required of an NBA referee. Section 1.2 of FIBA Manual for Referees states that game control is a golden rule of an elite basketball referee, and great game control is needed "to ensure a smooth running and dynamic game where players are able to showcase their basketball skills".⁴

4.3. Compliment as an MFMA

Finally, Example (3) demonstrates a compliment in the context of sport argumentation. In this example, referee Joe Forte and player Allen Iverson are arguing why the contact between two players was not called a foul. The referee first explicates that he saw Iverson's opponent make contact with him, but Iverson continued on without being affected and eventually scored (3.1–3.3). Hence, the referee further explains why he did not call a foul: if he had blown the whistle at the moment he saw contact being made, Iverson's continuing body movement would not have been observed (i.e., being able to shoot), and therefore he would have lost the opportunity to score (3.4–3.6). The player then responds by telling the referee that he could have missed the shot, which implies that he would have preferred to have benefited from the referee's foul call against his opponent, because the penalty would have increased his opponent's foul count. However, by playing on, he might have gained nothing if he had simply missed the shot (3.7, 3.9). The referee then tells the player that he has faith in him that he would not miss the shot (3.10–3.12), thus creating a favorable reaction (the player smiles in 3.13). We can see that the player is obviously not satisfied with nor persuaded by the referee's initial statements (3.7, 3.9), until the referee gives a positive evaluation of the player's skills and capabilities, thereby attending to the player's face wants and building common ground between them (3.10–3.12).

Example (3) A talk between referee Joe Forte (R) and player Allen Iverson (P): Approbation constraint recast as an MFMA

- | | | | |
|------|----|---|-----------------------------|
| 3.1 | R: | I see him get you here.
(The referee signals where contact occurred.) | |
| 3.2 | | You continued on {without being affected by the opponent}. | |
| 3.3 | | Everything's alright. | |
| 3.4 | | If I stop it {call a foul}, I guess, I can't put you in the (.) | |
| 3.5 | | in the act <X> okay?
{The referee decides whether the player will get bonus points based on his judgement of the player's shooting ability.} | |
| 3.6 | | So I just use good judgement, let you go on with the play <X> | |
| 3.7 | P: | <X> miss the shot, dude? | |
| 3.8 | R: | No, you made the shot. | |
| 3.9 | P: | No, I'm saying I would miss it. | |
| 3.10 | R: | No, you wouldn't miss it. | [Politeness:
Compliment] |
| 3.11 | | You wouldn't miss it. | [Politeness:
Compliment] |
| 3.12 | | Not you. Not you. I have faith. | [Politeness:
Compliment] |
| 3.13 | P: | ((Smiling)) | |

The compliments in Example (3) are MFMA, in that they can create the ambiance of conviviality, evincing the referee's positive thinking and positive image; besides, they also place a high value on the player's skills, thus maintaining both the referee's and the player's face wants. In terms of the functions of this type of MFMA, we see that in Example (3) the conversation is initially tense, but the referee's positive words mitigate the tension and bridge the communication gap between the two interlocutors. The player's reaction (smiling) at the end of the interaction (3.13) indicates the strategic acts performed by complimenting, that is, shortening the conversation and meeting the requirements of a fast-paced basketball game. Also, this type of MFMA assists referees when dealing with troublesome or even confrontational utterances from players, so that the former can concentrate on controlling the game instead of dealing with complaints. As Goffman's conception of face indicates, face is not an intrinsic feature of individuals, but a public image that is constructed during the flow of verbal interactions.

In the context of NBA referee talk, MFMA serve not only to lessen the impact of the intense emotions that can emanate from players and/or coaches, but also to reduce unnecessary verbal exchanges, which could create further tension, distrust, and dissatisfaction. Therefore, MFMA are indeed very much needed in this context. The notion of an MFMA affords at least three advantages. First, it is more positive than Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative perspective on face. Second, it emphasizes mutuality, which Brown and Levinson's approach to face does not seek to elucidate. Third, it can be used to analyze conversations in diverse contexts that lie beyond everyday conversational contexts.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings, this section discusses the potential applicability of the notion of an MFMA to sport contexts and beyond. Specifically, this section explores what types of speakers in which types of conversations are more likely to perform MFMA when interacting with certain types of addressees. This echoes Goffman's (1983) call for attention to be paid to the social circumstances in which a speech act can be performed felicitously or infelicitously (cf. Hashemian & Farhang-Ju, 2017; Kalinina & Gabdreeva, 2020; Zarei, 2012). We can discuss the MFMA in terms of both social roles (referees, players, coaches) relative to each other in a situated context and conversational genres. We follow Spencer-Oatey's (2007) account of identity as comprising multiple attributes, including social roles. In terms of genre, Fairclough (2003) distinguishes the concept of genre into three levels: "pre-genre", which is the most abstract (e.g., narrative, conversation), "disembedded genre", which is less abstract (e.g., interview, report), and "situated genre", which is the most specific (e.g., the genre of sports interviews in English that are broadcast on US television). Our research data genre belongs to a "situated genre", so our discussion about the applicability of the notion of an MFMA is relevant to "situated genres" of conversations.

After clarifying identity and genre, we must next make potential connections between the notion of an MFMA, the identities of the interlocutors, and the conversational genre to investigate the types of contexts in which an MFMA can be applied. Using a set of conversational data, the first two factors we need to establish are the identities of the interlocutors and the genre that the conversation exemplifies. Then, we need to inspect their links to the definition of an MFMA, which comprises three key elements (see Section 2.2): specific context, goal of communicative concord, and mutual face maintenance. Should the two factors that shape an utterance fail to be connected to the above-mentioned three key elements, the utterance is unlikely to be interpreted as an MFMA.

By way of illustration, consider "a professional basketball player speaking to his opponents in a game" as an example and compare it with "a professional basketball referee speaking to a coach or a player during a game" because these two occasions have interlocutors with clear social identities and each belongs to a situated genre. To examine the connection, we begin with the first key element of an MFMA: specific context. As these two occasions have clear situated genres, the clear setting of each occasion fulfills the requirement of the first essential feature. Thus, the link appears to have been established. Although these two occasions are similar in that they contain dynamism, hostility, competitiveness, and tension, the two genres differ in regard to the importance that is placed on the speaker's need for face maintenance. In terms of the genre of "player to opponent talk", a player's need for face-work may be less because his goal is to defeat the opponent and win the game, and, therefore, he might do face-work much less frequently. However, the genre of "referee to player/coach talk" requires referees to perform face-work, so as not to offend players. A professional sports referee, or an umpire/official in some other sports, is a qualified person and it is his duty and aim to avoid confrontations between teams and to mitigate a tense ambiance. Thus, we can see referees perform MFMA more frequently.

We next turn our attention to the second key element: goal of communicative concord. The social attributes of a referee can be defined by his duty and aim to maintain order and to assist in the smooth running of the game by preventing conflict developing. In other words, when a referee talks to a player or a coach, his identity is very likely to be appropriately linked to the communicative goal of an MFMA, which is to reach conversational concord. However, the social attributes of a player may be defined by his duty and aim to help his team win the game by whatever means possible. More specifically, when a player talks to his opponents, his identity is less likely to be connected to the communicative goal of an MFMA, because a professional player strives to be competitive and aggressive, and his main aim during a game is not to achieve a harmonious relationship with his opponent.

The last key element of an MFMA is the need for mutual face maintenance. The identity of a referee can be linked to this last essential element, in that mutual face maintenance ensures a smooth game without distrust or conflict developing between the interlocutors. However, the identity of a player, in terms of his duty and aims, means that he is unlikely to care much about his opponent's face wants, and thus a player might frequently perform acts that enhance his own face but threaten his addressee's face. Thus, when a player talks to his opponent, his identity is unlikely to be compatible with the third key element of an MFMA. The key element concerning identity is in line with Goffman's (1967, p. 5) conception of face: "Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes".

After contrasting the two different roles in similar contexts, we can assume that, in terms of the identities of the interlocutors and the conversational genres, speakers whose main social duty and aim is to reach communicative concord in the context where conversations involve potential tension, hostility, or conflict may be more inclined to perform MFMA. The data on NBA referee talk reveal the value of the notion of an MFMA, particularly when such acts are considered in relation to the interlocutors' identity and the data genre. In the spirit of Goffman's (1955, p. 222) conception of face, this study has elucidated "the positive social value a person [an NBA referee] effectively claims for himself by the line others [players/coaches] assume he has taken during a particular contact [a game]". Face emerges in interaction and is negotiated in situated contexts and for diverse communicative purposes. The present research offers a useful concept for analyzing face in communication, particularly where communicative concord is aimed for while potential tension exists.

Notes

¹ The National Basketball Association (NBA) is a professional basketball league in North America.

² The conversation segments in the collected videos were originally televised on ESPN, a well-known American cable sports channel. The videos were accessed in January 2021 from the following site: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4xSUEzj7_8&list=PLU196zTRXQU0taFAikv_AcEZ3XofNeOXⁿ

³ The NBA and the International Basketball Federation stipulate that three referees should officiate at games.

⁴ This quotation was cited from FIBA Referee Operations (2020). FIBA Referees Manual: Individual Officiating Techniques (IOT) Version 1.1. Retrieved on May 21, 2022 from: <http://fiba-iref.nubedemos.com>.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

Transcription conventions

Symbol	Description
((<i>italics</i>))	contextual information
<X>	inaudible speech
(())	bodily movement and facial expression, e.g., ((nodding))
{ }	the transcriber’s explanation of a term which may be unknown to the reader
(.)	A brief pause



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