

The power of language

*How people agree, disagree and complain
in everyday language*

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Our background

This session...

- how we assess, and agree and disagree with assessments
- how we complain and receive complaints
- focus on tone of voice
- use real examples taken from everyday conversation; become aware of everyday practices for handling complaints, and improve communication.

Assessment

when speakers evaluate something

(1) *Kate and Jade; classmate*

01 K =she's- she's- she's rea:lly nice isn't she

(2) *Lottie and Emma; nude swimming*

01 E I always h:ave liked to swim in the nude.

Agreement

Assessment invites agreement

assessment

(3) *Lottie and Emma; nude swimming*

01 E 1→ I always h:ave liked to swim in the nu: [de.]

02 L 2→ [M E]: TOO YOU KNOW

agreement

How to do agreement

To agree, do at least some of these things:

- Do it **soon** after the first assessment
- Use an **expanded** vocal range
- Use a **stronger** assessment term

Alice and Beth; Pepsi Max

01 A I think we should talk about peps i max
02 1→ and how it's wei:r[d
03 B 2→ [it's disgusti:ng

Lottie and Emma; wig

01 E did you WEAR YOUR WI::G?
02 L .h YE:[A H .]
03 E 1→ [Is it] beautiful?
04 L 2→ .hh Go:d Emma it's just go:rgeou[s.

Lesley and Robin; schoolteacher

01 Les 1→ [Ye:s.] Yes [she's just ticking over isn't sh[e.
02 Rob 2→ [Oh::
03 2→ it's ridicu[lous.
04 Les [Ye:s::=

Outright disagreement

Marion and Wendy; window seat
How do you think Wendy says *I hate it*?

M we always end up in the window though which I normally don't like but
 they've got really thick net curtains there °>so people can't see in<°
0-> I hate people that- seeing you eat
W 1-> ^oh I like sit[ting in the window,]
M 2-> [£#oh# I h:]Ate it£
 (0.7)
W °^oh n[o: , °]
M [#I always] feel like# some sort of performing chimp'£
 .1 . .

Outright disagreement

- Do it soon after the first assessment
- Use an **opposite** assessment term
- Use an **expanded** vocal range
- Often a restatement of something that's already been said or implied
- Usually: **continued talk on the topic**
- Usually: about things that don't matter much

Marion and Wendy; window seat

M we always end up in the window though which I normally don't like but
 they've got really thick net curtains there °>so people can't see in<°
0-> I hate people that- seeing you eat
W 1-> ^oh I like sit[ting in the window,]
M 2-> [£#oh# I h:]Ate it£
 (0.7)
W °^oh n[o:,°]
M [#I always] feel like# some sort of performing chimp'£

Mitigated disagreement

Mitigated disagreement

- Socially delicate actions like disagreement are often delayed
- [weak agreement] + [disagreement]
- Use a narrower vocal range (lower, quieter)
- Provide a reason for not agreeing

Jade and Kate; reluctant lover

J he wouldn't stop asking her out
 he used to ring her like three times a day and she'd go "no: no:" .h or
 she'd say yes and not turn up
 and then she just completely fell for him

K ! a:[h: that's love]ly=

J [°together°]

K 1-> =she's- she's- (she's rea:lly nice) in't [she

J 2-> [>she is n#i#ce,=<

=.h I do find that she just says stuff just for the sake of saying stuff though

K [year]

[yeah

J [even when she's not got that much to say

Another way not to agree:
Change the terms of agreement

Lesley and Robin; normal

Rob: ↑Yea[h

Les: [.hhhh ↑How d'you get on with Charles ↓Loft.
(0.6)

Rob: Oh he's al↑ri↓:ght.[[(↑Ye:s.)

Les: [e[↑Yes i- (.)if ↑you let him-m- (.)
gn: ↑just tick a↓long in iz ow:n llittle ge:ntle wa:y,

Rob: ↑Ye[:s.

Les: → [.hh B'I ↑don't think he's normal do you:,

Rob: → .hhhh (0.2) u-I think ↑he's ↓slo[:w,

Les: [.tch I think his
meta↑bolism is, tre↑mendously ↓slow.

Rob: ↑Wh't wh't makes you th:ink'v ↓him. I mean I: obv'sly
I'm getting t'know ↓him[but what is it=

Marion and Wendy; plump

M I thought she had really nice feet
W yeah I did
M that were not all scabby ahand hehe [°mh .mh
W 1-> [I think she's
1-> really attractive act#ually#,
(0.5)
M 2-> >she's a bit< plum:p
(0.4)
you saw a few rolls there fwhile she was on the
cou[ch::f]
W 1-> [yeah but I th]ink that's nice;
(0.3)
M 2-> [cuddly;]
W [(* *) a]ttRACtiveness comes in all f- shapes and forms
M oh well I don't like bony people
W (* *) bony
M °who was I noticing the other day who was bony°
W that'd be me with that skirt on

- By offering a different assessment, you reject the other speaker's version...
- but you offer another one of your own
- and offer another opportunity for the other person to agree with you
- This kind of disagreement leads to a kind of dance where people negotiate what they're agreeing on.

Words do one thing...
tone of voice another

Skip and Freddy; pay

1 Ski that's alright I just wanted to make sure: (.)
 2 whether you'd p'hh gone back or no[t.h
 3 Fre [yes I did.
 no[I got that=
 4 Ski [.hhhhhhh.p
 5 Fre =thanks 'n I, I've also heard about th'of course
 6 about the cash in toda:[y.
 7 Ski 1→ [gYes::. yes isn't that
 8 1→ good at l:ong la:[st. [((sniff))
 9 Fre2→ [that[s- that's (.) very good
 10 news. b't'v cour[se it (0.3)
 11 Ski [khhhhhhhh
 12 Fre we'll haf to pay out a lot a'that I [guess
 13 Ski [.hhhhhh ihye:s
 14 but at least it'll bring us int'th'black hhh.hhh in
 15 the middle of Ma:y whi:ch is just the time when we
 16 should be[.kmhhh[hhh.glp.tk]lp
 17 Fre [(0.5) [ih y e: s]but buh[but (.) do we
 18 owe:I mean=
 19 Ski [u h h h h h h h
 20 Fre =ih- we haven' paid any of the (Almans) 'n people
 21 like that yet I[(take it)
 22 Ski [eeyes we paid some of them-

words look like agreement

but doesn't match
Skip's tone of voice

Skip gives reasons not
to agree

Closing assessments (agreement)

Closing assessments

- A method to bring a topic to an end
- Summarise what's already come
- Agree with it, using a narrower vocal range
- Change the topic

Nancy and Emma; sun

Nan: °Ya[h wul°]

Emm: [The SU]:N'S COMIN OU:T.

Nan: I ≠know it.h

Emm: ØBeeutifu[l.

Nan: [°Jus'beautiful.°

(0.3)

Nan: So:: anyway: let me: uh .hhh call Rol's mother,h (.) a:nd uh,h
(0.4)ther,h (.)

Complaints in everyday conversation

- How to complain
- How to receive a complaint
- How to manage the exit from the complaint (graciously!)

How people complain

- often: a series of negative assessments
- reference to inappropriate quantities (too much, not enough, too late...)
- extreme formulations
- expletives
- complainant as victim

How do complaints sound?

- High pitched and loud; they often sound expansive.
- Responses which match these in vocal register, like agreements, are treated by complainants as agreement with the complaint.

How do complaints end?

- Provide an assessment that summarises the complaint. This shows you've understood what the complaint was about. Say it quietly and gently. Works like a **closing assessment**.
- Acknowledge the complaint but don't engage with the content of it. In everyday conversations, most complaints run out of steam. Risky in institutional settings!

Emma and Lottie; golf trip

5 E ((complaints about lack of air conditioning, and
6 only two staff to serve breakfast))
7 L yeah?
8 E because (.) uy Bud couldn't even eat his breakfast
9 A→ he ordered he waited forty-five minutes and he had
10 to be out there to tee off so I gave it to-uh (.)
11 Karen's little boy
12 (0.7)
13 E A→ ((swallow)) I mean that's how bad the service was.h
14 .hh
15 X→ .hh it's gone to pot
16 L ?oh y[eah
17 E [but it's a beautiful golf course

(7) *Lisa and Ilene; doctor*

Ilene says that she's kicked herself on the ankle. She moves to complaining about her doctor.

10 I it's probably a bruise, yeah
11 L no it's not, I think it'll be sprained
12 the do[ctor says he wasn't worried so that's all ri[ght
13 I [oh [yeah
14 L I'm glad he's not worried I'm the one who's living with it
15 I yeh-heh-heh- hh-hh
16 L he wasn't worried when I broke my thumb twelve month[s
17 I [.t
18 L ago and i[t's still broken
19 I [eh
20 (0.8)
21 I oh really they are casual aren't they
22 L well he i[s
23 I [yeah yeah

Conclusions

- Agreement and disagreement are done in response to someone else's talk
- Complaints are a way for people to seek solidarity with their position. Complaints are often presented as things to be agreed with.

- To agree:
 - * Reply without delay.
 - * Your words should be stronger than the other person's
 - * ...and your tone of voice more expansive.
- Agreement is the 'normal' expectation: not to agree takes more work, and is socially more tricky.

- **Disagreement** takes more work.
 - * Mitigate disagreement with weak agreement
 - * Provide a reason for disagreement
 - * Use a narrower vocal range than the other person.

- Match words with actions.
 - * Delayed agreement with narrower vocal range is heard as a prelude to disagreement.
 - * A display of understanding, even without agreement, is a good method for closing something down.

**Tone of voice is critical to
deliver your message!**

Thank you!
Diolch yn fawr iawn!