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AUTHOR Tannen, Deborah
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ABSTRACT

This paper, part of a larger study, focuses on a single linguistic device, the "machine-gun question," which was used by three of six participants in a Thanksgiving dinner conversation. This conversational device is characteristic of a style that seems to grow out of the need to have others approve of one's wants. It is a style characterized here as "high-involvement." The other three participants exhibited a style which seems to grow out of the need to not be imposed upon, or the need for independence; it is characterized as "high-considerateness." The "machine-gun question" is spoken at a rapid rate and is timed to come either as an overlap or a latch on the interlocutor's utterance. It also has reduced syntactic form and marked high or low pitch. It requests information, and it may come in a series. This type of question has its corollary in an answer, characterized by reduced form, rapid timing, and marked low or high pitch. Examples of such questions and answers demonstrates the process of perceiving intentions among interlocutors in conversation. A conclusion is that intentions are perceived correctly in proportion to the degree to which conversational style is shared. (AMH)

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TOWARD A THEORY OF CONVERSATIONAL STYLE:
THE MACHINE-GUN QUESTION¹

Deborah Tannen
Georgetown University

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Georgetown University

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As Robin Lakoff (1979) notes, "style" refers to all aspects of a person's behavior that are popularly thought of as "character" or "personality." She observes that we expect "coherency" and "consistency" among elements of others' behavior, dress, and so on, so that "we are surprised if one affects Victorian manners and dresses in tie-dyed shirts and cut-offs" (Lakoff 1977). The codification of these co-occurrence expectations (Gumperz 1964) amounts to a grammar of style.

Perception of style operates in the way Bartlett (1932) hypothesized for memory: in sweeping over a newly encountered person or scene, one grasps a small number of elements, associates these with a familiar schema based on prior experience, and postulates the existence of the entire schema. Thus a grammar of style assumes a "schema" or "frames" approach which underlies much recent work in theoretical linguistics (for example Chafe 1977 and Fillmore 1976) as well as other disciplines (see Tannen 1979a for a summary and discussion of theories of frames and related notions).

Ways of talking--the use of language in all its phonological, syntactic, paralinguistic and pragmatic variety--are part of the schema which constitutes personal style. Ultimately, we will want to link analysis of language use, or conversational style, to a comprehensive analysis of other elements of behavior, such as proxemic, kinesic, and other non-verbal channels, facial expressions, gestures, and so on. For the present, however, I have concentrated on the linguistic channel and, since one must start somewhere, on the language used in a single setting: informal talk among peers at a dinner gathering.

In a larger study (Tannen 1979b) I have attempted to isolate as many as possible of the linguistic devices which constitute the styles of the

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participants, and to demonstrate their operation in interaction both with those others who exhibited similar styles and with those others whose styles were demonstrably different. In the present paper I will focus on a single linguistic device which was used by three of the six participants. That device, the machine-gun question, is characterized by a number of syntactic and paralinguistic features which typify the conversational styles of those who use it.

Thanksgiving Dinner

The present analysis is based on two and a half hours of naturally occurring conversation which took place before, during, and after Thanksgiving dinner at a home in Oakland, California in 1978. The gathering was made up of six people (four men, two women), all single, ranging in age from 28 to 34, of varying ethnic and geographic backgrounds and of varying degrees of intimacy among them. Participants were aware that they were being taped. After the conversation was transcribed, a playback component was introduced (cf Labov and Fanshel 1978) whereby each participant separately listened to segments of the tape and discussed her/his own interpretations and recollections of the interaction.²

In recalling Thanksgiving dinner several months later, two of the participants recalled that it had been a fine gathering, with "great" conversation. A third recalled that it had been very nice indeed, although at times he had felt the conversation had been a bit "competitive." In contrast, two other participants said that they had enjoyed themselves, but that they had felt the conversation had been "dominated" by the other three. The last participant said it had been a very stimulating gathering, and he had particularly liked the conversation because it was "intellectual." Detailed analysis of the linguistic features of the talk that made up the two and a half hours of conversation taped made these differing reactions comprehensible. Each participant's talk exhibited a unique combination of features such as pacing, rate of speech, preferred topics, use of storytelling and humor, use of amplitude and pitch, and so on. Each speaker had a unique style. Yet there emerged as well a pattern by which, in some sense, three speakers could be seen as exhibiting similar styles, while three others exhibited contrasting styles. I shall describe these two styles as if they were discrete, but it should be borne in mind that this is an idealization for heuristic purposes; the similarity is more

precisely a clustering on a continuum, or perhaps on a series of continua, representing preference for the linguistic devices discussed.

High-Involvement vs. High-Considerateness Styles

Three of the six participants exhibited styles that used, to some degree, the following devices: frequent overlap of a cooperative rather than obstructive nature (Tannen 1979b and in press); the tendency to continue speaking over others' overlaps, contributions timed to latch onto preceding utterances without pause; relatively rapid rate of speech, relatively few internal pauses; preference for marked shifts in amplitude and pitch, resulting in exaggerated intonation contours; preference for personal topics, free offer of opinions related or unrelated to previous talk, persistence of contributions over numerous turns despite lack of response from others. These devices seem to grow out of a strategy that serves, above all what Brown and Levinson (1978) have identified as positive face wants--the need to have at least some others approve of one's wants, or what I like to think of as the need for community. Put another way, they are honoring Lakoff's (1973) R3 of rapport, 'Maintain camaraderie.' Speakers who exhibit such a style are operating on the assumption that, whereas it is nice to act as if "we're true friends," "true friends" do not have to worry about imposing on each other. This is a style, moreover, which loves talk and fears silence, for talk is seen as evidence of rapport, while silence is seen as possible evidence of its lack. Therefore I shall call it "high-involvement."³

The other three participants in the conversation at Thanksgiving dinner exhibited styles characterized by the following features: less frequent overlap, a tendency to stop speaking in reaction to others' overlap; allowing pauses between turns, more internal pauses, relatively slow rate of speech; use of flat intonation contours; preference for impersonal topics, preference for picking up on others' topics, abandonment of contributions that are not picked up by others; more use of hedges and hesitations. These devices seem to grow out of a strategy which honors what Brown and Levinson call negative face: the need to not be imposed upon or what I like to think of as the need for independence. Speakers of such a style also feel that the nicest thing one can do is to act as if "we're true friends," but in their system, true friends are considerate of each other in this way. This

is a style which honors first Lakoff's R1 of rapport, 'Don't impose.' It is a style, finally, which is more respectful of silence and is somewhat suspicious of talk, since talk is seen as an imposition and silence a sign of considerateness. Hence I shall call it "high-considerateness."

Thus we can postulate the existence of two styles, one having conventionalized linguistic devices which serve the need for community or involvement, the other having conventionalized linguistic devices which serve the need for independence.⁴ Again, these are not in fact discrete styles, as the devices discussed are not discrete entities; rather, the devices are made up of relatively more or less exaggerated use of the linguistic features, and each person's style represents a pattern of preferences for communicative strategies which make use of these devices. It should be noted, as well, that the use of the term "strategy" does not imply deliberate or conscious choice of ways of speaking. Quite the contrary, ways of encoding meaning in words are automatic and habitual and seem self-evidently appropriate to the speaker. We may talk of "strategies" only in retrospect, by way of explicating the pattern that can be discerned in linguistic variables.

The Machine-Gun Question

The machine-gun question is a linguistic device which was frequently used by the three speakers of "high-involvement" styles. The prototypical machine-gun question is spoken at a rapid rate and is timed to come either as an overlap or a latch (Sacks 1970) on the interlocutor's utterance. It has reduced syntactic form and marked high or low pitch. It requests information of a personal nature, and it may come in a series. The effect of the use of this device with speakers accustomed to such a style is to keep the conversation flowing rapidly and smoothly. The reduced syntactic form and rapid turn-timing carry the metamessage (Bateson 1972) "I am so interested that I can't wait for you to finish your turn before finding out this extra information about you." In addition, the marked pitch seems to denote a kind of casualness, carrying the metamessage, "This isn't all that important, and I don't want to take the floor away from you, so answer me if you like and then go on." Evidence that these intentions are clear to co-stylists will be seen presently; resulting conversation is rhythmically smooth and demonstrably pleasing to participants.

In contrast, the effect of machine-gun questions in cross-stylistic talk, that is, with interlocutors who are accustomed to a "high-considerateness" style, is the opposite of what is intended. The rapid-fire questions seem puzzling, startling, even rude. They catch the interlocutor off guard and make him or her feel on the spot. The resulting interchange is rhythmically uneven and, by the testimony of participants during playback, unsatisfying to all participants.

Examples

I first became aware of the machine-gun question in an informal way. My sister was visiting me in California during the time that I was beginning analysis of the Thanksgiving data. One of the participants in the Thanksgiving dinner had the chance to meet my sister. After he had been talking to her for a while, he came up to me with great excitement and animation. "Your sister talks just like you!" he exclaimed. My interest, of course, could not have been more intense. "Well, I was talking to her," he explained, "and I told her that I had been in New York last summer. And she said, 'WHERE'." He mimicked my sister's response by tacking the question, 'where,' right onto his sentence, very fast and abrupt, with falling intonation like a poke. As he said it, he darted his head in my direction, giving the feeling of physical imposition on "my space." He repeated, "Just 'WHERE.' Just like that!" as if this were the oddest utterance he had ever encountered. "She didn't say, 'Oh, really? Where did you go in New York?' or anything like that. Just 'Where!'" Again he imitated the abrupt question and jutted his head toward me. "And then I realized," he continued, "that that's what you do. And at first I thought it was really rude, but then I got used to it. And your sister does the same thing. If I hadn't known I would have thought it meant she was bored and wanted the conversation to be over quickly."

Thus I became aware of the process of pragmatic homonymy (Lakoff and Tannen 1979), by which the metamessage of the machine-gun delivery signalled to David just the opposite of its intention. His explanation of his reaction to my sister's question sent me back to the Thanksgiving transcripts with renewed focus. Sure enough, I found numerous instances of similar use of abrupt questions by the three participants who exhibited what I now refer to as "high-involvement" style. There was clear evidence that the

device had different effects when used with those who shared the style and when used with others who did not.

The Thanksgiving data include several instances of precisely the same question, asked in the same way, with similar effects. In the following excerpt from that transcript, the context is almost exactly the same as the one in which my sister asked David "Where." In this case, Chad, a native and resident of Los Angeles, makes reference to having visited New York City, and Kurt, a native of New York, asks "Where," in staccato fashion, with low pitch, and timed to overlap preceding talk. (Kurt and Chad do not know each other yet; they have met only once before, and briefly). The third speaker in this interchange is David, the same person who met my sister; David is also a native of Los Angeles and a good friend of Kurt.⁵

- (1) C: That's what I expected to find in New York was lots of bagels.
(2) D: Yeah lots of bagels and when you go to Boston you expect to find beans.
(3) K: Did you find them?
(4) C: No no. What I found were uh-- . . . croisa? crescent rolls? and croissant? and all that? . . . the . . . crescent rolls mostly. Lots of that kind of stuff.
But it was
(5) K: Where.
(6) D: Croissant.
(7) C: I don't know. . . I didn't go around a whole lot for breakfast. I was kind of stuck at . . . the Plaza for a while which was interesting.

In this interchange, the dynamic interaction is between Chad and Kurt. Although David participates, he does not offer new information but rather comments on and verifies (6) Chad's contributions. Kurt directs his response/questions directly to Chad. It seems in this instance that David and Chad are operating as a quasi-duet (Falk 1979); i.e. they are jointly holding one conversational role, with Chad the main speaker. Thus Kurt's interruption of David in (3) functions like an interruption of Chad. (3) is also in the form of a machine-gun question, and it focuses attention on Chad. Chad's reply (4) is fairly long and repetitive, slowed down by a filler (uh--), a false start

(croisa?), repetition and rewording ("crescent rolls," "croissant," "crescent rolls"), empty phrases ("and all that?" "that kind of stuff"); and pauses. Kurt interrupts this reply to ask (5) "Where." The contrast between Chad's diffuse and repetitive (4) and Kurt's abrupt question (5) could not be more dramatic. In (7) Chad replies to Kurt's question with another diffuse response. (7) begins with a hedge ("I don't know"), proceeds to a pause, has more hedges ("a whole lot," "kind of"), and has more pauses before reaching the answer that he ate breakfast at the Plaza Hotel, after which his voice trails off. During playback, Kurt commented that Chad's reply seemed very uncertain and evasive. Chad noticed this too, but he explained that the abrupt delivery of Kurt's questions made him feel "on the spot" and probably aggravated his slight feeling of defensiveness, since he was a new member of the group. Thus Kurt's attempt to make Chad feel comfortable had just the opposite effect:

You live in LA?

Precisely the same effect is created when another participant in the dinner attempts to show interest in Chad and make him feel comfortable. Frances has met Chad for the first time; early in the transcript she tries to "draw him out" by asking a series of questions about his life:

-
+ (8) F: You live in LA?
+ (9) C: Yeah.
+ (10) F: Visiting here?
(11) C: Yeah.
+ (12) F: What do you do there?

-
(13) C: Uh-- I work at Disney Prosu? . . . Walt Disney . . . and
+ (14) F: You an artist?
(15) C: No-- no.
+ (16) F: Writer?
(17) C: Yeah-- I write . . . advertising copy.

Listening to the tape, Frances recalled Chad had been unaccountably uncommunicative. She was quite puzzled by his unwillingness to engage in the friendly chat." Chad, for his part, explained that two aspects of her questions had been disconcerting to him. First, he was not comfortable talking about

himself, especially not to a new acquaintance, and especially not about his work. To Frances, it had seemed self-evident that a person likes to talk about him- or herself. Second, the rapid pace, high pitch, and staccato form of her questions--their machine-gun nature--made Chad feel, again, "on the spot." The resulting conversation between them, therefore, got off to a wobbly start. The interchange has a choppy rhythm which typifies such interaction (i.e. between a "fast talker" and a "hesitant" one); there are noticeably longer pauses between the question and its answer than between the answer and the subsequent question.

The Machine-Gun Question in Co-Stylistic Talk

The Thanksgiving conversation contains numerous examples of talk among the three participants who share a "fast" style, and these segments contain numerous examples of machine-gun questions which have an effect quite different from their effect in interaction with those who are not accustomed to their use. For example, the following segment presents an interchange among Kurt, Frances, and Kurt's brother, Peter. The previous topic of talk has been the effect of television on children. Frances then asks Kurt and Peter a series of questions which are similar in many ways to those she asked Chad.

- (18) K I think it's basically done ... damage to children. ... That
 what good it's done is ... outweighed by ... the
 damage.]
- + (19) F Did you two grow up with television?
- (20) P Very little. We had a TV in the quonset
- + (21) F How old were you when your parents
 got it?]
- (22) K We had a TV but we didn't watch it all the time.
 We were very young. I was four when my parents got
 a TV.]
- + (23) F You were four?
- (24) P I even remember that. [I don't remember / ?? +
- (25) K I remember they got a TV before
 P ??
- K we moved out of the quonset huts. In nineteen fifty
 four]
- (26) P I remember we got it in the quonset huts.

(27) F [chuckle] You lived in quonset huts? When you
 were how old?:

(28) K Y'know my father's dentist said to him what's a quonset
 hut. ... And he said God, you must be younger than my
 children. He was. Younger than both of us.

The pace of this segment is fast, with much overlap and little pause between utterances. The answers are as fast-paced as the questions. Peter and Kurt are operating as a duet, since they are equally knowledgeable on the topic: their own childhood. They overlap with each other (24, 25) and latch utterances onto preceding ones (22, 26). The entire interchange, then, proceeds according to the pace set by the question (19) "Did you two grow up with television?" which contrasts sharply with the pace and tone of Kurt's comment about the effect of television of children (18), which is uttered slowly, with a very sober tone and low pitch. Subsequent questions are asked in increasingly fast pace and higher pitch (21, 23, 27), as the questions and answers intertwine to create a rhythmically smooth interchange.

The initial question (19) represents a shift in focus of the conversation and puts Peter and Kurt on the spot in a personal way, whereas they were previously talking about television in general. This is similar to the way Frances was seen to focus questions on Chad. In this example, however, the effect is to spark an animated interaction. By the time Frances asks (21), "How old were you when your parents got it?" Kurt has begun to answer her earlier question (19) with the answer, (22) "We had a TV but we didn't watch it all the time." He goes ahead with his answer and then continues to answer the second question by saying, "I was four when my parents got a TV." The constructions of the two sentences in (22) reflect the shift in focus of Kurt's answers. His first sentence, "We had a TV but we didn't watch it all the time," echoes Peter's answer to the same question in (20): "We had a TV in the quonset" (His answer was not finished). Kurt's second sentence in (22) picks up the phrase "when my parents got a TV" from Frances' question (21).

Frances' questions are timed either to overlap or to latch onto Kurt's and Peter's talk. If they come at a time when Kurt is not prepared to stop talking, he either answers when he is ready, as has been seen in (22), or he ignores the question, as in the end of this example. Rather than answer

Frances' question (27), Kurt pauses for a second and a half and then tells a little story (28) which he has thought of in connection with the topic.

Frances' question (27) "When you were how old?" is uttered with high pitch and in reduced syntactic form. The interrogative intent is signalled most saliently by sharp rising intonation. The reduced form serves multiple functions. It contributes to the pace of the interaction and carries the metamessage of camaraderie through casualness: "I'm really interested in you, and that's why I'm asking this, but if you have something else to say, go ahead, because this isn't all that important." The evidence for this lies in the fact that Kurt in fact chooses to ignore this question (27), and on listening to the section on tape, Frances felt no sense of discomfort about this failure. Quite the contrary, she felt pleased that he did not "stand on ceremony" about answering her every question. His lack of compulsion about answering her questions frees her to toss them out as exuberantly as she likes.

Following is another example of the discretion of the speaker in determining whether or not to permit a question to alter the course of his or her talk. Later in the same discussion, Kurt comments that some people living in the quonset huts had rats, and he continues:

(29) K Cause they were built near the swamp. We used to go ...
hunting frogs in the swamps,

(30) F Where was it. Where were yours?

(31) K In the Bronx.

(32) P In the Bronx. In the East Bronx?

(33) F How long did you live in it?

(34) K Near the swamps? Now

there's a big cooperative building.

(35) P Three years.

In this segment, Kurt permits Frances' overlapped question (30) to become an interruption. When she asks "Where was it. Where were yours?" he halts his recollection about hunting frogs in the swamps (29) to answer (31) "In the Bronx." However, when her next question (33) comes: "How long did you live in it?" he is still answering her previous question with (34) "Near the swamps? Now there's a big cooperative building." Thus he allows one question (30) to determine his next contribution but ignores

another (33). That question, "How long did you live in it?" is answered by Peter (35). (Again, Peter and Kurt are jointly holding one conversational role, as they operate as a duet).

These are just a few examples of the process which recurs throughout the Thanksgiving data. Peter, Kurt, and Frances all use machine-gun questions in a cooperative way. When used among themselves, they have the result of greasing the conversational wheels. When used with the three other participants, they have the effect of disrupting the conversational flow.

The Machine-Gun Answer

As can be seen in the previous examples, the machine-gun question is not an isolated device but is a part of a style more generally typified by rapid pace, marked intonation, and staccato form. In fact, it has its corollary in the machine-gun answer. A dramatic example of this occurred in the following minimal interchange which took place between two new acquaintances in an informal setting similar to that of the Thanksgiving dinner. In the course of casual conversation, the speaker (B) mentioned her brother, and the listener (A) interjected a question which B answered in kind:

(36) A What's your brother do?

(37) B

Lawyer.

The monosyllabic response mirrors the question in its reduced form, rapid timing, and marked low pitch (in contrast to the relatively high pitch of the question). The result is an adjacency pair which is rhythmically synchronous and, by their subsequent testimony, satisfying to both participants. The conversation proceeded smoothly, with the added satisfaction that comes of having overt evidence that things are going well, that expectations about conversation are shared, and that each is playing her part successfully.

The Operation of Linguistic Devices in Conversation

Thus the machine-gun delivery is a potentially homonymous device. Its possible dual interpretation correlates with findings of an earlier study (Tannen 1976 and 1979c) which I call the "brevity effect." That research showed that some speakers interpreted 'brevity' in informal talk as



evidence of "casualness" and hence "sincerity." In contrast, others took it as an indirect way of showing displeasure or lack of agreement. The brevity of the machine-gun question and answer, combined with fast pacing, also has these two possible interpretations. It is intended by at least some speakers to carry the metmessage of rapport, but fails miserably to convey that message to at least some others who are not familiar with its stylistic deployment.

Such linguistic devices are not randomly distributed in the speech of members of the group. Though no two speakers use all the same devices in the same way, there are patterns by which certain devices cooccur in the speech of participants, and by which speakers who share ethnic and geographic background exhibit similar clusters of devices. The combination of devices makes up the style of each speaker. Both individual and social differences obtain. It is by virtue of individual differences that one may comment, "That sounds just like Harry," but it is by virtue of social differences that one may, upon meeting someone of a certain ethnic or geographic background, be poignantly reminded of some other person one once knew from a similar background. (See Gumperz and Tannen 1979 for a discussion of individual and social differences in conversational control devices).

Conclusion

Any set of devices becomes conventionalized in speech communities which employ them and habitual in the speech of individuals. The use of terms such as "strategy" and "device" are not intended to imply conscious decision-making about ways of talking. Rather, ways of verbalizing meaning and intent have an air of inevitability about them: a certain way of showing interest, friendliness, or anger seems self-evidently appropriate. It is likely that communication is always an imperfect business--each person is an island, and an interlocutor never precisely understands another's intent in all its ramifications, motivations, and associations. But intentions are perceived correctly in proportion to the degree to which conversational style is shared. When interlocutors have styles which are relatively similar, intentions are apt to be more or less correctly perceived. When conversational style is relatively different, intentions are likely to be misinterpreted. The present study of conversational style demonstrates that process.

1. The present paper is based on a small part of a larger study (Tannen 1979b) of conversational style. My analysis draws heavily upon the theoretical and methodological work of John Gumperz and Robin Lakoff, and I was helped throughout by their comments on earlier drafts, as well as those of Wallace Chafe. Finally, I shall always be grateful to the Thanksgiving celebrants, here pseudonymously named, who graciously agreed to be taped and whose perceptive comments during playback made my analysis possible.
2. Methodological issues such as the question of "naturalness" of data so gathered, the issue of informed consent, and the fact that the investigator was a participant are discussed at length in Tannen 1979b.
3. Terminology is problematic. It is my hope, always, to avoid terms which reflect value judgments, but in this the language fails me. The use of "positive" and "negative" (Brown and Levinson) are heavily loaded, and even "camaraderie" vs. "distance" (Lakoff) seems to favor the former. Len Talmy, who has independently observed a similar stylistic dichotomy, refers to one as Style A and the other as Style B. My own references to these stylistic prototypes waver, reflecting my dissatisfaction with available terms as I strive for names which are descriptive as well as objective.
4. Ron and Suzanne Scollon (Native Language Center/University of Alaska, Fairbanks) have studied communicative strategies of Athabaskans which seem to represent a style much further along the continuum toward "non-imposition."
5. Transcription conventions are gleaned from three sources: those developed by members of a project directed by Wallace Chafe at UC-Berkeley; those used by ethnomethodologists and presented in Schenkein 1978; and those used by members of a project directed by John Gumperz at UC-Berkeley. Those conventions used here are:
 - ... noticeable pause or break in rhythm (less than .5 second)
 - ... half second pause, as measured by a stop watch
 - ... an extra dot is added for each additional half second of pause
 - ^ marks primary stress
 - ^ marks secondary stress
 - Γ marks high pitch, continuing until punctuation.
 - L marks low pitch, continuing until punctuation.
 - . marks sentence-final falling intonation
 - , marks clause-final intonation ("more to come")
 - ? marks yes/no question rising intonation
 - ? is the standard linguistic symbol for glottal stop
 - ə is the standard linguistic symbol for phoneme schwa (pronounced uh)
 - indicates lengthened vowel sound
 - + indicates sentence continues without break in rhythm (look for continuation on next line)

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Musical notation is used for amplitude:

- p* piano (spoken softly)
- pp* pianissimo (spoken very softly)
- f* forte (loud)
- ff* fortissimo (very loud)
- acc* spoken quickly
- dec* spoken slowly

All notations continue until punctuation

[?] indicates incomprehensible talk

[words/ in slashes indicate uncertain transcription

[brackets] are used for comments on quality and non-verbal channel

[Brackets linking lines indicate overlapping talk

[Brackets on two lines] indicate second utterance latched to first without pause.

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