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Agency as an interactive achievement

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how agency emerges and is negotiated moment by moment in interaction by applying Erving Goffman's notion of production format to an extended sequence of discourse that revolves around accomplishing a conjoint action: the rewriting of an official letter. Deconstructing the participants into the social roles they undertake in accomplishing this task illustrates what is involved in exercising agency: interactively negotiating production format roles and footing shifts through several linguistic strategies aimed at either claiming, ratifying, or rejecting the participants' agency. These include providing options, negotiating production format roles, asking questions, speaking for another, questioning and asserting expertise, providing counter-arguments, and asserting past agentive selves. This study, thus, contributes to an understanding of agency as co-constructed, mediated, and continually negotiated, while also identifying specific linguistic strategies through which agency is negotiated in interaction. (Agency, disability, production format, social actor, conjoint action, linguistic strategies)*

Introduction

The concept of human agency is fundamental to our understanding of social interaction of all types; yet discourse analytic studies that have considered the concept have focused primarily on the discursive assignment and the linguistic realization of personal agency in narrative discourse (e.g., O'Connor 1994, 2000; Rymes 1995; Schiffrin 1996, 2000; Hamilton 1998). As a result, they do not explain how agency emerges and is negotiated moment by moment in conversational interaction. In this article, I aim to fill this gap by exploring what is discursively involved when social actors take action. I do so by applying Goffman's (1981) notion of production format to an extended sequence of discourse that was captured on audio tape as part of an ethnographic case study of the everyday experiences of Yahya, a quadriplegic man from the Islamic Arab country of Oman. Specifically, to examine how agency is negotiated in discourse, I deconstruct into PRODUCTION

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FORMAT ROLES the social actors engaged in one activity involving Yahya and two other participants: rewriting an official letter. This deconstruction illustrates what is involved in accomplishing a conjoint action: the interactive negotiation of production format roles and footing shifts through several linguistic strategies aimed at either claiming, ratifying, or rejecting the participants' (especially Yahya's) agency. These include providing options, setting and negotiating production format roles, asking questions, speaking for another, questioning and asserting expertise, providing counter-arguments, and asserting past agentive selves. The analysis thus demonstrates a powerful way of conceptualizing agency as collaborative and interactive – exercising agency as a mediated, collective process of negotiating alignments, tasks, and roles – while also outlining specific linguistic strategies used to do so.

The organization of the article is as follows. I first provide the theoretical background for this study: I define agency, discuss its relationship to power, and outline how agency has been examined in discourse analysis, and then introduce Goffman's notion of "production format." Second, I give background information on the ethnographic study from which the data I analyze were drawn and define how I use the term "conjoint action." Third, I illustrate how one conjoint action (the rewriting of a letter) is collaboratively accomplished by Yahya and two of his caregivers. Finally, I conclude by summarizing the implications of this research for our general understanding of how agency is negotiated in interaction, and the role that people with disabilities can play in claiming power over discourse.

Agency

The consensus among researchers in the social sciences is that agency, provisionally defined as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001:133), is a murky concept with a long, disappointing history (Harré 1984, 1998). Thus, Ahearn 2001 cautions researchers to define the term carefully. In this study, the definition of agency I follow uses Ahearn's basic definition while also integrating and building upon the considerations of agency proposed by Wertsch, Tulviste & Hagstrom 1993. According to these researchers, agency is best conceptualized as mediated by technical and psychological mediational means such as language. This means that social actors are neither free to do anything they desire nor entirely constrained by their societies; instead they are determined linguistically by the grammatical structures of their languages, as well as socioculturally determined (Harré 1998, Ahearn 2001). Further, Wertsch et al. suggest that agency is collective in nature (following Taylor 1985, 1989; Vygotsky 1978, 1981, 1987). In this article, I examine the nature of this collectivity through applying to the analysis of social action Goffman's (1981) production format; this examination enables me to refine the definition of agency just proposed by suggesting that agency is best conceived as a collective process of negotiating roles, tasks, and alignments that takes place through linguistic (on which I focus here) or nonlinguistic mediational means.

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In my consideration of agency, I also address power: Agency and power are interconnected, for agency is a major basis for claiming power (Davis 1988). Power is synonymous with implementing one's agenda (Berger & Luckmann 1966, Honneth 1991); in this view, Ainsworth-Vaughn 1998 explains, power is ethically neutral; that is, regardless of internal motives and external outcomes, when one participant's agenda is implemented, it is an act of exercising power whether or not he meant well.

As Tannen 1987 cautions, however, power must not be conceptualized as though it has a single source accessible to some and unattainable by others; it is co-constructed moment to moment, with all participants involved in the process of claiming and/or ratifying or rejecting it. Tannen 1994 also cautions against taking a simplistic view regarding linguistic strategies that are traditionally interpreted as power-claiming strategies. She argues that because of the interconnectedness of power and solidarity, all conversational strategies are potentially ambiguous and polysemous with regard to these interactional dimensions. Thus, instead of conceptualizing power and solidarity as opposite ends of a single continuum where power precludes closeness and intimacy precludes a power differential, Tannen proposes a multidimensional grid of intersecting continua, where one axis represents the closeness/distance dimension and the other represents the hierarchy/equality dimension. Asking a question, then, which is typically interpreted as a power-claiming maneuver, can indeed be produced or interpreted as status (negotiations along the hierarchy–equality dimension); it can also be interpreted as connection (negotiations along the closeness–distance dimension). Utterances can also be polysemous (i.e., meaning both status and connection simultaneously). Thus, in addition to power maneuvers, Tannen (2003:51) argues, "we also can speak of – indeed, need to speak of – 'connection maneuvers.'"

Most research in discourse analysis dealing with the topic of agency explores either the assignment of responsibility in narrative discourse (Schiffrin 1996, 2000) or the linguistic realization of personal agency in narrative discourse (O'Connor 1994, Rymes 1995, Hamilton 1998). While these studies have enriched our understanding of different discursive agentive sites and the variety of linguistic strategies social actors draw upon in constructing their agency, they do not examine the moment-by-moment strategies through which agency is negotiated. An exception is Ainsworth-Vaughn's (1998) examination of power-claiming maneuvers within medical institutions. Contrary to previous studies in medical discourse that have either focused only on physicians' claims of power or on single speech activities, Ainsworth-Vaughn's study presents a holistic investigation into the process of power negotiations between patients and their physicians in private clinics. In fact, she demonstrates the active role that patients play in medical encounters; she also illustrates how physicians incorporate their patients' power claims and actions. Thus, she paints a co-constructed picture of power maneuvers in medical institutions that provides a useful backdrop for a more interactive view of agency.

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Production format

Goffman 1981 developed the notion of "production format" to capture the inadequacy of the general concept of "speaker" to encapsulate the complexities involved in the relationship between a particular "social actor" and his or her produced utterances. The term "speaker" erroneously insinuates that the individual who formulates a text and those who deliver it or believe in the sentiment behind it are all one. In reality, however, it is often the case that those roles are divided among multiple participants. For example, a politician giving a speech likely did not compose the sentences he voices. Thus, Goffman suggests deconstructing speakers into the various roles that speakers occupy in relation to their produced utterances; this deconstruction shows "the production format." These roles include (i) ANIMATORS or those who verbalize or vocalize the produced texts ("the sounding boxes"), (ii) AUTHORS or instigators of the words being encoded, and finally, (iii) PRINCIPALS of the words being uttered (that is, the individual or group whose beliefs are being expressed). In this framework, a politician giving a speech would likely be the animator and the principal, but probably not the author.

The deconstruction of speakers into the roles they undertake in speaking is significant because it enables capturing a persistent feature of social interaction: the constant shifting of participants' footings and alignments, or the linguistic or paralinguistic expression of one's stance toward the social context (Goffman 1981). This deconstruction, I further propose, is crucial to see how agency collaboratively emerges in interaction, as I illustrate in my analysis of how three participants collaboratively rewrite a formal letter.[1]

Background: The study and the data

The data I analyze are taken from a larger ethnographic project for which I videotaped, audiotaped, and engaged in participant-observation with Yahya, a 32-year-old quadriplegic Omani man, and his primary caregivers, including myself, over the course of 9 months and 17 days (Al Zidjaly 2005). I became friends with Yahya and his family in 1995, 7 years after the car accident that rendered him quadriplegic for life at 19 years old; we have remained close friends and gradually I have become one of his main caregivers. As a result of the accident, Yahya has very limited movement in his upper and lower limbs and requires assistance in almost all aspects of his daily life. Thus, Yahya needs a live-in assistant, preferably female. Omanis themselves do not serve as resident assistants; in order to employ an assistant from India or another country, a special permit from Oman's Ministry of Manpower is required. Only married couples are allowed to get this special permit in Oman owing to cultural customs that prefer not assigning female assistants to houses with young unmarried men. As a result, since the accident, Yahya has depended on his parents to provide him with his assistants. Things changed in 2002, however, when the data for this article were collected. Yahya

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decided to no longer depend on his parents. Thus, he and I spent that summer trying to help him acquire the right to request his own permit. In the end, we succeeded in making Yahya the first unmarried quadriplegic man in Oman who possesses a Ministry of Manpower permit to hire his own resident assistant, and in doing so Yahya gained some control over this vital aspect of his life. This success included many bureaucratic actions; the first one was writing a letter to the mayor of his hometown. It is the rewriting of this letter – a conjoint action – that I consider in the analysis.

The eight excerpts analyzed in this article are taken from a single 2-hour and 15-minute audiotaped conversation that took place on August 16, 2002, at around 3:00 p.m. in Yahya's rented apartment. The conversation begins as a dyadic interaction between Yahya and me. Midway through the conversation, Fatma (Yahya's younger sister) joins us. The conversation revolves around the rewriting of the letter Yahya originally had written to the mayor of his town requesting his approval to proceed with the plea. In the original version of the letter, which addresses the mayor, Yahya is the animator, the author, and the principal of his request. The mayor, however, had some problems with this letter, which he outlined to me when I went to see him on Yahya's behalf, and he requested the following style-related revisions: typing his (the mayor's) name correctly, writing the new version as though the mayor is the writer of the letter addressing the governor of Al Khod, and, finally, adding more details regarding Yahya's medical condition. The mayor also showed concerns that Yahya is asking for a female assistant, which affects the rewrite as well. I refer to the rewrite as a conjoint action because it involved the cooperation of Yahya, the mayor (though he was not present), Fatma, and myself.

While Yahya can use only the knuckle of his right index finger to type, he is surprisingly swift in typing, especially in using the Arabic keyboard, owing to years of practice in typing Arabic at his previous workplace; Yahya is also quite proficient in writing formal letters in Classical Arabic. I, on the other hand, owing to my educational background in English, am less experienced in using Arabic keyboards and more experienced in using the English keyboard; my knowledge of writing formal letters in Classical Arabic is also not as good as Yahya's, owing to my lack of practice in doing so. However, I agreed to help Yahya rewrite the letter because he was experiencing abdominal discomfort and asked for my help. Note that while Yahya does not admit it directly during this conversation, he did state in a PLAYBACK SESSION (Tannen 1984) that the mayor's disapproval of his letter and the major "unnecessary" modifications he requested threatened what Brown & Levinson 1987 would call his POSITIVE FACE by challenging and downplaying his expertise in writing formal letters in Classical Arabic. This challenge was a major factor in assigning the original production format roles in our interaction: At the beginning, Yahya relieves himself of all responsibility regarding the rewrite while delegating to me the roles of typist (in other words, animator) as well as author of the rewrite.

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Agency as an interactive achievement

How do people exercise agency in interaction? I now turn to answering this question as I demonstrate how agency is collective, interactive, and emergent. Just as power is co-constructed moment to moment, with all participants involved in the process of claiming and/or ratifying or rejecting it (Tannen 1987), so too is the agency of each individual. However, I focus the analysis on the collaborative ratification or rejection of Yahya's agency. This is so because over the years a number of Yahya's caregivers, myself included, have developed a particular dynamic in which we set up Yahya as an expert through our own discursive actions and validate his moves toward agency.[2] The particular interaction analyzed in this article is representative of such a dynamic in which Yahya, his sister Fatma, and I draw upon various discursive strategies to construct him as an expert and assert his agency. As the analysis illustrates, Yahya turns such occasions into a forum for reinforcing his agency vis-à-vis others. When his claims of agency are not ratified, he incessantly asserts his agency, at times with the assistance of another party but quite often on his own. The analysis that follows thus includes examples of successful and unsuccessful negotiations of claims of agency, and is divided in three sections, each corresponding to three conjoint actions that make up the larger action of completing the letter rewrite: setting the agenda via establishing production format roles, carrying out the assigned tasks, and bringing the larger task to an end.[3]

Note that while, in theory, the mayor of Al Khod is the author, animator, and principal of the letter (in other words, when the mayor gives the governor the letter, it will appear this way), in the actual production of the letter, the roles of animator and author are divided among Yahya, Fatma, and me. Thus, because Yahya, Fatma and I all believe in Yahya's right to own the Ministry of Manpower permit (we are all principals), I deconstruct the co-present participants into the author and animator roles only. It is the three of us who negotiate how to select and arrange the words (authorship) and discuss who will physically type (who will assume the animator role).

Stage 1: Setting Production Format Roles

In the first example, Yahya and I successfully negotiate the first task inherent in any conjoint action: tentatively establishing the production format. In the initial production format, established by Yahya and agreed to by me, I am the author and animator. (Note that the data are translated from various languages spoken in Oman by Yahya, me, and his family. These include Arabic, which is the national and official language of Oman; English, the second official language of the country; Baluchi, an Indo-European language widely spoken in Oman by Baluchi Omanis such as Yahya, me, and our families; and finally Hindi, the language spoken by Lukshmi [Yahya's Indian assistant, who was brought to care for Yahya using his

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parents' permit]). To make it easier for the reader to follow the analysis, I underlined strings of words produced in Arabic, italicized strings of words produced in English, and underlined and italicized strings of words produced in Hindi. I neither underlined nor italicized strings of words produced in Baluchi. Note also that linguistic strategies relevant to the analysis in this article are indicated in boldface.[4]

(1)	Original PF:		Najma (author, animator)
	1.	Najma:	<in a bored tone> Go write the mayor's letter
	2.	Yahya:	Switch it ((the computer)) on
	3.	Najma:	<calling out> LUKSHMI
	4.		<addressing Lukshmi> *Switch on this computer*
			((Lukshmi plugs the computer wires and switches it on))
	5.		**Will you type or I?**
	6.	Yahya:	Do you think I have time for this.
	7.		**I will neither type nor do anything else**[5]
	8.		[I—]
	9.	Najma:	[Yahya]
	10.		It takes me an HOUR to type JUST ONE word
	11.	Yahya:	Whether you take an hour or hundred hours
	12.		Keep the computer over there
	13.		Don't bring it here
	14.	Najma:	**Where did you save the original?**
	15.	Yahya:	It's on the desktop
	16.		The name of the file is in the name of Allah

In response to my giving Yahya the option of my retyping his letter for him (out of consideration for his physical condition), Yahya sets the agenda for the rewrite by verbalizing his wish for me to be in full charge of the rewrite action, relieving himself of any responsibility. In addition to his being in pain, Yahya's wish was motivated (he explained afterward) by the rationale that, as I was the one who talked to the mayor when he rejected the letter, it was best to leave it up to me to retype the new letter. Though I contest his proposed agenda, at first, owing to my inexperience in typing Arabic, I eventually collaborate by accepting his assigned roles to me as the author and typist (Goffman's animator). Setting the production format roles initiates what Goffman (1983:7) refers to as a FOCUSED INTERACTION, an interaction in which "people effectively agree to sustain for a time a single focus of cognitive and visual attention." Note that while Yahya takes a powerful stand in setting the agenda (e.g., *I will neither type nor do anything else*, line 7), that stand is ratified or co-constructed by me as I agree to retype the letter. In this way, we co-construct our roles in this situation – I by providing Yahya with options, Yahya by choosing an option through which he assigns production format roles, and I, again, by verbally ratifying his choice. Note also that while Yahya is engaged in rewriting the mayor's letter in the sense that he sets the agenda, Yahya does not want to be included in the steps that follow.

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STAGE 2: CARRYING OUT ASSIGNED ROLES

In investigating how the participants carry out the assigned roles, I provide three examples that show how Yahya, Fatma, and I collaboratively and successfully negotiate Yahya's agency through altering production format roles via the linguistic strategies of asking questions, constructing an expertise identity, and doing what Schiffrin 1993 calls SPEAKING FOR ANOTHER. I also present three examples of failed negotiations of production format roles. In analyzing how participants negotiate and carry out their roles in the letter-rewriting process, I illustrate the interactive and emergent nature of agency. In addition, I identify some key linguistic strategies through which production format roles shift and thus agency is claimed, ratified, or rejected.

Successful negotiation of PF 2 through asking questions

Though Yahya makes it clear that he does not want to take part in the action of rewriting the mayor's letter, the minute I initiate the second stage of conjoint actions, which is to carry out the delegated assignments by starting typing, I flood him with a list of questions concerning what to write. This results in a series of negotiations of the already established production format roles that in turn lead to the letter-writing unfolding in a collaborative (albeit, at times, frustrating) way. In this revised version of the production format Yahya and I are co-authors, with Yahya taking on a "primary author" role, while I also am the animator:

(2)		PF 2:	Yahya (primary author); Najma (co-author, animator)
	47.	Najma:	**I should write 'to', right?**
	48.	Yahya:	Why to?
	49.	Najma:	**What should I write**
	50.		Just plain Your Excellency
	51.	Najma:	<laughing> **WHERE IS the letter E ?>**
	52.		<laughing> **C ?>**
	53.	Yahya:	It's at the end
	54.		Right side of—
	55.	Najma:	Y?
	56.		**Excellency what?**
	57.		Why is it so small
	58.		**Excellency WHAT**
	59.		Why is *space bar* not working
	60.		Excellency what
	61.	Yahya:	<annoyed tone>HE TOLD YOU WHAT
	62.		EXCELLENCY WHAT
	63.	Najma:	TO Your Excellency, the Governor
	64.		Or Your Excellency, the Governor
	65.	Yahya:	You see—
	66.	Najma:	**He said "to"**
	67.	Yahya:	TO

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68. Najma: *Yeah*
69. Yahya: **There's no such thing as 'to' →**
70. **if you are taking it yourself**
71. Najma: [YOUR EXCELLENCY], the Governor
72. Yahya: **[HELLO? use *space*]**
73. Use *space*
74. Najma: *Space?*
75. Yahya: Excellency and Governor are together?
76. Najma: I *spaced* them out
77. Yahya: **You need two *spaces***
78. Najma: Excellency
79. Yahya: <sighs> Your Excellency GOVERNOR of
80. Not THE Governor of
81. Your Excellency Governor of Seeb

In addition to serving as a genuine request for information, my questions in the above excerpt (e.g., asking Yahya whether to write *To Your Excellency* or *Your Excellency* and asking about the position of certain letters on the keyboard) indicate what Tannen 2003 calls CONNECTION MANEUVERS aimed at involving Yahya in the action of rewriting the mayor's letter and inviting him to claim power over the emerging discourse, despite his earlier expressed wish not to be bothered. As my repeated questioning of Yahya is at odds with his prior wish not to be included in the rewrite action, a series of negotiations between the two of us ensues in which Yahya initially points out the absurdity of my first question: As I was the one who had the talk with the mayor, which was the main reason behind delegating to me the role of author, I should be equipped to know what to write.

When I inform Yahya that the mayor wanted me to write *To Your Excellency* instead of *Your Excellency* (line 66), Yahya follows my response with a reinforcement of his agency by first rejecting the mayor's advice (e.g., *There's no such thing as 'to' if you are taking it yourself*, lines 69–70) and then by providing me with unsolicited advice on what to write, thus switching his footing, inevitably altering the earlier established production format of the letter. In doing so, Yahya accepts the invitation extended through my questioning, and involves himself in, while exercising agency in regard to the letter-writing process. The process is co-constructed through my incorporation of Yahya's suggestions on how to begin the letter.

Successful negotiation of PF 3 through speaking for another

In the next example Yahya, his sister Fatma and I interactively negotiate Yahya's agency, through using a strategy Schiffrin 1993 calls SPEAKING FOR ANOTHER. When Fatma joins the conversation as Yahya and I are engaged in deciding whether or not to use a subordinate clause, I become interested in taking a more agentive stance toward my participation in the conjoint action. So I inform Yahya that I no longer require his assistance. My newly constructed footing is not only at odds with my previous constructed identity (that of a person in need of guidance; example 2);

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but also, it is at odds with Yahya's newly acquired footing (that of primary author), which was indirectly proposed by me in the second example as well. Tension between the two of us escalates when, contrary to Yahya's suggestions, I stand by my choice regarding the position of a particular subordinate clause, which Yahya wants to eliminate. Fatma, the unaddressed ratified participant at the time, joins in the growing conflict by asserting Yahya's agency.

(3)		PF 3:	Yahya (primary author); Najma (co-author, animator); Fatma (co-author)
	610.	Fatma:	[*So you are saying*—
	611.		**You know why Yahya is saying so]**
	612.		**BECAUSE you have a long subordinate clause**
	613.		**The space between the verb requests and what he is →**
	614.		**requesting is LONG**
	615.	Najma:	But Arabic allows long subordinate clauses
	616.		At least up to four lines
	617.		[The Arabic—]
	618.	Fatma:	[NO]
	619.	Najma:	ARABIC SENTENCES ARE LONG
	620.	Fatma:	Requests WHAT?
	621.		[It takes] a long time to find out what
	622.	Yahya:	**[*Yes,*]**
	623.		**That's what I am saying**
	624.		**[Why don't you understand]**
	625.	Najma:	[Arabic sentences are long]
	626.	Fatma:	[Because Yahya—]
	627.	Najma:	[If supposedly] I said the citizen Yahya Al Belushi →
	628.		asks Your Excellency's permission to request a female maid
	629.		then [they'll say "*so what*"]
	630.	Yahya:	[*Okay* .. look at this]
	631.	Fatma:	Then say since he is?
	632.	Yahya:	[That's what I'm saying]
	633.	Fatma:	[First verbalize the request]
	634.		**Explain later**
	635.	Yahya:	**Najma,**
	636.		**that's what I am telling you**
	637.	Najma:	But you need to know in advance the prob-
	638.		problem that requires you to get a maid
	639.	Yahya:	*My god Fat-*
	640.		make her understand *please*
	641.	Najma:	Because Arabic sentences *are REALLY* LONG, Fatma
	642.	Yahya:	[Okay so they are long?]
	643.		I *also* thought to explain the request →
	644.		with *blah blah blah*
	645.		Okay so you say requests
	646.		but you follow it with what?
	647.		He had an accident
	648.		You first explain the request
	649.		Then say
	650.		<slow motion> "Since he had a car accident in so and so year
	651.	Yahya:	[now] he is in dying need"

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652. Fatma: *You know*
653. this SINCE HE, *the explaining sentence*
654. the subordinate clause
655. if it is small SHORT,
656. then you say—
657. Najma: But Arabic sentences they can—
658. they can be elongated up to →
659. four five sentences ((short pause))
660. <defeated tone> **But . .**
661. ***Yeah, okay***
662. <writing> requests a [female maid]

By becoming Yahya's co-principal through supporting his suggestion, Fatma alters the already established production format roles by incorporating herself in the action of the rewrite as co-author. This excerpt thus demonstrates how Fatma initiates an interactional team (Lerner 1993, Kangasharju 1996, Gordon 2003) through aligning with Yahya against me; thus, she takes up the footing of a collaborator by clarifying to me the reason behind Yahya's request to cancel the subordinate clause in question. Yahya accepts her alignment by verbalizing his agreement several times with her position; thus, he reasserts his agency. Following a series of efforts on my part to stand by my decision to keep the subordinate clause, I finally succumb with a defeated tone, deleting the subordinate clause in question altogether and rewriting it as a separate sentence as Yahya wished. The action of deleting the subordinate clause signals not just my assertion of Yahya's expertise, but also my agreement to continue keeping him included in the rewrite as the primary author, and, thus, assert his agency.

Successful negotiation of PF 4 through assertion of expertise

The instant I accept defeat, Yahya, who has received a double boost originating from Fatma teaming up with him and his wishes being honored over mine, goes over the production format roles with me one more time, as shown in excerpt (4), which is continuous with excerpt (3). Now that his previous struggle to be heard is over, Yahya constructs himself as an authority figure who should not be questioned when it comes to writing formal letters in Classical Arabic. He also reminds me that the reason behind choosing me to be in charge of the rewrite was my having talked to the mayor and not my "skills" in writing formal letters in Classical Arabic. By ratifying Yahya's assertions of his agency and accepting his teaming up with Fatma, the three of us successfully negotiate production format (4), where Yahya, Fatma, and I are co-authors while I am the animator as well. This illustrates not just that human agency is a negotiated process but also the active role that Yahya plays in claiming power over emerging discourse.

(4) PF 4: Yahya (co-author); Najma (co-author, animator); Fatma (co-author)
669. Yahya: [Najma]
670. **I am an expert in writing these kinds of letters**

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671. *so* don't drive me crazy
672. The reason . why I am—
673. The mayor told you what-what to write
674. That's why I gave you uh the freedom to type anything you want
675. You are saying the mayor told you so
676. That's why
677. Najma: **You want to still keep FETCH *I mean* a female maid?**
678. Yahya: *Well*, the subject is fetch
679. What can it be
680. Najma: Get or what
681. What [else]
682. Yahya: [Acquire]
683. Najma: What other [*synonyms*] for fetch
684. Yahya: [Acquire]
685. Fatma: Get hold of
686. Najma: **Should we write get hold of now**
687. **[or keep fetch]**
688. Yahya: [What have you] written there
689. Najma: Get
690. Fatma: **Use obtain**
691. Yahya: Keep get
692. Najma: *Okay*
693. Yahya: **Or I tell you what?**
694. **Fatma is right**
695. **Obtain sounds good**
696. Najma: **Obtain *it is***
697. <writing> requests to obtain.

By asking Yahya another question regarding finding a synonym for the verb 'to fetch' (line 677), Yahya and I revert to a production format similar to the one he and I were engaged in prior to Fatma's arrival, in which Yahya was the primary author while I was mainly the animator. This time, however, I contribute more than I did in example (2) by looking for synonyms and accepting and/or rejecting suggestions. In response to my question, Yahya and Fatma team up once again when Yahya rejects his own choice of a substitute verb and instead takes up the suggestion provided by the self-selected speaker, Fatma (e.g., *Or I tell you what?/Fatma is right/Obtain sounds good*, lines 693–695). I incorporate their suggestion promptly, with no question. In doing so, I signal my compliance to the production format favored by Yahya, and also my acceptance of the conjoint team created by Fatma through speaking for Yahya and maintained by Yahya and me, as I agree to their proposals. Thus, Yahya's agency is collaboratively asserted and ratified.

Unsuccessful negotiation of PF 5

I have illustrated thus far how Yahya, his sister, and I successfully and collaboratively accomplish a conjoint action – the process of rewriting the letter – and simultaneously and collaboratively assert Yahya's agency. Now I turn to what

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happens when claims of agency either are unratified or collide. This is important because it further demonstrates the interactive and emergent nature of agency. In this first example, which revolves around the appropriate definition of Yahya's medical condition suggested by the mayor, I invite Yahya to have a say in defining himself. Yahya declines my invitation; instead he requests me to turn to the mayor for defining his medical condition. This results in a series of unsuccessful negotiations of our expertise and the role of the mayor in the action of the rewrite. Note that in negotiating production format (5), where Yahya, the mayor, and I are co-authors, my attempt to make Yahya the primary author fails (I am still the animator):

(5)		PF 5:	Yahya (co-author); Najma (co-author, animator); mayor (co-author)
	230.	Najma:	<reading from computer screen> Requesting to bring a female maid
	231.		I mean
	232.		for those who—
	233.		those who what
	234.		those
	235.		What
	236.		I mean
	237.		What
	238.	Yahya:	<annoyed tone> This is enough for the subject
	239.		[Later on talk about]
	240.	Najma:	[*NO NO*]
	241.		It's not enough to just say—
	242.		He ((the mayor)) said "you didn't write →
	243.		those with needs"
	244.		"Write it down"
	245.		So here I wrote it down ((short pause))
	246.	Yahya:	***Oh, so you are back asking me***
	247.		**What did he tell you to write**
	248.		What did [he tell you?]
	449.	Najma:	**[*FOR THE LOVE OF GOD*]**
	250.		**Do you want to be referred to as a DISABLED,**
	251.		***or* someone with special [needs]**
	252.	Yahya:	**[WHAT ARE] YOU SEEING?**
	253.		What am I?
	254.	Najma:	You—
	255.		Which—
	256.		**Which *expression* do you want [me to choose]**
	257.	Yahya:	[You—]
	258.		In your opinion—
	259.		**What does the mayor think?**
	260.		**What did he tell you?**
	261.		**What did he say?**
	262.	Najma:	***TO HELL WITH THE* MAYOR**
	263.		**I'm [asking you]**
	264.	Yahya:	**[What do you mean *to hell with the* mayor]**
	265.		[That's why—]
	266.	Najma:	**[HOW DO YOU DEFINE YOUR CONDITION?]**

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In this excerpt, my connection maneuver signaled by a question intended to give Yahya a say in describing his medical condition backfires, indicating a mismatch between our expectations of each other's and the mayor's roles in the action of re-writing the mayor's letter, and in defining Yahya's condition for the letter's purposes.[6] Thus, the excerpt illustrates the collective and interactive nature of what is involved when people take action. As the basis of the original production format that Yahya proposed (i.e., that he not participate at all) was the fact that the mayor had certain requests that were verbally expressed to me, my turning to Yahya for continuous assistance was, in Yahya's view, pointless. This explains Yahya's incessant efforts to direct me to the definition preferred by the mayor. Yahya's redirection, however, frustrates me since besides not answering my question, it threatens my positive face; it makes me feel incompetent, although I was just trying to give Yahya a say in rewriting the letter and avoid insulting him by using a term he rejects.

Unsuccessful negotiation of PF 6

After Yahya misinterprets my connection maneuver aimed at giving him a say about his medical condition as a sign of incompetence on my part (example 5), I request a direct change of production format roles where I take the position of primary author. When Yahya finally provides me with the requested information preceded by an imperative, I immediately reject his contribution. This rejection is followed by a series of negotiations over primacy of authorship between the two co-authors, Yahya and me (I am the animator as well):

(6)		PF 6:	Yahya (co-author); Najma (co-author, animator)
	267.	Yahya:	Write
	268.		For someone who is disabled
	269.	Najma:	**I am writing myself—**
	270.		**[I don't] need anyone's help**
	271.	Yahya:	[*No no*]
	272.		I know you are going to waste [an hour thinking]
	273.	Najma:	[I am not thinking]
	274.		**I am writing**
	275.		**For someone who is physically disabled**
	276.	Yahya:	Motor-disabled
	277.		Write ((short pause))
	278.	Najma:	**Motor-disabled?** ((short pause))
	279.		Motor or physically?
	280.	Yahya:	Motor
	281.		Physically are those with polio
	282.	Najma:	**Motor?**
	283.	Yahya:	*Yes,* motor
	284.		No movement
	285.		My body exists
	286.		My body is fine
	287.		Nothing is wrong with the body
	288.		Understand?

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289. Najma: <jokingly> Your mind has problems
290. Yahya: <jokingly> You have
291. Intellectual disability
292. It's true God made me motor-disabled
293. But he, thank God, didn't make me intellectually disabled
294. **The proof is**
295. **As you can see**
296. **I am correcting you**
297. ***Come on,***
298. ***Finish it up***

Following Yahya's imperative, in which he provides the requested information (e.g., *Write/For someone who is disabled*, lines 267–268), a series of power-claiming maneuvers and a series of negotiations over the primacy of authorship begins. Taking too long to respond (excerpt 5) and using an unmitigated directive is perceived by me as patronizing; thus, I immediately reject Yahya's claim as primary author by informing him that I no longer require his assistance (e.g., *I am writing myself—/[I don't] need anyone's help*, lines 269–270). When Yahya corrects my choice to describe him as "physically disabled," a second attempt at rejecting his claim takes place when I challenge his choice to define himself as "motor-disabled." I follow the second attempt with a joking criticism of Yahya's mental abilities (to which Yahya responds by jokingly criticizing me). Instead of accepting my attempts at shifting roles, Yahya continues his assertion of his expertise. He not only corrects me through taking a one-up footing (e.g., *The proof is/As you can see/I am correcting you*, 294–296) but also by ordering me around (e.g., *Come on,/Finish it up*, 297–298). These strategies reflect Yahya's moves to reclaim his role as a primary author of the letter and thus illustrate the active role he plays in negotiating his agency.

Unsuccessful negotiation of PF 7

In this final example, Yahya refutes my attempt to shift roles whereby he is not a primary author through counter-arguments. My interest in shifting production format roles occurs when the interaction switches from a dyadic to a multiparty interaction; as a result of Fatma's presence, I become interested in taking a more active role in the rewrite. So I first inform Yahya that I do not require his assistance any more, then I stand by my choice regarding the position of the controversial subordinate clause 'who was involved in a car accident fourteen years ago that rendered him quadriplegic for life', which Yahya wanted me to delete. In this excerpt, Yahya, Fatma and I negotiate production format (7), where I am the primary author of this particular section of the letter (I deny Yahya's request to be primary author) and where Fatma is co-animator of the letter with me:

(7) PF 7: Yahya (co-author); Najma (primary author, co- animator); Fatma (co-animator)
500. Yahya: Just start from page one
501. Just do—

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502.		[*Click space]*
503.	Najma:	[*Nah*, now it needs]
504.		Who—
505.		He got into a car . [accident]
506.	Yahya:	[I wanted to tell—]
507.		I wanted to tell you ((short pause))
508.	Najma:	**Let me write it down first**
509.		**Then you let me know what you think**
510.		I-I-
511.		I don't get it
512.		D and Z in Arabic on the keyboard
513.		Don't they go together
514.		So why is D here
515.		And Z on the other side of the keyboard?
516.		[Why]
517.	Fatima:	[It's the same] with *ABCD*
518.		*A* and *B* don't go together in English
519.	Najma:	They don't?
520.		But *I guess* I'm used to typing in English
521.	Fatima:	You know?
522.		I was surprised too in my first typing class
523.		They taught us *ASDF* go together
524.	Yahya:	*Hey you*?
525.		*Pay attention*
526.		**Let me tell you what to write now**
527.		**Instead of showing it to me later** ((several lines deleted in which Yahya continues trying to catch Najma's attention))
532.	Najma:	Yahya, what?
533.	Yahya:	It's not like this
534.		This is not writing
535.		Look at this
536.		What are you doing? ((several lines deleted in which Yahya continues complaining about Najma's choice of words))
541.		For God's sake
542.		**Cancel who—**
543.		**Cancel it**
544.		**Go *back space***
545.	Najma:	[Where is Z:::::?]
546.	Yahya:	**[Don't say who]**
547.	Najma	**[What who]**
548.	Fatma:	[This is Z]
549.	Yahya:	*BACK SPACE*
550.	Najma:	*Back space?*
551.	Yahya:	**Cancel the subordinate clause starting with who fully**
552.	Najma:	Ha!
553.		Yahya,
554.		It took me a whole hour to write who
555.	Yahya:	Since the mentioned above
556.		**Write**
557.	Najma:	**Yahya?**
558.		**You can't do that**

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559. ***This is what I say***
560. *So and so* requests, since he had a car accident
561. **How can I write [what you are suggesting]**
562. Yahya: **[Because it's the mayor] talking**
563. **It's the mayor talking**
564. **[I'm not talking]**
565. Najma: [*Come on*]
566. **The whole *grammar* is wrong here**
567. [*So and so* requests—]
568. Yahya: **[But you've just talked] about the request in the regarding section**
569. **Didn't you say that that's what the mayor wanted**
570. **No need to go for details**
571. And now you say this
572. **I've already written a good letter**
573. It's ready
574. **Why are you corrupting it now**
575. **I'm not the one who is talking in this letter**
576. **[The mayor is the one who is talking]**
577. Najma: **[Let me finish that who sentence first]**
578. Yahya: [You are saying who had a car accident before finishing
579. *So it is like*
580. *Just* don't write Who ((short pause))
581. Najma: I want to see what Fatma thinks ((I keep writing my version of the sentence))
582. Yahya: Najma
583. Wait a second
584. Najma: **I'll write what—**
585. Yahya: Why are you wasting my time
586. The letter is ready ((I keep writing))
587. Yahya: **Najma,**
588. ***Believe me***
589. **NAJMA**
590. **Writing letters is not like that**
591. **IT'S NOT LIKE THAT**
592. **This sentence you are writing is COMPLETELY wrong**
593. Najma: **Later later**
594. I want Fatma to see it
595. Yahya: <sighs> **Write the request first**
596. **Then write the mentioned above →**
597. **had been involved in a car accident**
598. **WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS**
599. **Just writing incoherently**
600. What is he requesting now
601. Najma: /???/
602. Yahya: Okay, after this sentence
603. **Write the request**
604. **Then mention the accident**
605. Or what you just said "he was involved"
606. Najma: ***NO NO NO***
607. I have to mention the accident in the beginning
608. *Otherwise* they'll say
609. ["Why do you need a permit for a maid"]

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In this excerpt, Yahya meets my new agenda to be primary author (e.g., *Let me write it down first/Then you let me know what you think***,** lines 508–509) with a challenge (e.g., *Let me tell you what to write now/Instead of showing it to me later*, lines 526–527). He then resumes the earlier participation framework in which he is one-up and a primary author, which I originally proposed (example 2), by instructing me to delete the subordinate clause in question. This request leads to another series of negotiations consisting of numerous arguments and counter-arguments in which I continue rejecting his suggestion to delete the subordinate clause in question while Yahya continues defying being excluded. Yahya first justifies his position by resorting to the mayor's role as the author of the letter, which I do not accept (lines 561–569 and 575–576). Then he quite rightly uses the argument that formal letters need to be concise and brief (line 570). When Yahya's status as a primary author is threatened, he attempts to "put me back into my place" by pointing out that I am 'corrupting the good letter he has written by writing incoherently'; thus, he attacks my writing skills while praising his (lines 572–574 and 585–599).

Stage 3: Bringing the Conjoint Action to an End

The rewrite of the letter is brought to a successful end collaboratively after another series of negotiations of agency, mainly Yahya's. In this final excerpt, Fatma once again successfully manages to ratify Yahya's questioned expertise through defending his status as an expert in writing formal letters in Classical Arabic. In doing so, she not only continues including him in the action of the rewrite, but also provides him with an opportunity to assert his past agentive self. This particular excerpt occurs following my questioning of Yahya's suggestion to end the letter with a formal thank-you from the mayor to the governor of his hometown for his cooperation. When Yahya and I disagree about whether a thank-you is appropriate, my not being convinced by Yahya's argument leads Fatma to once again change the participation framework to assert Yahya's agency. She self-selects as a speaker and re-creates the earlier constructed team with Yahya in an attempt to ratify his (now) questioned expertise. In this excerpt, Yahya, Fatma, and I become co-authors of this particular section of the letter, with Yahya given the role of primary author, and me the role of animator.

(8)		PF 8:	Yahya (primary author); Najma (co-author, animator); Fatma (co-author)
	800.	Yahya:	[Aren't you going to] thank him
	801.	Najma:	[What I should I say]
	802.		He is not—
	803.	Yahya:	We thank you for your help
	804.		That's all
	805.		And please accept our kind regards

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806.		WRITE
807.		We thank you
808.	Najma:	We thank you for your help and [accept our kind] regards
809.	Yahya:	[That's separate]
810.		Please accept is separate at the bottom
811.	Najma:	So
812.		I mean is it POSSIBLE that the MAYOR
813.		says to the governor thank you for your help
814.	Yahya:	Why not
815.		The mayor is just a mayor
816.		The GOVERNOR is something else ((several lines deleted in which Yahya continues explaining the difference between a mayor and a governor))
824.	Najma:	***So* we thank you?**
825.	Yahya:	[*Yeah*]
826.	Fatma:	[Najma]
827.		***It's ENOUGH to REMEMBER***
828.		**Do you remember Yahya**
829.		**When you uh got your job**
830.		**You wanted some uh thank you letters**
831.		**Do you remember Yahya wrote one for the president of your university**
832.		One for the head of personnel affairs at the university
833.		[One—]
834.	Najma:	[I don't] remember anything?
835.		I-I-I must have Alzheimer's disease
836.	Fatma:	<shocked> You don't remember?
837.		[Nothing?]
838.	Najma:	[*Seriously* nothing]
839.	Fatma:	[These letters] [I remember]
840.	Yahya:	[These letters—][she remembers] [these letters]
841.	Fatma:	[I remember]
842.		[That-[that]]
843.	Yahya:	**[Now [she acts]] as though she's forgotten**
844.	Najma:	[Really?]
845.	Fatma:	**You know when you read each letter**
846.		**You know each style is *perfect* for the person addressed**
847.		**The president one was *perfect* for the president**
848.		**And the other ones were perfect for their recipients too** ((several lines deleted in which Fatma continues explaining how all three different letters were written in perfect style))
860.	Yahya:	**[*Yeah*] now-now you've forgotten now**
861.	Najma:	[*Yeah*]
862.	Yahya:	**[Don't] forget [that] Yahya has done a lot of things**
863.	Najma:	[/???/] ((laughter))
864.	Yahya:	She used to say that I forget
865.		**Now she's forgotten what I've done**
866.	Fatma:	No, she hasn't
867.		**She knows you are good at writing letters**
868.		***Right*, Najma?**
869.		That's why you like writing letters ((laughter))
870.	Najma:	***Yeah, of course***
871.	Yahya:	*Come on*

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872. *Finish it up*
873. Najma: *Okay okay*

A few years before, I had requested Yahya to write three formal letters for me to deliver to three important officials with different ranks at a prestigious Omani government institution as a thank-you gesture for hiring me. Besides their elegant style, the letters were impressive because they captured the different status of the different officials, a significant element in Arabic ritual letter-writing. Fatma's interactive move to team up with Yahya by reminding me of this past action encourages him to assert his past agentive self. For instance, in line 843 Yahya states [*Now [she [Najma] acts]] as though she's forgotten*, and in line 862 he reminds me *[Don't] forget [that] Yahya has done a lot of things*. When I continue to digress, rather than assert Yahya's expertise as requested by both Yahya and Fatma, Fatma indirectly asks me to confirm her brother's competence (e.g., *She knows you are good at writing letters/Right, Najma?* lines 867–868). I do indeed confirm Yahya's expertise in the end (e.g., *Yeah, of course*, line 870), which ensures Yahya's role as primary author, and we collaboratively bring the conjoint action of rewriting the mayor's letter to a successful end.

Concluding Remarks

At the onset of this article I noted the current gap in discourse analysis regarding the question of how agency emerges and is negotiated moment by moment in conversational interaction. To fill this gap, in this article I examined what is involved in accomplishing a conjoint task; I did so by relating social actors to the roles they undertake in rewriting an official letter. Doing so demonstrated the emergent and interactive nature of agency; it also pointed out specific linguistic strategies through which agency is negotiated (e.g., providing options, setting and altering production format roles, asking questions, speaking for another, asserting expertise and past agentive selves, and providing counter-arguments). Specifically, I showed how executing a conjoint action involves footing shifts and moment-by-moment negotiations of individuals' production format roles, alignments and expertise – not just those of Yahya, Fatma, and me, but also of the absent participant, the mayor – through several linguistic strategies aimed at claiming, ratifying, or rejecting the participants' (especially Yahya's) agency. The analysis thus demonstrates a powerful way of conceptualizing agency as collaborative and interactive – exercising agency as a mediated, collective process of negotiating alignments, tasks, and roles – while also outlining specific linguistic strategies social actors draw upon in exercising agency.

In addition to demonstrating what is involved when people exercise agency in conversational interaction, this article illustrates the active role that Yahya,

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a dependent individual who is considered marginal by his society's definition, plays in claiming power over discourse; Yahya's control, in fact, surpasses the communication he is involved in to participate in the conjoint action of rewriting the mayor's letter. This stands in contrast to disability studies that paint withdrawal and social isolation as inevitable outcomes of quadriplegia (e.g., Goffman 1963, Murphy 1990, Robillard 1999). This article also illuminates the role that family and friends, or people Goffman 1963 deems "wise," can play in empowering a person with a disability through discursive means. Through asserting and ratifying Yahya's agency, his wise interlocutors are able to incorporate him into conjoint discursive actions and in turn facilitate the discrepancy between Yahya's REAL SELF as a dependent individual and his VIRTUAL SELF as an independent social actor (Goffman 1963).

Illustrating that so-called dependent social actors use language to exercise and negotiate agency is reminiscent of Erickson's (1986) metaphor of communication as "climbing a tree that climbs back." While people might perceive that talking to dependent individuals is like "climbing a tree that cannot climb back," I showed that not only can Yahya climb back, in the sense that he actively participates, he can negotiate the roles of others – like any other tree in the forest. Thus, the analysis in this article also suggests that successful negotiation of agency requires what Becker 1995 calls ATTUNEMENT from all participants engaged in a conjoint action to one another's and their own sense of agency and perspectives (i.e., what Goffman 1983 refers to as FOCUSED INTERACTION). This suggests, consequently, that in addition to conceptualizing agency as an interactive process of assigning tasks and roles and negotiating alignments, a framework of agency might benefit from a theory of attunement or adjustment in terms of social actors' perspectives regarding their roles and tasks in carrying out collective social actions.

NOTES

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[1] Ron Scollon 2002 has additionally suggested that deconstructing social actors into the production format roles they undertake in carrying out actions is necessary to understand how social change takes place.

[2] Yahya's family and I have collaboratively developed this dynamic to partially alleviate Yahya's physical disability through continuously expanding his mental possibilities.

[3] To maintain "objectivity" and ensure sufficient distance from myself so as to not color the interpretations in this study, the analysis in this article was discussed with Yahya and Fatma in playback sessions (Tannen 1984) on several occasions.

[4] The transcription conventions used in this article are adapted from the transcription conventions developed by Deborah Tannen and Shari Kendall for use in the research study "Mothers and fathers at work and at home: Creating parental identities through talk."

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((words))	Double parentheses enclose transcriber's comments.
/???/	Question marks in slashes enclose unintelligible utterances.
Carriage return	Each new line represents an intonation unit.
→	An arrow within the transcription indicates that a breath unit continues onto the next line.
—	A dash indicates a truncated intonation unit.
-	A hyphen indicates a truncated word.
"words"	Quotation marks enclose "direct quotations"
.	A period indicates falling, final intonation, but does not necessarily occur at the end of a sentence.
:	A colon indicates an elongated vowel
?	A question mark indicates rising intonation, but not necessarily a question.
!	An exclamation point indicates an animated tone.
words . .	Dots indicate silences up to a minute, one dot per tenth of a second.
CAP	Capitals indicate emphatic stress.
<laughs>	Angle brackets enclose descriptions of vocal noises.
<*manner*> words>	Angle brackets enclose descriptions of the manner in which an utterance is spoken.
(John)	Parentheses around a speaker's name indicate that his or her talk occurs within the continuous talk of another speaker. Mary The parentheses around John's name (John) Yes! Mary indicate that my talk is continuous even though he says something while I'm talking.
Words [words]	
[words]	Square brackets enclose simultaneous talk.

[5]The interaction order among friends and relatives amid Baluchi Omanis is characterized by a preference for on-record direct requests or imperatives, which are quite appropriate to be used without being interpreted as rude. Thus, Yahya's unmitigated response in line (7) to my question is quite appropriate.

[6]It was pointed out to me by Cynthia Gordon that my insistence that Yahya as an individual with a disability must define himself (rather than be defined by others) could be an American sentiment I picked up from my living abroad in the United States for over six years; this is a sentiment that Yahya as an Omani apparently does not share, so the resulting conflict could be seen as an instance of cross-cultural miscommunication.

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