Language and persuasion: A discursive psychological approach

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Abstract
Across the social sciences, there is a wealth of research on the role of language in persuasion in interpersonal communication. Most of these studies have been conducted in laboratories using experimental methods, have taken a social cognitive perspective, and have focused on the effects of particular linguistic practices on how persuasive messages are understood, processed, and ultimately complied with. By contrast, less attention has been paid to how language can be used to create sequential, interactional, and social obligations, in everyday interactions, like sales encounters or business negotiations, where persuasion occurs naturally and is built into the fabric of the conversation. In reviewing the former approach to studying language and persuasion, in this paper, I highlight several critical shortcomings. Then, I argue that, when studying naturally occurring persuasion-in-interaction, a discursive psychological approach is better suited for investigating and theorising the interactional structures underpinning persuasion and the role of language therein.

KEYWORDS
conduit model of communication, conversation analysis, discursive psychology, language, message effects, persuasion, social cognition, social interaction
Across the social sciences, there is a wealth of research on the role that language plays in persuasion in interpersonal communication. The majority of these studies have been conducted in laboratories using experimental methods, have taken a social cognitive perspective, and have focused on identifying the effects that particular linguistic practices have on how persuasive messages are understood, processed, and ultimately complied with. This approach relies on an implicit view of language as furnishing the building blocks of messages within a “conduit” model of communication as information exchange (Maynard & Turowetz, 2013; Potter, 2021; Potter & te Molder, 2005). Epistemologically, individuals’ language-in-use is treated as “a window on the mind” (Edwards & Potter, 1993, p. 23); that is, a means for accessing otherwise inaccessible thoughts and feelings.

By contrast, less attention has been paid to how language is used to shape authentic and spontaneous social conduct in settings, like sales encounters, business meetings, or diplomatic/political negotiations, where persuasion occurs naturally. In these often high-stakes interactions, persuasion is built into the fabric of the conversation, intertwined with other co-occurring activities, and often obfuscated or disguised as, for example, advice giving. The roles of persuasion “source” and “target” are less-clear cut and can change throughout the conversation. To understand how persuasion is accomplished in real-life settings, we need to examine authentic data, collected from real-life interactions. Therefore, we need a framework that is equipped to illuminate the organisation of such conversations. In this paper, I will attempt to argue that, when studying persuasion in interpersonal interactions, a discursive psychological approach that pays attention to the sequential properties of conversations is better suited than a social cognitive approach for investigating and theorising the interactional structures underpinning persuasion and the role of language therein.

Discursive psychology (DP) and other related approaches like conversation analysis (CA) treat language as the medium in and through which individuals perform social actions in interaction. This implicates a fundamental epistemological shift in the relationships between language and psychological phenomena, which so far has rendered cognitive and discursive psychology difficult to reconcile (Humă, Alexander, et al., 2020; Potter & te Molder, 2005). While considerable attention has already been paid to DP’s treatment of language (inter alia Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1993; Potter, 1996), two key aspects are worth unpacking here: namely how language is used to build social actions and how language provides a medium for the collaborative organisation of social interactions (Garfinkel, 1967). To that end, let us look at a short fragment from a real-life sales call between a prospective customer (“prospect” in sales parlance) and a salesperson. The conversation has been transcribed using the Jefferson (2004) transcribing conventions designed to capture the details of speech production such as silence, emphasis, and pitch, which have been found consequential for the organisation of social interactions (Hepburn & Bolden, 2017). At the beginning of the conversation, the salesperson (S in the transcript) had disavowed the commercial nature of the call, and now, almost a minute into the conversation, we get the following exchange.

| TECH 12 | 1 | P: So you’re trying to sell me something then. |
| | 2 | (0.4) |
| | 3 | S: ↑No=↑no:.=I just wanted to drop some details off so you | |
| | 4 | can keep it on file. |
First, let us zoom in on the treatment of language as action. Take the prospect’s utterance “So you’re trying to sell me something then.” Instead of speculating about whether this turn at talk might have been brought about by the speaker’s sudden realisation that his interlocutor is indeed after a sale, an action-oriented approach to language asks what the prospect is doing at this very moment with this utterance. Key to answering this question are the minutiae details of the utterance, for example, the turn-initial “so”, which marks the rest of the turn as an inference derived from immediately prior talk (Schiffrin, 1987) and the turn-final “then” which implicitly sets up a contrast between the current characterisation of the salesperson’s conduct and her prior disavowal of selling. Together with the emphasised person reference “you”, these features point towards the utterance working as an accusation leveraged by the prospect against the salesperson for what is constructed as duplicitous conduct. Further evidence is also available in the salesperson’s turn, as I will show shortly.

Let us now turn to how language provides a medium for interaction. Focusing on the salesperson’s turn, we can note it is designed as a response to the prior utterance. This is not a trivial observation. Whatever the salesperson’s agenda may be and whether she is working off a script or not, in this moment in the conversation she is accountable for responding to the prospect’s accusation (Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Schegloff, 2007). Furthermore, whatever she does in this responsive slot, her turn will be interpreted as a reaction to the accusation. In other words, the prospect’s action activates a set of inescapable constraints regarding what his interlocutor can do next and a set of parameters regarding how her conduct will be understood. As it happens, the salesperson denies the accusation, first by rejecting the prospect’s inference with a double high-pitched negation “↑No=↑no:” and then by providing an alternative characterisation of her conduct as benefactive rather than self-serving “I just wanted to drop some details off so you can keep it on file.” Her denial reflexively provides further empirical proof that the prospect’s prior turn was treated as an accusation (Edwards, 2004).

This brief analytic endeavour has hopefully demonstrated that and how, when we deal with naturally occurring talk-in-interaction, language is first and foremost a means for social action and a medium for organising the conversation through prospective and retrospective ascription of meaning and through sequential constraints that a current turn sets up for upcoming talk (Heritage, 1984). Importantly, to properly grasp how language works in interaction we need to pay attention to how the tiniest details of speech production and, if available, embodied conduct are employed by interactants in the course of their conversation.

The main claim made in this paper is that, by considering the pragmatic and interactional affordances of language, persuasion scholarship would expand its understanding of persuasion in interpersonal communication by illuminating its hitherto unexplored interactional features. To support this claim, in the next section, I will provide a necessarily concise and selective review of the interplay between language and persuasion from the social cognitive perspective and highlight some shortcomings of this perspective as well as a paradox within it. Next, in Section 3, I will review the emerging body of DP work on persuasion in naturally occurring interactions and then exemplify the DP approach to studying it. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the insights and research opportunities provided by this approach.

2 | THE SOCIAL COGNITIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE AND PERSUASION IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

It is probably impossible to provide an exhaustive and, at the same time, concise overview of how the role of language in persuasion has been theorised and empirically investigated across the probably hundreds of research papers on this topic. In what follows, I will attempt to capture the gist of the social cognitive (SC) approach to persuasion in interpersonal communication and argue that, within it, language features as a vehicle for delivering "message effects" and that constitutes an incomplete view of how language works in social interactions.

From a SC perspective, persuasion has been theorised as the outcome of individual information processing mechanisms. Persuasion scholars thus "believe that the better they comprehend individuals’ modes of processing
information, the more accurately they can explain the *diverse effects messages have on attitudes*“ (Perloff, 2017, p. 222 added emphasis). For example, the well-known Elaboration Likelihood Model proposes two routes for processing information: the central route, which entails careful and deliberate consideration of persuasive messages and the peripheral route, which relies on selective processing of persuasive cues by means of heuristics (Petty et al., 2004). Similarly, other social cognitive frameworks, such as the Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), the Social Judgment Theory (Sherif et al., 1965) and the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011) theorise the cognitive processes that ostensibly underpin persuasion.

Within many of these models of persuasion, language is reduced to the status of an input variable, either as a vehicle for conveying information or as a set of factors influencing how cognitive processes operate (for reviews, see Blankenship & Craig, 2011; Hosman, 2012). As such, the use of language in social interaction as a means to constrain interlocutors' behaviours is not taken into account. For example, in personal selling, many well-known "closing" tactics rely on pressing prospects to immediately provide a definitive answer to the sales offer. This restricts prospects' opportunities to deliberate upon the offer, negotiate a more favourable alternative, or come up with appropriate reasons for refusing the offer (Bone, 2006). These and other "hard sell" tactics (Bone, 2006; Clark & Pinch, 2014; Oakes, 1990) rely on salespeople leveraging sequential, interactional, and social obligations, mobilised through language, to ward off resistance and wrestle an aligning response (cf. Clark et al., 1994; Darr & Pinch, 2013).

The SC approach to persuasion fails to incorporate such insights from language-in-use into its theorising of persuasion in interpersonal communication. More importantly, it also relies on a series of assumptions about language that not only put forward a decontextualised and impoverished view of it, but also have not been upheld by empirical research on naturally occurring conversations. Next, I will zoom in on these assumptions and the evidence against them.

### 2.1 | A decontextualised and impoverished view of language

By reducing language's role in persuasion to "message effects", cognitive social psychology ends up paying little attention to the sequential environment in which language is used in persuasive conversations. Simply put, the sequential organisation of conversations and the relative position of linguistic practices within speakers' turns at talk has not been treated as relevant for persuasion. As a result, the interactional functions that these practices accomplish in different sequential positions in a conversation have been overlooked.

Take, for example, the body of research that examines the relationship between persuasion and speech styles such as "powerless language" – characterised by the use of linguistic practices such as tag questions, hesitations, disclaimers, hedges, polite, and deictic phrases – and "powerful" language – characterised by the absence of such linguistic practices (Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005; Bradac & Mulac, 2009). Within this line of work, studies have investigated how persuasive messages with ostensibly similar content, but written in different (powerless vs. powerful) styles, set in motion attitudinal and behavioural changes under certain conditions (inter alia Blankenship & Craig, 2007; Hosman, 2006; Hosman & Siltanen, 2011; Sparks & Areni, 2008). When these messages are thought up by researchers themselves (and thus not naturally occurring) they can incorporate the unverified view that the above-mentioned linguistic practices are markers of powerless language irrespective of where they occur within the conversation.

This view is not upheld by decades of CA research on naturally occurring interaction demonstrating that the sequential position of linguistic practices is consequential for the interactional work they are deployed to accomplish. Take for example, the particle "uhm" which ostensibly functions as a hesitation marker and thus should be a feature of "powerless language". Extensive CA research has documented several different uses of "uhm", including signalling trouble with producing a turn, indicating the end of a sequence of talk, marking an action as potentially interactionally problematic, and, in telephone conversations, marking a turn as the reason for initiating the call (Schegloff, 2010). Similar insights originate from research on tag questions, also ostensibly a marker of powerless language (though see
Blakenship & Craig, 2007). CA research that employs a positionally-sensitive analysis of tags also showed that their position within a sequence and within a turn can have different consequences for its interactional functions (Hepburn et al., in prep; Hepburn & Potter, 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Heritage & Raymond, 2005).

Let us zoom in on one example, namely the use of a tag in the middle, rather than at the end, of a turn such as here: “at the end of the day i-it’s about priorities isn’t it.” “an ye know obviously she’s got to come first” (Hepburn & Potter, 2011b, p. 234 added emphasis). This advice-giving turn was produced by a child protection officer on the phone with a mum who had called the child protection helpline to complain about her daughter. By systematically tracking such tags found within rather than at the end of speakers’ turns, Hepburn and Potter (2011b) observed that they were employed by the helpline staff in the delivery of previously resisted advice. These formulations position the interlocutors in agreement with the advice but they do not provide an interactional slot for them to respond. Thus, they constitute an interactional “power move” rather than a marker of “powerless” language. Such findings should strongly urge social psychologists interested in language and persuasion to scrutinise unverified assumptions about how language works and check them against empirical findings based on studies of naturally occurring interactions.

Furthermore, the majority of social cognitive research on language and persuasion operates with an impoverished view of language that is stripped down of its production features and accompanying multimodal aspects. In line with the conduit model of communication as conveying information, aspects related to speech production and embodiment are presumed inconsequential for persuasion and, thus, can be removed to minimise possible interference. For example, Sparks and Areni (2008, p. 44) write that “recordings contain noise” stemming from individuals’ speech idiosyncrasies and from situated vocal variation and that “[s]uch variation confounds researchers’ ability to attribute effects to language power and not the idiosyncratic vocal characteristics present on recordings”.

This impoverished view of language is challenged by extensive CA research that has documented the involvement of prosodic and multimodal aspects of talk-in-interaction in accomplishment and coordination of social actions in interaction (Heath & Luff, 2013; Rossano, 2013; Walker, 2013). To exemplify, in a study on how magazine street-vendors engage passers-by in an attempt to transform them into customers, Llewellyn and Burrow (2008) demonstrate how proximity, body orientation, and gaze are crucial persuasive resources deployed even before a verbal sales offer is made. Conversely, passers-by use gaze to manage their involvement in the sale, for example, by averting their gaze to avoid being engaged or by making visual contact with the vendor to signal their approachability. More recently, Llewellyn (2021) has made a compelling case for the crucial role that embodiment plays in the interactive organisation of consumer knowledge in commercial encounters.

To conclude, this section has hopefully shown that the current treatment of language by persuasion scholars adopting a social cognitive perspective is at odds with empirical evidence on how language is actually utilised in social interaction, and fails to consider all aspects of language-in-use that have been documented to be consequential for persuasion in interpersonal interactions. This incomplete view of language is also embedded into the methodological choices that researchers make when studying persuasion. In the next section, I will turn to this aspect and, by contrasting it with how persuasion has been generally conceptualised, I will argue a methodological paradox arises within the social cognitive approach to persuasion in interpersonal communication.

2.2 | The methodological paradox of persuasion

Overwhelmingly, research on language and persuasion has been conducted in laboratory settings, using researcher-designed stimuli, and relying on self-reports for capturing the “message effects” of persuasive communication on individual beliefs, attitudes, and behavioural intentions (O’Keefe, 2016). Limitations of these methodological choices, including questioning the validity and reliability of self-reports (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) and the ecological validity of experiments (Cicourel, 1982) have long been highlighted and acknowledged; still, they have remained by-and-large unaddressed (Humă, Stokoe, & Sikveland, 2020). From a DP perspective, the irremediable shortcoming of these methodological choices stems from treating participants’ and researchers’ language-in-use as
a representation of otherwise ‘hidden’ cognitive processes, while failing to consider that and how social interactions, including in experiments and surveys, are collaboratively organised (Billig, 1994; Leudar & Antaki, 1997; Potter & Hepburn, 2012; Puchta & Potter, 2002), and rest on common sense knowledge that remains implicit and, thus, untheorised (Heritage, 1974; Potter & Hepburn, 2012; Roiser, 1974).

The almost exclusive use of decontextualised self-reports in studying language and persuasion in interpersonal communication also occasions the methodological paradox of persuasion. Put simply, while persuasion is conceptualised as an interactive phenomenon involving a persuasion agent and a target (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Kirmani & Campbell, 2004) or as an activity involving one or more persons (Gass & Seiter, 2018), it is preponderantly measured via techniques that ostensibly capture individual cognitive processes. This is paradoxical. It would be expected that, given its interactional nature, the investigation of persuasion would rely on techniques that investigate social processes and mechanisms and not only the minds of persuasion targets.

How did this paradox come about? The almost exclusive focus of persuasion scholars on individual minds can be traced back to the fact that, to date, persuasion is most often operationalised as attitude change and measured via self-reports. This methodological move is enabled by the assumption embedded in the social cognitive approach mentioned at the beginning of the paper, namely that language reliably reflects individuals’ preferences, and beliefs. This assumption has been challenged by over 3 decades of discursive psychological research that has repeatedly demonstrated that and how attitude displays are social actions that are designed to accomplish various interactional effects (Billig, 1988, 1989; Edwards & Potter, 2017; Potter et al., 2020; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1988; van der Heijden et al., 2021; Wiggins, 2013, 2014; Wiggins & Potter, 2003). Meanwhile, studies that have investigated how attitudes and opinions are “measured” illuminate that and how they are co-constructed by researchers and study participants through the use of psychological instruments (Antaki, 2006; Ford et al., 2020; Maynard et al., 2002; Ostermann, 2017). Not only explicit, but also implicit attitudes (Petty et al., 2009) are co-constructed as it could be argued that the latter can be seen as “laboratory artefacts” that are created rather than uncovered via, for example, implicit association tests.

How can we study persuasion if not by measuring its effects on individuals’ attitudes? First, we have to step out of the experimental lab, and into the "natural laboratories" of persuasion, from sales encounters to the doctor’s office, where we can observe how persuasion is actually accomplished, in an interactive and collaborative manner, by the parties involved in the interaction. The discursive psychological approach to language and persuasion, to which we turn next, can facilitate the investigation and theorising of the interactional structures that underpin persuasion.

3 | THE DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LANGUAGE AND PERSUASION

This section provides a concise review of the growing body of work that has studied persuasion in authentic interactions and then illustrates the pay-offs of the discursive psychological approach to persuasion through the analysis of a fragment from a "cold" call in which a salesperson secures a meeting with a prospect without actually asking for one.

3.1 | Persuasion as a sequential, interactional, and collaborative accomplishment

The first thing we notice when we examine any stretch of naturally occurring conversation in which an individual attempts to persuade another is that this attempt extends over several turns at talk. Minimally, we need at least two turns: an initiating action, for example, a service offer or a donation request, and a response to it, for example,
the acceptance of the offer or the making of a donation. Such a sequence of paired turns, termed by conversation analysts “adjacency pair”, is one of the fundamental building blocks of social interaction (Schegloff, 2007).

One property of adjacency pairs relevant for persuasion is the “preference” relationship between the initiating action and the responsive action within the adjacency pair sequence. A “preferred” response to an initiating action is one that aligns with it by carrying out the course of action that has been launched, such as accepting to meet with a sales agent, while a “dispreferred” response, is one that fails to carry out the initiated course of action, for example, refusing the sales meeting (Schegloff, 2007). Given that successful persuasion is accomplished through aligned initiating and responsive actions, understanding how “preferred” responses are mobilised constitutes one avenue that CA and DP researchers interested in persuasion have pursued (e.g., Humă et al., 2019; Humă, in press; Llewellyn, 2015).

For example, comparing “when” and “if”-formulated sales requests, Humă (in press) found that the former are more effective and the explanation for this rests on their respective preference mobilising features. Similarly offers of a gift-aid (slightly more expensive) museum ticket formatted as yes/no questions such as “D’you want to add gift aid today?” (Llewellyn, 2015, p. 497) were found to be more effective in eliciting a preferred response than offers formatted as alternative interrogatives such as “Would’ya like to gift aid those today or just pay the standard.” (p. 479). The latter format, which included the option of buying a cheaper ticket among the projected alternatives, offered museum patrons a morally safe way of choosing not to pay the gift aid ticket. By contrast, opting for the cheaper ticket in response to the yes/no question required patrons to do additional interactional work to mitigate the risk of appearing tight-fisted.

More often than not, however, adjacency pairs that implement persuasion are expanded – meaning that additional related turns at talk precede or follow them (Schegloff, 2007) – which makes pinpointing the exact moment when a person ostensibly “changes their mind” impossible and irrelevant (cf. Gibson & Smart, 2017). Persuadees regularly put up considerable resistance that persuaders have to deal with and this expands the sequences through which persuasion is accomplished even further (Clark et al., 1994; Clark & Pinch, 2001; Humă, 2018). Furthermore, a salesperson will not blurt out a commercial offer as soon as a potential customer walks through the door. Instead, an offer could be preceded by various presequences that create auspicious conditions for its acceptance. In his latest book entitled Pre-suasion, Cialdini (2016) has drawn attention to the importance of exactly such preparatory moments for the success of persuasive attempts. Investigating business-to-business “cold” calls, Humă et al. (2019) found how one type of presequence termed “preamble” preceded meeting requests and worked to secure alignment to the ongoing course of action from the prospect even before the possibility of a sales meeting was actually mentioned. Importantly, the study showed that this presequence was designedly opaque to obscure the course of action it was helping to implement. This highlights an important aspect of naturally occurring persuasion, namely that it can often be designed as defeasible, especially given that persuadees can be held accountable for their attempts to override persuadee’s agency (Humă et al., 2021) or, as we saw in Extract 1, for trying to “sell them something”.

The design of persuaded responses and their social-moral implications constitutes another fruitful avenue for the investigation of persuasion-in-interaction. Interestingly, findings from studies that have examined persuasion in a range of institutional settings where it occurs naturally found that persuadees who originally displayed resistance designed their eventually aligning responses to convey that they have independently arrived at a different position (Stokoe et al., 2020) and that they voluntarily subscribe to the proposed course of action (Sikveland & Stokoe, 2016). Interestingly, through subtle turn design features such as silence or discourse particles, individuals mark a response as, for example, a “qualified acceptance” (Kendrick & Torreira, 2015, p. 273) that conveys low commitment to the agreed-upon course of action or as an “enthusiastic acceptance” (Albury et al., 2018, p. 646) that conveys a clear positive stance. Moreover, Albury et al. (2018) showed that tracking these subtle linguistic cues in responsive actions pays off as they may be able to predict individuals’ future actions.

Two implications of these findings are particularly noteworthy. First, it appears that persuadees (and, as I argued in the previous paragraph persuaders also) work to manage the moral accountability of their conduct. Thus, in real-
life interactions, especially those with high stakes, such as business or political negotiations, individuals design their actions to achieve multiple interactional outcomes such as persuade/resist, challenge/affirm existing power relations, or assert/contest own/others’ autonomy. Therefore, theoretical models that aim to capture individuals’ orientations to persuasion, such as the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) should also consider the moral dimension of persuasion. Second, by scrutinising both persuaders and persuadees’ turns at talk, studies of persuasion-in-interaction demonstrate that examining responses to persuasion can provide novel insights into how persuasion is interactionally accomplished.

In addition to adjacency pairs and preference relationships therein, a range of other sequential and interactional structures of talk-in-interaction can be mobilised by persuaders. In a pioneering study of street-selling, Pinch and Clark (1986) documented how market vendors sequentially and rhetorically work up the value of the products on offer while simultaneously lowering the asking price. These sequences build up to a “sales relevance place” (Pinch & Clark, 1986, p. 171), marked by the vendor’s final price announcement, often accompanied by an attention-grabbing gesture like a clap, and the audience’s response of buying the product. This analysis also reveals an interesting feature of persuasion, namely that it is prospectively managed (Atkinson & Drew, 1979, p. 115) with prior sequences building up to favour particular interactional outcomes (Humă et al., 2019).

The prospective organisation of persuasion becomes even more apparent when we zoom in on the practices that persuaders use to design their social actions. In the above-mentioned study of business-to-business “cold” calls, Humă et al. (2019) found that salespeople designed their meeting requests to minimise or solve possible hindrances that prospects could use to build their accounts for refusing to meet. Not only persuaders, but also persuadees orient to the sequential and interactional implications of their turns at talk. Examining business-to-consumer “cold” calls, Mazeland (2004) showed how prospects oriented to the salespeople’s opinion queries about the financial products on offer as moves that invited them to take a favourable stance towards these services which would then imply possible interest in purchasing them. Thus, it can be concluded that the interactive and collaborative organisation of persuasion involves prospectively managing interlocutors’ opportunities for acting. For persuaders, this means forestalling possible or actual resistance while for persuadees it means avoiding actions (such as displays of agreement, appreciation, interest, or need) that could be taken up as a possible commitment to following the outlined course of action.

To provide a concrete example of persuasion-in-interaction, in the next section, I will examine a fragment from a business-to-business “cold” call in which the salesperson manages to secure a sales appointment with the prospect without asking for one. To do so, he mobilises a range of conversational resources that delete the sequential slot where the interlocutor would have had the opportunity to refuse the meeting (Humă, 2018; Humă, Stokoe, & Sikveland, 2020).

3.2 Persuasion-in-interaction: Securing a sales meeting without asking for one

The following extract comes from a business-to-business “cold” call between a prospect who is an employee of a London hotel and a salesperson working for a telecommunications company. Based on the latter’s mention of “a chat” they had in December (lines 3–4), it is fair to assume this is a subsequent “cold” call, the purpose of which is to set up a sales meeting (Humă & Stokoe, 2020). As an activity, setting up a meeting requires at least two sequences, one in which interactants first agree on having the meeting, often preceded by a preamble (here in lines 1–7), and one in which they set a date and time for it (Humă & Stokoe, 2020). The first sequence, frequently initiated through a request for a meeting, is vulnerable to failure as prospects can simply refuse the request. Thus, we will see the salesperson in Extract 2 designing the preamble to enable him to bypass the request sequence and initiate the scheduling without giving the prospect the opportunity to say “no” to the meeting.
Two details of the preamble are worth noting as features of persuasive conduct. First, the salesperson produces a “because of” account (Humă, 2018, p. 17) for why he is contacting the prospect, whereby the call is described as the fulfillment of a promise the former had made to the latter in a prior conversation. This frames the call as part of an ongoing business relationship and as potentially beneficial for the prospect (Clayman & Heritage, 2014). Second, the salesperson builds up his company’s expertise by mentioning some categories of clients selected to match the prospect’s type of business and geographical location.

Latched to the preamble, the salesperson formulates a reported appointment request, the format of which merits careful scrutiny. First, the request is designed as a speaker-oriented assertion (note in particular the self-oriented preface “I just really wanted”) and thus makes a response from the prospect less relevant (Stivers & Rossano, 2012). The prospect also does not treat this as a request, but as an informing, which he receipts with the acknowledgment token “Okay,” (line 11). Second, and crucially, the salesperson does not provide a sequential slot in which the prospect could say “yes” or “no” to the meeting. We see that the acknowledgment token (line 11) comes in overlap as the salesperson keeps the floor to produce a scheduling initiation, which asks the prospect to suggest a time for the meeting. As already mentioned, within the appointment making activity, scheduling initiations follow meeting request sequences that establish both parties’ agreement to meet. Moving to the scheduling thus implies that the meeting has been agreed upon, even if, in this particular case, it has not. In response, the prospect starts to provide an answer, specifically a possible date for the meeting. Thus, the salesperson has managed to secure an appointment without really asking for one.

4 | CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has reviewed existing social psychological research on persuasion in interpersonal communication with a focus on the role of language therein. I proposed distinguishing between the established SC approach that theorises language as “message effects” and the emerging DP approach that treats language as social action in interaction. Comparing these approaches, I have tried to make a case for the latter as a promising avenue for future research on persuasion. In what follows, I will: (1) briefly summarise key insights from studies of naturally occurring persuasion,
When studying persuasion in authentic interactions, we get an immediate sense of how it is built through sequences of embodied talk and artful coordination of participants’ social actions. Thus, it is fair to surmise that the sequential properties of conversations provide the interactional infrastructure for persuasion-in-interaction. Moreover, zooming in on how individuals design their persuasive conduct, we notice that they often work to obfuscate persuasive attempts which reveals their orientation to situated social-moral orders (Versteeg & te Molder, 2018) around interpersonal influence and agency. Lastly, studies on persuasion-in-interaction highlight that and how individuals engaged in persuasion prospectively manage the recipiency of each other’s conduct to create or, conversely, forestall sequential, interactional, or social obligations for themselves and their interlocutors.

The main strength of the DP approach to persuasion originates from its potential to deal with the minutiae details of embodied language-in-use. Liberated from preconceptions about how language presumably operates within single minds, this perspective shifts the focus to how individuals perform social actions in coordination with others and how persuasion emerges as a collaborative achievement. Thus, this approach allows us to investigate the contribution of all parties to persuasive activities.

Future research on persuasion-in-interaction could be aimed at one or more of the following directions. First, persuasion scholars could continue to examine the conversational structures – like sequence organisation or turn design – that underpin persuasion. Second, researchers could also focus on how persuasion-in-interaction is practically managed by individuals. Finally, a fruitful avenue for research with both theoretical and practical application would be the investigation of the discursive practices through which persuasion is accomplished.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

In line with conversation analytic methodology, anonymized data that support the findings presented in this paper have been published alongside their respective analyses. The corpora from which these data originate are not publicly available due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

1 Detailed information on how these data were collected and handled is available in Humă (2018).
2 This conversation took place in late January.
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