CHAPTER 6

Computing Narratives

Assemblage Relations in Diplomatic Conversations

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My purpose in this chapter is to propose a formal methodology for analyzing diplomatic conversations. That methodology, which, different from much other social science work on sequences, involves computing the ways in which narratives are assembled, is particularly appropriate for the kinds of constitutive questions asked by constructivist scholars in International Relations (IR). My specific research proposition is that conversations have discernible narrative features and that we can formalize those features (building on existing work in the field of conversation analysis) to shed light on significant aspects of the social relation between interlocutors. I apply this proposal to diplomatic conversations, giving a "who influences whom" analysis of two such conversations involving US presidents and UK prime ministers. The chapter concludes with brief thoughts on the potential benefits for scholars of IR in using this methodology.

Narrative Analysis and Assemblage

A striking characteristic of social life is that it both unfolds and is recalled in sequential form. By this, I mean not simply that events are indexed temporally (e.g., A happened at 9.00 and B at 11.00) but that they seem to exhibit a necessary ordering: either A's occurrence is necessarily followed by B's, or B's occurrence implies that A's must necessarily have already happened.[1] Moreover, B is not usually the end of the story, so the A-B sequence will

customarily be part of a longer sequence involving events C, D, and so forth. Such sequences are not only considerably easier to remember than collections of events unordered temporally but are arguably one of the principal means by which participants recount—and perhaps even understand at the moment—the events in which they are involved.

The Specificity of Narratives

Many sequences are ordered far more than as a set of before-and-after relations between pairs of events. When we say that a sequence is made up of more than two events, we are saying something about a feeling of incompleteness if the sequence were to be terminated after the second event. Much in the way that melodies in Western tonal music are expected to resolve, sequences being recounted are expected to arrive at a natural ending point. Of course, life goes on, and other events will follow, but those later events represent some sort of a shift to a new (or expanded) sequence. Sequences, in other words, are quite often apprehended as narratives.[2]

The difference between sequences in general and narrative sequences in particular can best be seen by a stylized example. Take a five-element nonnarrative sequence S: A-B-C-D-E, and a five-element narrative sequence N: U-V-W-X-Y. Both of these sequences display necessary ordering relations, so that any two consecutive elements will be linked: C, for example, might only occur if B did earlier, and D might occur only if C did. What N has that S does not is a sense of completeness, or closure: there can be no sixth element Z, at least not without turning N into something else. By the same token, there can be no element T preceding U, again not without turning N into something else. Thus U is an opening element, and Z is a closing one (e.g., "there was once a king whose wife gave birth to a son" and "the son blinded himself"); this is one of the ways in which N is a structured whole.[3]

In effect, I am proposing a distinction between three types of sequences: (1) temporally indexed arrangements, in which the order of events matters but in which the elements are not related to each other in a causal or entailment fashion; (2) historical sequences, in which events cause subsequent events or are entailed by preceding ones; and (3) narrative sequences, in which the arrangement of events evokes a sense of closure. This distinction corresponds roughly to Hayden White's tripartite division of historical representation into annals, chronicles, and "proper" histories.[4]

A note on terminology is needed before proceeding further. Much work in sociology and, separately, in political science often goes under the heading of

narrative analysis. Accepting the above distinction, these otherwise disparate approaches should be characterized as the analysis of historical sequences. Thus the pioneering studies by Andrew Abbott, Peter Abell, and David Heise and his colleagues are each concerned, in different ways, with causal entailment relations between consecutive pairs of events.[5] Similarly, political science work on "analytic narratives" and on conflict "trajectories" is primarily concerned with causal entailment relations.[6] Sociologists and political scientists who use the term *narrative* in their work mostly do not study narratives as structured wholes, analyzable as assemblage relations (see below).[7]

Narratives and Computation

What are some of the characteristics of narratives, as events arranged to evoke a sense of closure, that is, as structured wholes? There are a number of possibilities, ranging from the types of agents (characters) to the topics dealt with over and over (themes). We can, à la Aristotle, talk about plot trajectories (e.g., *peripeteia*) or genres; alternatively, we can, à la Labov, talk about evaluation (akin to point of view). Regardless of which characteristics we focus on, that focus can be exemplified in a narrative label, with the apprehending of the label used to reproduce at least the main lines of the narrative. In other words (to anticipate the argument below), narrative closure (as a well-formed and self-contained sequence) implies that sequential relations can be put into correspondence with a label, much as a mathematical function brings into correspondence arguments and a value.

Interestingly, many labels are actually components of narratives. A classic example comes from the frames of Marlow's story about Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The inner frame begins,

> The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream, and lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman lighthouse, a three-legged thing erect on a mud-flat, shone strongly. Lights of ships moved in the fairway—a great stir of lights going up and going down. And farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars.
>
> "And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth."

The final paragraphs of the novella conclude,

> "I heard a light sigh, and then my heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exulting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain. 'I knew it—I was sure!' . . . She knew. She was sure. I heard her weeping; she had hidden her face in her hands. It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn't he said he wanted only justice? But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether. . . ."
>
> Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. "We have lost the first of the ebb," said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.

Marlow both starts and ends his account with the word *dark*, and the unnamed narrator of the outer frame does the same, glossing first London and then the sea as marked by "brooding gloom" and "the heart of an immense darkness." In this way and with great artistry, Conrad furnishes a label that adumbrates and summarizes the novella's theme.[8]

It might be objected that we are dealing here with high art and that people simply do not bother including labels in their narratives in everyday life. That view, I think, is mistaken. Consider a narrative elicited and reproduced by William Labov in his famous early work on narrative analysis.

> (Did you ever have a feeling, or a premonition, that something was gonna happen, and it did happen?) Yes I did. (Tell me about it.)
>
> I was goin' with a girl, one time; we were layin' on a bed—we weren't doin' anything, we were talkin'—and, I don't know, I looked into her face, and I saw, like, horns coming out of her head. You know. You know—like—I said, "You look like the devil!"
>
> She said, "What do you mean, I look like the devil? Don't kid around."
>
> I said "I'm not kiddin'. I saw horns comin' out of your head."
>
> And the girl got very angry, and walked out. But we got together, and we went together about four months.

> And, like, this girl tried to put me in a couple of tricks. Like she tried to get some boys to hurt me. You know. And she was a devil.
>
> So, now, anything I see I believe it's gonna happen.[9]

Labov supplies a label in his question, and the respondent not only recounts a narrative but finishes it off quite nicely with exactly the same label ("gonna happen"). Arguably, only the very shortest stories, recounted by the very youngest children (e.g., the one analyzed by Sacks),[10] lack such labels.

The presence of a label suggests that a particular sequence is a narrative; but it does not, in itself, shed any light on how the individual elements in the sequence are connected to each other. In fact, as indicated above, the mode of connection will depend on which aspect of the narrative, as a whole, is of interest. If the focus is on a presumed goal of the plot (as is the case in many of Propp's folktale types), successive elements must move in the direction of the goal, provide impedances that are overcome, or perhaps provide information (on character, say) that will help move toward the goal. If, instead, we focus on a narrative's theme or point of view, successive elements must each illustrate a hitherto unmentioned dimension of the theme or point of view. Notice that none of these modes of connection is causal in nature; without denying that some of the consecutive elements in a recounted narrative are connected causally,[11] they are not—and cannot be—what gives the narrative its status as a complete whole.[12] Rather, we are looking for consecutive elements to share both the hypothesized overall aspect of the narrative and some situational semantics (e.g., if the narrative is posited to have a theme of, say, self-sacrifice, an element describing a mother sacrificing her life to save her child would not be seen as connected to a following element of a man giving his dining companion his dessert—unless, of course, the overall aspect of the narrative is authorial irony).[13]

I am claiming that the way in which a narrative is put together on a microlevel—the way in which particular elements are linked to preceding or following ones—mirrors the narrative's overall aspect. Here, two points are worth making. First, we are speaking about two types of relations: (1) the linkage between elements and (2) the relation between the linkages and the overall aspect. The linkage between elements is, as pointed out above, not a relationship of causality; rather, it is a mode of assembly. Similarly, the mirroring of linkages and overall aspect is one of wholeness, not one of cause and consequence: a narrative whose linkages are at odds with its claimed label is at best a poorly constructed narrative. In this sense, the relationships that give a narrative its sense of closure are constitutive: they

define those specific elements, related to each other in that specific way, as a specific narrative.

Second, the *constitutive relations* by which narratives are composed can be thought of as akin to mathematical functions that take component elements as "arguments" (think, crudely, of inputs) and, by bringing those elements into some type of arrangement (this is the "structure," whether sequential or otherwise), generate as a "value" (think, crudely, of an output) the particular phenomenon of interest, whether that phenomenon is an algebraic term or a *social fact*, such as a fair election.[14] Note that when functions are calculated for particular instances of the arguments (e.g., $y=x^2$ for $x=3$ or a fair election when only a handful of people vote), the calculation involves engaging in a specific, predefined action. That action, in turn, is mechanical, involving the manipulation of symbols, whether by a person or a machine; as such, it is a "computation."[15] In fact, any constitutive relation can be represented as a function that, in turn, can be "evaluated" computationally.[16] Thus, for narratives, we can cast the aspect of a narrative (e.g., goal, theme, point of view) as a function of multiple assemblage relations between individual elements; by evaluating assemblage relations for a specific candidate narrative,[17] we can make empirical claims about the existence of evidence of a particular aspect of the candidate. For example, if we hypothesize that particular sequential elements are key parts of a narrative in which an important aspect is the hero's accomplishing of almost impossible tasks, we should find numerous paired elements along these lines (task + accomplishment), as well as a general label about the hero accomplishing tasks. Indeed, by coding each pair of elements in the candidate narrative, we can check not only whether the elements jointly compose a narrative of that sort but when the narrative proper begins and ends.

Narratives and Constructivism

Since the assemblage relations by which narratives are constituted are a particular type of structured social facts, it follows that the computation of those assemblage relations could be of relevance to constructivists. I make this claim not so much because constructivist theories spend much time on narrative analysis[18] but, rather, because a key claim for many constructivist writers is that social facts are structured—that is, arranged in a patterned fashion, with the patterns having important generative implications for interactions between the units being studied. As Wendt put it, a structure is "a set of internally related elements," with the internal relations

of a structure comprising one or more "possible transformations or combinations of its elements."[19] One of the most frequently cited instances of this structured quality of social facts is "anarchy"; the claim made by some of the early constructivists is that the absence of an explicitly acknowledged central authority is compatible with more than one set of interaction relations among states.[20] In the terminology introduced above, we could rewrite this claim as a functional relationship between alternative sets of interaction patterns, on the one hand, and the social fact "anarchy," on the other.

The focus on social facts as structured goes back to at least one of the antecedents of the early constructivists, the work of British "new social realists" such as Roy Bhaskar, Anthony Giddens, and Rom Harré (although less often cited, Harré's work profoundly influenced both Bhaskar and Giddens).[21] As Bhaskar put it in a review article published at a time when the new social realists had been taken on board in the United Kingdom but before IR constructivism had really gotten off the ground, "society itself is a social product"; that is, "social forms" (equal to particular social structures) are dependent on activity and relational in character.[22] Because, as we have seen, narratives are one ubiquitous type of social form, the study of their assemblage could be a constructivist project.

Research Proposition: Conversations as Narratives

When one thinks of narratives, particularly in IR, one thinks of the stories recounted by statesmen in speeches and memoirs, as well as the histories crafted by political scientists, biographers, and historians to explain state interactions, policy decisions, and the creation of international institutions. I propose, however, that we cast the net further afield and compute the assemblage relations of a very different type of verbal product, diplomatic conversations. A priori, since conversations unfold in real time between at least two interlocutors, they would not seem to be good candidates for narrative analysis. In this section, I argue the contrary.

When Harvey Sacks began the systematic study of conversations some fifty years ago, he quickly realized that even though they were unscripted and involved actors with quite different agendas who often jumped from one topic to another, they were, nonetheless, highly structured.[23]A recent textbook on the subject glosses the issue by beginning with a snippet of conversation held between a husband and wife after two old friends, who had stayed the night, left.

01 Ann: That was fun,
02 (0.4)
03 Jeff: mm
04 Ann: ish.[24]

Ann begins the conversation with an evaluative description. Jeff, who might be expected to respond with a phrase or sentence, is silent for almost half a second, then produces a noncommittal sound, which leads Ann to modify her statement significantly.

The conversation between Ann and Jeff has several notable characteristics. First, it is collaborative. Even though the participants do not necessarily agree, each works with the other. Ann, as the first speaker, is silent while Jeff is supposed to respond; Jeff, needing to respond, finally makes a sound, to which Ann, in turn, responds by a new utterance. Each conversationalist, in his/her sounds and his/her silences, opens a space for the other to respond and does not (normally) intrude on the other when it is his/her turn for the response. Second, the conversation involves semantic and pragmatic connections between the utterances, with responses having to be locally (at that moment) relevant: Jeff could have said no or yes, but if he had instead started talking about the cat or a bank loan, it would likely have been apprehended by Ann as an attempt to avoid coming down on one side or the other of her opening characterization. Conversational turns therefore point both forward and backward (every utterance or silence is linked pairwise to its predecessor and its successor; the term for such linked elements is *adjacency pair*), and the conversation can only be sustained as long as each participant keeps up that pointing. Third, the conversation is highly indexical: no one besides the participants would know, merely on reading the transcript, that the word *that* referred to the friends' visit rather than to something else (a film? dinner?), which is why conversational continuity—of necessity, unscripted—is a genuine, if unremarkable, achievement.[25]

This continuity has aspects of structural wholeness. For example, in the Ann-Jeff conversation, Ann's "ish" comment not only is a response to Jeff's immediately preceding silence and noncommittal sound but modifies her initial characterization—now separated from the modification by Jeff's turn. Similarly, all three turns are about the same topic, the evaluation of the friends' visit. It could be objected that the snippet is so short that its wholeness is not much of an achievement, but participants often construct much longer conversations as wholes through various sequential mechanisms.[26] One particularly noteworthy way of tying together conversations is via closings, that is, deliberately bringing conversations to an end by

such means as recapitulation or bounding of earlier topics.[27] Some of these closings strongly resemble labels as that term was used above for narratives. Computationally, this implies that one can specify various whole-creating assemblage relations across a conversation's adjacency pairs and then assess the apprehension of that generated whole by the participants' labels for what they had just gone through.

Obviously, brief conversations or brief conversational segments may not occasion the explicit closings in which participants label what they have just been going through. Sometimes, the closings may be nonverbal, such as a gesture or a nod of the head; at other times, they may be too short to contain a detailed label ("OK"; "Well"). Nonetheless, to a very significant degree, participants in even brief, unscripted conversations, whether between strangers or old friends, often provide labels that arguably summarize the microassemblage relations in which they have just been engaged. For this reason, in line with the spirit, if not the letter, of much work in conversation analysis, a computational approach to conversational assemblage relations seems warranted.[28] If the conversations are high-level diplomatic interactions, which presumably are scripted for each participant (though without guarantees that the interlocutor will abide by the script), then labeling (and hence my proposal on computing assemblage in a way akin to narratives) seems quite plausible. To see if it is, I now turn to some examples.

Diplomatic Conversations

One of the virtues of electrical means of voice communication is that they permit third parties to listen in (perhaps at the time, perhaps to a recording) and thereby produce a fairly accurate and detailed transcript of what was said. As an information source, this is far superior to the memoranda of conversation regularly produced in foreign ministries and embassies. Moreover, and luckily for the scholar, top leaders tend to be sufficiently paranoid that they routinely make it possible for their conversations to be transcribed (e.g., both Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger regularly had their phone conversations, including with each other, listened to and transcribed by their subordinates), which has meant that an enormous cache of materials has now begun to make its way into the public domain.

It might immediately be objected that such transcripts are next to worthless as a report on what policies leaders actually followed. The standard putdowns of this sort are "lies" or "cheap talk,"[29] and there is certainly a kernel of truth to that criticism—even if these conversations are behind closed

doors and even if saying something that turns out to be untrue reduces a leader's credibility in the eyes of his/her peers. (For that matter, documents can be classified, misplaced, redacted or destroyed; conversations can be not committed to paper; and journalists can be spun, if not downright lied to. In other words, there is no privileged access point to a knowledge of *wie es eigentlich gewesen*.) However, the point of analyzing conversations is not to get a better idea of a government's secret policies but to understand what leaders were agreeing or disagreeing on and how much one deferred to another. By analyzing conversations, one might shed some light on such phenomena as partnership, adversarial relations, or power.

In the following examples, I summarize a "who influences whom" analysis of two diplomatic conversations. For each conversation, I begin by briefly giving the background, then a transcript of the actual words. That transcript includes, in square brackets, the results of a manual parse of illustrative portions of the conversation, with conversational turns labeled as argumentative speech acts.[30] I then count the number of argumentative speech acts used by each interlocutor, calculate the most common pair(s) of those acts in the conversation, and see whether that most common pair is, as per the above research proposition, reflected in the label of the conversation as a whole.

In this method, identifying the assemblage relations constitutive of a conversation's narrative and, computing the conversational label from those relations are straightforward tasks: the most common pair of speech acts is taken as the function's input and matched against the label for the conversation as a whole.[31] Of course, we can imagine far more complicated assemblage relations, but in the case of diplomatic conversations, where at least one of the leaders has clear points that she/he wants to make, a focus on the most frequent speech acts is reasonable, especially as a way to start analyzing who influences whom.

Example 1: Reagan and Thatcher, Grenada, 1983

My first example is drawn from a conversation between Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher a day after US troops intervened in the former British colony of Grenada. Reagan had cabled Thatcher on the eve of the intervention, indicating that he was thinking of sending troops; a few hours later, he sent her a follow-up cable saying that he had decided to intervene. Thatcher, who had been working on a draft reply after the first cable, immediately reworked it and dispatched it after receiving Reagan's second message. In her telegram, she argued that intervention was both unjustified and likely to

have negative consequences. She then followed up her cable with a phone call to Reagan (by then, it was shortly after midnight in London), urging him to take seriously her written message. Reagan promised to do so but was fairly clear that he had reached the point of no return, a position he reiterated in another cable sent some half a dozen hours later. The day went on, fighting occurred, and the next day, in the afternoon, Reagan telephoned Thatcher, starting their conversation by joking that if he were there, he would throw his hat in the door before he entered. He then stated that he regretted any embarrassment US actions had caused to the British government because of the secrecy of US military planning. After a somewhat lengthy recitation of events, the conversation continued as follows:

01 Prime Minister Thatcher: I know about sensitivity, because of the Falklands. That's why I would not speak for very long even on the secret telephone to you. Because even that can be broken. I'm very much aware of sensitivities. The action is underway now and we just hope it will be successful. [CHALLENGE]

02 President Reagan: We're sure it is. It's going beautifully. . . . They turned out to be a military command and the opposition that still remains, as the last word we have here—in about three spots on the Island—is led by these Cubans. They are the leading combat forces, not the Grenadian forces. We have captured 250 of them already. [RESPONSE TO CHALLENGE; INVERSION OF EVALUATION]

03 Prime Minister Thatcher: Well let's hope it's soon over Ron, and that you manage to get a democracy restored. [REITERATION; INVERSION OF EVALUATION]

04 President Reagan: We're very hopeful that it is going to be short and then your role is going to be very critical, as we all try to return Grenada to democracy under that constitution that you left them. [REVISION OF RESPONSE TO CHALLENGE; RESPONSIBILITY SWITCH] . . .

05 President Reagan: . . . We know that you and through the Queen's Governor General there—all of us together—can help them get back to that constitution and a democracy. [RESPONSIBILITY SWITCH]

06 Prime Minister Thatcher: I just hope Ron, that it will be very soon and that they will manage to put together a government which can get back to democracy. [REITERATION; RESPONSIBILITY SWITCH]

07 President Reagan: Those people on those other islands are pretty remarkable. [PARTIAL AGREEMENT; RESPONSIBILITY SWITCH] . . .

08 President Reagan: . . . We want to put them out ahead in helping with the restoration of a government, so there will be some taint of big old Uncle Sam trying to impose a government on them. [RESPONSIBILITY SWITCH]
09 Prime Minister Thatcher: There is a lot of work to do yet, Ron. [SIDESTEP; RESPONSIBILITY SWITCH]
10 President Reagan: Oh yes. [PARTIAL AGREEMENT; TRYING TO CLOSE]
11 Prime Minister Thatcher: And it will be very tricky. [REITERATION; CHANGE IN EVALUATION]
12 President Reagan: We think that the military part is going to end very shortly. [TOPIC SHIFT; TRYING TO CLOSE]
13 Prime Minister Thatcher: That will be very, very good news. And then if we return to democracy that will be marvellous. [REITERATION; INVERSION]
14 President Reagan: As I say, I'm sorry for any embarrassment that we caused you, but please understand that it was just our fear of our own weakness over here with regard to secrecy. [TOPIC SHIFT; APOLOGY]
15 Prime Minister Thatcher: It was very kind of you to have rung, Ron. [COURTEOUS NONACCEPTANCE][32]

For Reagan, the most common speech act in this conversation is RESPONSIBILITY SWITCH (four instances; he carries out no other speech act more than twice); for Thatcher, it is REITERATION (five instances; she carries out no other speech act more than twice). The closing (which, per the argument above, is presumed to be the label given by the interlocutors to the conversation as a whole) is APOLOGY (Reagan), COURTEOUS NONACCEPTANCE (Thatcher).[33] Although this is not an exact match to the pair RESPONSIBILITY SWITCH (Reagan), REITERATION (Thatcher), it is compatible with it: in both cases, we see Reagan proposing something to Thatcher (for most of the conversation, Reagan is attempting to get the British to help out or at least to sympathize with the US action), only to be rebuffed by her. Indeed, what is interesting about the conversation is how a superpower, dominant in its own region and able to take the military initiative, is nonetheless unable to persuade a supposedly close ally to lend it support, a finding reflected in a lopsided Security Council vote the next day.[34] Formal analysis of the conversation thus sheds light on limits to international power relations, limits usually scanted in the scholarly literature.

Example 2: Blair and Bush, G-8, 2006

A second example comes from a conversation held during the G-8 meeting in the summer of 2006. It was captured by an open microphone when Tony Blair walked over to where George Bush was eating lunch. My focus here is on the portion of the conversation that bore on the Middle East: the summit issued a statement in support of Kofi Annan's efforts; Blair, who wanted more to be done, proposed dealing with the Israel-Hezbollah conflict by sending an international force, then offered himself as an envoy. In the press commentary (see below), Blair was widely ridiculed for the way he stood behind Bush (who was munching on a roll at the time) and was spoken to by the latter (Bush began the conversation, "Yo, Blair. How are you doing?" Bush later mentioned his presumption that Blair himself had picked out a gift sweater for Bush, which led to a gushing response by Blair).

1 President Bush: What about Kofi? [inaudible] His attitude to ceasefire and everything else . . . happens. [PROPOSAL]
2 Prime Minister Blair: Yeah, no I think the [inaudible] is really difficult. We can't stop this unless you get this international business agreed. [DISAGREE; ALTERNATIVE]
3 President Bush: Yeah. [NONCOMMITTAL; WAITING]
4 Prime Minister Blair: I don't know what you guys have talked about, but as I say I am perfectly happy to try and see what the lie of the land is, but you need that done quickly because otherwise it will spiral. [REITERATION; PROPOSAL]
5 President Bush: I think Condi is going to go pretty soon. [NONCOMMITTAL; ALTERNATIVE]
6 Prime Minister Blair: But that's, that's, that's all that matters. But if you . . . you see it will take some time to get that together. [PARTIAL DISAGREEMENT; REITERATION]
7 President Bush: Yeah, yeah. [NONCOMMITTAL; WAITING]
8 Prime Minister Blair: But at least it gives people . . . [PARTIAL DISAGREEMENT; REITERATION]
9 President Bush: It's a process, I agree. I told her your offer to . . . [NONCOMMITTAL; TRYING TO CLOSE]
10 Prime Minister Blair: Well . . . it's only if I mean . . . you know. If she's got a . . . , or if she needs the ground prepared as it were. . . . Because obviously if she goes out, she's got to succeed, as it were, whereas I can go out and just talk. [PARTIAL DISAGREEMENT; REITERATION]
11 President Bush: You see, the irony is that what they need to do is to get Syria, to get Hezbollah to stop doing this shit and it's over. [SIDESTEP; ALTERNATIVE]

12 Prime Minister Blair: [inaudible]
13 President Bush: [inaudible]
14 Prime Minister Blair: Syria. [REITERATION]
15 President Bush: Why? [QUESTION; WAITING]
16 Prime Minister Blair: Because I think this is all part of the same thing. [PARTIAL DISAGREEMENT; REITERATION]
17 President Bush: Yeah. [NONCOMMITTAL; WAITING]
18 Prime Minister Blair: What does he think? He thinks if Lebanon turns out fine, if we get a solution in Israel and Palestine, Iraq goes in the right way . . . [BUTTRESSING OPINION; REITERATION]
19 President Bush: Yeah, yeah, he is sweet. [NONCOMMITTAL; TOPIC SHIFT]
20 Prime Minister Blair: He is honey. And that's what the whole thing is about. It's the same with Iraq. [PARTIAL AGREEMENT; REITERATION]
21 President Bush: I felt like telling Kofi to call, to get on the phone to Assad and make something happen. [SIDESTEP; ALTERNATIVE][35]

For Blair, the most common speech act is REITERATION of his proposal to visit the Middle East as an envoy (eight instances); second is PARTIAL DISAGREEMENT with Bush's alternative of Condoleezza Rice going to the region (five instances); Blair carries out no other speech act more than once. For Bush, the most common speech act is NONCOMMITTAL with respect to Blair's proposal (six instances); second is WAITING for Blair to give better arguments or give up on his idea (four instances); third is ALTERNATIVE of sending Rice (three instances); Bush carries out no other speech act more than twice. Since the conversation was cut off, there is no closing supplied by the interlocutors; instead, we need to look at press accounts to label the conversation as a whole. In fact, there is unanimity on the label (REITERATED PROPOSAL [Blair], REITERATED NONACCEPTANCE [Bush]), with media commentary emphasizing Blair's self-imposed and serial humiliation.[36] Although this is not an exact match to the pair (REITERATION [Blair], NONCOMMITTAL [Bush]) or to some other pairing of the top two or three instances by each speaker, it again is compatible with the top pairing and most of the other combinations.

To say that Blair's inability to influence Bush is simply part and parcel of a more general weakness of junior partners as compared with senior ones, particularly superpowers, somewhat misses the local dynamics of the conversation between the two leaders. Bush never flat out says no to Blair (just as Thatcher never explicitly rejects Reagan's ideas); Blair, who was of course

a very skilled politician, takes advantage of Bush's reaction to push his idea over and over again, each time putting a slightly different spin on it. In the end, that Blair was a close ally of Bush and loyally supported him, including on the Israel-Hezbollah conflict, meant that Bush at least had to listen to Blair, an action that foreshadowed the drafting of an eventual cease-fire resolution the following month. In this sense, once again, formal analysis illuminates more of the subtleties of international power relations than either structural accounts or press commentary.

So What?

The computations summarized for the two conversations above lend support to the proposal made earlier that diplomatic conversations, at the very least, display modes of assemblage strongly akin to narratives. But what does this gain for us either substantively or theoretically? Why go through an intricate coding and aggregating procedure, when one can simply eyeball transcripts? Why even study conversations, when, as everyone knows, strong states push around their allies? To start with, the reason to engage in systematic coding is that "eyeballing" texts is practically a guarantee of overemphasizing certain passages and scanting or ignoring others. Similarly, explicitly coding on several possible adjacency-pair dimensions and calculating the frequency with which each dimension appears is a good way of counteracting biases and preconceptions (e.g., the British press reaction to the "Yo, Blair" conversation) as to the overall tenor of a given conversation.

More generally, without bothering to repeat the arguments made earlier against the "cheap talk" objection, the computations summarized above show that the US leader has the upper hand, substantively speaking, in both conversations, even though, in both cases, he makes more concessions to his British counterpart than IR theory would suggest. This is why both the clearly prescripted talking points that Reagan had been given and the equally clearly preset position that Bush had on the Middle East had to be fuzzed even as they were insisted upon. However, the conversations also show what we might call "first-mover disadvantage." In the Grenada case, Reagan was the requester, Thatcher the refuser; in the G8 case, those roles were played by Blair and Bush, respectively. If the person who is being asked a favor by an ally feels some pressure not to say no directly, the person who is asking the favor is in a structurally disadvantaged position: the interlocutor only needs to avoid saying yes. That the favor seeker is the superpower in one of my examples and the junior partner in the other makes this first-mover disadvantage particularly striking. This is a concrete demonstration of how power

involves consent, not just imposition; as Reagan and Bush (but not Thatcher and Blair) might have put it had they ever read Gramsci, hegemony is always more pleasant when it is swaddled in compliments.

Conclusion

This short analysis, though both partial and preliminary, is promising. It suggests that whether social facts are assembled in a temporally indexed fashion, as narratives, or as conversations, they are constitutive relations akin to functions. As such, they can be modeled computationally, a task that involves bringing into correspondence their nature as a specific phenomenon and the assemblage of their elements.

We have also seen that despite the necessarily improvised nature of most conversations, they are every bit as structured as narratives or typical social objects. This, I think, has three implications for future constructivist work. Methodologically, it would be worthwhile to learn computational techniques, particularly from linguistics. Theoretically, it would be of value to become better acquainted with microsociological work, particularly in the field of conversation analysis. This is a well-established domain, with its own vocabulary and coding techniques; its emphasis on locally produced forms of order is a useful complement to the fascination many constructivists have for macrosociological theories. Microsociological work does not ignore issues of power or identity; it grounds them in concrete, routine practices. Finally, it would be of considerable interest for constructivists to become better acquainted with diplomatic conversations and other traces of the nuts and bolts of day-to-day global politics. It would give us many more phenomena to theorize about, provide a built-in series of checks for empirical assessment, and, last but not least, help us be better able to compare and also contrast the world we live in with other, earlier historical eras.

In addition, constructivists and other IR scholars are able to contribute a certain theoretical depth that until now has been lacking in the analysis of diplomatic conversations. Until recently, of course, there were few real-time conversations available for analysis (comparison with "memoranda of conversations" or telegrams summarizing conversations shows just how inexact most official summaries are); in the last two decades or so, such conversations have mostly been studied by biographers and diplomatic historians. Their intellectual hobbyhorses—whether about personality, the role of individuals, or the significance of chance, are well-known, and both the systematic quality of social science methods and the institutionalized cyni-

cism of IR scholars, whether constructivist or otherwise, offer the possibility of bringing to the study of diplomatic conversations significant theoretical and substantive insights.

Notes

1. This requirement is at the core of sequence analysis as it is used to study phenomena such as careers and life cycles; for applications to political science and more specifically to international relations, see Philippe Blanchard, Felix Bühlmann, and Jaques-Antoine Gauthier, eds., *Advances in Sequence Analysis: Theory, Method, Applications* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2014), chaps. 9–11; Valerie M. Hudson, Philip A. Schrodt, and Ray D. Whitmer, "Discrete Sequence Rule Models as a Social Science Methodology: An Exploratory Analysis of Foreign Policy Rule Enactment within Palestinian-Israeli Event Data," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 4, no. 1 (2008): 105–26.

2. In "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1991): 1–21, Jerome Bruner argues that narratives are not only (locally, at least) complete but have a point to them and that, for that reason, scripts of the Schank-Abelson type are not really narratives. I think that this view is a bit too literary (and a bit insufficiently sociological): yes, executing a restaurant script does not usually involve Propp-type complications, but a disruption in the script (e.g., the waiter failing to bring a dish, the customer walking out without paying, or the customer asking for dessert before the main course) not only is likely to be seen as a break (or, in effect, a switch to a different script) but carries with it a sense of norm violation, which might well be gist for a new narrative. Cf. Livia Polanyi, *Telling the American Story: A Structural and Cultural Analysis of Conversational Storytelling* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1985).

3. In "Some Further Steps in Narrative Analysis," *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7, no. 1 (1997): 359–415, William Labov enumerates a number of other features of narratives; one that would be particularly interesting to explore is point of view.

4. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 5–27.

5. Andrew Abbott, "Event Sequence and Event Duration: Colligation and Measurement," *Historical Methods* 17, no. 4 (1984): 192–204; Abbott, "Conceptions of Time and Events in Social Science Methods: Causal and Narrative Approaches," *Historical Methods* 23, no. 4 (1990): 140–50 (cf. Abbott, "On the Concept of Turning Point," *Comparative Social Research* 16, no. 1 [1997]: 85–105; the concept of "turning point" that is presented there is not really followed up); Peter Abell, "Comparative Narratives: Some Rules for the Study of Action," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 14, no. 3 (1984): 309–31; Abell, "Causality and Low-Frequency Complex Events: The Role of Comparative Narratives," *Sociological Methods and Research* 30, no. 1 (2001): 57–80 (in "Narrative Explanation: An Alternative to Variable-Centered Explanation," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 [2004]: 301–2, Abell touches on the topic of "generative structuralism"); Larry J. Griffin, "Narrative, Event-Structure Analysis, and Causal Interpretation in Historical Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 5 (1993): 1094–1133; David R. Heise and Alex Durig, "A Frame for Organizational Actions

and Macroactions," *Journal of Mathematical Sociology* 22, no. 2 (1997): 95–123. Heise has a useful piece of software guiding the researcher through the specification of causal structure for historical sequences: see http://www.indiana.edu/~socpsy/ESA/.

6. See Robert H. Bates et al., *Analytic Narratives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), introd.; Thomas Schmalberger and Hayward R. Alker, "A Synthetic Framework for Extensible Conflict Early Warning Systems" and "Exploring Alternative Conflict Trajectories with the CEWS Explorer," in *Journeys through Conflict: Narratives and Lessons*, ed. Hayward R. Alker, Ted Robert Gurr, and Kumar Rupesinghe (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), chaps. 11–12; cf. Hayward R. Alker, "Historical Argumentation and Statistical Inference: Towards More Appropriate Logics for Historical Research," *Historical Methods* 17, no. 3 (1984): 164–73. I find it particularly striking that neither in the original introduction by Bates et al. nor in the debate that their volume touched off (*Social Science History* 24, no. 4 [2000]) is there any mention of what had, by that time, become an extensive literature on the sociological applications of causal event sequences.

7. An extremely partial exceptions is the work by Roberto Franzosi and his colleagues on the features of the most commonly occurring events in certain recurring sequences: see Roberto Franzosi, Gianluca De Fazio, and Stefania Vicari, "Ways of Measuring Agency: An Application of Quantitative Narrative Analysis to Lynchings in Georgia (1875–1930)," *Sociological Methodology* 42, no. 1 (2012): 1–42; see also the description of "composition analysis" on Heise's website cited in n. 5 above.

8. Other classic examples of labels from literature include the following openings: "It was now lunch time and they were all sitting under the double green fly of the dining tent pretending that nothing had happened" "This is the saddest story I have ever heard," and "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, / ché la diritta via era smarrita." Examples of closings are "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead," "But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before," and "Il fait une clientèle d'enfer; l'autorité le ménage et l'opinion publique le protège. Il vient de recevoir la croix d'honneur."

9. William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience," in *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts, ed. June Helm* (Seattle: University of Washington Press for the American Ethnological Society, 1967).

10. Harvey Sacks, "On the Analyzability of Stories by Children," in *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, ed. John J. Gumpers and Dell Hymes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972).

11. Cf., though, the famous *Seinfeld* segment in which two of the characters discuss the possibility of a television show "about nothing": "'No story?' 'No, forget the story.' 'You gotta have a story.' 'Who says you gotta have a story?'"

12. This statement may seem surprising, at least as regards wholeness through typical plot or plot trajectory. Are the motivational or causal linkages between consecutive elements not what drive the plot forward? Maybe so, but that has nothing to do with the narrative as a whole, even as a plot with a particular arc. If a hero overcomes various obstacles, then loses hope, and finally finds the strength to win out over all, we

cannot say that a particular accomplishment along his trajectory is the cause of the next obstacle. Rather, the obstacles may be arranged in order of difficulty, which is a magnitudinal quality of the narrative as a whole and not a set of interlocked plot elements. This is why it is important to distinguish between narratives as recounted or recalled and the causal sequences about which narratives are constructed.

13. Cf. David R. Heise, "Narratives without Meaning?" *Journal of Mathematical Sociology* 18, nos. 2–3 (1993): 183–89.

14. Cf. Alonzo Church, *The Calculi of Lambda-Conversion*, Annals of Mathematics Studies 6 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 1.

15. A. M. Turing, "On Computable Numbers, with an Application to the Entscheidungsproblem," *Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society*, 2nd ser., 2 (1936): 230–66.

16. This involves the use of the calculus of λ-conversion, which, as Post showed, is tantamount to string editing operations (Emil L. Post, "Formal Reductions of the General Combinatorial Decision Problem," *American Journal of Mathematics* 65, no. 2 [1943]: 197–215). The argument here is drawn in a highly compressed fashion from Stephen Majeski and David Sylvan, "Modeling Theories of Constitutive Relations in Politics" (unpublished manuscript, Feb. 19, 2000, Microsoft Word file); for an application, see Majeski and Sylvan, "How Foreign Policy Recommendations Are Put Together: A Computational Model with Empirical Applications," *International Interactions* 25, no. 4 (1999): 301–32.

17. The researcher will also need to specify threshold criteria for how many assemblage relations of a given type are representative of the narrative.

18. In constructivist writings, one finds occasional references to "narrative" but, to the best of my knowledge, no analysis of assemblage relations by which narratives are constituted. Cf. Audie Klotz and Cecelia Lynch, *Strategies for Research in Constructivist International Relations* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2007), chap. 3.

19. Alexander Wendt, "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory," *International Organization* 41, no. 3 (1987): 357. See also Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 249; Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 158; Onuf, "Constructivism: A User's Manual," in *International Relations in a Constructed World*, ed. Venduka Kubálková, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 63.

20. The principal target cum cynosure of Wendt and other early constructivists was Kenneth Waltz. Note that although early constructivists' work followed hot on the heels of post-structuralist writings, the key "post" aspect of the latter—namely, that there are multiple possible structures possible in any set of elements, with the dominance of one particular structure being a historical artifact—was largely left by the wayside.

21. Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979), chap. 2; Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism, Vol. 1, Power, Property, and the State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), chap. 1; Rom

Harré, *Social Being: A Theory for Social Psychology* (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, 1979), chap. 2. Cf. David Sylvan and Barry Glassner, *A Rationalist Methodology for the Social Sciences* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), chap. 4.

22. Roy Bhaskar, "Beef, Structure, and Place: Notes from a Critical Naturalist Perspective," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 13, no. 1 (1983): 84.

23. Sacks was a student of Harold Garfinkel, the sociologist who coined the term *ethnomethodology* for his work on mechanisms of social order that are locally produced, in situ, and bottom-up (all synonyms). Sacks, who died in a car accident in 1975, did not publish most of his work, but his students tape-recorded his lectures, and transcripts of those lectures had a profound influence on the new field of conversation analysis. The transcripts were subsequently published in *Lectures on Conversation*, 2 vols., ed. Gail Jefferson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). Numerous overviews of conversation analysis now exist; one I have found useful for teaching purposes is Jack Sidnell's *Conversation Analysis: An Introduction* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). Recent work is published in a number of places (e.g., *Human Studies*, *Journal of Pragmatics*), but the journal *Research on Language and Social Interaction* is, in effect, the official periodical of the International Society for Conversation Analysis.

24. Sidnell, *Conversation Analysis*, 2.

25. Cf. Paul Seedhouse, "Conversation Analysis Methodology," *Language Learning* 54, no. S1 (2004): 1–54. One of the hallmark papers in conversation analysis concludes similarly that the key aspect of conversations—their turn-taking character—is structured as "locally managed, party-administered, interactionally controlled, and sensitive to recipient design [orientation and sensitivity of parties to each other]" (Harvey Sacks, Emanuel A. Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, "A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation," *Language* 50, no. 4 [1974]: 696. The terms *indexical* and *achievement* (which I use in the text) are fetish terms in ethnomethodology: the former signifies that many of the phrases used in social interaction are specific to time and place (e.g., "now" and "here") and thus that the produced order is genuinely bottom-up; the latter points to the fact that the order in question involves effort and is not a matter of mechanically applying generic rules.

26. Emanuel A. Schegloff, *Sequence Organization in Interaction: A Primer in Conversation Analysis*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

27. Emanuel A. Schegloff and Harvey Sacks, "Opening Up Closings," *Semiotica* 8, no. 4 (1973): 289–327.

28. Several points should be noted here. First, although the entire point of conversation analysis is to adduce patterns of, and test hypotheses about, the microassemblage relations between interlocutors, little work in the field explicitly analyzes conversations as narratives (there is work on stories told in the course of conversations, but up to now, that work has mostly been on how such stories are announced or recounted if they are lengthy or on how they are distinguished from other conversational elements; see, e.g., Sidnell, *Conversation Analysis*, chap. 9). Second, by the same token, despite the extremely technical nature of much work in conversation analysis, computational approaches have only recently begun to be used (see the references below about adjacency pairs). Third, as I touch on below, the mechanics of coding adjacency pairs to evaluate assemblage relations is presently a lengthy process involving numerous passes through a conversational transcript; although there are numerous functional forms

that assemblage can involve, the actual computation is, at least given current limitations in parsing technology, much less involved a task than the prior one of coding pairs.

29. However, cf. Gavan Duffy and Evelyn Goh, "Testing Sincerity: Henry Kissinger's February 1973 Encounter with the Chinese Leadership," *Journal of Language and Politics* 7, no. 1 (2008): 1–30.

30. The parses are manual for two reasons. First, there are large numbers of indexical expressions, which make the use of standard parsing corpora (many of which are drawn from newspaper articles) of only limited use in identifying both the coreferential terms ("he," "it") that permit adjacency pairs to be identified and the argumentative speech acts that indicate what is going on in the backward and forward chaining in each adjacency pair (e.g., seeing "they," in the first conversation, as a responsibility switch from "all of us together"). Second, the usual way of "training" automated parsers—namely, hand-correcting initial parses—is only feasible with large textual corpora, which obviously is not the case for isolated conversations lasting perhaps fifteen minutes. For further discussion and references on these points, see David Sylvan, "Automated Detection of Political Rejoinders: Identifying Adjacency Pairs in Diplomatic Conversations" (paper presented at the Fifth Annual Conference of the European Political Science Association, Vienna, June 26, 2015).

31. Writing the actual computer code for the counting and matching is straightforward; trickier is setting the threshold for "most common," particularly when each interlocutor frequently resorts to two or more specific speech acts. Neither the literature on narratives nor that on conversations says much about this issue.

32. Memorandum of a telephone conversation between Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, October 26, 1983, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/displaydocument.asp?docid=109426. Note that most turns are labeled with two speech acts: the first points back to the turn that, together with the current turn, makes up the preceding adjacency pair; the second points forward to the next turn (the following adjacency pair). The exceptions to this are the start of a passage or the end of the conversation as a whole, in which cases there is only one speech act.

33. Additional evidence of this label comes from press commentary years later, when the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library released the actual audiotapes: see, e.g., the following articles from November 10, 2014: "Reagan Apologised to Angry Thatcher over Grenada, Tapes Reveal," *Guardian*, http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/nov/10/reagan-apologise-angry-thatcher-grenada-white-house-tapes; "Reagan's Apology to Thatcher over Grenada Revealed," BBC News, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-29986729; "Reagan Apologized to Thatcher for Grenada Invasion," *Time*, http://time.com/3576221/ronald-reagan-margaret-thatcher-new-tapes/; "Listen: When Reagan Apologized to Thatcher for a U.S. Invasion," *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/11/10/listen-when-reagan-apologized-to-thatcher-for-a-u-s-invasion/.

34. UN Security Council resolution S/16077/Rev.1, condemning the invasion of Grenada by US troops, received eleven votes (including from three US allies) and three abstentions (including from the United Kingdom) and had to be vetoed by the United States.

35. "Transcript: Bush and Blair's Unguarded Chat," BBC News, July 18, 2006,

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/5188258.stm. The conversation ends here abruptly (which is why there are two speech acts, rather than one, as a closing would involve) because Blair figured out that the microphone was live and tapped it, and the technician presumably flipped the switch off.

36. "It Wasn't the 'Yo' That Was Humiliating, It Was the 'No'," *Guardian*, July 23, 2006, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/jul/23/comment.politics; "'Private' Chat Heard by World Caps Disastrous G8 Summit for Blair," *Independent*, July 17, 2006, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/private-chat-heard-by-world-caps-disastrous-g8-summit-for-blair-6095108.html. Geoffrey Wheatcroft wrote that Bush treated Blair "like a put-upon valet, a part Blair played very convincingly": *Yo, Blair: Tony Blair's Disastrous Premiership* (London: Politico's Publishing, 2007), 6.