

COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES IN CONVERSATION
THE CASE OF SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE

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The question of artistic verisimilitude -- the relationship between the representation and the reality -- is one of the more intriguing issues in a theory of aesthetics. Until now, linguists have largely been isolated from this area of philosophical speculation because it seemed irrelevant to our interests and impervious to our methodology. But as we get more involved in the formal analysis of naturalistic conversation -- through tape recordings or transcripts -- we are struck, often, in a perverse way by their apparent unnaturalness, their difficulty in being understood. Compared, say, with the dialog in a play or a novel, naturalistic conversation strikes us as not what we expected, not working by preconceived pattern.

We would not claim that constructed dialog represents a reality lacking in transcripts, but rather that artificial dialog may represent an internalized model or schema for the production of conversation -- a competence model if you will, that speakers have access to. If, then, we are interested in discovering the ideal model of conversational strategy, there is much to be gained by looking at artificial conversation first, to see what these general unconsciously-adhered to assumptions are; and later to return to natural conversation to see how they may actually be exemplified in literal use. Thus, we are not claiming that the artificially-constructed dialog we are going to discuss literally represents natural conversation, but rather that one can inspect a different level of psychological reality and validity through the use of literary data, and in this paper we will illustrate how such work might responsibly be done. In this sense, our work here is in support of a theory of communicative competence -- the knowledge a speaker has at his/her disposal to determine what s/he can expect to hear in a discourse, and what s/he is reasonably expected to contribute, in terms of the implicitly internalized assumptions made in her/his speech community about such matters.

We need, then, some notion of what parameters the speaker can use as reference-points in determining how a contribution can appropriately be made in a particular context. The speaker must know first, what sort of extralinguistic facts pertain: what kind of a conversation it is, how well the participants know one another, what sorts of things must be communicated; and additionally, what mode of communication is the normal style for each speaker -- what can be expected of each from prior acquaintance and/or a priori assumptions based on age, sex, social position, and so on. All this specific information need not be directly represented as part of the speaker's specifically linguistic competence; but what is reflected in her/his pragmatic grammar is a general schema, a theory of communicative competence.

It has been suggested (Lakoff 1979) that there are four principal foci of communicative competence: that is, that while competence itself comprises a continuum, with infinite possible points prescribing the appropriate interaction for an individual in a particular setting, these infinite possibilities are organized in terms of four targets, and which target is relevant depends on the participant's perception of her/his role in the conversational setting as s/he perceives it. For each person, in any culture, there is a more or less unconscious sense of an idealized interactional human being: an idealized human being behaves in such a way, in this setting. The four points as they have been specified are: (1) distance. The aim is to inspire separateness and privacy. The least intrusiveness is the best. Hostility is not expressed therefore by confrontation (which is unthinkable) but by sarcasm, irony, impersonality. (2) deference. The aim is to avoid imposition. That is, unlike distance, deference allows interaction as long as the speaker does not attempt to get the upper hand. Hostility cannot be directly expressed, but can be made clear enough through questions or silence, for instance. (3) camaraderie. The aim here is to acknowledge interrelationship. Participants are to express their equality and their feelings toward one another, friendly or hostile. The ideal is to be totally open, though openness in this mode is as politeness is to the others -- it can be conventional, though this is not perceptible to people who don't use this mode as an ideal. (4) clarity. Where the other modes implicitly or explicitly expressed relatedness, or the fact that the relationship was an important part of the communication, clarity is used where the pure expression of factual information is at issue. Hence closeness or distance is not an issue. This is not normally a possibility in ordinary dyadic communication; it is found with television newscasters (sometimes), or with certain forms of lecturing.

Our task then is to select a constructed example of dialog, discover what each participant's preferred strategy is, or whether what it appears to be is what it really is, and why; and talk about how the writer's realization of his characters' styles represents a reality that has correlates, if not necessarily direct ones, in more naturalistic texts.

We could have selected any of a wide variety of examples. We had to choose between plays, movies, novels, television -- just as a start. We felt that a genre that used dialog as the principal expository means of expressing characters and their relationships would make our position clearest. Novelists have many other techniques to fall back on, but for a playwright, dialog and its concomitant extralinguistic behavior is all the audience has to go on. Interpretation must be done by the viewer, or listener -- as in actual conversation; whereas in the novel, the novelist by careful selection and description can do a lot of his/her own interpretive work.

We wanted to find a contemporary example, as that would be the clearest to us. We needed something with a lot of dialog between

relatively few people -- so that register differences would be minimized, and we would be dealing with something like a minimal pair. We would want to examine as many possible interactional types between as few participants as possible -- to see what a single individual's or two people's strategies were, when confronted by different contexts. That is, we wanted the largest possible sample of conversational situations involving the smallest number of people, to maximize the contributions and types of contributions of each.

We wanted something that was supposed to approximate natural conversation, and that would seem to its audience as natural and as something they could identify with, something similar to their intuitive assumptions about ordinary conversation. Ideally, we would have preferred a contemporary American setting. But when practical considerations are involved -- amount of text, availability, and so on -- what we found to be the most useful compromise was the screenplay of the original 6-hour television version of Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes From a Marriage*. There is the possibility that Swedish couples do not talk to each other as American couples do, but the successful reception of this work in the United States, both in the shortened movie version and the complete version presented several times on PBS in the last year, indicates that we can understand perfectly well what's going on, and that although there may be slight differences in a particular choice of how to say a particular thing, the general concepts are universal, or at least the same in Swedish and American conversation.

Throughout *Scenes From a Marriage*, the metastrategy agreed upon by both Johan and Marianne is distance: the avoidance of the couple's deep differences and dissatisfactions, while maintaining the illusion of camaraderie: open communication and rapport. This can be seen clearly in Scene 1, when Johan and Marianne are discussing the grisly display of mutual viciousness in the breakdown of the marriage of their friends Peter and Katarina. Marianne proclaims that the problem with Peter and Katarina is that "They don't speak the same language," and she contrasts this with what she sees as the happy situation of Johan and herself:

- (1) Marianne: Think of us. We talk everything over and we understand each other instantly. We speak the same language. That's why we have such a good relationship.¹

In fact, evidence to the contrary abounds in this very discussion. Johan does not agree with Marianne at all; he contends that Peter's and Katarina's problems stem from their money, and he responds to Marianne's analysis with characteristic sarcasm: "You and your languages" (27). She in turn chides him, "You always confuse the issue" (27), and she employs characteristic condescension: "You're sillier than I thought" (28).

The contrast between surface camaraderie and underlying distance is the theme of Scene 2, entitled "The Art of Sweeping Under the Rug." When one partner tries to break the system by expressing dissatisfaction, the other "sweeps it under the rug" to maintain the

surface of harmony. In the beginning of Scene 2 it is Marianne who expresses dissatisfaction:

- (2) Marianne: Just think about it. Our life's mapped out into little squares -- every day, every hour, every minute. And on every square it's written what we're supposed to do. The squares are filled in one by one and in good time. If there's suddenly an empty square we're dismayed and scrawl something onto it at once.
- (3) Johan: But we have our vacation.
- (4) Marianne (with a laugh): Johan! You haven't a clue to what I mean. On our vacation we have more of a schedule than ever. It's all Mummy's fault, actually. And your mother's not much better.
- (5) Johan (laughing): What have the dear old ladies done wrong?
- (6) Marianne: You don't understand anyway, so there's no point talking about it. (44-45)

Marianne makes several other attempts to articulate her discontent, and Johan uses a variety of strategies to deflect her attempts. He blames her mood on her period ("Is it the curse?" [44]); he evades a direct request for information ("Do you like coming home?") with an ironic rhetorical one ("Is everything so awfully complicated today?" [48]); he is sarcastic ("You're suffering from mother persecution mania" [49]); he evades another direction information question ("Did you want your life to be like this?") with pontification ("I think that life has the value you give it, neither more nor less. I refuse to live under the eye of eternity" [49]).

Later in Scene 2, Marianne asks Johan to meet her for lunch, and she suggests that they take a trip in order to bring them closer together. Johan is unenthusiastic, and Marianne gives up the idea. Again, she declares that communication between them is open, and Johan agrees, although we know from the next Scene that he too is deeply dissatisfied; in fact, he is having an intense love affair with another woman. Nonetheless, he dismisses Marianne's inklings of trouble and supports her declaration of communication:

- (7) Marianne (searchingly): Has something happened?
- (8) Johan: Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I swear.
- (9) Marianne: We're pretty honest with each other, you and I. Aren't we?
- (10) Johan: I think so.
- (11) Marianne: It's awful to go around bottling things up. One must speak out, however painful it is. Don't you think?
- (12) Johan (irritably): Hell, yes. What time is it?
- (13) Marianne: One fifteen.
- (14) Johan: My watch is always stopping. What were you saying? Oh yes, honesty. I suppose you mean over sex, to put it bluntly.
- (15) Marianne: Sometimes I think we...
- (16) Johan: People can't always live cheek by jowl. It would

be too tiring.

(17) Marianne: Yes, that is the big question.

(18) Johan: Anyway, I must go now. (66-67)

In this dialog, it is Marianne who purports to believe in talking about everything, and Johan who proclaims that some things are best not talked about (especially things sexual). Later in the same scene, they exchange roles. Faced with Johan's admitted dissatisfaction with their sex life, Marianne espouses the distance strategy:

(19) Marianne: Let me tell you this. You can talk too much about these things.

(20) Johan (Giving up): I suspect you're right.

(21) Marianne: I know you're supposed to tell everything and not keep anything secret, but in this particular matter I think it's wrong.

(22) Johan (Who has heard this before): Yes, you're probably right.

(23) Marianne (Following up her advantage): There are things which must be allowed to live their life in a half-light, away from prying eyes.

(24) Johan (Total retreat): You think so?

(25) Marianne: I'm quite convinced of it. (75)

More abstractly, Johan and Marianne can be seen to be using similar devices, though not necessarily at the same time nor to the same end. Their conversational contributions display a pattern of deep and surface structure which replicates, on the pragmatic level, the basic semantic relations of synonymy, homonymy, and identity. That is, Marianne and Johan alternately use:

I. Pragmatic synonymy (the use of different linguistic devices to achieve similar ends).

II. Pragmatic homonymy (the use of similar linguistic devices to achieve different ends).

III. Pragmatic identity (the use of the same linguistic device toward the same end).

Pragmatic identity can be seen, for example, in the fact that both Johan and Marianne employ the tactic of proposing sleep when unpleasant information is confronted. Johan does this in Scene 2 when he and Marianne begin to argue about their sexual problems:

(26) Marianne: Then I don't understand.

(27) Johan: Let's drop the subject now and go to bed. It's late anyway. (74)

Marianne adopts the same strategy in Scene 3, when Johan has told her that he is planning to leave her for another woman:

(28) Johan: You know the truth now and that's the main thing.

(29) Marianne: I know nothing. Let's go to bed. It's late. (86)

The suggestion of sleep is a variant of the broader tactic of suggesting that a painful subject not be discussed. At the very

beginning of the film, Marianne and Johan are being interviewed for a woman's magazine. When the interviewer asks Marianne for her opinions about love in marriage, Marianne becomes upset and says, "I can't see through this problem, so I'd rather not talk about it" (13). In Scene 5, she is trying to tell Johan that they must get a divorce, whereas he has changed his mind. Just when he seems to be seeing her point, she says, "Let's not talk about it" (165). This is just what Johan says in Scene 3, after he has told Marianne that he has decided to leave her: "We'd better not talk. There's nothing sensible to say in any case" (86). Just as Marianne did not want to talk to the interviewer about love, Johan in Scene 5 begins to tell Marianne about his unhappiness with his girlfriend Paula but then stops: "I can't talk about this. You know it all anyway" (161). It has already been seen how Marianne uses this strategy in Scene 2 when Johan fails to respond to her expressions of dissatisfaction in their marriage (6).

Pragmatic synonymy can be seen when Johan and Marianne use different linguistic devices to achieve similar ends. In order to avoid unpleasant topics, Marianne characteristically uses excessive verbiage made up of trifling details or a barrage of questions. These questions take the form either of deferential offers to give aid or of unrealistic appeals to romanticism of the "Why can't..." sort. Johan characteristically employs the distancing strategies of sarcasm, pontification, pompousness, and talking on a theoretical plane. Both partners can be seen rubbing in a temporary conversational victory, but Johan does this by increasing sarcasm, while Marianne intensifies a strategy of patronization in which she treats him as if he were a child.

At the outset of Scene 3, Johan returns unexpectedly early to the country house where Marianne is about to go to bed alone. The stage directions supply a non-verbal analog to Marianne's verbal strategies:

Before he has time to take his coat off, she flings her arms around his neck, hugs him, and gives him four loud kisses.

(30) Marianne: Here already! You weren't coming home until tomorrow. What a lovely surprise. Are you hungry? And me with my hair in curlers. How good of you to come this evening. The children are asleep, we went to bed early. There was nothing on TV and we thought it would be nice to have an early night. The girls and I have been dieting today. Would you like an omelette or a sandwich and some beer?

(31) Johan. That sounds good.

(32) Marianne: Or would like a real meal? Shall I fry some eggs and bacon? Or heat some soup? (81)

The ensuing conversation reveals that Marianne and Johan had a fight on the phone when they last talked, and that she immediately called him back, but got no answer. That, coupled with his unexpected arrival late at night, might give her reason to suspect

some unpleasant news. After making some hasty comments about their telephone argument, Marianne launches a long and irrelevant soliloquy about life-as-it-should-be, occasioned by her announcement that she will eat a sandwich despite her diet.

- (33) Marianne: Sometimes everything seems utterly pointless. Why should we grudge ourselves all the good things in the world? Why can't we be big and fat and good-tempered? Just think how nice it would make us. Do you remember Aunt Miriam and Uncle David? They were perfect dears and got along so well together, and they were so fat! And every night they lay there in the big creaky double bed, holding hands and content with each other just as they were, fat and cheerful. Couldn't you and I be like Aunt Miriam and Uncle David and go around looking comfortable and safe? Shall I take my curlers out? (83)

Johan's characteristic strategy is sarcasm. This has already been seen in a number of examples ("You and your languages" [27]; "What have the dear old ladies done wrong?" [45]; "You're suffering from mother persecution mania" [49]). Other examples abound. In addition to sarcasm, Johan characteristically pontificates: he talks in broad generalities, using high-flown language. For example, in Scene 3, when Marianne refers to the fact that she called him back after their telephone argument and he did not answer the phone, Johan avoids the admission that he was with his girlfriend by launching a pompous diatribe aimed at government bureaucrats:

- (34) Marianne: I called you right back, but you must have pulled the plug out.
 (35) Johan: I was pretty tired last night. I'd been out all day at the institute with the zombie from the ministry. You wonder sometimes who these idiots are who sit on the state moneybags and determine our weal and woe. (82)

When Marianne asks simply, in Scene 2, "Did you want your life to be like this?" Johan evades with a similar strategy:

- (36) Johan: I think that life has the value you give it, neither more nor less. I refuse to live under the eye of eternity. (49)

It is interesting to note the consistency with which each partner uses her/his habitual strategies. When Marianne tries to use sarcasm, Johan does not let her get away with it; in fact, he rebukes her with sarcasm of his own:

- (37) Johan: I don't have much self-knowledge and I understand very little of reality in spite of having read a lot of books. But something tells me that this catastrophe is a chance in a million for both of us.
 (38) Marianne: Is it Paula who has put such nonsense into your head? Just how naive can you get?
 (39) Johan: We can do without taunts and sarcastic remarks in this conversation.

(40) Marianne: You're right. I'm sorry. (95)

Pragmatic homonymy describes the phenomenon by which speakers use the same linguistic devices to achieve similar ends. For example, both partners employ a barrage of rhetorical questions. In (33) Marianne asks a string of "Why can't ..." questions which serve the surface function of camaraderie by involving Johan in an idealized romantic vision of their life, yet their underlying purpose is distance: to avoid their real problems.

Johan also asks strings of rhetorical questions (many more in fact), but he uses them quite differently:

(41) Johan: Do you know how long I've had this in mind?
Can you guess? I don't mean about Paula, but about
leaving you and the children and our home. Can you guess?
(88)

Johan's rhetorical questions function as taunts. Similarly, he utters a string of questions which purport to represent what Marianne is thinking:

(42) Marianne: You're putting me in a ridiculous and
intolerable position. Surely you can see that.
(43) Johan: I know just what you mean. What are our parents
going to think? What will my sister think, what will
our friends think? Jesus Christ, how tongues are going
to wag! How will it affect the girls, and what will
their school friends' mothers think? And what about the
dinner parties we're invited to in September and October?
And what are you going to say to Katarina and Peter? (91)

Johan's questions serve the surface purpose of camaraderie by taunting, which seeks to rouse Marianne to anger and hence involvement. At the same time they fulfill the underlying function of distance by their rhetorical nature, which precludes reply.

These, then, are brief examples of the three pragmatic relations of identity, synonymy and homonymy. It has been shown that Marianne and Johan use questions quite differently. In order to thoroughly exemplify how verbal strategies operate on multiple levels, we will further examine the use of questions in a single scene: Scene 3, in which Johan returns to the country house to tell Marianne that he is leaving her for his lover, Paula.

In sheer numbers, Marianne asks nearly twice as many questions in Scene 3 as Johan: 63 to his 37. If questions seek to draw in the interlocutor by necessitating a response, then Marianne seeks involvement through her greater use of questions. It is even more revealing, however, to examine the types of questions they ask. Of Marianne's 63, 50 are real (in most cases they ask for information; in some they constitute offers [see example 30]). 13 of Marianne's questions are rhetorical; that is, no response is expected. Thus, 21% of Marianne's questions are rhetorical while 79% are real. Of Johan's 37 questions, 32 (86%) are rhetorical, and 5 (14%) are real. Marianne's preferred strategy is the information question, while Johan's preference is for the rhetorical question.

The purpose of Marianne's questions seems to be to involve Johan with her. For example, she asks a series of questions about his relationship with Paula. In addition, she uses the indirect speech act strategy of offering assistance in question form:

- (44) Marianne: Shall we pack now or have breakfast first?
Would you like tea or coffee, by the way? (98)
- (45) Marianne: Shall I pack the shaver, or will you take the one you have in town? (99)
- (46) Marianne: Do you want the receipt for the dry cleaners?... (99)
- (47) Marianne: Which pyjamas are you taking? (99)

She involves him, then, by seeking to participate in his departure.

While Marianne's information questions seek to draw Johan in by getting him to talk about himself, Johan's 5 real questions do not function this way. Three of those 5 real questions seek information about his belongings:

- (48) Johan: Do you know if my grey suit is here or in town? (86)
- (49) Johan: Do you know what has become of Speer's memoirs?
I'm sure I left the book on the bedside table. (98)
- (50) Johan [With reference to retrieving his grey suit]:
Which cleaners is it? (99)

Thus his questions devolve back on himself. Furthermore, while they draw attention to Marianne's involvement with him, they focus on her role as household manager, in contrast with Marianne's questions, which focus on Johan's personal state.

Whereas in Scene 2 Johan was sexually interested in Marianne and she avoided his advances, in Scene 3 she tries to interest him sexually, but he does not respond. For example, after her flight of fancy about Aunt Miriam and Uncle David, Marianne asks,

- (51) Marianne: Shall I take my curlers out? (83)

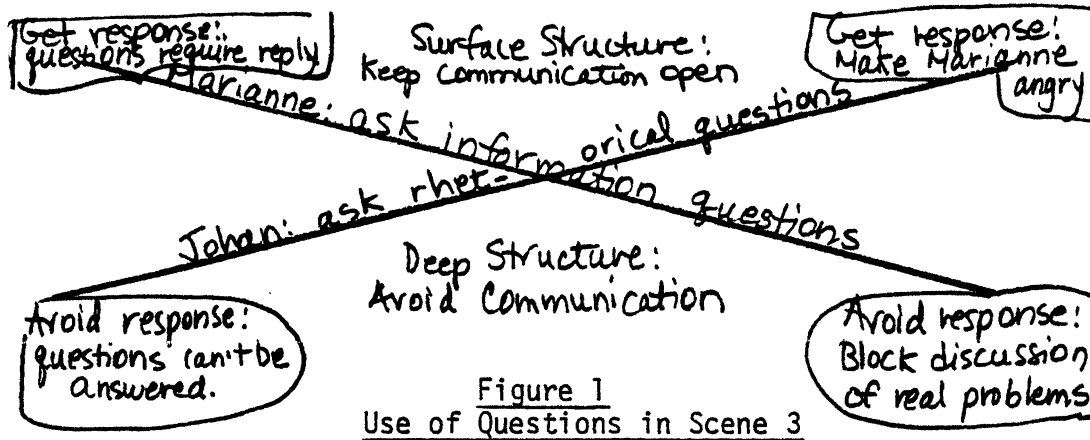
This seems like a prelude to lovemaking, but Johan demurs:

- (52) Johan: Don't mind me. (84)

Similarly, early in the Scene, she tries to elicit a remark from him about her body, but meets with indifference:

- (53) Marianne: I've lost over four pounds this last week.
Does it show?
- (54) Johan: No. (83)

The following diagram illustrates the ways in which Johan's and Marianne's strategies of questioning operate differently but ultimately collude to maintain a surface of open communication while maintaining the underlying purpose of avoiding communication.



In Figure 1, the diagonal lines represent Johan's and Marianne's use of questions: he asks rhetorical questions, while she asks information questions. Both strategies have the surface function of getting a response from the other, though they do this in different ways. Her information questions require answers, and his rhetorical questions seek to rouse anger. However, the underlying purpose of both strategies is to avoid communication. Rhetorical questions cannot be answered, and Marianne's information questions invite talk about issues other than their own problems.

This deep complicity underlying the dissension between Johan and Marianne is a key to the general plot of the series. At first glance, it is puzzling that these two apparently so compatible people should have to separate; but after a while, what becomes still more curious is that these two people who apparently are continually at odds with each other cannot stay apart. We who watch feel that it makes sense -- we know relationships like this -- but offhand it seems merely paradoxical, one of the inexplicable mysteries of human psychology. But if we disentangle Johan's and Marianne's communicative strategies thoroughly enough, the mystery turns out to be quite predictable.

Johan and Marianne become quite aware of their surface discord and, somewhat more dimly, of their deeper stylistic incompatibility. What they do not see is their essential complicity at the deepest level: their implicit agreement to disagree. Because of that underlying and overriding similarity of intent and desire, this couple actually has a great deal in common. It may not make for pleasant or productive communication, but the similarity creates a need, and an indissoluble bond between them. As long as they both are in this close bond, they cannot break apart. But as long as they are operating under different assumptions about what constitutes an effective or appropriate contribution, they will create friction between them with everything they say. We can look at the situation diagrammatically:

Figure 2

SURFACE:	Johan & Marianne both ask questions	MATCH
DEEPER LEVEL:	Johan's questions are distancing Marianne's questions generate rapport	CONFLICT
DEEPEST LEVEL:	Johan's & Marianne's stylistic differences cause shared implicit strategy: non-communication	MATCH

So in the most complex case, illustrated above, there is a dual shift between match and conflict; sometimes, as when one asks questions and the other utters sarcastic jibes, the first two levels both represent conflict, but the third level always matches.

The levels of cooperation and conflict create a sort of paradoxical communicative situation: people can operate in complicity by talking at apparent cross-purposes, and an understanding of their communicative strategies is only possible through a recognition of this paradox. What is apparently conflict-ridden and anti-communicative is in effect deeply satisfying the participants.

The situation in *Scenes From a Marriage*, then, has overtones of the Batesonian double bind (Bateson 1972) in which a paradoxical communicative strategy keeps participants from fulfilling their communicative needs. A double bind, however, is by definition unilateral: it is effected from above by an authority who himself or herself remains free. But the situation here, while it has certain aspects of the double bind, is bilateral: it is arrived at by negotiation by both participants, both derive equal benefit, and it can be resolved by both participants together. In this way, while it creates confusion and conflict in its participants, it is not pathogenic in the way the double bind is.

In this paper, taking *Scenes From a Marriage* as a text, we have suggested both a new methodology for interpreting communication and a new development of a theory of communicative competence. We have argued that the examination of a constructed text enables us to inspect pragmatic competence -- speakers' abstract knowledge of what is expected of them in a discourse -- perhaps more effectively than natural texts can do. We have also given some evidence of the complexity of communicative strategies and the number of factors participants are operating with. We show that pragmatic structures, like those elsewhere in grammar, entail a multi-leveled analysis, from superficially accessible to deep and implicit, and that contributions of different participants can be related to each other in terms of their functioning as pragmatic paraphrases, ambiguities, or identities. We argue finally on this basis that the choice of forms and the effects of these forms can only be understood with reference to these levels, and that both the structure of a single conversation and the pattern of an entire relationship is explicable in terms of the matchings and conflicts among the consciously-accessible and deeper levels of the participants' conversational strategies.

Notes

¹Ingmar Bergman, *Scenes From a Marriage*, translated by Alan Blair, NY: Bantam, 1974, p. 26. All quotations are taken from this edition. Future page references will appear in the text.

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