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Seventeen Times Six Equals Eleven-Twelve: A Multi-Level Analysis of a Conversation with Donald Trump

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Abstract

In this work, we apply a variety of theoretical perspectives and tools to discourse from a popular talk show. We describe how participants in a 72-second excerpt from The Howard Stern Show marshal social, cognitive, and linguistic resources to negotiate the answer to a simple arithmetic problem. Our interdisciplinary analysis of the interaction identifies phenomena occurring at multiple levels as eight people are clamoring to influence the conversation in their own way, arguing, interrupting one another, aligning on certain phrases, and generating embodied mental imagery. While math errors are common human mistakes, the social dominance effects that allow a wrong answer to be accepted as a correct answer are concerning. We conclude that when multiple theoretical perspectives and tools are applied together on real-world linguistic phenomena, there is a multi-scale richness and massive interactivity that is sometimes neglected when language scientists focus solely on a single level of analysis.