

## The Parameters of Conversational Style

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There are several dimensions along which verbalization responds to context, resulting in individual and social differences in conversational style. Style, as I use the term, is not something extra added on, like decoration. Anything that is said must be said in some way; co-occurrence expectations of that "way" constitute style. The dimensions of style I will discuss are:

1. Fixity vs. novelty
2. Cohesiveness vs. expressiveness
3. Focus on content vs. interpersonal involvement.

### Fixity vs. novelty

Any utterance or sequence must be identified (rightly or wrongly, in terms of interlocutor's intentions) with a recognizable frame, as it conforms more or less to a familiar pattern. Every utterance and interaction is formulaic, or conventionalized, to some degree. There is a continuum of formulaicness from utterly fixed strings of words (situational formulas: "Happy birthday," "Welcome home," "Gezundheit") and strings of events (rituals), to new ideas and acts put together in a new way. Of course, the latter does not exist except as an idealization. Even the most novel utterance is to some extent formulaic, as it must use familiar words (witness the absurdity of Humpty Dumpty's assertion that when he uses a word it means whatever he wants it to mean, and notice that he chooses to exercise this license with only one word); syntax (again Lewis Carroll is instructive: the "comprehensibility" of Jabberwocky); intonation; coherence principles (cf Alton Becker); and content (Mills' "vocabularies of motives," e.g.). All these are limited by social convention. Familiarity with the patterns is necessary for the signalling of meaning both as prescribed and agreed upon, and as cued by departure from the pattern (cf Hymes).

For example, a situational formula is a handy way to signal familiar meaning, but if the formula is not known the meaning may be lost entirely, as when a Greek says to an American cook, "Health to your hands." If meaning is not entirely lost, at least a level of resonance is lost, when reference is implicit to a fixed pattern which is unfamiliar to the interlocutor. For example, when living in Greece and discussing the merits of buying an icebox with a Greek friend, I asked, "Doesn't the iceman cometh?" After giggling alone in the face of his puzzled look, I ended up feeling I hadn't communicated at all. Indeed I hadn't.

### Cohesiveness vs. expressiveness

This is the basic linguistic concept of markedness and is in a sense another facet of the above distinction. What is prescribed by the pattern for a given context, and what is furnished by the speaker for this instance? To what extent is language being used to signal "business as usual," as opposed to signalling, "Hey, look at this!" This distinction shows up on every level of verbalization too: lexical choice, pitch and amplitude, prosody, content, genre, and so on. For example, if someone uses an expletive, is this a sign of intense anger or is it her/his usual way of talking? If they reveal a personal experience or feeling, is that evidence that you are a special friend, or do they talk that way to everybody? Is overlap a way of trying to take the floor away from you or is it their way of showing interest in what you're saying? Of course, ways of signalling special meaning -- expressiveness -- are also prescribed by cultural convention, as the work of John Gumperz shows. The need to distinguish between individual and social differences is thus intertwined with the need to distinguish between cohesive and ex-

pressive intentions. One more example will be presented, based on spontaneous conversation taped during Thanksgiving dinner, among native speakers of English from different ethnic and geographic backgrounds.

In responding to stories and comments told by speakers from Los Angeles of Anglican/Irish background, speakers of New York Jewish background often uttered paralinguistically gross sounds and phrases ("WHAT!?" "How INTEResting!" "You're KIDding!" "Ewwwww!"). In this context, these "exaggerated" responses had the effect of stopping conversational flow. In contrast, when similar responses were uttered while listening to stories and comments by speakers of similar background, they had the effect of greasing the conversational wheels, encouraging conversation. Based on the rhythm and content of the speakers' talk, as well as their discussions during playback (i.e. listening to the tape afterwards), I could hypothesize that for the New Yorkers such "expressive" responses are considered business as usual; an enthusiasm constraint is operating, whereby a certain amount of expressiveness is expected to show interest. It is a cohesive device, a conventionally accepted way of having conversation. In contrast, such responses were unexpected to the Californians and therefore were taken by them to signal, "Hold it! There's something wrong here." Consequently, they stopped and waited to find out what was wrong. Of course such differences have interesting implications for the ongoing interaction, but what is at issue here is the contrast between the cohesive and expressive use of the feature.

### Focus on content vs. interpersonal involvement

Any utterance is at the same time a statement of content (Bateson's 'message') and a statement about the relationship between interlocutors ('metamessage'). In other words, there is what I am saying, but also what it means that I am saying this in this way to this person at this time. In interaction, talk can recognize, more or less explicitly and more or less emphatically (these are different), the involvement between interlocutors. It has been suggested that the notion that meaning can stand alone, that only content is going on, is associated with literacy, with printed text. But certainly relative focus on content or on interpersonal involvement can be found in either written or spoken form. I suspect, for example, that one of the reasons many people find interaction at scholarly conferences difficult and stressful is the conventional recognition of only the content level, whereas in fact there is a lot of involvement among people and between the people and the content. Whereas the asking of a question following a paper is conventionally a matter of exchange of information, in fact it is also a matter of presentation of self, as Goffman has demonstrated for all forms of behavior.

A reverse phenomenon has been articulated by Gail Dreyfuss. The reason many people feel uncomfortable, if not scornful, about encounter group talk and "psychobabble" is that it makes explicit information about relationships which people are used to signalling on the meta level.

Relative focus on content gives rise to what Kay (1977) calls "autonomous" language, wherein maximal meaning is encoded lexically, as opposed to signalling it through use of paralinguistic and nonlinguistic channels, and wherein maximal background information is furnished, as opposed to assuming it is already known as a consequence of shared experience. Of course this is an idealization as well, as no meaning at all could be communicated if

there were no common experience, as Fillmore (1979) amply demonstrates. It is crucial, then, to know the operative conventions. As much of my own early work shows, a hint (i.e. indirect communication) can be missed if a listener is unaware that the speaker defines the context as one in which hints are appropriate. What is intended as relatively direct communication can be taken to mean for more, or simply other, than what is meant if the listener is unaware that the speaker defines the context as one in which hints are inappropriate. A common example seems to be communication between intimates in which one partner, typically the female, assumes, "We know each other so well that you will know what I mean without my saying it outright; all I need do is hint"; while the other partner, typically the male, assumes, "We know each other so well that you will tell me what you want."

Furthermore, there are various ways of honoring interpersonal involvement, as service of two overriding human goals. These have been called, by Brown and Levinson (1978), positive and negative politeness, building on R. Lakoff's stylistic continuum from camaraderie to distance (1973) and Goffman's presentational and avoidance rituals (1967). These and other schemata recognize the universal human needs to 1) be connected to other people and 2) be left alone. Put another way, there are universal, simultaneous, and conflicting human needs for community and independence.

Linguistic choices reflect service of one or the other of these needs in various ways. The paralinguistically gross listener responses mentioned above are features in an array of devices which I have hypothesized place the signalling load (Gumperz' term) on the need for community. Other features co-occurring in the speech of many speakers of this style include fast rate of speech; fast turn-taking; preference for simultaneous speech; tendency to introduce new topics without testing the conversational waters through hesitation and other signals; persistence in introducing topics not picked up by others; storytelling; preference for stories told about personal experience and revealing emotional reaction of teller; talk about personal matters; overstatement for effect. (All of these features surfaced in the setting of a casual conversation at dinner; it would be premature to generalize for other settings). These and other features of the speech of the New Yorkers sometimes struck the Californians present as imposing, hence failing to honor their need for independence. The use of contrasting devices by the Californians led to the impression on some of the New Yorkers that they were deficient in honoring the need for community. Of course the underlying goals were not conceptualized by participants at the time. What was perceived was sensed as personality characteristics: "They're dominating," and "They're cold." Conversely, when style was shared, the conclusion was, "They're nice."

Perhaps many of these stylistic differences come down to differing attitudes toward silence. I suggest that the fast-talking style I have characterized above grows out of a desire to avoid silence, which has a negative value. Put another way, the unmarked meaning of silence, in this system, is evidence of lack of rapport. To other speakers -- for example, Athabaskan Indians, according to Basso (1972) and Scollon (1980) -- the unmarked meaning of silence is positive.

#### Individual and social differences

All of these parameters are intended to suggest processes that operate in signalling meaning in conversation. Analysis of cross-cultural differences is useful to make apparent processes that go unnoticed when signalling systems are shared.

An obvious question, one that has been indirectly addressed throughout the present discussion, confronts

the distinction between individual and cultural differences. We need to know, for the understanding of our own lives as much as for our theoretical understanding of discourse, how much of any speaker's style -- the linguistic and paralinguistic devices signalling meaning -- are prescribed by the culture, and which are chosen freely. The answer to this seems to resemble, one level further removed, the distinction between cohesive vs. expressive features. The answer, furthermore, must lie somewhere between fixity and novelty -- a matter of choices among alternatives offered by cultural convention.

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