

Discourse strategies

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Introduction

Communication is a social activity requiring the coordinated efforts of two or more individuals. Mere talk to produce sentences, no matter how well formed or elegant the outcome, does not by itself constitute communication. Only when a move has elicited a response can we say communication is taking place. To participate in such verbal exchanges, that is, to create and sustain conversational involvement, we require knowledge and abilities which go considerably beyond the grammatical competence we need to decode short isolated messages. We do not and cannot automatically respond to everything we hear. In the course of our daily activities we are exposed to a multitude of signals, many more than we could possibly have time to react to. Before even deciding to take part in an interaction, we need to be able to infer, if only in the most general terms, what the interaction is about and what is expected of us. For example, we must be able to agree on whether we are just chatting to pass the time, exchanging anecdotes or experiences, or whether the intent is to explore the details of particular issues. Once involved in a conversation, both speaker and hearer must actively respond to what transpires by signalling involvement, either directly through words or indirectly through gestures or similar nonverbal signals. The response, moreover, should relate to what we think the speaker intends, rather than to the literal meanings of the words used.

Consider the following conversation, recorded in a small office:

- (1) A: Are you gonna be here for ten minutes?
B: Go ahead and take your break. Take longer if you want to.
A: I'll just be outside on the porch.
 Call me if you need me.
B: O.K., don't worry.

The exchange is typical of the many brief interactive routines that fill our day and which for the most part pass without special notice. Speakers' moves and addressees' responses follow one another automatically. They tend to be produced without much conscious reflection and alternate with rhythmic synchronization to avoid awkward pauses. Yet if we ask what it is about the passage that leads us to perceive it as a normal everyday occurrence, we soon discover that the episode as a whole consists of more than just a collection of utterances. In other words, neither the grammatical form nor the meaning of individual words or sentences taken in isolation give any indication that they belong together or show how they continue to fit into a single theme.

Speaker A begins with a question which, as our knowledge of English tells us, requires a yes or no answer. Yet B's reply takes the form of a suggestion which does not overtly acknowledge A's question. The relationship between the two utterances becomes evident only if we assume that B implicitly or indirectly signals assent by the way in which she formulates her suggestion. But this raises further problems as to the nature of the knowledge involved in A's and B's ability to see beyond surface content and to understand such indirect messages. Since there are no overt linguistic cues, it seems reasonable to assume that both A and B rely on a shared understanding that the interaction takes place in an office and on their expectations of what normally goes on in offices. That is, it is taken for granted that both participants are office workers, that it is customary to take brief breaks in the course of a working day, and that staff members should cooperate in seeing that someone is present at all times. Such background assumptions then enable B to hypothesize that A is most probably asking her question because she wants to take her break and is checking to make sure that her absence will not inconvenience B. A's reply in the third utterance which implies that she does indeed intend to go out for a while, confirms this interpretation. B's final "O.K., don't worry" can then be understood as a reassurance that A's absence will not cause any problem. Conversationalists thus rely on indirect inferences which build on background assumptions about context, interactive goals and interpersonal relations to derive frames in terms of which they can interpret what is going on.

For reasons that will become clear in the course of this book, I believe that understanding presupposes conversational involvement.

A general theory of discourse strategies must therefore begin by specifying the linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge that needs to be shared if conversational involvement is to be maintained, and then go on to deal with what it is about the nature of conversational inference that makes for cultural, subcultural and situational specificity of interpretation.

Conversational analysis is a growing field of inquiry which during the last decade has been enriched by contributions from a number of disciplinary perspectives. For many years now linguists and other social scientists, mindful of the limitations of positivist-empiricist approaches to the study of human behavior, have been aware of the need for a deeper understanding of the functioning of verbal signs in human cooperative processes. Linguists, whose grammatical formalisms continue to have some success in clarifying the cognitive processes involved in word and sentence decoding, are nevertheless aware of the limitations of existing grammatical theories and have begun to look for new approaches to the study of conversational processes. Sociologists and psychologists have become centrally concerned with the analysis of communicative processes involved in human learning, social cooperation and underlying social evolution.

Research stimulated by such concerns provides new data and new analytical perspectives which must ultimately be incorporated into a general theory of pragmatics. To cite just a few examples, linguistic anthropologists employing ethnographic methods to survey what they call rules of speaking as they apply to speech events, have shown that language usage, norms for what counts as appropriate speech behavior, as well as the very definitions of such events vary from culture to culture and context to context. Findings are supported by micro-studies of non-verbal communication which examine the interplay of verbal and nonverbal signs in signalling context and constraining interpretive preferences. Among linguistic semanticists there are many who argue that the established grammarians' practice of concentrating on the referential meaning or truth value of isolated propositions is subject to serious theoretical objections. Semantic analysis, they contend, should properly concentrate on the study of speech acts, seen as units of human action. Other linguists have begun to focus on grammatical and semantic signals of textual cohesion and on the role of interpretive frames, scripts or schemata in understanding discourse (Fillmore 1977, Schank & Abelson

1977, Spiro, Bruce & Brewer 1980). Perhaps most directly relevant to the studies in this volume is the work of sociologists, who, building on the critical writings of Harold Garfinkel (1967), are creating a new tradition of conversational analysis which concentrates directly on verbal strategies of speaker/listener coordination as revealed in turn taking and other practices of conversational management.

Yet, important as these contributions are, we are still far from a general theory of verbal communication which integrates what we know about grammar, culture and interactive conventions into a single overall framework of concepts and analytical procedures. Each of the traditions cited tends to concentrate on certain parts of the total signalling process, while tacitly relying on findings and concepts reflecting other disciplinary perspectives when dealing with different facets of communicative signs. Thus, linguists build on the macro-sociologists' notion of group, status, role and social function in their discussions of social norms of language usage. Sociologists, on the other hand, employ the theoretical linguists' sentence level categories of referential semantics and syntax in their discussions of interactive strategy.

The main objects of study in most existing forms of conversational analysis are communicative signs as such and their patterning in texts, i.e. either in written prose passages or in transcripts of spoken dialogue. Almost all conversational data derive from verbal interaction in socially and linguistically homogeneous groups. There is a tendency to take for granted that conversational involvement exists, that interlocutors are cooperating, and that interpretive conventions are shared. The experience of modern industrial society with its history of communication breakdowns, of increasingly intricate constitutional and legal disputes and its record of educational failure, suggests that such assumptions may not fit the facts of modern urban life. We know that understanding presupposes the ability to attract and 'sustain others' attention. Yet so far we have no empirical methods for analyzing what is required in the way of shared linguistic and cultural knowledge to create and sustain conversational involvement.

This book attempts to deal with such issues by concentrating on the participants' ongoing process of interpretation in conversation and on what it is that enables them to perceive and interpret particu-

lar constellations of cues in reacting to others and pursuing their communicative ends. There is no question that the effective employment of communicative strategies presupposes grammatical competence and knowledge of the culture. But this does not mean that we can rely solely on existing grammars and ethnographies to explain how interlocutors make situated interpretations.

Returning for a moment to our conversational example, we could argue that the background assumptions we list in our discussion are part of the givens of American culture. But not all Americans are familiar with office behavior, and existing cultural analyses do not cover the details of office routine. Even if we did have exhaustive descriptions and the relevant knowledge were shared, we still need to ask what it is about the situation at hand that enables participants to retrieve relevant items of information. Moreover, the actual words A uses and the way she stresses them are of crucial importance in evoking the office routine frame. Had she used expressions such as "Do you intend to stay here?" or "Do you plan to go out?" or had she stressed the initial word "are" rather than "be here," the response might have been different and the course of the interaction would have been changed greatly. Such matters of idiom and sentence stress are, as we will show in our discussion, not ordinarily incorporated in grammatical descriptions. The study of conversational inference thus requires assumptions and procedures which are different from those used in either ethnography or grammatical analysis.

Seen from the perspective of the individual disciplines, analyzing inferential processes presents what must seem like almost insuperable problems. Yet conversational exchanges do have certain dialogic properties, which differentiate them from sentences or written texts and which enable us to avoid, or at least bypass, some of the difficulties involved in the study of isolated messages. Two such properties which are illustrated in our example are: (a) that interpretations are jointly negotiated by speaker and hearer and judgments either confirmed or changed by the reactions they evoke – they need not be inferred from a single utterance; and (b) that conversations in themselves often contain internal evidence of what the outcome is, i.e. of whether or not participants share interpretive conventions or succeed in achieving their communicative ends.

If episodes are selected to contain such information, therefore, a

single passage can be subjected to multiple forms of analysis. Examination of participants' success in establishing common themes, maintaining thematic continuity or negotiating topic change at the level of content yields empirical evidence about what is achieved. The timing of speakership moves and listenership responses can be examined through rhythmic or nonverbal cues to check for evidence of breakdowns in conversational coordination. Once outcomes are known, linguistic analysis can be employed along with direct interviews of participants and comparative data from other similar episodes to reconstruct what it is about the signalling cues employed and participants' underlying knowledge that led to the achieved effect.

Because it makes no assumptions about sharedness of rules or evaluative norms, the interpretive approach to conversation is particularly revealing in modern urbanized societies where social boundaries are diffuse, where intensive communication with speakers of differing backgrounds is the rule rather than the exception, and signalling conventions may vary from situation to situation. Much of the work reported on in this book concentrates on encounters involving participants who, while speaking the same language, nevertheless show significant differences in background knowledge and must overcome or take account of the communicative symbols which signal these differences to maintain conversational engagement. In addition, encounters involving style or code switching are analyzed to demonstrate how known differences in social values and grammar and lexicon are exploited to convey new information.

This interest in linguistic and cultural diversity is in part the result of my earlier field work on social and regional dialects and on bilingualism and small rural communities in India, Norway, Austria and the United States (Gumperz 1971a). It was a concern with universals of intergroup contact that first led me to turn to interethnic encounters in urban settings. But the more I learned about the nature and functioning of conversational strategies, the more I became convinced that socio-cultural differences and their linguistic reflections are more than just causes of misunderstanding or grounds for pejorative stereotyping and conscious discrimination. Language differences play an important, positive role in signalling information as well as in creating and maintaining the subtle boundaries of power, status, role and occupational specialization that make up the

fabric of our social life. Assumptions about value differences associated with these boundaries in fact form the very basis for the indirect communicative strategies employed in key gatekeeping encounters, such as employment interviews, counselling sessions, labor negotiations and committee meetings, which have come to be crucial in determining the quality of an individual's life in urban society.

With the disappearance of small, egalitarian face to face societies, diversity of background and communicative conventions come to take on important signalling functions in everyday interaction. Any sociolinguistic theory that attempts to deal with problems of mobility, power and social control cannot assume uniformity of signalling devices as a precondition for successful communication. Simple dichotomous comparisons between supposedly homogeneous and supposedly diverse groups therefore do not do justice to the complexities of communication in situations of constant social change such as we live in. We need to be able to deal with degrees of differentiation and, through intensive case studies of key encounters, learn to explore how such differentiation affects individuals' ability to sustain social interaction and have their goals and motives understood. It is in this area of urban affairs that sociolinguistic analysis can yield new insights into the workings of social process. By careful examination of the signalling mechanisms that conversationalists react to, one can isolate cues and symbolic conventions through which distance is maintained or frames of interpretation are created. One can show how these conventions relate to individual or group background. To the extent that it achieves this goal, research on conversational inference can make important contributions not only to sociolinguistic theory as such but also to general theories of social interaction and social evolution.

Most of the chapters in this volume combine reviews of existing theory with illustrative analyses of conversational sequences or case studies of particular events. Chapter 2 begins with a critical examination of developments in linguistics, linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics that underlie recent sociolinguistic approaches to language, and then goes on to a detailed examination of a short speech exchange, which points out the limitations of existing notions of language usage. Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on code switching in multilingual communities, where diversity is both used to signal group membership and exploited for communicative ends. Chapter

5 deals with the role of prosody in discourse interpretation and with variations in prosodic conventions and their communicative input. Chapter 6 discusses the notions of contextualization, contextualization cues and contextualization conventions and reviews relevant literature on nonverbal communication and conversational synchrony to show how subtle, subconsciously perceived verbal cues can affect interpretation. A number of brief exchanges are analyzed, which illustrate how conversational analysis can serve to establish direct explanatory links between interpretive processes and participants' history and ethnic backgrounds. In chapter 7 current anthropological, linguistic, sociological and psycholinguistic approaches to conversational analysis are discussed in some detail. The more general notion of conversational inference is introduced and its application to actual speech situations illustrated by means of a number of additional brief examples. Chapter 8 presents an intensive analysis of longer passages extracted from a counselling interview and illustrates the miscommunication problems that can arise when speakers who know English well rely on different contextualization conventions to interpret what they hear. Chapter 9 presents an analysis of a public event where misinterpretation led to serious legal difficulties. These last two chapters suggest how sociolinguistic analysis can contribute to an understanding of recurrent problems in key areas of public affairs. A brief postscript in chapter 10 reviews the theoretical bases of the analytical principles reflected in the book and discusses some further implications of the approach.