A Cultural Approach to Interpersonal Communication

Essential Readings

Edited by

Leila Monaghan & Jane E. Goodman

2007

pp. 145-149

Blackwell Publishing

Hill, Jane. 2001a. The racializing function of language panics. In R. Dueñas González and I. Melis, eds., *Language Ideologies*, 245–67. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
—— 2001b. Language, race, and white public space. In A. Duranti, ed., *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader*, 450–64. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
Irvine, Judith. 1989. When talk isn't cheap: Language and political economy. *American Ethnologist* 16:248–67.
Lee, Benjamin. 1997. *Talking Heads*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Peirce, Charles S. 1955. *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler. New York: Dover.
Shaklayen, Gholam. 1983 (1959). *Eker Bhitare Panch (Five-in-One)*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Book Co.
Silverstein, Michael. 1981. *The Limits of Awareness*. Working Papers in Sociolinguistics 84, Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
Urban, Gregory. 2001. *Metaculture: How Culture Moves through the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

18

Conversations: The Link between Words and the World

Leila Monaghan

Introductory note from the Editors

Leila Monaghan takes the conversation as her starting point. She brings together two major approaches to the ways conversation contributes to the social construction of reality: Conversation Analysis, which emphasizes pitch, volume, timing, and the sequencing of turns of talk, and the Ethnography of Speaking, which foregrounds the larger social and ethnographic context. Scholars from both fields work from detailed transcripts of actual conversations, and Monaghan introduces basic transcription conventions that you may find useful for your own ethnographic projects. Think about these transcription conventions in relation to the hypothetical story Monaghan tells about Conor and Jane. How does Monaghan's transcription help you to understand the story better than a simple record of the words they exchanged? Try writing down a brief conversation with and without transcription conventions. What do the transcriptions add to your understanding? What aspects of the conversation are you still unable to capture?

Robin Lakoff breaks down language into three parts: form, meaning, and function. Using these terms as tools, you can begin to analyze any sentence. Take a simple sentence like "The ball hit the window." You could describe the form as "article-noun-verb-article-noun," or "subject-verb-object," or "subject-predicate." For the meaning, you might say something like "A round object came into contact with a flat pane of a heated and then cooled mix of silicates." The function or pragmatics of the statement could range from a basic description of an event with no particular repercussions to the thrower, let's call her Jane, being sent to her room for playing with a hard baseball far too near the house.

By looking at communication in terms of form, meaning, and function, we can see how a sentence or a part of a sentence (or even just a word or part of a word) can be manipulated to change the meaning and pragmatic outcome of an affair. The orator Member Shaheb featured by James Wilce in Chapter 17 might take the verb "to hit"

and reduplicate it, creating a sentence equivalent to "The ball hit-hit the window." This version would give equal weight to the possibility that "The window hit the ball." (This could also be seen as naturalizing the rather unlikely idea that a window has a will of its own, or at least the ability to move.) If both the ball and the window could be construed as equally involved in the process of hitting, Jane might be saved from being sent for a time out.

In analyzing language, ethnographers of communication look beyond the individual sentence to the larger setting and context. The linguistic anthropologist Dell Hymes developed what he calls a SPEAKING model to enable us to situate a sentence like "The ball hit the window" in relation to a broader communicative event. Let us look at one hypothetical situation in which a ball hit a window. Each letter of the SPEAKING model stands for a different aspect of the event.

Setting: the family yard and perhaps the house
Participants: Jane, her brother Conor, her mother, and her father
Ends (social business): children playing, perhaps showing off to each other; parents disciplining children as they see fit; the ends would include issues of power and accountability as well as gender issues
Act sequence (the order of talk): Conor dares Jane to roof the ball; Conor and Jane utter worried sounds; parents ask for an explanation; children confess; both children are admonished
Key (tone of the event): first cheerful and casual, then a little worried and tense
Instrumentality (medium of communication): spoken American English with some nonverbal gestures
Norms: one norm in this situation is that children should be able to play without breaking things; another would be that parents have the right to punish children if they break the rules (formal or informal) of the family
Genre: a "what happened here?" conversation, perhaps with some form of "parents talking to children" going on as well

This way of mapping out the event has strengths and weaknesses. One strength is that it enables ethnographers to focus on the social business of the situation, or on what is getting accomplished for participants. Also, by emphasizing the norms and genres, it enables an analyst to work comparatively – that is, to figure out how the ways of speaking found in this event can be compared with and contrasted to related speech situations.

To get from the sentence "The ball hit the window" to the SPEAKING model analysis of the events, we need to know something about the larger conversation in which the sentence was uttered. My real-life niece, nephew, brother, and sister-in-law might have said something like this:

1	CONOR:	Bet you can't roof that baseball=
2	JANE:	=Betcha I can [Jane throws baseball, breaks a second-story window]
3		(10)
4	CONOR:	Uh oh (. . .)
5	JANE:	Uh oh oh oh oh oh
6		(10) [Mom and Dad come out of house to see what is happening]
7	DAD:	[Shouting from by the house] **WHAT HAPPENED?**
8	CONOR:	The ball hit the window.
9	MOM:	And– and just **how** did the ball hit the window::::?
10	JANE:	Uh, I threw it.
11	MOM:	Aa::::h
		[
12	DAD:	And just why did you throw it, young la:dy?
		[
13	CONOR:	I bet her she couldn't roof the
14		baseball.
15	MOM:	[[Hmpff]] [Mom trying to suppress a laugh]
16	DAD:	You **know** you shouldn't be playing with a hard baseball by the house,
17		Jane, and Conor, **you** know you shouldn't dare your sister to roof the ball.
18	JANE:	*Yes, daddy:
		[
19	CONOR:	*Yes sir::

Once we see the transcript of the larger conversation, our interpretation of a sentence like "The ball hit the window" changes quite dramatically. When we know Conor's words, we understand his part in the affair. Knowing Conor's words entails more than knowing *what* he said; we also need to know *how* he said it. Conversation Analysts, including Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, developed a systematic way of transcribing conversation that allowed us to read in print form how the give and take of natural language works. They gave us a way to record and transcribe conversations such as this one between Conor, Jane, and their parents. They were aided by the invention and widespread use of the tape recorder, which changed how researchers interested in communication and culture worked.

Though this conversation is fictional, it includes a number of features found in normal conversation that Conversation Analysts typically mark, including:

Speech of different volumes and tone: LOUD, **emphasized**, and *soft
Speech of different speeds: including latched=speech, where one person follows quickly upon the previous; extended wor::::dds; space between words, either parts of seconds (. . .) or seconds (10); and overlap, marked with a [or bracket to indicate when two people speak at once
Specific examples of nonstandard speech: marking specific dialect differences, casual speech, or other variations such as "Betcha"

Conversation Analysts are especially interested in the specifics of how conversation works. How do people decide who takes the next turn? How do bits of conversation invite traditional answers? One example might be greetings:

A: Hi!
B: He:::y

These are called *adjacency pairs*. A speaks the first pair part, B the second pair part. Another example of an adjacency pair is a question-and-answer pair:

9 MOM: And– and just **how** did the ball hit the window::::?
10 JANE: Uh, I threw it.

The typical way a question is structured is that the addressee (in this case any one who knows what happened) answers the question. You can even tell by looking at the transcript that there is a bit of hesitation, an "Uh" before Jane answers (line 10). Jane knows that Mom is not going to be happy to hear about what happened, so she stumbles a bit before saying something. Conversation Analysts have found this a pretty consistent pattern for *dispreferred answers*.

But the person addressed doesn't have to answer. In the case of the second question asked, this time by Dad, he refers to Jane specifically, but Conor answers the question, overlapping the end of Dad's sentence:

12 DAD: And just why did you throw it, young la:dy?
[
13 CONOR: I bet her she couldn't roof the
14 baseball.

Here Conor jumps in ahead of Jane's answer to this question. A Conversation Analyst would be particularly interested in the timing and sequence of interactions. An ethnographer or analyst of the cultural aspects of interpersonal communication would also be interested in the *meaning* and the *social business* being accomplished in this situation – not just the meaning of the words but the meaning of the entire interaction. This leap to meaning can take us in many directions. As ethnographers, we might speculate that Conor wants to protect Jane, an interpretation that makes even more sense if you know that Jane is two years younger than Conor. We could look at how typical or atypical the gender roles are in this setting. Why does Mom laugh while Dad admonishes? Why does Conor push Jane beyond her limits? Why does she feel compelled to accept his dare? We could look at sibling relationships in Charlottesville, Virginia (where they live) and related settings, and particularly at how squabbling siblings will defend each other from outsiders, even if the outsiders here are parents.

Alessandro Duranti (1997) argues for the importance of contextualized ethnographic accounts to accompany Conversation Analysis. To understand the meaning of a speech event requires rich, in-depth knowledge of a particular group of people as well as of the culture they belong to.

Consider this final brief hypothetical stretch of conversation:

20 CONOR: I just wanted her to wiffle ball bat it.
21 DAD: [[Hehehehehehehe]]
22 MOM: [[Hehehehehe]]

To understand what was going on, you would need to know that Dad, when he was a boy just a little older than Conor, was dared by a neighbor in Brooklyn to roof a light plastic wiffle ball bat and ended up breaking his own bedroom window, and that his entire family always found the story hilarious. By bringing this up, by strategically using common family memory, Conor might just have spared Jane and himself more serious punishment.

Meanings can be found at every level of communication, but because conversation is the mediating force between so many other levels of meaning, conversations and conversation transcripts provide particularly rich sources of information. If an issue is important to people, if it affects their lives and thoughts in some way, it probably shows up in their interpersonal interactions. This is why we study the ideas, words, uhms, aahhs, laughs, and overlaps that make up talk.

Transcription Conventions

.?! end of phrase
[ ] nonverbal behavior
( ) uncertain hearing
(.) pause within turn, each . approximately ¼ second (each syllable of "one one thousand" is approx 0.25 seconds).
(# seconds) if pause is longer than a second, use number of seconds.
: lengthening. Each : ¼ second.
word vocal emphasis
WORD increased volume
[[LF]] vocalizations such as laughing
[talk over, simultaneous behavior
= rapid speech or latching
– cut-off or self-interruption
* quiet speech
xxx unintelligible

Acknowledgments

This chapter is dedicated to my brother Anthony, who did indeed once spectacularly fail at trying to roof a wiffle ball bat, breaking not one but two third-story windows in the process, and to his family – Dayna, Conor, Jane, Regan, and Liam – none of whom, as far as I know, have tried to roof anything. Thanks also to Teresa Palmitessa for her copy of the simplified Conversation Analysis transcriptions used above in a modified form and Jane Goodman for editorial assistance.

References

Duranti, Alessandro. 1997. *Linguistic Anthropology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Goffman, Erving. 1964. The neglected situation. In J. J. Gumperz and D. Hymes, eds., *The Ethnography of Communication. American Anthropologist* 66(6), part 2:133–6.
Sacks, Harvey, Emmanuel A. Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson. 1974. A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language* 50:695–735.