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ABSTRACT

A competence paradigm may provide communication scholars with a theoretical framework for the study of interpersonal communication. The study of ritualistic behavior is a study of competence in its most basic form. Turn-taking in conversations--an example of ritualistic behavior--not only helps us apportion the floor, but also serves a symbolic function of helping the interactants to define their relationship. The way in which this ritual is managed by one interactant will affect the judgments made about him by the other interactant. Thus, research may show that it is the management of the small, unnoticed, ritualistic behaviors that has the greatest effect upon us all; it may be these behaviors that determine whether or not we are successful interactants. (WR)

RITUAL AND REGULATION IN CONVERSATIONAL TURN-TAKING: VERBAL AND NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR

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Ritual And Regulation in Conversational Turn-Taking: Verbal and Nonverbal Behavior

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The ebb and flow of our day-to-day existence is full of small and seemingly insignificant behaviors. The smile given to the stranger in an elevator, the handshake used to greet a business partner, the nod of support given a student in class as he attempts to answer a question: these behaviors, for the most part, go unnoticed by those involved in the interaction. If questioned about them, the probable responses would be along the line of "I just wanted to be polite," "It was really nothing," or "I didn't do that, did I?"

These small behaviors are usually performed unconsciously; and it is not until they are omitted that we might take notice of them at all (Goffman, 1967). The head nod, the hand shake and the smile could be classified as "ritualistic" behavior (in the most vernacular sense of the term). The classification follows from the fact that these behaviors--and many like them--are repeated unthinkingly to many different people over and over again every day. This repetition and indiscriminate display, popular notion has it, deprives these small behaviors of any real meaning for the individuals involved. If this isn't degradation enough, it is usually further assumed that these sort of behaviors add no new information (contribute no content) to the conversation and, therefore, the conversation could get along just as well without them.

This folk definition of the function of small behaviors possesses a kernel of truth. A detailed analysis of the behaviors under question, however, reveals the role they play in our social interaction; I hope to demonstrate here what an important role that is and why communication scholars could profit from their study. To this end, I will discuss interpersonal rituals and, by way of example,

examine in detail one of the most pervasive and important of interpersonal rituals: turn-taking in face-to-face interaction.

The Interpersonal Ritual

It may be an unwise choice to describe the small behaviors discussed so far with the term "ritual." In daily usage, the "meaning" of the word is not very clear. Behavioral scientists have not helped the situation very much; ritual has been used to cover a variety of behaviors, ranging from the mock battles in which dogs engage (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967), to the deference two people show each other while conversing (Goffman, 1967), to a religious ceremony (Broom and Selzinck, 1963).

There are almost as many definitions of ritual as there are writers who have discussed the subject. (And I will not forego the academic tradition of creating my own definition.) Based on the work of Goffman (1967), Watzlawick, et al. (1967), and others, ritual can be defined as "the interaction of two or more participants whose behavior is stylized and has symbolic value which transcends the content of the behavior."[1]

Many classes of behaviors can be considered interpersonal rituals (e.g., greetings, conversational turn-taking, leave-taking, etc.). The primary purpose--and often the only purpose--of these behaviors is to mark the relationship of those involved. New acquaintances are affirmed by a handshake; the "hello-how-are-you?" greeting renews old acquaintanceships; the "I-really-have-to-go-now" that accompanies leave taking symbolically says "I am not leaving because I don't want to be with you; other forces are compelling me to leave" (Knapp, Hart, Friedrich and Shulman, 1973). The message involved in all of these examples transcends the overt content of the words and actions. The fact that these same behaviors will be repeated over and over again with many different interactants

is what allows them to take on this symbolic function; this is what makes them rituals.

To further demonstrate this point, consider what must be done by an interactant who wants the content of his words to be taken seriously--that is, to be interpreted as something in addition to the ritual. The handshake that accompanies most greetings is suddenly not enough. An extra pump or two might be added along with "I'm really very glad to meet you."

The way in which the ritual is enacted will, of course, vary with the people involved, their relative role status, and the setting of the interaction. For example, two old friends may usually embrace upon meeting. If, however, one is a lawyer and the other a judge, we can safely predict that their greeting behavior will be severely curtailed when they meet in court. Likewise, subsets of a culture may devise peculiar methods of enacting a ritual to separate them from the rest of society or to mark the special nature of their relationship. Fraternal organizations have secret handclasps; young people often greet each other by slapping the other's palms; boys around ten years of age may punch each other to "say" hello.

Turn-Taking In Conversations

Up to this point, I have purposefully neglected turn-taking in conversations when giving examples of interpersonal rituals. However, now the stage is set to approach these most-unconscious-of-all behaviors in terms of their importance to interpersonal communication.

The behavior by which an exchange of speaking turns is accomplished will be referred to as the turn-taking mechanism. Any number of verbal and nonverbal behaviors can function (either alone or accompanied by other behaviors) as part

of the mechanism (see Table 1). While these behaviors may serve other functions in the interaction, when they are used to implement a change in the speaking turn, they take on a ritualistic quality.

In discussing the nature of face-to-face interaction, Goffman (1959) recognized that when two or more people come together to interact, they are making a symbolic commitment to one another to respect the role that each chooses to play. One role that is basic to almost all other roles that an interactant can present is the role of human being, one worthy and deserving of consideration and respect.

In order to help insure that one receives the respect that each person considers his due, various cultures have developed rather elaborate (if unelaborated) rules[2] to govern what should and should not be done in interactions. (Civil and criminal laws are examples of formal rules that societies have developed to insure respect for the individual.)

Interaction rules are seldom specified, and consequently the actions they govern (e.g., conversational turn-taking) are usually carried out unthinkingly. For the most part, it is only when a rule is broken that these seemingly insignificant behaviors assume any importance. At this point, the interactants become aware that something is amiss with the interaction. Then attention is usually directed away from the substance of the interaction (the conversation) and toward putting the interaction back on the right track (Goffman, 1967).

This must be done--the interaction must be put back on the right track--because of the ritualistic nature of the behavior involved. One of the rules regarding turn-taking states that a speaker should not be interrupted. When one person repeatedly interrupts another, he is putting forth a specific definition of the relationship, to wit, "You are not as important as I am; I'm not

interested in what you are saying." Since interruptions or inattention (remember how you felt the last time a student fell asleep in your class) may convey disrespect they "must be avoided unless the implied disrespect is an accepted part of the relationship" (Goffman, 1967, p. 36).

The way interaction is regulated in an elementary school classroom is an example of the way people rely on conformity to interaction rules for information about an individual's relationship with or orientation towards a group or other individual. When a child enters first grade, he is told that he must raise his hand if he wishes to speak. The rule is "you may not speak unless the teacher gives you permission." The symbol by which the rule is implemented--by which permission is requested and gained--is the upraised hand. New students will be given a certain period time to learn the rule. (Note that learning the rule and learning the symbol to implement the rule are, for all practical purposes, one and the same thing.) During the learning period, violations of the rule are corrected, but tolerated. When the learning period is over--that is, when the teacher decides that all of the first graders have had enough time to become acculturated--violations of the hand-raising rule are likely to result in punishment. The reason for the punishment is the inference that the child knows the rule and willfully violates it; disrespect and disregard for the school-culture is implied.

Rules For Turn-Taking in Conversations

Three rules have been posited to govern the allocation of the speaking role in face-to-face dyadic conversations (Duncan, 1970, 1972, 1973; Wiemann, 1973). If these rules are properly employed, a "successful" exchange of the speaking role takes place. The exchange is considered successful when both interactants do not try to assume the speaker's role at the same time--that is, there is no attempt at simultaneous turns.

Duncan (1972) discussed a turn-yielding rule and a back channel rule. The rule for turn-yielding states that the auditor may take his speaking turn when the speaker emits any one of a number of verbal or nonverbal yielding cues (see Table 1). The display of a turn-yielding cue does not require the auditor to take the floor; he may either remain silent or reinforce the speaker with a back channel cue.

Back channel cues are exhibited by the auditor and are related to various speaker signals, either within-turn signals (Duncan, 1973) or turn-yielding cues. In relation to turn-yielding cues, they serve to signal the speaker that the auditor does not wish to take the speaking role.

Turn-requesting (Wiemann, 1973) operates in much the same fashion as turn-yielding. The rule states that turn-requesting consists of the display of any one of a number of verbal or nonverbal cues by the auditor. If the turn-taking mechanism is functioning correctly, the speaker should relinquish the speaking role upon completion of the statement he is engaged in at the time the request is made.

Table 1 about here

The Turn-Taking Mechanism In Operation

Behaviors that seem to play a part in the turn-yielding include sentence completions, interrogatives, other-directed gazes (after Kendon, 1967), gesticulations, intonation, drawl on the final syllable, buffers and pitch/loudness. Only two of these cues can be considered overt; sentence completions and interrogatives. All of the other behaviors are nonverbal and seem to be less specific; they can be interpreted in a number of different ways. This fact

is instructive about the nature of face-to-face interaction. That auditors pay respect to speakers simply because they are speakers has already been mentioned. The more or less unobtrusive yielding behavior that speakers seem to exhibit indicates that speakers may feel a certain responsibility to their auditors. It is almost as if they had a "the show must go on" attitude toward the speaking turn. This is not to deny that speakers talk for a variety of other reasons, but they do seem to take the responsibility for filling the silence. The speaker feels it is his "duty" to keep the interaction alive; if the other interactant wants to talk, then he must let the speaker know that he is ready to assume responsibility for the interaction.

Turn-requesting, on the other hand, does not always take such a subtle form. Even though respect is due the speaker, the auditor is not completely at his mercy. Cues which seemed to operate most frequently as part of the turn-requesting mechanism are simultaneous talking, buffers, reinforcers, stutter-starts, speaker-directed gazes (decreasing as the auditor prepared to take the floor), head nodding, deep inspiration of breath, holding mouth open and gesticulations.

Both nodding and speaker-directed gazes are particularly important to the turn-taking mechanism because they serve the interactants in two ways. Obviously, they serve to exchange the speaking role. On a ritualistic level, however, these behaviors indicate support for and interest in the other interactant when they are displayed. Their supportive nature "softens" the terms of the exchange. The nodding auditor is signaling the speaker his agreement and reinforcement at the same time the request is being made; the respect of the speaking role is maintained because, in effect, the auditor is letting the speaker know that there is no threat or disrespect intended by the take-over of the floor. In like manner, the speaker can use nodding and auditor-directed

gazes to inform the auditor that he is looking for feedback and that he is receiving the auditor's messages. All this can be accomplished without interrupting the flow of the conversation.

Conclusion

The study of ritualistic behavior may provide the communication researcher with a way to study the communicative competence of individuals. Argyle (1969, 1972) has suggested that social competence can be studied much as motor skills are, with similar implications. If the components of "successful" interaction can be isolated, they can be analyzed and taught. Argyle lists four components of social competence: (1) perceptual sensitivity, (2) basic interaction skills, (3) rewardingness, and (4) poise (1972, pp. 78-79). While all of these come into play even in something so elementary as negotiating the speaking turn, basic interaction skills seem to be at the heart of the matter: "To be socially competent it is necessary to be able to establish a smoothly meshing pattern of interaction with other people" (Argyle, 1972, p. 78).

A competence paradigm may provide communication scholars with a theoretical framework for the study of interpersonal communication. The study of ritualistic behavior is a study of competence in its most basic form. In this paper I have attempted to show that turn-taking in conversations--an example of ritualistic behavior--not only helps us apportion the floor, but also serves a symbolic function of helping the interactants to define their relationship. The way in which this ritual is managed by one interactant will affect the judgments made about him by the other interactant. (We all know the person who won't let us get a word in edgewise at a cocktail party--he's a boor!) Thus, research may show that is the management of the small, unnoticed, ritualistic behaviors that has the greatest effect upon us all; it may be these behaviors that determine whether or not we are successful interactants.

> Whatever the activity and however profanely instrumental, it can afford many opportunities for minor ceremonies as long as other persons are present. Through these observances, guided by ceremonial obligations and expectations, a constant flow of indulgences is spread through society, with others who are present constantly reminding the individual that he must keep himself together as a well demeaned person and affirm the sacred quality of these others. The gestures which we sometimes call empty are perhaps in fact the fullest things of all. (Goffman, 1967, p. 91)

FOOTNOTES

[1]This definition eliminates from consideration as rituals routinized behaviors of individuals, e.g., the person, who upon rising, brushes his teeth, washes his face, combs his hair, etc., every morning in the same order and in the same way. To be sure, this man has a routine, but his routine does not assume symbolic import beyond the traditional meaning of the acts performed. More crucially, there is no human communication involved.

[2]From this perspective, Goffman defines a rule as a "guide for action, recommended not because it is pleasant, cheap, or effective, but because it is suitable or just" (1967, p. 48).

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Table 1: Turn-Taking Cues

The behaviors listed below were found to operate as turn-taking cues by Duncan (1972, 1973) and/or Wiemann (1973).

Turn-yielding

1. Intonation. The use of any pitch level-terminal juncture combination other than 2 2| at the end of a phonemic clause.

2. Paralanguage: Drawl. Drawl on the final syllable or on the stressed syllable of a phonemic clause.

3. Buffers. Short words or phrases which are content-free, more or less stereotypical, and which either precede or follow substantive statements (e.g., "but ah," "um," "you know"). Called "sociocentric sequences" by Duncan.

4. Paralanguage: Pitch/Loudness. A drop in paralinguistic pitch and/or loudness, in conjunction with one of the buffers described above.

5. Sentence completions. The completion of a grammatical clause involving a subject-predicate combination.

6. Interrogatives. A question specifically directed to the other dyad member.

7. Gesticulations. The termination of any hand gesticulation used during a turn. Excluded are self-adapters (Ekman and Friesen, 1969).

8. Auditor-directed gazes. The amount of time spent looking at the facial area around the eyes of the auditor.

Turn-requesting

1. Speaker-directed gazes.

2. Head nods.

3. Forward leaning angle. When that plane defined by a line from the communicator's shoulders to his hips is away from the vertical plane, such that the communicator is bending forward at the waist. It is the shift to this posture that seems to serve as the cue.

4. Buffers.

5. Interruption. The attempt to assume the speaking role before it has been relinquished by the current speaker.

6. Simultaneous talking. The assumption of the speaking role by both interactants at the same time.

Table 1 (cont.)

7. Stutter starts. Short words (including nonfluencies) or phrases repeated with increasing frequency by one interactant while the other interactant holds the speaking role (e.g., "I. . . . .I . . . . I . . . I think its time to go.").

8. Reinforcers. Words that provide feedback to the speaker, but do not necessarily attempt to gain the speaking role for the interactant emitting them. Short questions seeking clarification are included.

Back channel

1. Reinforcers.

2. Sentence completion by auditor. Completion of a sentence by the auditor that the speaker has begun. In such cases the auditor would not continue beyond the brief completion; the speaker would continue his turn as if uninterrupted.

3. Request for clarification. Contrasting with sentence completions are brief requests for clarification.

4. Head nods and shakes.

Additional behaviors which may play a role in the turn-taking mechanism, but have not been specifically studied (or data on them is inconclusive) include:

1. Up-raised finger.

2. Deep inspiration of breath accompanied by straightening of posture.

3. Backward lean and other relaxation cues.

4. Smiles.

5. Certain self-adaptors, particularly those which might be considered "preening" (e.g., straightening one's hair).