



January 2001

The Interdependence of Representation and Action

Stanton Wortham

University of Pennsylvania, stanton.wortham@bc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs

Recommended Citation

Wortham, S. (2001). The Interdependence of Representation and Action. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/68

Reprinted from *Philosophy of Education 2001*, 2001, pages 426-434.

Publisher URL: <http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-yearbook/>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/68

For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

The Interdependence of Representation and Action

Abstract

After spending many years arguing about the nature of knowledge in the human sciences, Charles Taylor decided that the core disagreements were not epistemological but ontological. Instead of simply focusing on how people know (and on how to know them), we must unearth our presuppositions about what people are. However, although knowledge and representational practices do not exhaust who we are, they are central to the human condition. How can we follow Taylor in shifting away from a knowledge-centered account of human nature, while nonetheless capturing how representation is central to many human activities?

Comments

Reprinted from *Philosophy of Education 2001*, 2001, pages 426-434.

Publisher URL: <http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-yearbook/>

The Interdependence Of Representation And Action

Stanton Wortham
University Of Pennsylvania

After spending many years arguing about the nature of knowledge in the human sciences, Charles Taylor decided that the core disagreements were not epistemological but ontological.¹ Instead of simply focusing on how people *know* (and on how to know them), we must unearth our presuppositions about what people *are*. However, although knowledge and representational practices do not exhaust who we are, they are central to the human condition. How can we follow Taylor in shifting away from a knowledge-centered account of human nature, while nonetheless capturing how representation is central to many human activities?

For those of us who study language, this question has often been cast in terms of the referential and interactional functions of speech. Since Austin, many philosophers and social scientists have focused on the interactional functions of speech.² We now know that speakers and audience members respond systematically to the interactional positioning that is signaled by speech, even though they are often unaware of doing so.³ This work on verbal action has weakened purely referential approaches to speech, which has been salutary, but we must not lose sight of the fact that speech also refers. In order to develop an adequate conceptualization of how speech can simultaneously refer and accomplish action, I argue that we must go beyond recognizing the coexistence of multiple functions.⁴ We must also consider how the referential and interactional functions of speech *systematically interrelate*.

This essay considers a particular type of case in which the referential and interactional functions of speech are deeply interrelated. I argue that in such cases neither the referential nor the interactional functions of speech can be derived from the other, because the two are mutually dependent. The interdependence between reference and action in this type of case may provide a model for how to conceptualize the interrelations between knowledge-based and other kinds of practices.

ENACTED PARTICIPANT EXAMPLES

In a participant example, participants in the conversation get cast as characters in an example. These participants then have two roles: as characters referred to in the example and as participants acting in the conversation. Participant examples occur approximately once every fifteen minutes in high school literature and history class discussions.⁵ In some cases, like the one described here, participants *act out* the roles given to them as referents in the example. That is, in discussing a particular set of events and relationships as the content of an example, teachers and students sometimes *enact* analogous events and relationships in their own classroom interaction. I have shown that such enactment happens more than one might expect.⁶

The following participant example occurred in one ninth-grade history class described at length in my *Acting Out Participant Examples in the Classroom*.⁷ The class has read Cicero's letter to Atticus, in which Cicero ponders what he should do about the tyranny of Caesar and the plot to overthrow him. Should he tell Caesar?

Should he join the plotters? Or should he just keep quiet? In this respect, the text represents a three-part structure in Rome: Caesar-the-tyrant, those plotting against him, and Cicero stuck in between the two. The teacher (Mr. Smith, abbreviated T/S) places a student (Maurice, abbreviated MRC) in a hypothetical situation analogous to Cicero's and asks him what he would do. (Italics indicate stress. Numbers in parentheses indicate pauses, in seconds. Left brackets indicate overlapping talk.)

See original for formatting of transcripts!!!

- T/S: Maurice let's give a good example, you'll love this.
 suppose this dictator, *me*. there was a plot going on.
 150 and *you* found out about it. and you *knew* it was gonna-
 it's existing (3.0) among the people you knew. would
 you tell me. (5.0)
- MRC: you said *they* know about it.
- T/S: the *plotters*, against me. they're planning to push me
 155 down the stairs. [and *you* know about it
- STS: [hahhahahah
- T/S: now we *all* know Maurice and I have had arguments
 all year. *would* you tell me about it.
- MRC: well- I *might* but uh what if they- what if they found
 160 out that I *told* you then they want to kill me. (5.0) so
 I'm putting *myself* in trouble to save you, and I'm not
 going to *do* it.
- STS: hnh hahahaha

Read for its referential contribution to the academic discussion, the example describes a role structure analogous to that in Rome: Mr. Smith-the-tyrant, the conspirators plotting to push him down the stairs, and Maurice-the-potential-informer stuck between the two. This is a participant example because Mr. Smith and Maurice, participants in the speech event itself, now have a second role within the example.

Because it doubles the roles played by Mr. Smith and Maurice, this example has rich interactional potential. Discussion of the represented content of the example may spill over into the classroom interaction. At line 157, for example, Mr. Smith says "now we *all* know Maurice and I have had arguments all year." Prior to the example, everyone in the class knows that Mr. Smith and Maurice have had a strained relationship. Mr. Smith imposes a relatively rigid code of conduct, and Maurice has resisted this all year. As he says at line 157, and as presupposed by his "you'll love this" at line 148, Mr. Smith recognizes his power struggle with Maurice. He mentions it at this point because he *also* recognizes that the example may have implications for their actual relationship. It gives Maurice the opportunity, within the example, to express his anger at Mr. Smith-the-teacher. Maurice takes this opportunity, in places, by imagining that he would leave Mr. Smith-the-tyrant to be killed.

Participant examples sometimes spill into the interaction in a particular way: teachers and students sometimes *enact* the represented content of participant

examples. In the example of Mr. Smith-the-tyrant, for instance, Mr. Smith himself comes to act tyrannically in his interaction with Maurice, and Maurice gets stuck in the middle like Cicero. Mr. Smith asks Maurice-the-potential-informer whether he would take Mr. Smith-the-tyrant's side or whether he would join the other students who are opposed to Mr. Smith-the-tyrant. This interactional issue — central to the represented content of the example — also has implications for participants' own identities and interactional positions. Mr. Smith-the-teacher makes it clear that he would like Maurice-the-student to side with him. Thus Maurice himself gets put in the same interactional position as Cicero: he must choose either to ally himself with those in power or to affiliate with the opposition. This position becomes uncomfortable for Maurice, as it was for Cicero. **See original for formatting of transcripts!!!**

T/S: well that was my next *question*, do you think Caesar was
a *tyrant*. [do you think *Cicero* thought
185 ST?: [I don't think so.
T/S: Caesar was a *tyrant*.
ST?: no
MRC: yes
T/S: then what's his *problem*. if the man- *you* just told me
190 point *blank* [that we could be pushed down stairs
MRC: [so.
T/S: and you wouldn't feel a *thing* about it. what's his big
deal, if he believes Caesar is a *tyrant*, so what.
MRC: well- he- if uh he finds out that they're making
195 some kind of plot *against* him, but he doesn't want to
get *involved*. he doesn't know if he *should* get
involved, he could get himself in more trouble.
T/S: well if *Caesar's* a *tyrant* why *shouldn't* you get
involved. tyrants are generally *dictatorial nasty*
200 people, that prevent people from being at their ease.

When Mr. Smith says “*you* just told me point *blank* that we could be pushed down stairs and you wouldn't feel a *thing* about it” (lines 189-192), both the volume and tempo of his speech increase. He seems angry. Even though they are speaking about a hypothetical example, Mr. Smith-the-teacher treats Maurice's choice not to tell him as a betrayal.

This starts to put the same sort of pressure on Maurice-the-student that was applied to Cicero and to Maurice-the-potential informer. When Maurice describes Cicero's hesitation in the face of his dilemma (lines 194-198) he could also be describing his own situation. He can tell that his answer does not please Mr. Smith-the-teacher, but he does not know what to do about it. In forcing Maurice-the-student into this position, Mr. Smith-the-teacher also acts a bit tyrannically — thus acting out the represented content in another respect.

At this point, Mr. Smith may simply be play-acting to involve the students. But Maurice-the-student's problems become more serious when several girls volunteer to tell the teachers about the plot. (T/B is Mrs. Bailey, another teacher leading this classroom discussion along with Mr. Smith. CAN is Candace, a female student.)

- T/S: gee you sound terribly confused
Maurice. sort of like Cicero here.
- T/B: what w- if you knew that they *actually* you know there's
a group of kids that are *actually* going to do
225 this *dastardly* deed. and you *know* that there's going to
be some *reaction*. what might you do th- and you kn- you
know basically while you might not be- *enamored*
totally of Mr. Smith or myself you- basically don't
230 wish that we were crippled for *life* or whatever, what
might you *do* that day. you know that's going to come-
that this is all going to happen on *Wednesday*. what are
you going to *do* that day.
- CAN: *I* would try to warn you.
- STS: right. I would ((* overlapping [comments *])
- 235 T/B: [he's- he's not- he's not
going to warn us though.
- T/S: no.
- T/B: what- what are you going to *do* that day Maurice. (1.0)
- MRC: stay away.
- 240 T/B: *what* are you going to do?
- MRC: I'm going to *stay* away so I won't be-
- T/B: so you're not going to come to school on Wednesday.
- MRC: no
- CAN: that way he's a *coward*.
- 245 ST?: what would *you* do.
- MRC: what would *you* do.
- T/S: a *coward*.
- CAN: yeah 'cause he's *scared*.

When Candace calls Maurice a coward (line 244), she begins to speak as Candace-the-student. Her energetic tone here indicates that she is not only elaborating the example, but also picking on Maurice-the-student. This establishes another relevant group in the classroom interaction — Candace and the girls (several of whom subsequently join her) — who position themselves with respect to Maurice and the teachers. Like their characters in the example, in the classroom the girls affiliate with the teachers and exclude Maurice.

Gender plays an important role here, as it has all year in this ninth grade classroom. Girls and boys generally occupy separate, often antagonistic groups. Girls have more latitude to affiliate with teachers. Boys act more oppositionally toward teachers and risk losing face if they do not. Maurice has had particular difficulty with this gender difference over the school year. He is intelligent and motivated to participate in class, but he does not want to jeopardize his masculinity by joining the girls and the teachers in classroom discussions. I observed Maurice struggle with this in-between position all year.

Mr. Smith and Candace both presuppose and intensify Maurice's predicament, through their discussion of the example. Maurice might like to affiliate with Mr.

Smith-the-tyrant and thus, implicitly, with Mr. Smith-the-teacher, since he has aroused Mr. Smith-the-teacher's anger by distancing himself. But to do so, he would have to affiliate with both the teachers and the girls. This would damage his standing with the other boys.

Thus Maurice-the-student *acts out* the dilemma confronted by Cicero and by Maurice-the-potential informer. Like Maurice-the-potential informer (and like Cicero), Maurice-the-student gets excluded by the other groups as he thinks about what to do. Mr. Smith-the-teacher also plays the role of tyrant relatively well. Like a tyrant, he has the power to reward students if they behave properly and punish them if they do not. He uses this power to tyrannize Maurice-the-student, by forcing Maurice into a difficult situation and then excluding him.

THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF REPRESENTATION AND ENACTMENT

How should we conceptualize such parallelism between represented content and interactional positioning? One important question involves the priority of one function over the other: is the enactment derived from the representation, or vice versa? I argue that neither of these positions suffices. Instead, the represented and enacted patterns interrelate, such that each contributes to the other.

The clearest case of the inevitable interrelation between representation and enactment comes from the category of linguistic forms called deictics, which occur in all known human languages and are ubiquitous in speech. The category includes personal pronouns, demonstratives (English *this/that*), spatial and temporal adverbs (*here/there, now/then*), verb tense, and so on. Deictics "single out objects of reference or address in terms of their relation to the current interactive context in which the utterance occurs."⁷ Deictics often presuppose some aspect of participants' interactional positions as the warrant for their referential value. *We* provides an example. For hearers to understand what a particular utterance of *we* refers to, they must know something about presupposed social groups that include the speaker. *We* presupposes a radial geometry centered on the speaker, with the speaker a member of some group. People referred to as *they* lie beyond some boundary, while people referred to as *we* lie inside the boundary with the speaker. Hearers can only understand what a particular token of *we* refers to by presupposing something about the relevant social groups in the speaker's world, including the event of speaking. The existence and ubiquity of deictics thus shows that in many cases interactional patterns (for example, who belongs in the same social group as the speaker) are intrinsically related to the referential meaning of language in use.

Deictics show that in actual speech neither referential nor interactional functions ever exist independent of the other. Just as the referential function of language depends on interactional structures, the interactional functions of language depend on referential structures. By virtue of referring to some social group that includes the speaker, for instance, a particular use of *we* can potentially create or reinforce solidarity among members of a group. In a bid to create community among an ethnically diverse group of students, a teacher might refer to himself or herself plus all the students as *we*. If others in the class come to presuppose this usage, these deictics might be central to creating the desired community. This use of *we* to create

social solidarity would not happen unless the deictic *referred to* the relevant group. Thus the referential and interactional functions of deictics, and of language use more generally, depend on each other.

With enacted participant examples, which involve more elaborate parallelism between reference and interaction, I give a similar argument: neither the represented nor the enacted pattern can be derived from the other. Maurice's representation of himself as caught in the middle between Mr. Smith and the student "conspirators" may gain force from his interactional position as a black male student torn between engagement in and withdrawal from school. But the representation cannot be reduced to that interactional position. Similarly, Maurice's enactment of his in-between position gains force from the referential content of the example and the text; but the enactment is not derived from and secondary to the representation. I argue that representation and enactment in cases like this each contribute to the other, as in the case of deictics.⁸ Maurice and Mr. Smith successfully represent his hypothetical predicament through a combination of referential and interactional patterns. And they reinforce his difficult interactional position through a similar combination of representation and enactment.

THE FUNCTIONS OF PARALLELISM

If neither the represented nor the enacted side of the parallel can be reduced to the other, where does such parallelism come from? One possible explanation is psychological. In his theory of transference, Freud notes that patients often enact, in their relationship with the analyst, interactional patterns that match key relationships from their past.⁹ While they describe their past relationships as part of therapy, patients sometimes also enact similar relationships with the analyst in the therapeutic storytelling event. His psychological theory leads Freud to *expect* patients both to describe and to enact similar patterns, because neurotics get stuck in relational patterns they experienced with important others.

Freud's theory might explain enacted participant examples. Perhaps Mr. Smith and Maurice habitually relate to others in characteristic ways. Mr. Smith might want younger males to affiliate with him, and Maurice might feel both drawn to and repelled by male authority figures. Mr. Smith, then, would have described the example because it represents relations that fit with his psychological needs. He and Maurice would enact the example because their roles in the example fit with their habitual ways of relating to others. Thus both the represented content and the enacted interactional positions accomplished through the example would derive from Mr. Smith and Maurice's underlying psychological tendencies.

Freud's observations about transference are brilliant.¹⁰ But I would propose an alternative, partly cultural explanation for the parallel between represented content and interactional positioning in examples like Mr. Smith's. A more sociocentric account can incorporate Freud's extraordinary insights about transference without adopting his metapsychology. Vincent Crapanzano argues that Freud's concept of transference can be understood as a matter of interactional positioning and not psychological structure.¹¹ Crapanzano argues that a Freudian description of underlying psychological tendencies really involves interactional and cultural as much as

psychological patterns. Thus he moves toward a sociocentric account of the parallel between represented content and interactional positioning: the social world offers typical positions and events, and in practice people tend to enact particular configurations of these types over and over. In this view, the parallel between representation and enactment results from the salience of certain socially-typical positions and events. Just as any speaker inevitably has to “rent” the words he or she uses from the already-used set of words available in a community, any person has to borrow the categories of relationship and selfhood from his or her community.¹² Mr. Smith and Maurice do not both describe and enact the roles of tyrant and ambivalent subject only because of something in their psychology, but also because of the ubiquity of these as cultural patterns.

Applying this more sociocentric perspective to Maurice’s case would highlight the representational and interactional pattern involving an authority figure (the teacher), subordinates who side with authority (students who support the teacher’s agenda) and subordinates who resist authority (students who do not participate actively). This pattern, including the powerful, in-favor subordinates, and out-of-favor subordinates, circulates widely in the larger society. Mr. Smith and Maurice often represent and position themselves in more specific versions of this general pattern, and on a sociocentric view they do so because of the wide cultural circulation of the pattern.¹³

I find something compelling about both psychological and sociocentric accounts of the parallelism between representation and enactment. The sociocentric account captures the social origin and circulation of the relational patterns that get both represented and enacted. But the psychological account explains why particular individuals consistently represent and enact certain patterns, despite their exposure to various patterns that circulate in the social world. In order to bring these two perspectives together, I argue that the individual self — that which is prone to represent and enact particular relational positions and not others — is simultaneously individual and social.

MAINTAINING THE SELF

The Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin¹⁴ presents the self not as a bounded territory but as what Morson and Emerson call a “boundary phenomenon.”¹⁵ The self exists only on the boundary between self and other. It does not contain or develop inner regions, but instead exists only in dialogue with the other.

Bakhtin describes how a self emerges as speakers position themselves with respect to others, by adopting and inflecting others’ words. “The ideological becoming of a human being, in this view, is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others.”¹⁶ To become a self one must speak and, in speaking, one must use words that have been used by others. In using words that echo with the voices of others one must take a position with respect to those others.¹⁷ Expanding this analysis metaphorically from the level of the speech event to the level of a whole life, Bakhtin argues that becoming a self involves positioning oneself with respect to other speakers whose words (and relational stances, characteristic acts, and viewpoints) one takes on and then inflects to one degree or another.

On Bakhtin's account, then, a person cannot become a self alone. The self has unique experiences and a unique trajectory because any particular self gets positioned with respect to the others it happens to encounter and position itself with respect to. But this individual uniqueness gets fashioned only by speaking through or ventriloquating *others*. In this way, as Clark and Holquist argue, Bakhtin attempts to capture both the uniqueness and the dialogic character of the self.¹⁸

This puts the (Western) self in an ironic position: struggling to articulate its own individual voice but able to do so only by speaking through others. Thus Bakhtin offers neither a social nor a psychological account of the self.¹⁹ Against social determinism, he does not reduce the self to social categories. On the contrary, Bakhtin casts the creative self, ventriloquating others and creating complexity, as the hero in the struggle against official monologic discourse. He praises Romanticism for elaborating this aspect of the self.²⁰ But he complicates this view by locating the self within a dialogic process.

Bakhtin's account of the self on the boundary can help us conceptualize the function of parallelism between representation and enactment. Instead of simply manifesting either psychological schemata or cultural patterns, enacted participant examples can be central to the process of maintaining the self on the boundary.²¹ I argue that first-person discourse involving a parallel between representation and enactment provides particularly rich opportunities for this process of maintaining the self on the boundary.²² This process involves both individual and social aspects, but neither of these can be reduced to or extricated from the other. Participant examples and other speech events in which speakers both represent and enact parallel patterns can maintain the self as a socially recognized type and recreate the social type at the same time.

So exploring the phenomenon of parallelism between representation and enactment has yielded a more general approach. I have argued that, instead of reducing representation or enactment to the other, we must see both as part of larger systems composed of mutually reinforcing components. Just as deictics accomplish both representation and enactment through the systematic interrelation of referential and interactional functions, broader human processes — like the construction and maintenance of the self — depend on various mutually reinforcing components of a system. Instead of separating out and prioritizing either representation or enactment, we should study examples of how these various components interrelate to produce the self and other central human processes.

For response see essay by Dhillon

1. Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
2. John L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, 2d ed. (1956; reprinted, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).
3. For example, Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, "A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-taking in Conversation," *Language* 50 (1974): 696-735; see also, Michael Silverstein, "The Improvisational Performance of 'Culture' in Real-Time Discursive Practice," *Creativity in Performance*, ed. Keith Sawyer (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press).
4. As in Michael Halliday, *Language As Social Semiotic* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978); John Searle, *Speech Acts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

5. Stanton Wortham, *Acting Out Participant Examples in the Classroom*, (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishers, 1994).
6. I have also described parallelism between referential content and interactional positioning in another genre: autobiographical narratives. Stanton Wortham, *Narratives in Action* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001a) shows a narrator describing her past selves in certain relations and — in the storytelling event — *enacting* analogous relations with the audience. I argue that autobiographical narratives and other speech that involve a parallel between representation and enactment can help establish and maintain individuals' identities.
7. William Hanks, "The Indexical Ground of Deictic References," in *Rethinking Context*, ed. Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 47.
8. I have also argued that the interactional positioning accomplished through discussions of such examples can help students learn the subject matter in Stanton Wortham, "Internationally Situated Cognition: A Classroom Example," *Cognitive Science* 25, (2001b): 37-66.
9. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated by James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1900/1965).
10. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.
11. Vincent Crapanzano, *Hermes' Dilemma and Hamlet's Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
12. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," translated by Caryl Emerson and Michale Holquist, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1935/1981).
13. Greg Urban, *Metaphysical Community* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996). This more sociocentric account has been strengthened by recent work on the parallelism between representation and enactment in ritualized discourse [Parmentier, 1997; Michael Silverstein, "The Improvisational Performance of 'Culture' in Real-Time Discursive Practice,"]. This work shows that participants in ritual often represent and enact parallel patterns and that this sort of parallel plays an important role in reproducing culture. The practices and beliefs that characterize a cultural group often get passed down through events in which people both describe and enact the same characteristic patterns, because ritual itself — a central mechanism for reproducing culture — is often built around parallelism between representation and enactment. So Mr. Smith's example may not only reflect but also maintain or transform widely circulating social patterns.
14. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, translated by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963/1984); Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel."
15. Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin : creation of a prosaics* (Stanford, Ca: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990), 51.
16. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 341.
17. For example, if one wants to talk about "collateral damage," meaning 'civilians unintentionally killed in war,' one must first choose a term — "collateral damage," "dead civilians," or something else. By choosing and elaborating on one of these terms, one must generally express a position as to whether inadvertently killing civilians is unethical or merely unfortunate.
18. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
19. Hubert Hermans and Harry Kempen, *The Dialogical Self* (New York: Academic Press, 1993).
20. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Harold Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965/1984), 44.
21. I cannot *prove* that the self gets constructed, and not simply manifested, through parallels between representation and enactment. No matter how sophisticated the linguistic analysis and no matter how robust the discursive pattern, these patterns can always be interpreted as manifestations of underlying psychological structure. Nonetheless, I prefer an account of the self as the virtual or absent center of many overlapping processes [Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1991)]. I have described this as "the heterogeneously distributed self" ("The Heterogeneously Distributed Self" *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 12 (1999): 153-73..
22. Wortham, *Narratives in Action*.