

Two Approaches to Negotiating Positions in Interaction: Goffman's (1981) Footing and Davies and Harré's (1999) Positioning Theory

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The purpose of this paper is to compare Goffman's (1981) notion of footing with Davies and Harré's (1999) Positioning theory. First, I examine how the notion of footing developed from Goffman's (1959) earlier work on the presentation of self as well as from his more recent *Frame Analysis* (1974), and what some of its implications are for discourse analysis. Then, I compare Goffman's idea of footing with Davies and Harré's Positioning theory which they claim is much more dynamic and based on a moment-by-moment basis. I conclude by evaluating the two approaches, and suggest that they complement each other and work towards gaining a better understanding of face-to-face interaction.

Goffman's (1981) ideas about footing and the participation framework can be traced back to his earlier division of the self into character and performer (1959) and his more recent work on frame analysis (1974). Goffman (1959) portrays the individual as a two-party team which consists of a performer (a fabricator of impressions) and a character (a figure whose qualities the performance is designed to evoke). The self is viewed as the product of a performance— "to be a given kind of person [...] is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and appearance one's social grouping attaches thereto" (1959:75).

Similar ideas run through the much more linguistically-oriented papers in *Forms of Talk* (Goffman, 1981). There is a change in terminology, and the two regions (back stage and front stage) with the various norms of behavior associated with them are substituted with frames. The focus has shifted to how through talk and through what Gumperz (1982) identifies as contextualization cues the individual displays a self to others in social interaction. Talk is viewed as a form of performance through which the person establishes his or her alignment. In fact, in the introduction to *Forms of Talk* Goffman notes that his purpose is to show that the fundamental requirements of theatricality are deeply incorporated in the nature of talk.

Before moving on to footing and the various positions one can take in relation to an utterance, I would like to discuss how Goffman's ideas from his earlier work are transformed in his *Frame Analysis* (1974). *Frame Analysis* deals with the issue of how individuals make sense of their experience and surrounding events. The ideas presented here diverge from previous

work since the focus is now more on the subjective view of a situation. This is reflected in the definition Goffman provides of the frame as a way of organizing experience— “[...] frame incorporates both the participant’s response and the world he is responding to; [therefore], a reflexive element must be necessarily present in any participant’s clearheaded view of events” (1974:85). Later on, this insistence on the subjective view surfaces in the decomposition of the traditional category of the speaker and the differentiation among the various positions that make up the production format.

Of all the ideas propounded in *Frame Analysis*, the ones that are most relevant to footing are those put forward in the chapter “Frame Analysis of Talk”. Given Goffman’s definition of frame with its emphasis on the subjective view, it follows that informal talk is especially suitable for frame analysis since it is a way of taking up an alignment to what is going on, and through it people try to gain appreciation of themselves by replaying their personal experience. The author draws a parallel between stage and conversation by pointing out that in both cases there is a “preformulation” of previous experience seeking the engagement of an audience. Goffman (1974:523) introduces the terms *principal*, *strategist*, *animator*, and *figure*, which enable the individual to replay any strip of experience. These four notions (with slight modifications) are later referred to as the production format, and play a role in establishing one’s alignment to a particular utterance.

Goffman (1981) defines *footing* as “the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance” (1981:128). He notes various deficiencies in the traditional two-party paradigm for talk, which includes only the categories of speaker and hearer and proposes breaking it into more differentiated parts. Through the production format and the participation framework, the notions of speaker and hearer are decomposed into a set of positions. The notion of speaker is decomposed into animator, author and principal, whereas the notion of hearer is decomposed into ratified/unratified recipient and addressed/unaddressed recipient. Those in the visual and aural range of an utterance take a position from the above-mentioned set in relation to that utterance. The redefinition of the category of speaker made possible to distinguish among the different ways of self-presentation available to those who produce speech. Any change in the alignment an individual takes in terms of these positions is reflected in change of footing. Furthermore, in most interactions, participants do not simply change footing but they laminate experience by embedding one footing within another. Goffman notes that “within one alignment, another can be fully enclosed. In truth, in talk it seems routine that, while standing on two feet, we jump up and down on another” (1981:155).

Another important point about footing is that every participation status has some normative conduct associated with it. In the process of ritualizing participation frameworks, i.e., transplanting them from their original social situations to environments that are not natural for them (1981:153), our interpretation of any changes in positioning is facilitated by expectations about appropriate conduct associated with each position.

Davies and Harré (1999) offer an alternative analytic scheme, which they call Positioning theory. Rejecting any suppositions that rules and conventions exist independently of production, they argue for an immanentist view. For them, social order is produced on a moment-by-moment basis in conversational action. The authors define positioning as a discursive process whereby “people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (1999:37). Positioning has a dynamic aspect to it, i.e., people are viewed as capable of exercising choice in defining themselves in relation to one another through what they say and how they say it. Davies and Harré deny the existence of any prior schemata and maintain that meaning is produced on the basis of current understandings of past and present conversations.

Davies and Harré suggest the metaphor of unfolding narrative as a way of understanding how people interact in everyday life. What it means is that it is possible for people to take one position at the start of a story, which they later can refuse and negotiate a new one. It is also possible to stand in multiple or even contradictory positions. This comes very close to Goffman’s idea that over the course of conversation we constantly change our footing, and that these changes are a persistent feature of natural talk. Davies and Harré contrast their approach to Goffman’s, and comment that while he takes for granted that alignments exist prior to speaking, in their approach “alignments are actual relations jointly produced in the very act of conversing” (1999:45). In Goffman’s view, indeed, there is a set of expectations of behavior associated with each position, and these expectations surface in actual conversation. But at the same time, he allows for the possibility for people to break out of frame and to re-key events, which lends further strength to his model.

In sum, the two approaches discussed here, although differing in their views about the importance of any pre-existing conventions, both point to the fact that the ‘production’ of oneself and others in interaction is a socially situated event. An underlying theme in Goffman’s earlier work is that in interaction one displays one’s self in respect to others, and in order to foster a certain image, one has to realize other people’s conceptions of what that image entails. In discussing the notions of frames and footing, he notes that talk is governed by social rules and common understandings. When entering a situation, each participant has to negotiate his or her definition with those

of other people and the constraints that pre-exist the event itself. Davies and Harré, too, acknowledge that knowledge of the past and understanding of the current interaction are necessary. In their view, however, speakers draw only upon what has happened before and upon human memories of it. Their model focuses more on the idiosyncratic aspects of interaction, and on how the specific dynamics of an event enable people to negotiate their positions.

In conclusion, I would like to outline the broader importance of the notions of framing, footing and positioning to linguistics. At the end of his paper on footing, Goffman (1981) expresses his belief that linguistics can provide us with the cues and markers through which changes in footing (that is, changes in the way we manage the production and reception of an utterance) become manifest. At the same time, Goffman's analyses also offer numerous insights for people working in the field of linguistics. His frame analysis and footing provide complex systems of concepts and principles that can help the analysts grasp better the nuances and subtleties of the context of a situation, and the parts each of the participants plays. All this contributes to a better interpretation of what the intended meaning of an utterance is and how it is perceived. While Goffman places more emphasis on the fact that participants are constrained by the situation in which they find themselves, for Davies and Harré the individual emerges through the process of social interaction. What both approaches have in common is the belief that the production of oneself and others in interaction is a socially situated event.

References

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