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[Papers from the Special Session in Honor of Erving Goffman (Professor at the University of Pennsylvania 1968-1982)] Non-verbal navigational tools of conversation

## Non-Verbal Navigational Tools of Conversation

Laura J. Wright

Goffman (1971) compares social interactions to traffic patterns to illustrate the ways an individual is similar to a vehicular unit. Just as motorists obey traffic rules to make driving go smoothly, individuals obey norms which help interactions to go smoothly. Goffman states, "The members of an orderly community do not go out of their way to aggress upon one another. Moreover, whenever their pursuits interfere, they make adjustments necessary to escape collision and make them according to some conventional rule" (1971:6). Although Goffman is primarily concerned with non-verbal interactions (e.g., pedestrians passing on the street), he alludes to the same underlying rules as governing conversations. He says, "There are rules for taking and terminating a turn at talking, there are norms synchronizing the process of eyeing the speaker and being eyed by him; there is an etiquette for initiating an encounter and bringing it to an end" (1971:3-4). All conversational encounters have an underlying system of norms that allow people to interact efficiently. For example, there are socially acceptable ways to take turns speaking and normalized times in conversation when it is appropriate to change topic. Goffman goes on to say that this points to the "awesome competency both with respect to performance and interpretation which seems to be required by all those who are able to exchange a few remarks with a friend..." (1971:4, fn 1).

Many researchers interested in discourse analysis miss a main concept of Goffman's work, that is, information "given off" (1959) when they fail to consider the many non-verbal signals people employ when talking. Part of Goffman's interest in examining social interactions is in analyzing the numerous non-verbal gestures people use in communication. These exude information that others use to form impressions of the individual. For Goffman, information given is only part of the equation.

In this paper I will explore the use of a number of paralinguistic devices similar to the ones that Goffman cited in "The Individual as a Unit" (in Goffman 1971), which allow an individual to maneuver effectively with others. This behavior, when accompanying talk, allows for smooth interaction among participants. In order to analyze these devices, I will use examples from a staff meeting held at the University of Maryland. The meeting involves four women: Rita, the supervisor, and three of her employees: Clara, Anna, and Melba. This analysis first examines how Rita, in particular, utilizes non-verbal communication to construct conversational preserves (cf.

Goffman 1971:40). Primarily through the use of gaze, Rita is able to initiate and maintain interaction with participants. Secondly, this analysis focuses on what Goffman calls critical signs (1971:13). These non-verbal signals make otherwise unavailable facts about one's situation "gleanable."

The first examples show how Rita uses directed gaze as a way to select another speaker. Rather than selecting the speaker by using the staff member's name, she looks directly at the other participant while she is speaking to indicate that she is directing a question or utterance at a particular individual.

21. **Rita:** Right. (looking at Anna)  
 22. Good.  
 23. Excellent.  
 24. That reminds me, too.  
 25. I don't know if you saw my message  
 26. this morning  
 27. Remember to, uh,  
 28. hand in your travel reimbursements  
 29. cuz it's the  
 30. end of the fiscal year.  
 31. You've been doing a good bit of  
 32 pony express stuff recently  
 33. @@  
 34. So that needs to be handled

If one only looked at the written transcript, it is not clear to whom Rita has directed this utterance. However, in watching the video, one can see that Rita is looking directly at Anna while saying this. Through her use of directed gaze, Rita constructs a conversational preserve with Anna, implying that she is talking to Anna and not to the other staff members. In turn, there is evidence that Anna recognizes that she is the intended recipient because she responds to Rita by asking her a question about the travel reimbursements.

35. **Anna:** are there forms?

Anna's question shows that she has received Rita's message and that she understands that Rita was talking to her. Furthermore, the lack of the others' participation in this section of the dialog indicates that the conversational preserve is only between Anna and Rita. Neither Melba nor Clara asks questions about the travel forms.

In addition to gaze directed at one person, Rita also shifts her gaze to other participants when she wants to signal that they are included in the conversational preserve. Following the exchange with Anna regarding travel reimbursements, Rita directs the message to the rest of the staff.

43. I sent you a message— (looking at Anna)  
 44. I sent all of us a message on that. (shifts gaze to Clara)

In line 43, Rita was directing her gaze at Anna. She then changes the direction of her gaze in line 44 to look at Clara. Her language further reflects that this utterance is intended for everyone through using the word *us*. This demonstrates how a shift in gaze can open the conversational preserve to other participants.

Lastly, in line 48 Rita shifts her gaze to Melba while giving her a directive.

48. **Rita:** Give her a copy  
 49. of the one I've already done  
 50. so she can go by that  
 51. as a sample  
 52. **Melba:** Okay, I will.

Again, while it would not be clear to whom Rita was directing this utterance from looking at a transcript, it is evident in watching the video that Rita is telling Melba to provide Anna with a sample of the travel reimbursement form because she is directing her gaze at Melba. Furthermore, Melba shows that she understands that this utterance was directed at her by responding that she will give Anna the copy.

Another example of Rita's use of direct gaze comes in line 150 when she asks two of the staff members if they would like to have a retreat. Rita is not specific in naming the addressees; however, in observing her gaze, it is clear to whom she is directing her speech.

150. **Rita:** When do (looking at Clara)  
 151. when do you think  
 152. we should schedule a retreat day? (looking at Melba)

When Rita begins her utterance, she is directing her gaze at Clara. At the end of her utterance, she shifts her gaze to Melba. Through observing where Rita looks, it appears that both Melba and Clara are included in the retreat. This is later confirmed in line 256 when Rita writes the retreat day in her schedule.

She says Clara and Melba's names along with the class that they will be revising as she is writing in her calendar. During the talk that is interspersed between lines 150 and 256 Rita only looks at Clara and Melba, not Anna. Furthermore, Anna never speaks during this portion of the conversation and Rita did not write Anna's name for the retreat. Rita's lack of gaze at Anna suggests that Anna is not a participant in the conversational preserve.

Another example of Rita's use of gaze to indicate to whom she is speaking occurs in line 54.

54. **Rita:** What's the um (looking at Melba/Anna)  
 55. What's the volume of phone calls from faculty  
 56 Who are calling you and saying  
 57. "I don't like what you're asking me to do  
 58. or I'm confused or..?" (looking at Clara)

Here, Rita asks a question, and by circulating her gaze among the staff members, shows that anyone may respond. After a slight pause, Clara responds to Rita's question. This slight pause and trailing off of the sentence indicate that the floor was open for anyone to speak. The staff members did not know who was selected to speak next. Because Rita's gaze rested on Clara on the end, it seems most likely that she would answer. However, even after Clara answers Rita's question, Rita continues to circulate her gaze among all staff members. Rita's continual use of circular gaze indicates that all of the staff members were included in the conversational preserve.

Following talk of the retreat, Rita uses a circular hand motion again in line 267 to include everyone in the conversation when she introduces a new topic. This gesture functions, in Goffman's terms, as a critical sign to show the participants who is included in the conversational preserve. Coupled with her linguistic choices, Rita indicates that she is addressing everyone in the meeting.

267. **Rita:** ....So before I do that  
 268. I need to know from you (circular hand motion)  
 269. what your sense of it is  
 270. How did this work? (picks up paper)  
 271. This was designed  
 272. to get the student services teams  
 273. through su—  
 274. the summer registration period  
 275. with all of us keeping our sanity @@

Through Rita's choice of pronouns, she shows that she is addressing the entire group again. While the use of *you* is ambiguous because it could be singular or plural, Rita's use of *us* shows that she is directing this utterance at the whole staff. Furthermore, she finds it necessary in the next line to select the next speaker by naming her.

276. So did it  
 277. did it work?  
 278. And I guess Melba you're the one  
 279. who's most  
 280. ya know  
 281. on the front line.  
 282. Is there anything I  
 283. that we could say better on this?

Had Rita's gaze been directed at one person, she would not have needed to name the next speaker; she could have let her gaze communicate the next speaker selection as she had in other cases. By directly naming the next speaker, Rita avoids confusion implied by her non-verbal behavior. Even though Melba has been directly selected to take the next turn, Rita's use of the pronoun *we* in line 283 indicates that all of the staff are included in this discussion. This underlines what had been communicated through her use of a circular hand motion as a critical sign.

In addition to her hand motion, Rita uses another critical sign to guide the conversation. She uses a real world object to help the other participants know to what she is referring. In line 270 Rita uses the word *this* while picking up a memo on her clipboard. If one were not able to see to what Rita was referring, this utterance could be ambiguous. However, because she picks up the piece of paper, the other participants know which memo she was talking about and can respond to her question.

Finally, the discourse surrounding the closing of the meeting is quite different from standard pre-closings and closings. Rather than using verbal channels to indicate that the meeting is coming to an end, Rita gathers her papers up to signify that the group has finished talking about their business. The other participants in turn, gather their belongings and prepare to leave the table. The topic of the conversation at this point is focused on travel reimbursements as Rita jokes about the reimbursements helping her employees' bottom line. Although the topic is coming to an end, there is no other indication other than the non-verbal cues that Rita is using to signify the close of the meeting.

388. **Rita:** It'll give you a little bubble in your paycheck.  
389.     @@  
390.     Not much.  
391.     Okay. Thanks everybody.

Without this important critical sign, the end of the meeting would seem abrupt. However, because the participants can observe Rita packing up her belongs and preparing to leave, her quick transition to thanking everyone for coming to the meeting does not seem abrupt.

Through this paper I have shown that non-verbal behavior plays a major role in helping the others navigate the interaction. Through Rita's use of gaze, she constructs and maintains the conversational preserve and is able to facilitate turns in the meeting with minimal gap and overlap. There are rarely points where the speakers compete with one another for the floor or overlap because they misunderstood whose turn it was. Even though Rita rarely used the other participants' names, her use of non-verbal behavior helped the participants know who was being addressed and who was to take the floor. Additionally, Rita's use of critical signs shows participants whether they should be looking at a memo or preparing to take leave. Goffman's analysis of the individual as a vehicular unit provides useful tools for analyzing the ways in which individuals interact in society in an orderly fashion. Equally important in our understanding of social interactions are the non-linguistic behaviors that accompany our talk. These behaviors "give off" vital information so that other participants can navigate encounters and avoid potential collisions. As discourse analysts look for rules which govern turn-taking, openings and closings, and other norms of conversation, Goffman's legacy is a framework to account for the non-verbal channels used in these interactions.

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