

## The Interaction Order and the Joint Production of Discourse

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In his 1982 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Goffman reflects on his dedication to the examination of social interaction, aiming to defend his focus on face-to-face interaction. He calls this domain “the interaction order” (1983:2) and suggests that other sociologists “have not been overwhelmed by the merits” of studying it through microanalysis. Twenty years later, six students and four professors met in a Georgetown University seminar dedicated to his work, to discuss those merits and how they personally were using them in their linguistic scholarship. While his notions of “face” (1967), “involvement,” (1963) “framing” (1974) and “footing” (1981) are prominent in sociolinguistics, his approach to the interaction order on the whole is highly valuable. In this short paper I will relate his approach to the sociolinguistic concept of the joint production of discourse. His own words are preferable to an unpleasant paraphrasing:

It is a fact of our human condition that, for most of us, our daily life is spent in the immediate presence of others: in other words, that whatever they are, our doings are likely to be, in the narrow sense, *socially situated*. So much so that activities pursued in utter privacy can easily come to be characterized by this special condition. (Goffman 1983:2)

Goffman’s work examines what happens when individuals find themselves in the presence of others where their words and actions are socially situated. In his address he states, for example, that co-presence allows for an individual to glean from another’s appearance, activity and manner an impression of that individual’s “immediate intent or purpose” (1983:3). This alludes to *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1952) and expression given and given off, where the first is information communicated intentionally by an individual and the second is information communicated unintentionally in an individual’s actions, manners and the like.

His address then deals with co-present individuals’ management of a “joint focus of attention” (1983:3):

When in each other’s presence individuals are admirably placed to share a joint focus of attention, perceive that they do so, and perceive this perceiving. This, in conjunction with their capacity to indicate their own courses of physical action and to rapidly convey reactions to such indications from

others, provides the precondition for something crucial: the sustained, intimate coordination of action, whether in support of closely collaborative tasks or as a means of accommodating closely adjacent ones.

These comments reflect his corpus of work on the individual's socially situated activity, a few examples of which I will discuss. In *Behavior in Public Places*, for instance, he introduces the term "face-engagement" (1963:89) as an occasion where two or more individuals openly maintain the same focus of attention and gives as the most common example the scenario where two people are present in some situation and they may engage in talk. When I get on the Georgetown shuttle and see a colleague, then, I am "admirably placed" (1983:3) to talk to that colleague—not to do so would be rude. I perceive that I should talk to that person even though I may not want to, and recognizing this, I perceive that perceiving.

A face-engagement tends to begin when one individual conveys intention to start one and the other individual reacts positively to that indication. This communication can be as subtle as a change in the initiator's eye gaze (1963:91), "indicating [her] own courses of [action]", then acknowledged by some expression of the eyes in the respondent (1963:92), "rapidly conveying reactions to such indications from other" (1983:3). Building on this, in *Relations in Public* he likens social order to traffic (vehicular and pedestrian) order (1971:6). He suggests the term "critical sign" (1971:13) for an act that informs an individual about the intentions of another and the term "establishing point" for the moment when both individuals sense that critical signs have been conveyed to such an extent that they both understand what happened.

Using such signs individuals can thus engage in that "sustained, intimate coordination of action, whether in support of closely collaborative tasks or as a means of accommodating closely adjacent ones" (1983:3). One such collaborative activity is conversation, where, as Goffman notes in *Forms of Talk* listeners use back-channel responses to indicate to the speaker that she is understood and communicating in a socially acceptable way (1981:18). Co-present individuals manage independent activity as well. In a university library, for example, two people may sit reading at the same table without any face-engagements. It is in fact beneficial for them not to talk as interaction would distract them and others from their work. They merely establish their own "stalls" (1971:32) at the table, areas of space to which they lay claim while they or their possessions are present there, and work independently. They accord one another "civil inattention" (1963:83), showing awareness of the other person's presence but in no way drawing attention to the other person.

Let me relate this to contemporary sociolinguistic study. As a method of discourse analysis, interactional sociolinguistics examines primarily the verbal exchange between interlocutors, also paying attention to the non-verbal signs that an individual conveys because they too give and give off information. It considers conversation a “joint production” (Tannen 1989:12) by both speaker and listener. The audience is the co-author and the speaker the co-listener of a conversation as they both participate in interpreting and shaping the utterances (13). Also, as Bakhtin (1986) suggests, every utterance is a response to a previous one and anticipates a future one.

Goffman’s work supports this concept of joint production and is valuable for its analysis. From the moment a face-engagement is initiated to when it is disbanded, individuals maneuver themselves through the interaction in coordination with the other participants. Let us take as an example two friends, Jenny and Suzanne, unexpectedly meeting on the Georgetown shuttle.

In his observations on the “territories of self”, Goffman notes that an individual maintains a “conversational preserve” (1971:40) in which she has some control over who can initiate talk with her, and how. A co-present individual, who may or may not wish to initiate talk, is aware of this preserve. An individual seeing a friend on a public bus usually has the right to enter this preserve. When Jenny does this, the face-engagement begins as described earlier according to Goffman’s *Behavior in Public Places*, with Jenny using some sign to initiate talk and Suzanne acknowledging the overture with another sign (1963:92).

As the conversation flows, the interlocutors maintain an “expressive order” (1967:9) a concept discussed in terms of face-work in *Interaction Ritual*. This is the order that regulates the events of the interaction ensuring the protection of the participants’ face. Participants take a “line”, a manner of verbally and non-verbally participating in the exchange that indicates their view of the situation, in an interaction. Face is the “positive social value” they claim for themselves by the line they take. Thus in conversation, participants engage in face-work, protecting face and the expressive order. Face might be “threatened” in the sample interaction when Jenny asks Suzanne how she is doing in a class, to find out that Suzanne had been doing so badly that she dropped the class. Having threatened Suzanne’s face they are in a state of “ritual disequilibrium” and Jenny makes some face-saving moves as part of the “corrective process” to reinstate the expressive order. She apologizes, saying that she did not mean to bring up such a topic (implying that it is embarrassing and face-threatening), Suzanne accepts by saying “It’s OK, you didn’t know” and Jenny shows appreciation for her friend’s forgiveness.

Goffman calls the steps in this process “challenge, offering, accepting [and] gratitude” (1967:20-21).

Jenny and Suzanne, then, as they work at maintaining the expressive order, are co-constructing their discourse. This is facilitated by, according to Goffman’s later work *Relations in Public*, supportive and remedial interchanges. Supportive interchanges are actions that affirm and promote the relationship between the participants (1971:63), in this case two friends. As such, greeting one another and maintaining a conversation are supportive interchanges as they affirm and maintain their relationship. Were Jenny not to greet Suzanne on the bus, this lack would act as a slight to Suzanne, an “offense” (1971:100). Jenny’s embarrassing mentioning of Suzanne’s academic failure is also an offense, one she remedies in her apology, a “remedial exchange” (1971:95).

Participants also coordinate the end of an interaction. Like the initiation of a face-engagement, its conclusion is negotiated through subtle signs. Goffman discusses this both in *Behavior in Public Places* and *Relations in Public*. In the former he mentions that an individual must release her conversation partner if that person shows signs of wanting to be released (1963:110). Jenny and Suzanne disembark the shuttle while Suzanne tells an interesting story. They pause on the street as Suzanne finishes the story but upon completion she does not bring up further topics and instead brings the conversation to a finish, because she has picked up on cues from Jenny’s body that Jenny is heading in a different direction from Suzanne and wants to be on her way. In the latter book Goffman’s suggestions about leave-taking pertain to the expression of the status of the relationship in that closing salutation (1971:82). Jenny and Suzanne are friends who go to the same university and see each other regularly. Their quick farewell utterances “See you later!” and “See ya!” reflect their “anticipated time of no contact” (88) which is not a long period. Were they both going home for the summer their farewell would reflect that anticipated absence and be longer, address the absence and likely also involve physical contact, such as a hug.

Jenny and Suzanne co-construct their interaction, maintaining the interaction order, by relying on their awareness of the norms of interaction, one another’s verbal and non-verbal cues and supportive and remedial strategies. They are both aware of their situation, namely that they are participating in a friendly, casual conversation. Goffman discusses this mutual awareness in terms of frames and frameworks in *Frame Analysis*. A framework is something that keeps its elements together so that those elements have meaning based on the framework. Without the framework they would have no meaning. It answers the question “What is going on here” (1974:25). If Jenny were to ask herself that during her conversation, her answer would be “I’m

in a conversation with my friend.” That framework gives her utterances and actions meaning. Because Suzanne is operating within the same framework, she can coordinate her utterances and actions successfully as well. They are able to co-construct their dialogue because they are both using this framework.

Goffman’s concept of frames is widely used in interactional sociolinguistics. It can be complemented effectively though by (though not exclusively) his other concepts outlined above. The maintenance of face and expressive order, for instance, contributes directly to the co-construction of discourse. The negotiation of non-verbal signs to begin and end interaction is also essential. Goffman’s many interactive strategies, such as supportive and remedial exchanges, sustain the expressive order and the co-construction of discourse. Goffman may have expressed in 1982 that his contribution to sociology had not been embraced and required defending, but in 2002 its contribution to linguistics is well known, at least to some discourse analysts, and is growing as enthusiastic scholars discover his work.

## References

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