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Philburn, RS

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CONVERSATIONAL COMPETENCE AS 'CONSTRUALISTIC' ACTIVITY

Rob Philburn

University of Salford, Allerton Building, Salford, M6 6PU, UK

Abstract

This paper builds on the previously advanced notion of the 'conversational construal', that is, the degree to which persons overlap with or differentiate from each other based on their conversational contributions. Specifically, the paper explores the notion of how mobilising different aspects of one's conversational construal over the course of talk with others can be regarded as a key 'conversational competence'. Moreover, this competence is argued to underpin cultural manifestations of ordinary, naturally occurring conversation, making the conversational construal a culturally sensitive phenomenon. To illustrate this idea, the paper draws on two lingua-cultures (England and Germany), which have been shown to display quite differing conversational orientations as participants in talk go about doing sociable interaction. The paper seeks not only to illustrate the links between these two ideas for the study on conversational interaction generally, but also to show how cultural variation in conversational style, and potential points of cross-cultural misunderstanding, might be better understood, made sense of, and appreciated.

Keywords: *conversational construal, conversational competence, cross-cultural communication, German-English conversational styles*

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I want to briefly expand on ideas previously presented (Philburn, 2016) with a particular focus on the notion of *conversational competence*. Unlike the conceptual focus of this earlier discussion, the focus here is on the practical aspects of conversation, that is, how does one do - and demonstrably so (i.e. show that *this* or *that* is what one is currently doing) - conversational interaction? Conversation has of course come under the glare of academic focus from a number of perspectives, which have sought to discover its underlying organizational principles. Awareness of, and ability and willingness to execute in interaction, these principles is the sort of thing that allows speakers to demonstrate, and others to recognise, 'competence'. This notion of competence, although not infrequently mentioned, is not often fully examined. Although approaching the notion from a somewhat side on perspective, I want here for the reader to consider the notion from a particular perspective, that of competence as a 'construalistic' matter.

2. THE 'CONVERSATIONAL CONSTRUAL'

In a recent paper (Philburn 2016) I proposed the notion of the 'conversational construal', which I defined as '...the degree to which persons overlap with each other based, not on their cultural membership or personal disposition, but on their conversational contributions' (p. 32). Set against the backdrop of discussions in a range of literature employing the notion of 'self-construal', that is 'the degree to which [people] see themselves as separate from others or as connected with others' (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p.226), I suggested a move away from understanding the self construal as located in the *psychology* of the person, or as being characteristic of this or that *culture* (the two predominant camps in the discussions of the self-construal), to consider it as located in the reality *sui generis* generated during episodes of *conversational interaction*. The move away from psychological or cultural determinism, to something more akin to *conversational relativism* would reflect more clearly, I argued, what goes on in actual instances of conversational activity, or 'fresh talk' as Erving Goffman (1981) termed it, and how the aspects of selfhood pointed to in the body of work on self-construals actually operate in, or underpin, such talk.

The arguments advanced had support lent to them from a range of studies of spoken interaction, straddling some considerable time, from Simmel's (1949 [1911], p.259) observations on sociable interaction, through studies of sociability (Riesman and Watson, 1964; Watson, 1958; Watson and Potter, 1962), examination of 'casual conversation' (Eggins and Slade 1997), theorising about face and facework (Brown and Levinson 1987), sociological studies of talk (Earley 1997, Malone 1997, Schiffrin 1984, Tannen 1986), commentary in cognate disciplines (Baxter and Montgomery 1996, Freud 1922, Giles 1977, Maner et al 2007) to a more recent resurgence in interest in the dynamics of relatedness and separateness in talk (e.g. Arundale 2010).

In essence, the arguments I advanced were as follows:

1. Conversational interaction involves the taking of conversational lines, consisting of such things as *definitions of, experience with, or attitudes towards* the referent of joint focus of the current talk.
2. This taking of lines has symbolic consequences, i.e., generates and lays claim to images of self, character, face, in short, 'conversational selfhood'.
3. Conversational selfhood can be conceived of as inherently construalistic, that is, expressively geared towards *connectedness with or separateness from* others in talk.
4. A relational dimension is necessarily involved between conversational participants, that is, degrees of connectedness to or separateness (in terms of the expressed, hearable, 'overlapping' or 'separateness' of those conversational construals).
5. Contexts of connectedness or separateness are jointly produced, from fleeting moments, through conversational sequences, to whole conversations.
6. Boundaries or thresholds constrain construalistic activity, meaning the notions of 'too connected' or 'too separated' operate as expressive and relational system checks for any moment, sequence, or conversation.
7. Cultural conversational norms may exist around the mobilisation of conversational construals, marking or characterising this or that culture's conversation style (e.g. geared towards connectedness or separateness as a conversational 'norm').

Alongside work by others exploring the workings of conversational interaction (most notably in the fields of conversation analysis and in the writings of Erving Goffman), I suggested that these propositions exposed one level of organisational principles, involving the alignment of self, others, and conversational contributions. Although not touched on in that paper, perhaps implicitly suggested were also ideas around ability, willingness, awareness and aliveness to what the current organisational state of talk - and its current expectations and obligations - might be. Such ideas raise the notion of competence, of conversational competence, as being intimately related to construalistic activity.

3. THE NOTION OF CONVERSATIONAL COMPETENCE

The notion of 'conversational competence' does appear here and there in academic literature and research papers, the bulk of which seem to focus on either child development (e.g. Haslett 1984) or second language learning (e.g. Barraji-Rohan 2011). However, the focus in both cases tends to be on *acquisition and development*, rather than *presentation, demonstration, recognition and evaluation*. Of relevance here - largely due to what might be regarded as *the sequence-self link* - are the two main sociological perspectives on conversational interaction (Dennis, Philburn, and Smith 2013), namely, the work of Harvey Sacks and colleagues in the field of conversation analysis (see Clift 2016), and Goffman's work as part of his analysis of what he called the interaction order (see Goffman 1983b).

Since Harvey Sacks first 'invented' (Sacks 1992: 549) the perspective to understanding the collaborative organization of naturally occurring conversation known as conversation analysis, generations of scholars have examined how features of naturally occurring talk - adjacency pairs, repair, preference organisation, topic talk, storytelling, non-lexical utterances, pauses and overlaps etc - are predicated on the underlying sequential organisation of spoken actions. Central to understanding

how social life gets conversationally done is a recognition of the competence required of conversationalists to keep the sequential train of talk on the interactional rails:

'The central goal of conversation analytic research is the description and explication of the competences that ordinary speakers use and rely on in participating in intelligible, socially organized interaction. At its most basic, this objective is one of describing the procedures by which conversationalists produce their own behavior and understand and deal with the behavior of others' (Heritage & Atkinson 1984, 1).

This approach to understanding conversational interaction as competence is drawn from more general assertions from ethnomethodology, that the practical accomplishments of everyday life are a product of 'competent members' joint actions (Garfinkel 1967). Not only that, action are demonstrations, that is, not simply practical in applicability, but evidential in demonstrability. They are recognisable *instances of actions*. Surrounding these ideas are notions of accountability, that is, competent persons are producers of such actions, and can be expected to be accountable for their doings, not doings, or wrong-doings. There is then, alongside practical element to actions, a moral one.

Although casting his eye over many things, the Sociologist Erving Goffman also had an interest in the practical matter of competence:

'if a particular ... group or society seems to have a unique character of its own, it is because its standard set of human-nature elements is pitched and combined in a particular way ... the human nature of a particular set of persons may be specially designed for the special kind of undertakings in which they participate, but still each of these persons must have within him something of the balance of characteristics required of a *usable participant* in any ritually organized system of social activity' (Goffman 1967, 45 emphasis added; see also Goffman 1974, 496).

Again, although differing markedly in many respects to the work of conversation analysts, Goffman's interest in spoken interaction as central to understanding what goes on in everyday life had not only a practical dimension of usability, but a moral one, that is, what might be read about a person who was not able, or willing, to demonstrate his/her competence at conversational participation. The risk of such failure was that one may be perceived, to some extent, in the worst possible way - as '...strange, odd, peculiar, in a word, nutty' (Goffman 1983a: 26).

In both cases then, the expectations and obligations around competence, and using conversation to demonstrate this, point to its importance alongside the linguistic and ideational features of talk.

Although seldom extending his analytical gaze outside of the Anglo-American context, Goffman's comments here also allude to the contextual and cultural relevance and sensitivity around the notion of competence. Indeed if we find ourselves entering new contexts or cultures that are to some extent 'foreign', it is as such points, when new conversational demands might be made of us, that we may find ourselves out of our *conversational comfort zones*, so to speak. The point here is that, although our conversational behaviour may be most obviously associated with our linguistic abilities, the symbolic implication of what we are doing, and the moral inferences that may be drawn from them, would seem also to be at play.

4. CONVERSATIONAL SELFHOOD AND (INTER)CULTURAL (IN)COMPETENCE

A nice way to illustrate the place of competence as a construalistic activity then is by examining two contexts that appear to reveal differing conversational orientations, or styles. In a previous paper (Philburn 2011) I explored the terrain on which the current discussion is built by examining two different lingua-cultures, which a range of studies (e.g. Blum-Kulka & House 1989, Byrnes 1986, Fetzer 1996, Friday 1994, Hellweg, Samovar & Skow 1994, House 1979, 1982a, 1982b, 1982c, 1989, 1993, 1996, 2000, House & Kasper 1981, Kotthoff 1988, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1994, Straehle 1997, Watts 1989) had revealed to have quite different conversational styles. The ideas I presented focused specifically on conversational selfhood, that is, culturally recognisable (and positively valued) images of self expressed as part and parcel of engaging in sociable conversation.

Specifically, the argument advanced was that persons in each of these two lingua-culture worked to express various aspects of conversational selfhood, do so in an appropriate way, where and when conversationally relevant, and work closely with other conversationalists to align these aspects of selfhood as conversational character was collectively and collaboratively pursued, demonstrated, and sustained. This, it was argued, could be regarded as the hallmark of 'useable' participants, and its absence as the signs of something less so:

'The difference between having a hand in the game of sociability or putting one's foot in it, between being a cog in the sociable machinery or a spanner in the sociable works would seem to be largely influenced by competence as usability: competence in convincingly playing and competently aligning culturally available aspects of selfhood, and in doing so achieving and sustaining a culturally recognisable social(b)(e) encounter within the parameters of which those aspects of selfhood can be safely and comprehensibly played and those desirable images of selfhood presented. Linguistic competence may be a part of this usability, but that alone may not be enough. Indeed, the wider the gap between one's intercultural linguistic competence and one's intercultural usability, the greater, one would assume, the potential confusion and misperceptions for persons from any given culture entering and attempting to 'fit into' a culture that is not his/her own and realising that they are turning out to be more of a spanner than a hand, more of a foot than a hand, and that, in effect, *something more* is needed for them to become a competent and usable participant'. (Philburn 2011: 430)

Implied in the arguments around English and German aspects of sociable selfhood was a sort of cultural/conversational (and for the sake of the current argument - construalistic) *skewing*. That is, English aspects of sociable selfhood appear best suited for more solidarically oriented talk, at least with those other participants in the talk. Viewed on the one hand as conflict avoidance, or on the other as insincerity (echoing Goffman's (1967) comments on 'lip service' and 'working consensus' as a condition or ground rule of spoken interaction, at least in Anglo-American context), this argument seems well-supported by commentary across cross-cultural work. Conversely, German aspects of sociable selfhood (at least relative to English) appear best suited for more opinionated, less solidaric, and potentially combative talk in which the *raison d'être* of participation in conversation appears to be about outlining and defending one's own position, and finding fault with one's interlocutors.

The discussion presented in this paper was very much based on personal experience, and one which very much brought to the fore the question of competence. Although now familiar with the construalistic requirements, initial exposure revealed something of a lower level of competence:

'When I first entered German sociable encounters around 20 years ago I experienced a certain degree of 'sociable shock', similar to what Agar (1980, 50) referred to as 'cultural shock', that is '...sudden immersion in the lifeways of a group different from your own. Suddenly you do not know the rules anymore'. I remember being taken aback by what I heard and believed to be strangely unfriendly, unresponsive, and sometimes outright aggressive replies and responses to my early tentative attempts to be sociable. Verbal contributions to sociable conversations that I thought would allow me to *show my sociable side – to enter something of my sociable 'self' into the proceedings* – such as light-hearted 'throwaway' comments, offering amusing little anecdotes and recalling 'things that had happened' to me, and throwing in the odd joke and quip here and there seemed to have the opposite effect, and, led to curious unexpected conversational consequences. I often found myself having to clarify, justify or even defend what I had just said. This not infrequently led to me being (as I perceived it) rather unsociably 'dragged' into an extended conversation that I had not really intended nor wanted, and quite frankly – and herein lies the rub – didn't know how to 'sociably' deal with'. (Philburn 2011, 411-412, emphasis added).

The notion of competence would, in this context, seem to be tied to appropriate presentation of sociable selfhood. Moreover, the inferences drawn about persons (this or that person is a good/poor speaker of English/German) and stereotypes generated about cultures (the Germans are conversationally aggressive; the English are conversationally insincere) seem to have their symbolic and moral foundations in the notions of sociable selfhood. Whilst not drawn upon in this discussion of English and German variations in conversational style, these apparent variations in style and the

derived assumptions about persons and cultures would seem to point to what is being done, not done, or mis-done with conversational construals.

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What might these recounted experiences, and reported cultural differences, tell us about the concept of the conversational construal then, and its relationship to conversational competence? I think these experiences of exposure to, engagement with, and immersion in a 'foreign' conversational culture point to an important issue with not only cross cultural communication, but conversation more generally. I have already briefly outlined what Dennis et al (2013) regard as the two key sociological approaches to understanding the organizational principles of naturally occurring conversation, namely, the work of Sacks and colleagues and Goffman's examination of the spoken interaction. The competence demanded of participants in spoken encounters noted in both perspectives would seem also to extend to what I have referred to as construalistic activity. The cross-cultural experience may most clearly reveal this, but it is, I would argue, a competence demanded of all participants in all talk. To re-iterate, the matter concerns the mobilisation of aspects of conversational selfhood that expressively overlap or differentiate from others in talk. There has recently been something of a resurgence in the interest generated by Brown and Levinson's (1987) earlier exploration of the centrality of positive and negative facework to talk, and perhaps the propositions here fit generally into this camp. However, the arguments around competence, and the implications and inferences that might be drawn from it, are something that require more exploration.

The matter would seem to rest on three fundamental pillars: *awareness* of how to conversationally express similarity and difference, *aliveness* as to the conversational contexts in which this *can, may, should, must* occur, and the expressive (linguistic competence being just part of this expressiveness) *ability* to do this (for the current discussion the question of willingness is assumed, although this is of course the always the case). Or, stated differently, 'what are participants in conversation doing in terms of their conversational construals, and how might I do the same?'

Much like the non-determined nature of conversation noted by Sacks and colleagues, there is no pre-determined answer to when, how, to what extent this *can, may, should, must* occur. It is necessarily emergent and contingent. There is always the possibility of error, gaffe, faux pas (we may find that we have overstepped the expressed boundaries of 'sameness' to appear 'phony', or alternatively overstepped the expressive boundaries of 'difference' to appear 'disagreeable'). As noted in my previous discussion, conversationalists, in such instances, may quickly change their expressive footing to assist each other in restoring expressive order and balance in such instances.

An interesting idea, and final point, is the idea of what might be regarded as intrinsic agreeables / disagreeables, that is, topics that not only allow for the mobilisation of overlapping or differentiating conversational construals, but in many cases demand this. One quick and easy way to show one's conversational competence is to demonstrate an awareness of, aliveness to, and ability to express one's self in relation to these topics. Thus, those topics that anyone (everyone) might be expected to agree on allow for the easy overlapping of conversational construals. Politically correct topics and their resultant expressions are a nice example of this. Likewise, some topics open up the floor for (and again, may even demand) conversational separation ('politics' being an obvious example of an intrinsically disagreeable theme). There will be necessarily cultural and contextual sensitivity at play in drawing on such agreeables / disagreeables to overlap / differentiate conversational construals, and one cannot simply expect to take from one culture / context to another such conversational resources. The availability and use of such resources is, however, a nice way for us to appropriately, and competently, express sameness and difference with our fellow-conversationalists.

6. CONCLUSION

Although used in an almost informal vernacular sense in many contexts, the notion of 'competence' in language use is somewhat difficult to define (Witte and Harden, 2011, 3). Attempts to explicate the notion tend to focus on acquisition or teaching, of 'first' or subsequent language. In this paper I have attempted to ground the discussion not in the linguistic aspects of talk, but in the symbolic ones, that is, the ways in which the self located in conversation overlaps with or separates from the conversational selfhoods of fellow participants in talk. What I have argued is that the awareness of these features of talk, aliveness to them in operation, and ability to participate will allow persons to demonstrate, and others to recognise and evaluate, conversational competence. The immediately obvious example of this may indeed come from exposure to foreign conversational cultures, and one would indeed be making a mistake in thinking that exposing oneself to and engaging in such encounters with the belief that linguistic competence alone is sufficient. However, one need not encounter the foreign or exotic to consider the question of construalistic activity as a key aspect of conversational competence. In any context, persons must be aware of, alive to, and have the ability to mobilise appropriately both overlapping and differentiating aspects of conversational selfhood. Indeed, the 'skilled' conversationalists might be the sort of person who can overlap and differentiate at just the right points, to just the right extent, in just the right way to give fellow participants the feeling that the right conversational 'balance' has been struck. Fortunately, such perfectly deft conversationalists are rare, allowing the incompetences most of us display at one time or another to be easily overlooked or quickly assimilated into the ongoing to and fro of talk.

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