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Inference

Individuals engaged in a verbal encounter do not just rely on literal or denotational meaning to interpret what they hear. At issue is communicative intent—that is, what a speaker attempts to convey at a particular time and place in the interaction, not what an utterance means in the abstract. More often than not, listeners build on what they remember about preceding talk, their expectations about what is to follow, as well as on culturally specific background knowledge acquired through previous communicative experience, in order to fill in for what is left unsaid. I use the term *inference* or *conversational inference* to refer to the mental operations we engage in to retrieve such knowledge and integrate it into the interpretive process. The notion has become familiar to students of everyday communication through the writings of anthropologist Dan Sperber and linguist Deirdre Wilson, who argue that theories that treat meaning as directly transmitted via codes assuming a one to one relationship of sound to thought are inadequate to explain the facts of everyday discourse. Following philosopher Paul Grice, they suggest that everyday interpretive processes are akin to scientists' deductions from experimental evidence. From this perspective, talk can be treated as communicative practice, a form of goal oriented human action and as such its interpretation is contingent on power relations as well as culturally based typifications and premises. Consider the following illustrative example.

Driving home from the office one evening, my car radio was tuned to a classical music station. The announcer, a replacement for the regular host who was about to return, signed off with the following words: "I'VE enjoyed being with YOU these last two weeks." I had not been listening closely but the unexpected prosodic highlighting of "I've" and "you" in unmarked syntactic position (here indicated by caps) caught my attention. It sounded as if the speaker were producing the first part of a formulaic leave-taking sequence. But since he did not follow up with the expected second part, "I hope you have enjoyed being with ME," I hypothesized he was relying on

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his audience to infer, from the way he had used prosody to contextualiz his talk, that this is what he intended to convey or to use Grice's tern implicate. Several points are worth noting here: (1) We rely on such infe encing both to interpret content and to construct the contextual premise or presuppositions in terms of which content is understood. (2) Althoug my interpretation goes beyond what was literally said, it is important t note that inferences here are directly grounded in linguistic form. (3) To th extent it builds on listeners' ability to perceive and recall interdiscursiv relationships learned through shared communicative experience, the infe ential process is by its very nature culture bound. Culture, when seen i these terms, becomes a resource we rely on to participate in situated dis cursive practice. (4) Finally, the interpretation is not the only possible on there are always many possible interpretations. The interpretive proces yields plausible assessments that must then either be confirmed or defeate by what follows in the exchange. That is, it is the discursive exchange as whole rather than an individual utterance that constitutes the basic unit c analysis. The following example illustrates this.

Two students sitting in a coffee shop are gossiping about their landlord A: "But she's a FLAKE". B (fast tempo): "Ya know we should probabl watch it. They're probably sitt'n there." A (overlapping B's last three words "I know." B: "It's just nice going to cafes now and I feel like I don't hav to avoid anybody." A (overlapping B's last three words): "THIS is the LIFE. To those familiar with American student culture, the exchange seems pe fectly understandable; moreover, from the way the two respond, overlap ping each other's turn, they seem in perfect agreement. But surface meanin of component utterances alone does not indicate how the talk coheres. Onl if we assume that B's phrase about not having "to avoid anybody" indirectl indexes or evokes a normative principle—"do not gossip about people whe there is a chance they can hear you"—does her reply make sense. When A replies with an overlapping "I know," we conclude that the two are engag ing in shared inferencing. This is then confirmed at the end where the tw jointly manage a change in theme to coffee shop life, again with overlappin turns. In other words, by focusing on the inferencing and the extent t which it is shared, we come to see the exchange as a cohesive whole tha alludes to students' cultural worlds and the attendant tensions between th satisfactions of peer life and the adult world of landlords, where power an inequality are inevitably at work.

Comparative analyses of discursive practice following the above princi ples can account both for shared inferencing and the societal forces tha affect it. If carried out in a representative sample of discursive encounte and human societies, such analyses should not just provide insights int how inferencing works. They should also show how and in what ways th inferential process is culture bound. Cultural knowledge and power com to be seen as integrally involved in discourse. The ways in which they wor are subject to empirical analyses that do not depend on a priori assumption about ethnicity or group membership. In this way, discourse analyses ma among other things show how communicative practices create and maintai cultural identity.

(See also *identity, indexicality, intentionality, maxim, power, reflexivity, truth*)

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