

## Control

**S**ocial control is getting people to do things they would not choose to do were they completely free to decide, or not to do things they probably would do were they free to choose. While it is possible, of course, to control behavior physically or through denial of financial where-withal or through non-verbal signals, such control for competent users of language is primarily accomplished through discourse, spoken or written. What resources are available for control (and resistance thereto) are determined by the sociological variables of relations of power and of affect between/among interactants, and the valence to interactants of outcomes sought.

A sampling of the many dimensions upon which language-based control moves may vary follows.

(1) *Intentionality and ends*: When a child asks a grown-up to cut up her meat, she probably wants to be able to eat. When an older sibling warns a younger one to eat more slowly, she may want to keep her brother from choking—but she may also want to demonstrate her authority. She may unintentionally cause an audience to see her as bossy. Control that moves through talk can have multiple goals, both conscious and unconscious; the talk may produce a variety of outcomes—not all of which will be accessible to all interactants. The great variety of possible goals of talk contributes to deniability of socially disapproved motives for control—or to possibilities for unwarrantedly claiming societally endorsed motives for what are actually raw displays of power.

(2) *Directness-indirectness*: Indirect speech acts such as “Isn’t it cold in here?” when one wants a window closed, or a thermostat turned down, or an offer to bring a sweater.

(3) *Instrumentality selection*: English has a large number of labels for verbs that name ways of talking intended to control others’ behavior (e.g., ask, beg, demand, order, suggest). Actors of lower power don’t ordinarily order those of higher power, nor do those of higher power beg those with less.

But considerations of affect or of the perceived importance of an end sought by someone of lower power may generate unexpected behaviors. What we do to make sensible strangenesses we hear reveals our knowledge of rules for competence in social control accomplishment. This sense-making is greatly facilitated by our sometimes conscious, sometimes not so conscious, attunement to shifting characteristics of contexts identified by Erving Goffman as "keys" and "keying."

(4) *Intensity/degree*: How likely are signs such as "Private," "No Trespassing," "Restricted Area" (or their spoken equivalents) to deter potential trespassers—independently of the presence of higher and more formidable fences? If a social actor has committed an offense, would they rather be admonished, berated, chastised, chewed out, chided, harangued, rebuked, reprimanded, reproached, scolded, or tongue-lashed?

(5) *Paralinguistic cues and other dimensions*: There are both individual and cultural differences in the meanings attributed to production of speech varying in such features as (a) paralinguistic/prosodic aspects such as amplitude, hesitation, intonation, rhythm, stretching, stress, tempo, voice quality and so on, (b) register, (c) sequencing, (d) phonology, (e) lexical selection, and a variety of kinesic/proxemic behaviors including (f) gestures, (g) gross bodily movements, (h) gaze management, and (i) proxemic orientation. These and other features collectively define/identify what Dell Hymes has called "key," viz., "the tone, manner, or spirit in which an act is done." Utterances thus varying may be seen to differ in key as between mock and serious or perfunctory and painstaking. Within speech communities such variation signals how seriously an "order" or "entreaty" is to be taken. Across speech communities, unfamiliarity with subtleties of key can generate communicative failure and tension.

(6) *Powerfulness-powerlessness*: Courtroom studies show that witnesses who produce powerful speech, epitomized by assured affirmative or negative responses to questions ("yes" or "no") are seen as more credible than those who employ hedges, hesitation forms, polite forms, question intonation, tag questions ("You know about tag questions, don't you?"), and intensifiers. Not surprisingly, control attempts by actors who speak with assertive assurance are most likely to be successful.

(7) *Positive-negative/reward-punishment*: Obvious instances are "Grandpa will take you two for ice cream if you let him finish this piece on control" as opposed to "Stop fighting or you'll both be grounded."

(8) *Modes of control*: Basil Bernstein has labeled "positional" ("Because [I/your mother] said so") as opposed to "personal" ("Because it's too close to dinner time and you won't eat your supper" or "Because tomorrow is a school day") parental responses to children's queries about why they can't have something to eat or watch the rest of a television show.

(9) *Words of autonomous power/words as arbitrary symbols*: Medieval Europeans believed in the efficacy of a curse of damnation—particularly if it came from a senior cleric. Modern Americans don't believe in magical words, incantations, charms, spells ("Abracadabra," "Open Sesame," "Shazam"[\*]). Why then do we "knock on wood" and tell interlocutors, "Don't even think of it" or "I don't want to hear it"? The ability to produce

the right words for ritual is, in some religions, more important than the state of the producer's soul. Word taboos are a very nearly universal feature of even the most modern societies—just as rules about the employment of sacral languages and not vernaculars in religious contexts have been for millennia. Words can hurt, and some individuals have onomatomania (irrational fear of a particular word). The notion that words have autonomous power has often been made more complicated by beliefs about the special qualities of written text as opposed to spoken.

(10) *Relevant social differentiation*: Compare "Get th' fuck outta my face!" and "Please leave me alone" or "No!", "Don't do that!", "I'd think twice before doing that," and "That's probably not a good idea," and consider differences in "languages of control" available to different social strata, genders, age groups, and so on, interacting with similarly differentiated interlocutors.

(12) *Spoken-written discourse*: Schieffelin has shown how the invention and introduction of an evidential construction to refer to mission-generated literacy instruction material among the Kaluli (Papua New Guinea), translatable as "known from this source/not known before," has not only granted authority to this written text but has also been associated with granting status to those who have taken the new role of interpreter of Christianity. Written text gains part of its authority because of its accessibility only to some and its close association with modernity, Christianity, and Truthfulness. It may also be seen as more powerful than spoken text because of its relative permanence and availability for documentation, whether of contractual obligations or of commitment to love (comparisons of the weight of written text and of oaths before audiences need to be made). In modern, "secular" America, "swearing on the bible" is seen as somehow more binding than simply giving one's word. The greater efficacy and lesser fallibility accorded written text with emergent literacy is inextricably inter-implicated with just noted beliefs about intrinsic power of words.

Contemporaries from "critical linguists" of various stripes to practitioners of various sorts of structuralism or deconstruction have looked for ways in which to uncover the manipulation which goes on in (primarily) written text. These researchers conclude that language is used to control behavior; most conclude that "emancipation" from that control is possible, but not to be taken for granted. Kress and Hodge see control processes as axiomatic and treat them as linear (i.e., social structure > ideology > language in use > social control). Their model treats social structure and ideology as givens and control-outcomes as dependent on the manipulation of choices among linguistic options such as active or passive voice and the presence or absence of agents (on which two matters see Trew's examination of ideological slanting of newspaper coverage). Control efforts can be so subtle that they can be revealed only by practices of "interpretation-interruption." Most of us have experienced the control which can be accomplished by written text.

(See also *gesture, inference, literacy, orality, plagiarism, power, register, turn*)

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