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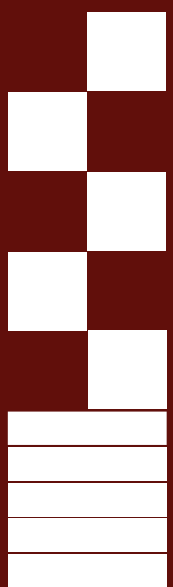
Communication Conduct in an Island Community

Erving Goffman



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COMMUNICATION CONDUCT IN AN ISLAND COMMUNITY

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Division of the Social Sciences in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Sociology

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Chicago, Illinois

December, 1953

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In Dixon, as apparently in other Bergand communities, there are many occasions when persons make a special effort to show respect and concern for each other. If a person become sick, neighbors offer to help out, and all the adult members of the community will make a point of asking anyone who might know about the current status of the sick person. When a person of any age has a birthday, the occasion will usually be marked by a party held for upwards of fifteen people; the immediate family, favorite relations and neighbors, and close friends. Invited persons all show their regard by bringing gifts. When a couple marries, a hundred or more persons will usually attend the wedding party held in the community hall, and many gifts will be given. When someone dies, males who are immediate neighbors, friends, and close relations will accompany the body to the burial ground. There are many other ceremonies of a similar kind. The islanders account for the ceremonial concern they show to one another by saying by saying that nothing much happens on the island so that persons are forced to turn to themselves as topics of conversation and as excuses to congregate. In any case, the ceremony seem to confirm a change in status of one or a few of the community's members, or to reaffirm community support of a member who is injured.

Ceremonial respect is frequently expressed or conveyed by the offering of gifts or assistance and the like. This study is not concerned with these ceremonies as such. However, some ceremonial offerings rely upon communication itself as a vehicle for conveying the offering. These provide clear examples of concrete interchanges and will be considered here.[1]

Road Salutations

There are no sidewalks in Dixon, and anyone going to or from a center of organized social activity is usually obliged to travel part of the way on roads. These roads are never very crowded. Therefore

[1] While in general it did seem that islanders showed "genuine" respect and courtesy to one another, frequent demonstrations of considerateness cannot be taken, in themselves, as evidence of mutual regard. For example, if tradition makes islanders sensitive to high standards of mutual concern, and at the same time islanders have come to feel dislike for one another, then elaborate

when persons pass each other during the day, whether on foot, bicycle, cart, motor bicycle, or car, they cannot convincingly act as if the other has not been seen.[2] The overlooking of someone cannot be rationalized as having arisen from accident or communication barriers; overlooking can only be taken as an expression of the attitude of the overlooker to the overlooked.

Adult residents of the island who pass each other on the road, regardless of the community, class, or the sex from which they come, whether they are personally acquainted or "know of" each other, or neither, or obliged to enter into interplay with one another. Minimally this consists of a momentary meeting of the eyes in the exchange of an nod or verbal salutation, with no other interruption of their current ongoing activity.[3] If the persons are acquainted with each other, and especially if they have not engaged in interplay with each other for a long period, or if a ritually significant event has occurred to one of them recently, then a mere salutation or recognitional interchange is followed by a chat which can last for minutes.

Minimal salutation between adult commoners on the road involves the use of a few set interchanges consisting solely of a statement on the part of one actor and a reply on the part of the other, both delivered with a specific and quite standardized tone. The following are perhaps the most frequent.

Actor: "Ae, ae."
Other: "Ae, ae." (Used only by men.)

Actor: "Foine day."
Other: "Foine day."

Actor: "Better day."
Other: "Ae," or, "Grand day."

Actor: other's Christian name
Other: actor's Christian name

Actor: "Voo ist du?"
Other: "Nae sae bad."

When one of the persons is on a cart, or bicycle, or motor bike, then each usually waves or nods his head. When one of the persons is in a car, then he may lift one hand off the wheel and smile,[4] or only one of these, and receive a similar sign in return.

In Dixon, salutations seem to confirm and symbolize the right of all islanders to have certain kinds of access to all other islanders. More important, apparently, these salutations provide an opportunity of acknowledging allegiance to the island and to the commoners, in general, who live on it. In these interchanges, each participant seems to symbolize for the other not a particular person but the whole

politeness may merely represent an effort to conceal or hold back real hostilities that are considered to be improper. On much the same grounds, Bales has argued that gestures of solidarity shown during interaction may be evidence not of deep solidarity but of the concern shown by participants that breakdown of the interaction is threatened and that something must be done to bolster it. See his discussion of what he calls the "flip-flop" problem, *Interaction Process Analysis*, pp. 117–118.

[2] One exception is allowed by the islanders. When a car passes a pedestrian going the same way, it is appreciated that the task of driving on a curving, narrow road may constitute a legitimate excuse for not turning from the steering wheel to salute the pedestrian who has been passed. On the other hand, there are so few cars in Dixon—approximately fourteen—that when two cars pass each other going in opposite directions in the night, it is assumed that drivers can identify each other, and honking of the horn is a required salutation.

[3] In Capital City persons unacquainted with each other tend not to offer a salutation on passing each other on the sidewalk. At the same time, there are enough people on the street so that it is possible not to see persons that one passes close to.

[4] This seems to be the only occasion when men regularly use smiles as salutations.

island, and it is to the whole island, via its momentary representative, that the salute is give. Thus, a very standardized tone is employed on these occasions, as if to express the fact that individual differences between one person whom an individual may salute and another are at the moment irrelevant.

When a commoner is working in a field and is close to the road, and another commoner passes on the road, then a recognitional interchange occurs, or the person working interrupts his task and comes to the fence by the road for a brief chat. The ceremonial care that commoners on the island exert in each other's behalf is illustrated by the readiness of persons to interrupt their work for these reasons.[5] When the person in the field is not near the road, but near enough to be able to determine who the walker is, then a salutation occurs but without an interruption in work unless there is a very special reason for having a chat. However, there is a point not close to the road, but not too far away, where the willingness of the worker to come up to the road for a chat becomes, in a sense, optional, and not dictated by custom. Work at this middle distance from the road places the worker in a sign situation, for it becomes difficult to handle particular passers-by by means of conventionalized courtesy due anyone. The decision of the worker to come to the fence for a talk, or not to come to the fence, and the decision of the walker to invite this move, or to inhibit it, becomes an expression of the particular feelings between the two persons, an expression that is writ too large not to become an in opportune or embarrassing source of impression.

Meetings on the roads between members of the gentry and a commoner are characterized, minimally, by a salutation. On the part of the gentry this consists of a nod, a smile, a comment about the weather, or mention of the commoner's Christian name. On the part of the commoner this consists of mention of the surname of the other, "Doctor" or "Doctor Wren" in the case of the physician, comment about the weather, and, to a decreasing extent, "sir" to the laird. Very occasionally a male commoner will doff his hat to male gentry. These exchanges of recognition, by their linguistic and expressive content both, signify a relation of inequality.[6]

The salutations which occur when gentry meet each other almost always form part of a longer interplay. If their meeting is planned, then an interplay of some length is inevitable; if their meeting is accidental then—due to the fact that there are so few of them—the accident itself is grounds for a small celebration. First-naming is symmetrically indulged in, apparently as a symbol of the mood of equality, intimacy, and differentiation from gentry-commoner communication that characterizes these situations. A mere recognitional interchange would be a sign that the participants were on very bad terms.

[5] In Dixon, readiness to interrupt work in the fields for the sake of social interaction can also be partly explained by the fact that crofters apparently feel that their repetitive tasks are tedious and that any "break" is welcome.

[6] In general, solutions or recognitional interchanges seem to be possible between persons of widely different statuses. For example, in many army systems, all persons of lower rank have the right to salute, and receive a return salute from, officers of the highest rank. It may be noted that at cease-fire parleys, rules may bar opposing representatives from saluting each other or shaking hands, and that soldiers under disciplinary detention may be excluded from the right to give and receive salutes.

Until the age of approximately fourteen, children of commoners are, in certain senses, not obliged to conduct themselves in a socially responsible manner. In a sense they are neither sacred nor profane, but rather ritually neutral; in some ways they cannot give serious offends nor ought they to take it. One way in which this capacity of being a "non-person" is illustrated is by their meeting behavior. When they pass an adult on the road, they need not be given recognition by him and they seldom give recognition. Their eyes tend to meet the eyes of others less than is the case with adults. When this does occur they often become "shy" or a little embarrassed. Similarly, when recognition is given to a child in a home, this recognition often takes the form of play and often is not returned. Thus, too, an adult may sit next a child at a social or at dinner and never break the activity with a moment of recognition, which almost always occurs when adults are thus situated.

Seamen who put in at the Dixon pier are divided by residents into British and Foreign, usually on the basis of appearance. All seamen have the right to shop at the local stores, to attend the dances and dance with local girls, to attend the bi-monthly movies, and to use the local post office and trunk line. They also have the right to receive free medical attention. (All of these rights are also enjoyed by tourists.) Further, foreign and British seamen who have used the pier for years have friends in the community with whom they may upon occasion spend an evening or who visit with them for a while on their boats. The seamen recognize the obligation of receiving the local customs officer and allowing inspection.

It is the opinion of some commoners that foreign seamen are of the lowest type, uncouth and uncivilized. In any case, foreign seamen are rarely given salutations by residents whom they may pass on the road or stand next to in the shops. Frequently residents will look at these seamen, as they pass them or stand near them, but not recognize them as persons with whom interplay is to be initiated.

British seamen and tourists share a mixed status with respect to salutation rights. Sometimes they will be treated as foreign seamen are, as if not there in the capacity of persons but there merely in the capacity of objects to be looked at. Knowing the language, however, they sometimes initiate a salutation to residents whom they may pass. Residents then usually reply, although with a gesture in which they patently put very little feeling. Sometimes, however, residents will proffer a brief nod to these strangers, or even a truncated reference to the weather. A similar gesture will then be returned to them. Perhaps such interchanges sometimes assure the outsider that within limits he is safe. In any case, the nod seems to convey equality coupled with extreme distance.

There are on the island at least three persons whose faces are deformed in such a way as to affect speech patterns. They are by "aesthetic" standards "ugly," and ugly to such a degree that looking at them throws attention off. They tend to remove themselves from contexts where recognitional interchanges would ordinarily occur and to restrict their communication to situations which are clearly defined in technical as opposed to social terms. These persons have developed a pattern of withdrawal and even in the circle of their own family play an atypical ritual role.[7]

[7] The communication problem presented by these persons is considered in chapter xx.

Social Occasion Salutations

During community-wide social occasions, when up to two hundred persons may be gathered together in the community hall, it is not expected that each person present will enter into a salutation army interchange with every other person present. There are sufficient intervening barriers to supply excuses for neglect. During intermissions, in moving from the hall to the hallways or smaller rooms, it is necessary of persons to pass each other in close quarters. On these occasions a minimum interchange of some kind is required. Similarly, in sitting down on a bench, whether during teatime or during a dance, persons on either side are usually acknowledged in some way. (This general pattern of showing responsibility to those closest to one also obtains in shops and outdoors on occasions when crowds collect for an auction or the like.) Salutations in these circumstances may contain the same words as are found in salutations between persons passing on the road, but the intonation appears to be different, apparently giving less weight and seriousness to the hall salutation. Typically, interchanges involving two messages will occur. For example:

Actor: "Good crowd."
Other: "Aye, fine crowd."

Actor (during whist): "Good score?"
Other: "Aye."

Actor: head nod.
Other: nod returned. (Between male adults.)

Actor: smile.
Other: smile returned. (Between women.)

Actor: "So."
Other: "so so."

Actor touches arm of other.
Other: Christian name of actor. (A woman to another woman or to a child.)

Actor: "Well, well."
Other: "Well, well."

Actor: other's Christian name.
Other: actor's Christian name.

Since a person can reasonably take the stand that it is feasible to salute only one person at a time, the possibility arises in the hall that while an individual is engaged in saluting one person he will pass immediately in front of another person and not be able to salute him in doing so. This kind of overlooking is not justified on the road.

The smiles and nods that persons in Dixon used as a brief recognitional interchange also occurred in houses where interplay might lapse during domestic activity. Thus, the female head of the household tended to involve those present who were not out of the immediate family in occasional smile interchanges. This occurred especially when eyes happened accidentally to meet. Friends were given assurance in this way, throughout the period of their stay in the house, of the welcome and approval given them. In the hall, often no one was quite in a position to offer anyone else assurance as to the propriety of his presence and so the kind of smile interchange characteristic of household activity was not possible.

When a group of five or six persons worked on a particular piece of land, pulling weeds, clearing stones, planting potatoes, spreading manure, raking hay, or any of the other croft tasks, the work would be interrupted every fifteen or twenty minutes when two workers happened to find themselves close to each other. The interruption would consist of a brief interchange in which the workers would affirm to each other that the work was getting done or make a comment about the weather. These pauses, and the longer ones for ten o'clock tea, one o'clock lunch, four o'clock tea, and supper, seemed to express the fact that the workers were not merely animals engaged in routine labor all day long but were persons, capable and desirous of conducting social interaction with other persons.

Minor Propitiatory Interchanges

Salutations provide examples of very brief interchanges, many of them reduced to the bare minimum of two short messages. For another set of illustrations we may turn to occasions when persons feel they must exercise "etiquette," or "manners," or "courtesy."

The role of etiquette is clearly seen when persons impinge upon each other in some accidental and incidental way. At such times, they frequently make use of stereotyped social formulae as a means of handling the situation and ensuring that no offense is given. These

formulae cover requests for small favors, apologies for accidents, misdemeanors, and the like.

Forms of etiquette and courtesy represent, in a sense, model interchanges. These forms of communication plainly recognize that persons are objects of value that must be treated with ritual care in an environment that is full of potentially offensive signs. In the case of many of these interchanges, the number of messages and the approximate content for each message have been formally laid down in books on etiquette.[8]

When one person in Dixon passes in front of another in such a way that this can be interpreted as an act of precedence, or when one person touches another in a way that may be interpreted as an aggression, then the actor in many cases offers a pardon to the other person. A pardon begged is a corrective strategy, a way of exorcising a possible slight already committed and neutralizing a sign situation. Interchanges involving pardons and apologies frequently have a very simple structure:

1. Actor performs potentially offending act.
2. Actor says to other: "Sorry," or "Oh, oh," or "Pardon," or "Excuse me."
3. Other terminates the interchange by saying, "O.k.," or "That's all right," or merely by smiling.

When one person in Dixon wants to ask another for a minor assistance of some kind—an assistance which might be interpreted as an act of servant-like subordination on the part of the individual offering the assistance—then an interchange of messages is frequently required in order to ensure that offense will not be taken. These interchanges are not corrective, since the potentially offending act has not yet occurred; they are, rather, preventive. Thus, if one person wishes to have something passed to him by another, or wishes to have the other change position a little, etc., the following interchange frequently occurs:

1. Actor formally makes a request in a supplicating tone of voice, e.g., "Will ya please pass the . . .," or "Do ya mind moving a little so I can . . . "
2. Other agrees to perform act and at the same time states that he has not been offended by the request, e.g., "Surely," or "With pleasure," or "Uh hm."
3. Other then performs the service.
4. Actor offers some kind of thanks to the other.

[8] Thank-you notes, and "bread and butter" letters ("roofers") provide nice examples as to specification, paragraph by paragraph, of courtesy letters. The round of correspondence called forth by a letter of introduction provides an example of specification as to number of messages.

5. Other terminates the interchange by a brief not or by saying "Aye," etc.

If the favor is considerable or is of the kind that is very likely to be taken as an expression of relative "status," then the interchange may include an extra round of statement and reply, in which the actor, after the other agrees to perform the favor, asks again if the other is quite sure that he will not mind performing the service. To this the other usually gives a second assurance that no offense is being taken, and the interchange terminates in the usual way.

Terminative Echoes

As suggested in the last chapter, during informal conversational interplay it is possible for one participant to introduce a message and then for the next speaker to give very little attention to what has been said but rather to make use of his opportunity as sender to contribute a message involving mention of his own experience. The second speaker will allow the first speaker to finish his message, and will take a cue as to what range of things ought to be talked about from the first message, but he will go on to put his own oar in, as it were, not bother, really, to answer the first statement. The first message seems to establish a license as to what sort of self-reference can be made, and the following speakers in the interplay exercise the license in their own behalf. Interchanges of this kind—if it is proper to refer to them as interchanges—will have as many messages in them as the participants have personal experiences that can be mobilized descriptively for the occasion.

Another favorite conversational interchange is one in which the first message makes a claim which the other participants cannot quite let pass, and some qualifying messages are directed to the first one until matters have been sufficiently put aright to allow the interchange to end.

In Dixon, apparently more so than in more argumentative and less polite subcultures, many claims made by a participant in the interplay were not duplicated by other participants or disputed by them but rather politely honored in a rapid if half-hearted way. Whether the sender implicitly asks his recipients to respond with shock, surprise, laughter, agreement, or approval, and whether or not recipients were genuinely in sympathetic tune with the speaker's implied request, they tended to comply.

Every member of the community seemed versed in the use of an extensive set of brief phrases, by which an expectation introduced by a person's message could be fulfilled, the interchange quickly terminated, and the respondent freed from further need to act out

what was perhaps not felt.[9] So smooth was this technique that on many occasions speakers did not become aware that their face had just been saved. Especially useful were proverbs, which committed the respondent to nothing and could usually be used to terminate an interchange regardless of the message with which it had been started.

If the first message in an interchange implied that the recipients ought to be shocked at why they had just heard, phrases such as, "My feeder," "Such o ting," would be chorused in response. If a point of view had been voiced that recipients could not agree with, they would guardedly respond with, for example, "There's something in what you say," or "I donna kin." A few of the island's favorite terminative echoes are given below, following instances of interchanges in which they were employed.

A commoner of wide repute, known as one given to bragging: "I've been in every house and know everyone on the island." His host: "Dat'll be right, dus du kin."

Commoner, proud of his Ford car: "I've been driving it for seven years, mind you, and never a part I've had to buy." Passenger: "I hear you, boy."

Hotel maid, speaking about scullery boy having stayed out till six o'clock. "It's no right now, is it." Cook: "Past spaekin about."

[9] In American subcultures there is a corresponding list of accommodative echoes, for example, "Tsk-tsk," "You don't say," "My gosh," "What d' ya know," "Really," etc., each of which terminates a two-message interchange. Without command of these pat replies, it is difficult to be at ease in the conversation of a particular group.