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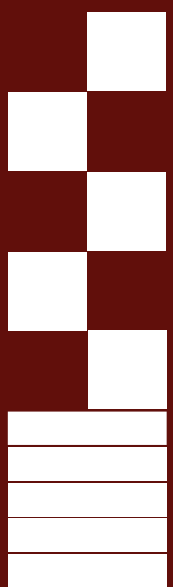
Communication Conduct in an Island Community

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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We have considered the interplay and some of the units of interaction which may occur within it once accredited participation has been established. Let us now return to consider some of the structural characteristics of interplay as such.

It has been suggested that an interplay characteristically involves a focussing of the attention of the listeners upon the speaker. The initiation and maintenance of this organized attention, the transfer of it from one speaker to another, and its final dissolution all involve problems in attention management.

Persons who wish to be accorded attention as senders—to be given the floor, as it were—frequently precede or initially accompany their messages with signs conveying a specific request for attention. These signs consist of speech infections, interjections such as "oh" or "hello," calling out of a recipient's name or "catching" his eye. It is possible to distinguish between those signs which request accredited participants to focus their attention on a particular participant and those which request individuals to enter into interplay and become accredited recipients. These signs (whether initiating a message or an interplay) frequently impress the potential recipient in such a way as to prepare him for the length of the message that is to come, for its urgency, and to some extent for its character. Very frequently, an immediate reply is given to these signs by the recipient, assuring the sender that his message will be received and that, in a sense, it will not be taken as an offense for him to proceed with it.[1] Sometimes the reply may contain an explicit request to hold off for a moment so that the individual can prepare himself for the interaction he is being called into. In addition to this information, the reply may also provide the original sender with some idea as to how willing the other person really is to become involved in interaction. Typical replies in answer to a request for attention consist of interjections such as "yes" and "uh hm," a pause in he recipient's ongoing behavior, and orientation to the recipient's eyes in the direction of the sender. In other words, before a potential sender launches into his message he may

[1] It may be worth noting that persons in highly structured subordinate positions, for example butlers, may be required to call the other into interplay by means of signs which preserve the illusion that the subordinate is not initiating interplay.

signify a request for clearance and wait for clearance to be given him before proceeding.

Where interplay is limited to a few persons who are not at the moment related to each other in such a way as to make offense or misunderstanding likely, a potential sender may not wait for an actual reply to his request for clearance but merely mark the point where it should have occurred by introducing a slight pause and change of tone between his initial request for clearance and his message. In many formally-organized interplays, however, clearance becomes a codified practice. At a formal meeting, for example, a participant who wishes to become the accredited sender often must first stand up or get authorization from the chairman.[2]

It will be apparent that the ability to refuse, overlook, or postpone a request for clearance gives the potential recipient an important way of exerting control over participation obligations that important senders place upon him. Clear cases of this can be found in situations where there is some doubt as to which of several requests to initiate an interplay a recipient will honor. For example, in order to obtain service, a patron may attempt to catch the eye of a waitress or store clerk, thus initiating an interplay in which requests and orders can be presented.[3] Service personnel may wish to avoid ill-timed involvement of this kind and can do this by averting their own eyes.[4] Similar cases occur in situations where a potential recipient can choose from among several accredited participants the one to be given clearance. The power of choice, in this case, may be an official right, as in the case of a chairman at a meeting,[5] or an unofficial right, as in the case of an "informal leader" during interplay.[6]

Once clearance has been accorded to a potential sender, and he begins to send his message, both sender and recipient may continue to convey their involvement in communication by means of what we might call attention signs. These constitute a minor but significant communication courtesy. Attention signs are frequently conveyed by a medium other than the one employed for the message, thus ensuring that jamming does not occur between the two streams of signs. Direction of the eyes in the case of both sender and recipient is a typical attention sign during spoken communication.[7]

It does not seem to be usual for a sender to lose interest in his communication role. Therefore attention signs which pass from sender to recipient do not play a vital role in the organization of communication, except, of course, as a means of distinguishing addressed recipients from unaddressed recipients. Attention signs from recipients to a recognized sender seem to play a more important role. They act as an "informative feedback," telling the sender of the effect of his message in time for him to modify his behavior in a direction

[2] Clearance signs can also be important in mediated communication. Many organizations have a policy of answering each letter with two letters, one to say that the letter has been received and read, and a later one to give the answer originally requested. So, too, the receipt in the case of financial transactions serves as lasting proof for the sender that his financial communication has been received.

[3] So commonly do we employ eye-to-eye looks as a means of initiating an interplay or addressing a message that when we suddenly find ourselves in this relation to someone with whom we are not communicating at the time, we frequently feel flustered and look away or enter into momentary interplay to regularize the situation. Those who look into another's eyes without acknowledging this in either of the above ways are sometimes thought to be "cold" or "hard."

[4] In many societies, averting of eyes is apparently an institutionalized way of conveying a modest and tactful self-restraint from entering into the intimacy of an interplay.

[5] H. S. Elliott provides an example of this in his consideration of the problems of management that a chairman of a meeting faces, in *The Process of Group Thinking* (New York: Association Press, 1929), pp. 73–74: "The chairman would, on the one hand, get every person to take part and see to it that all points are represented and, on the other hand, restrain the inveterate talker and keep him from monopolizing the discussion. Just to look encouragingly toward those who are not taking part and not to look toward the ones who want to participate in essentially is a help.

calculated to obtain a desired response from recipients. These signs also warn a sender if there is a danger that the focus of attention is about to break up or pass on to a new sender.

It has been suggested that clearance signs and attention signs play an important role in the organization of interplay. These signs, especially attention signs, provide the sender with a continuous indication of the stability of the communication structure. They constitute what Ruesch and Bateson refer to as communication about communication, or "metacommunication."[8]

It is customary for a sender to close his message with a gesture or speech inflection conveying the fact that the message has ended and that the sender is now ready to relinquish his role and himself become a recipient. These termination-of-message signs may sometimes be used by a recipient as evidence that clearance has been given to him. The most clearcut sign of this kind, perhaps, is the intonation and word-order we employ when we ask a question.[9]

It is to be noted that clearance signs which signify the termination of a message may be distinguished in practice from those clearance signs that are employed to terminate an interplay,[10] and these, in turn, from signs which signify the termination of a social occasion. For example, a resolution may be required to terminate a committee meeting, and a special song, or a special lighting and staging effect, may be employed to terminate a social occasion. It may be noted that in the Dixon primary schools, where some of the pupils have not yet learned to interpret or respect cues which signify the termination of an interplay, the teacher, after calling a pupil up to her desk to check over an exercise, sometimes had to propel the pupil back to his or her seat (usually in an affectionate or joking way) in order to bring the hearing to a close.

* * * * *

Let us use the term "sending position" to refer to the spatial or ecological point at which any participant in an interplay is or could be located, relative to the other participants. Senders find it useful to be at a sending position at which it is possible and convenient to receive attention cues from all the recipients. The degree to which any particular location permits this kind of reception is a measure of its favorability as a sending position. Whenever there are more than two participants in an interplay, one participant is likely to be in a position that is more favorable than the position held by any of the other participants. During informal interplay in Dixon there was a certain amount of surreptitious (and even unconscious) jockeying for favorable sending positions, while, on the other hand, partici-

Frequently the expression of the face indicates that a person is on the point of taking part and just recognizing this desire will bring timid ones into the discussion. Sometimes the chairman may call upon certain ones by name. If a person persists in monopolizing the discussion he may find it necessary to restrain the talkative member. He can do this easily by tactfully saying, "Wait a minute, Mr. - - -, we want to hear what Mr. - - - thinks about this question!"

[6] W. F. White, "Small Groups, Large Organizations," in Rohrer and Sherif, eds., *Social Psychology at the Crossroads* (New York: Harper, 1951), pp. 297–312, provides on p. 300 an illustration of how an informal leader can serve as a sort of sanctioned for those who should take over the focus of attention. "Several men are standing in the club room in groups of two, two, and three. Individual X comes in and the three little groups immediately reform into one larger group, with the seven men remaining silent while X talks, and each man seeking to get the attention of X before he himself speaks."

[7] This is apparently not a universal practice. An early report on the Northwest Coast Amazons claims that: "When an Indian talks he sits down, no conversation is ever carried on when the speakers are standing unless it be a serious difference of opinion is under discussion; nor when he speaks does the Indian look at the person addressed, any more than the latter watches the speaker. Both look at some outside objects. This is the attitude also of the Indian when addressing more than one listener, so that he appears to be talking to someone not visibly present." See Thomas Whiffen, *The North-West Amazons* (London: Constable, 1915), p. 254.

[8] Ruesch and Bateson, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–24.

[9] As Bales points out, in "The Equilibrium Problem in Small Groups," *op. cit.*, asking a question is an effective way of signalling a desire to relinquish the role of sender with the expectation that the addressed recipient will then take up the role of sender. Of course the effectiveness of this sign depends upon the addressed recipient accepting the obligation and responsibility of the role that is being proferred him. During informal conversation, recipients usually accept this obligation so automatically

pants frequently arranged to sit or stand so as not to block any other participant's line of vision too much.

It is apparent that interplays will vary according to the disposition of favorable and unfavorable sending positions established in it. At one extreme we have cases where only one or two points provide good sending positions, so that a participant who wants to become a sender must first move into position to do so. This is the case in platform-audience communication, where a potential sender must first come to the front of the audience and preferably stand on a raised platform. A characteristic of this kind of communication arrangement is that one physically closed interplay can be maintained even though an extremely large number of persons, relative to the size of the region, are packed into the region.

At the other extreme we have the ecological arrangement by which all participants are in a favorable and more or less equally favorable sending position. The typical case is where three or four persons have come together and face each other in a circle for the purpose of informal conversation. A sending circular of this kind provides the one important exception to the rule that one participant in an interplay usually has the best sending position.[11]

The case of sending circles, where all participants are in a favorable sending position, provides some interesting complications. If all the persons in a bounded region are to be involved in the same sending circle—that is, if there is to be only one interplay, and all participants are to have an equally favorable sending position in it—then there is a relatively low limit to the number of persons who can be contained or enclosed in the region. If the bounded region is to be filled with many effectively closed sending circles of three or four persons each, with no participant from one circle penetrating the area enclosed by the participants in another circle, then a relatively large number of persons can be enclosed by the region. There are geometrical as well as empirical grounds for this statement. Two illustrations may be given:

In Dixon the community hall dance floor is about twenty feet wide and thirty feed long. In dances such as the "old-fashioned waltz," the sending circles consist of couples, and more than thirty couples can easily be enclosed in the hall. When square dances such as "Lancers" or "Quadrilles" are danced, however, the hall has a capacity of only three "sets," each of these sets constituting a sending circle of eight participants.

In Dixon it is customary to hold large birthday parties for persons of all ages. On these occasions it is not uncommon for a family to fill their small cottage with twenty guests. A variation of the game of "spin the bottle" is popular at these times. The game requires one

that they seldom realize that an obligation has been fulfilled—although, of course, they may give a false answer, or an insufficient answer, or an unserious answer. However, at formal meetings, a guest speaker may request questions from the floor at the end of his speech, and he and the chairman may expect that a period of questions and answers will follow, and yet no one in the audience may take up the role of sender which the guest speaker has, by his request for questions, attempted to relinquish. At such times we can see more clearly that our ordinary willingness to make at least some answer to a question is the fulfillment of an obligation. It is interesting to note that high-placed political figures who are asked questions by newsmen may find themselves in the dilemma of giving no answer and thus failing to fulfill the obligation of communicators, or giving an ambiguous answer those subtle expressive overtones may be examined for implications that are embarrassing. The dilemma is sometimes resolved by the curt phrase, "No comment," by which the individual can acknowledge the fact that a question has been put to him, that he has correctly received it, and that he accepts, in general, the role and obligations of communicator

[10] In mediated communication, clear differences can sometimes be found between signs which terminate a message and signs which terminate an interplay. In one-way wireless communication, for example, a word such as "over" may be given as a sign that a message has ended and that the other participant has clearance, and a word such as "out" may be given as a sign that the interplay has been terminated. In the case of wireless communication, the initiation of an interplay may call for signs that are similarly explicit and specific, e.g., "calling . . ," "come in, . . ."

[11] This point has, of course, been recognized in the literature. For example, Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 64, in talking about a discussion club called a Bible Circle, says: "This is a good name because some circular arrangement gives the best results in discussions. The important thing is that just as far as possible the members have a chance to look into the face of the other members." Circle organization, of course, solves a ceremonial problem; no one need be given the head or the foot of the table and the invidious evaluation which such positions may be taken to express.

closed circle, however, and seems in fact to be a ceremonial exercise in this kind of communication arrangement. Because of the size of the rooms, occasions arise when all the guests at a party cannot be fitted into one circle, although they can easily be fitted into a number of smaller circles.

It is to be noted, finally, that platform-audience organization enables more persons to be incorporated in a region of given size for purposes of communication than can be incorporated in this region by sending circle organization, regardless of how small the circles are and how closely they are packed.