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On the Necessity of Collusion in Conversation

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INTRODUCTION

> Language . . . lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's.
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> —M. M. Bakhtin

In 1928, V. N. Voloshinov[1] complained that "all linguistic categories, per se, are applicable only on the inside territory of an utterance" and are of no value "for defining a whole linguistic entity" (1986 [1930]: 110). This essay begins with a whole linguistic entity by going beyond the utterance to the social scene in which it is embedded for a unit of analysis. Unlike some recent linguistic analyses that acknowledge that speech acts do not in themselves provide for discourse cohesion but nonetheless are restricted to speech acts for a primary focus of investigation, we start with the properties of social activities as the essential guide to analysis.

We start with some assumptions that are, by now, well informed: participation in any social scene, especially a conversation, requires some minimal consensus on what is getting done in the scene; from the least significant (strangers passing) to the culturally most well formulated scenes (a wedding or a lecture), such a consensus represents an achievement, a cumulative product of the instructions people in the scene make available to each other; and, because no consensus ever unfolds simply by predetermined means, because social scenes are always precarious, always dependent on ongoing instructions, the achievement of a consensus requires collusion.

Collusion derives from a playing together (from the Latin *com* plus *ludere*). Collusion refers to how members of any social order must constantly help each other to posit a particular state of affairs, even when such a state would be in no way at hand without everyone so proceeding. Participation in social scenes requires that members play into each other's hands, pushing and pulling each other toward a strong sense of what is probable or possible, for a sense of what can be hoped for and/or obscured. In such a world, the meaning of talk is rarely contained on the "inside territory of an utterance"; proposition and reference pale before the task of alignment, before the task of sequencing the conversation's participants into a widely spun social structure. The necessity of collusion in conversation has wide-ranging implications not only for how people use their talk in conversation but for how linguistics might profitably locate units for an analysis of conversation.

In this essay, we build a case for the importance of collusion in the organization of talk ("The Case for Collusion") and offer a brief example of how collusion operates in a conversation ("An Example: From Precarious to Treacherous"). From a transcript taken from a videotaped seven-person reading lesson in grade school, we try to give a sense for the complex contexting work people do to arrange for utterance interpretations consistent with, and not disruptive of, the situation the people are holding together for each other. With an example in hand, we attempt to highlight the dimensions of a collusional stand on conversation by contrasting it to the now dominant propositional approach and the recently popular illocutionary approach to language behavior ("Three Ways of Appreciating Language"). Each is discussed in terms of its definition of such fundamental notions as units of analysis, their function, the role of context in their organization, and the theoretical prize won by their description. The relationship between collusion and power is addressed in a final section.

THE CASE FOR COLLUSION

> Discourses on humility give occasion for pride to the boastful, and for humility to the humble. Those on skepticism give occasion for believers to affirm. Few speak humbly of humility, chastely of chastity, few of skepticism doubtingly. We are but falsehood, duplicity and contradiction, using even to ourselves concealment and guile.
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> —Blaise Pascal

We build on two common observations on language behavior to develop the claim that collusion is necessary for any conversation. The first observation has it that everyday language is irremediably indefinite, that every utterance indexes or builds on a wide range of knowledge about the world

that would require a potentially endless expansion for precise application. The second observation, seemingly contrary to the first, has it that talk is so amazingly exact that participants can often talk their way to long-term concerted activities and well-shared ideas about what they are doing together (often far beyond any agreements immediately obvious in a transcript of their talk).

During the past decade both observations have been secured with much data. Under the banner of pragmatics, we have been shown how much a person must know about the world to understand even brief utterances, and, urged on by sociologists interested in conversational analysis, we have been shown an amazing variety of interactional mechanisms that conversationalists have available for directing and specifying utterance interpretations.

The collusion claim takes both observations seriously. It starts with an appreciation of how much unspecified, and likely unspecifiable, knowledge people must have in order to understand each other. At the same time, the collusion claim recognizes the powers of conversationalists to use local circumstances to shape their knowledge into mutually perceptible and reflexively consequential chunks. This marriage of indefiniteness and precision in utterance interpretation both requires and is made possible by conversationalists entering a state of collusion as to the nature of the world they are talking about, acting on, and helping to create. With a little help from each other, by defining what can (or must) be left vague or made precise, they can shape their talk to fit the contours of the world in which they are embedded, a world they can prolong to make possible further interpretations of their talk.[2]

At its cleanest, conversational collusion is well tuned to people's finest hopes about what the world can be—this often despite the facts, despite a world that sometimes offers them little reason for harboring such hopes. Examples include "We really love each other" or "We can all be smart." Although making believe that such statements are true does not insure our being loved or looking smart, it is an essential first step.

At its dirtiest, people's collusion amounts to a well-orchestrated lie that offers a world conversationalists do not have to produce but can pretend to live by, a world everyone knows to be, at the same time, unrealizable, but momentarily useful as stated. Examples of collusion as treachery can be cut from the same utterance cloth we used to illustrate collusion as hope. "We really love each other" can still be said when both know the statement as a cover for a relationship that offers only protection from the imagined world beyond the relationship; we have it from marriage counselors that under such conditions demonstrations of love can further lock the participants off from the world and further limit the possibility of

their loving each other. Similarly, "We can all be smart" has its most frequent occasion of utterance the classroom, the very place, as we shall see, in which people organize significant moments during which smartness, and its opposite, must be alternately displayed, recognized, hidden, and held back, in which displays of smartness and stupidity must be choreographed into the relations people have with each other. Without resources for organizing conditions for making possible an experience of love or intelligence, their invocation points more to oppression than to hope.

By lies, we refer to a phenomenon far more prevalent than those in which speakers must first remind themselves what not to say on a future occasion, in which "one has to remember the truth as well as the lie in order to bring consistency to a recriminatory future" that could disprove the lie (Lang 1980: 535). We think this kind of conscious lying is rare relative to the amount of treachery in the world at large. One way of understanding social structure, in fact, is that it offers differential protection from confrontations in which pure lies must be told.[3] Institutional authorities are afforded various shelters from unpredicted accountability. It is possible to live lies without having to tell them. Our institutions secure such lives for us at every turn. Starting with the generalized gender configurations available in a culture to specific institutions built around informational entanglements (Hanunóo or Mehinaku courtship, Kpelle secret societies, Mediterranean honor codes, or a therapeutic halfway house for drug offenders in America, and so on), we can find people choreographing each other's behavior according to scores that remain ad hoc and tacit and which, if made explicit, would render the behavior that seems to service them useless. We should never allow ourselves to forget the warning of Nietzsche: "To be truthful means using the customary metaphors—in moral terms: the obligation to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie herd-like in a style obligatory for all" (1954 [1873]: 47).

The collusion stand on conversation not only unites apparently disparate facts about language behavior (indefiniteness and precision) but holds out the promise of a linguistics that could be useful to understanding the social situations in which people do their talking. Although it is a century since George Simmel told us that secrecy is at the heart of any social order and William James told us that hope is a human possibility only by spitting in the face of the odds, our social sciences have proceeded pretty much as if the conditions organizing our lives were well ordered, shared, available for common understanding, and easy to talk about.[4] The social sciences have proceeded oblivious to the basic conditions of our lives together. In the language sciences, this has translated into a focus on the sentence as if truth value or illocutionary force could be found in the utterance.

Now it appears that to account for even the simplest conversations, we

have to take seriously the moment-to-moment hopes and lies that connect our utterances into coherent parts of the social order. Language analysis can lead us back to social structure. To the extent that collusion is essential to conversation, then its exploration cannot leave too far behind an account of the institutional constraints that have us colluding in the ways that we do. It will leave us in the long run wondering about the constraints we are working against that, if we are making up so much of our lives together, we manage often such impoverished versions of what is possible.[5]

Our discussion of the necessity of collusion in conversation could proceed from first principles: All action, said John Dewey, "is an invasion of the future, of the unknown. Conflict and uncertainty are ultimate truths" (1922: 12). This is no less true for speaking and listening actors than it is for acrobats and subway riders (whatever the differential in risky outcome). Without a tentative agreement about what the future is (no matter, for the moment, how fanciful or harmful it might be), how else could conversationalists achieve precise understandings from ambiguous materials without ever really saying what is going on? Clearly, conversationalists have to be working together, tripping over the same defenses, stumbling into the same understandings, and working to the same ends (if only to reach the silence at the conversation's end). How they do this work should represent an answer as to how their collusion is both made necessary and subsequently organized.

AN EXAMPLE: FROM PRECARIOUS TO TREACHEROUS

> All lies are collusional; all truths are collusional. The nature of the truth is always bound by the shape of the context. . . . Truth and falsity are matters of agreement. . . . The conditions of sending the signal which arranges for deception may rest in a variety of places within the deception system.
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> —Ray L. Birdwhistell

For an example of collusion in conversation, we can offer some talk between a teacher and her first-grade students filmed and analyzed in some detail by McDermott (1976). It is a reading lesson, and much of the interaction is around the issue of getting turns to read. Unlike turns to talk in most conversational clusters, turns to read are not just managed in the pursuit of other conversational goals but are often the focus of the group. It is in terms of turns to read that the group's talk is made directional, that it takes on meaning and carries social facts. The details of the taking turns to read system are constantly put up for noticing, analyzing, and interpreting, and their organization helps to curb the indefiniteness of talk, to make clear, for example, that "Me" is a call for a turn to read or

that "Not me" is a request not to read while constituting simultaneously a display of an agreement to listen to another child reading. Collusion is visible in the ways the members have of instructing each other in the use of turns in organizing their interaction and is essential to their production of group order.

The case for the necessity of collusion in conversation is perhaps most arresting in the talk of one child, Rosa, who is often treated as if she had said something different than a literal interpretation of her words would indicate. That is to say, her words, imprecise on their own, are made precise by those about her in ways not well predicted by their propositional content. Literalness aside, how her words are used by the group seems much better described by the conversationalists' situation together as a particular kind of reading group within a particular kind of classroom, school, and wider educational community.

Rosa constantly calls for a turn to read by shouting "I could" or "I could read it." In addition, she complains when she is bypassed, "G ... Go around" or (long later and still without a turn) "I wanna go around." But Rosa almost never gets a turn to read; she is understood to be not very good at reading, and her status as a turn-taking reader seems to be problematic enough to be commented on at various times during the children's half-hour at the reading table with the teacher. Upon careful examination, it seems that Rosa is doing much work to arrange *not getting a turn:* everyone else is on page 5, Rosa on page 7 (as everyone can tell with a first-grade illustrated reader); as the teacher begins to call on another child, Rosa calls for a turn, just a fraction of a second behind; as the other children move up from their books to face their teacher and to call for a new turn, Rosa lowers her head into the book with her face turning away from the teacher. The ploys are numerous in kind and fast in occurrence.

Linguists have not had enough trouble with the kind of duplicitous talk just described. It has been unfortunately easy to put aside. Propositional analysis can chalk it up to the abomination of actual use in social scenes. However great the evidence to the contrary, no matter how much conversationalists seem to rely on meaning one thing by saying another, traditional linguistic analysis remains intact by claiming that the *literal* meaning of an utterance must remain the point of departure for describing how speakers understand each other.[6] The argument is that the meaning of Rosa's calls for a turn to read is quite clear; how else could they have been transformed into something systematically different from a literal reading. In addition, such a transformation in use would have been most likely signaled linguistically by some marked appeal to irony or subterfuge. However transformed by the situation, for most linguists propositions remain meaningful in their own terms.

Illocutionary analysts would take Rosa a little more seriously. They

would try to extrapolate the actual conditions of the social actors so that their intentions could protrude without anyone having very literally put them into words. Again, the propositions would be understood on their own, albeit in a series. In either case, Rosa would be understood cognitively, as a strategist who was manipulating the social scene and the people in it with her words. What organized her words or their systematic interpretation would have been left undiscovered. Neither Rosa nor linguistics would have been well served.

The collusional approach to Rosa's talk forces us to take her situation much more seriously. We are not interested simply in speakers, or even speaker-hearer pairs and the ways they react to each other. Rather we are interested in ongoing social scenes into which people walk and talk their lives together. As Arthur Bentley said long ago: "Terminology has been poor in the social sciences, drawn as it has been from the language of everyday life—from the vocabularies of the manipulation of one man by another. But not the point of view of one toward another is what we seek, rather the very processing itself of the ones-with-others" (Bentley 1926: 457). We are not interested in Rosa the strategist but Rosa the participant. Rosa's words, Bakhtin reminds us, are only half hers. They must be brought to completion by the group. And all their words together, if well enough studied, belong to the conversation which is in turn a moment in a far more extensive conversation we might call American education (Varenne 1983).

A collusional approach takes it that Rosa does not act on her own; that the very machinery used to transform, reframe, or to put into a new key Rosa's talk is group-produced; that every member of the group helps to instruct Rosa to say what she says in favor of what she did not say, which, in fact, if she did say would break the conditions for the group being together in an order that they can recognize, use, and perpetuate.

The collusional stand further takes it that the work members do to construct a consensus (that we are all learning how to read) while allowing, ignoring, and hiding important exceptions (namely, that some of us are here only to not get caught not knowing how to read) is a direct product of the institutional conditions under which the teacher and children are asked to come to school. Their production and interpretation of talk must be understood as a product of their collusion in response to a complex institutional setting that requires that they talk as if they could all learn while they meanwhile arrange much of their day around catching each other at not learning (Hood, McDermott, and Cole 1980). In taking up utterances that seem to mean the opposite of what they would on their own appear to say, we have moved from collusion as a necessary solution to the precariousness of everyday life situations to collusion as a defensive

tactic against the treachery of everyday life. There are reasons for "using even to ourselves concealment and guile." When further pressed, there are reasons for lying even to others, although we must remember, before hunting down liars, that "the conditions of sending the signal which arranges for deception may rest in a variety of places within the deception system."

It is not easy to describe an instance of collusion in conversation. One effort, particularly directed to linguists, is available in a paper by Dore and McDermott (1982). The dedicated reader can examine that data analysis in the light of the more radical arguments of the present account. The argument of that paper is that a particular "I could read it" by Rosa, by virtue of how it is said and its timing, is seemingly accepted as such by everyone in the group while they simultaneously act as if she had said that she could not read it and that a particular someone else had been given the turn to read. Rosa's claim for a turn appears at a time when the group is somewhat at a loss for a clear definition as to what they are doing together. By interpreting Rosa's utterance as saying something different from what it seemingly proposed, an interpretation Rosa helped them to, the members of the group used Rosa's call for a turn to establish both a turn and a reader (other than Rosa) for the turn. The point is that everyone used the primary practice of the scene, namely, the constant evaluation of every reader's skill and the avoidance of such evaluation by different members at various times, to understand Rosa's call for a turn as a suggestion that she be bypassed. The very conditions that allowed for the methods Rosa used to instigate her subterfuge were not only well recognized by the group, they were maintained and supported by every member's involvement with evaluation.

The present essay offers a different fragment of talk from Rosa's reading group (table 8–1). The scene opens with the teacher calling on child 4 (numbered in order around the table). Child 1 and child 2 have read page 4 to the group. Rosa is child 3. The teacher and the children raise their heads as child 2 finishes page 4, and the teacher turns her head toward Rosa, who has moved her head further down into the book and right, away from the teacher's advancing gaze. The teacher continues turning her head left, past Rosa, until she reaches child 4. She calls on him, "All right. Let's see you do it." He moans a complaint, "Unnh." Rosa begins to suggest that they take turns in order: "G ... go around." She is supported almost immediately by child 4: "What about Rosa [screaming] Sh .. she don't get a turn." Child 5 begins to chide Rosa, "You don't get a ... ," while child 2 also calls for a more rigorous linear order, "Yeh. Let's go around." The teacher then, after a nonvocalized false start and a nervous glance away, addresses child 4 very softly, "Jimmy. You seem very unhappy. Perhaps you should go back to your seat." Simultaneously with the teacher's attribution

Table 8-1. Transcript of Procedural Positioning, Getting a Turn 3

Teacher:	All right. Let's see you do it.
Child 4:	Unnh
Rosa:	G ... go around
Child 4:	What about Rosa [screaming] Sh .. she don't get a turn.
Child 5:	[to Rosa] You don't get a ...
Child 2:	Yeh. Let's go around.
Teacher:	Jimmy [very softly]. You seem very unhappy. Perhaps you should go back to your seat.
Rosa:	Back to Fred, then back to me. No. Back to Fred, back to Anna, and back to Fred and Maria and back to me.
Teacher:	All right, Fred. Can you read page 4?

of Jimmy's feelings, Rosa begins to lay out the order of the going around that she has called for; in none of the two or three versions she suggests is there any discernible going-around order. After Rosa has her say, the teacher calls on child 6, "All right, Fred. Can you read page 4?"

How can we understand Rosa's talk? Is she calling for a turn, seeming to call for a turn, simply showing that she knows some rules about turn-taking in rounds, or, as we suspect, arranging not to read while nonetheless appearing to be part of the group? The point of this essay is that there is no one answer to this question. Rosa's "G ... go around" may yield all the interpretations just listed. Some are more interesting than others in supplying insight to life in classrooms, and some are used more than others at various subsequent moments by group members. We should not expect Rosa to have a uniform stand serviced by her words. In the complex role that teaching-learning scenes play in the lives of young children, could we expect Rosa to be free of all the tensions of her community around the issues of relative skill, smartness, competitiveness, and the like?

As we flee from utterance complexity to a consideration of social context for a key to what Rosa might be talking about, we are offered some relief by the fact that Rosa's utterance does not stand alone. The question of meaning must be rephrased: What instructions are available in the scene for the participants to organize an interpretation of Rosa's utterance? Part of the instructions, of course, is Rosa's utterance; her talk reflexively arranges its own context and helps to organize the conditions for its own interpretation. And what does Rosa's utterance have to work with in arranging a hearing?

First of all, the group is organized posturally into a procedural focus or positioning well suited for activities such as getting a turn to read (for

criteria establishing postural-kinesic events and their importance to the structure of interaction, see McDermott, Gospodinoff, and Aron 1978; and Scheflen 1973). That they are at a getting-a-turn-to-read relevant moment is everywhere available in their body alignments and attentional structure. Second, that such moments are delicate can be seen in the work members do to preserve them; for example, they all attend carefully to the beginning and endings and hold each other accountable for any disruptions of the apparent order. Third, within any positioning, alternative formulations of what might be going on between the participants are often attempted and usually abandoned; for example, while most are still calling for a turn-to-read, someone might start reading. Fourth, while working hard at keeping a focus organized and rejecting rival formulations, members of the group constantly make available for use the dimensions along which they can understand each other; for example, a child who does not follow the pattern of a procedural positioning may be considered a management problem, whereas a child who does not follow a pattern in a pedagogical positioning may be understood as a learning problem. Fifth, there appears to be a strong preference about how and when different dimensions can be applied; for example, the smart-dumb continuum is constantly applied in classrooms, and much interactional delicacy must be organized to apply the continuum only in cases when someone can be called smart. The application of the continuum to instances of "dumb" behavior does occur, but participants usually work hard to have it not noticed. Sixth, a getting-a-turn positioning does not usually attract the application of a smart-dumb contract set, and it is accordingly used as a moment safe from intelligence evaluations. By virtue of its comparative safety, it is used often as a place in which the participants prepare for some next intelligence display, including preparation for who might be subject to an upcoming evaluation. It is therefore a perfect umbrella under which to perform covert, unspoken evaluations that organize for more public contests in the next moment.

With all this going on (and the reader, for purposes of this essay, has only to agree that such events could be at work; it would take a volume to complete a description of the behavioral background), Rosa's utterance enters the world pregnant. As Bakhtin noted well: "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accounts, is a difficult and complicated process" (1981: 294).

The utterance is shaped to fit its occasion. The conditions that organize its production and interpretation are distributed throughout the system.

To the extent that "G ... go around" represents a hope, the possibility (no matter how improbable at the moment) of Rosa learning to read well

enough to perform must be organized by all the participants. To the extent that it represents an institutionalized lie, a delicate way to avoid a confrontation with a smart-dumb contrast set, that too has to be organized across persons. Indeed, the lie has to be told against the background that everyone is still hoping, or at least making believe that they are hoping, that Rosa can learn to read.

Instead of asking whether Rosa is intending to get a turn—an unanswerable question anyway—if we asked about the social constraints to which Rosa's remark might be an appropriate and constitutive reaction, then we have to ask how the participants are playing into each other's hands (that is, more literally, colluding) to organize the world Rosa gets systematically instructed to avoid. If we could ask more questions about what issues our every institution has us avoiding, we would have not only a better account of social structure but a better account of the language tools people use to build social structure.

THREE WAYS OF APPRECIATING LANGUAGE

> The salient aspect of the social fact is meaning; the central manifestation of meaning is pragmatic and meta-pragmatic speech; and the most obvious feature of pragmatic speech is reference. We are now beginning to see the error in trying to investigate the salient by projection from the obvious.
>
> —Michael Silverstein

There are a number of dimensions along which to rank different approaches to language behavior. Silverstein (1979) goes to particular pains to point out what cannot be accomplished with traditional analyses that focus on reference and what might be accomplished if we were to concentrate more immediately on the social facts produced with talk. This essay proceeds in that spirit. By starting with the collusion required of conversationalists, we move the social facts of which the people are a part to the center of analysis and their language can be understood for what it does within the social order. This approach gives us a different way of appreciating language behavior. It also requires a shift in some of the tools we have used to do language analysis.

In the following chart (table 8–2), we offer a simple scheme for contrasting a collusional approach to appreciating what people do with their talk with the more traditional propositional and illocutionary approaches that dominate contemporary linguistics. At its best, the chart should offer a snapshot of what each of the approaches is trying to accomplish and its underlying conceptual assumptions.

Table 8-2. Three Ways of Appreciating Language

	Units of Analysis	Function of Talk	Role of Context	Analytical Accomplishment
Propositional analysis	Speaker's propositions	Reference	An occasionally necessary afterthought to cover possible transformations under supposed conditions of actual use.	Utterance *X* means *a* or under special well-marked circumstances *b* or *c*.
Illocutionary analysis	Speaker-hearer propositions and intentions	Expression and manipulation	A frequently necessary afterthought to explain how apparent social conditions regularly alter canonical propositional meanings to express speaker intentions.	Utterance *X* means *a* under conditions *a*, *b* under conditions *b*, *c* under conditions *c*, where the conditions are defined by phenomena beyond the talk, such as statuses and roles, that transform the talk.
Collusional analysis	Scenes and social facts	Alignment and linkage, institutional maintenance and social change	An essential dimension of language analysis. As behavior reflexively organizes its own contexts, talk can be appreciated for how it organizes its own interpretation as a sequentially relevant element in a social scene.	Utterance *X* helps to preserve and organize the conditions for its own interpretation as a constitutive element of social scene. Institutional treachery and social transformation are constant possibilities around which interpretations are reflexively organized.

The propositional approach focuses on the sentence as the unit of analysis, understands sentences in terms of their referential potential, and asks questions about their clarity and possible truth value. Propositional analyses produce statements of the type, Sentence X can mean *a, b,* or *c.* The variation in meanings available in the sentence is understood as contained within the sentence. Context is irrelevant and invoked only in the face of the abominations of actual use; it has no systematic bearing on utterance interpretation. Meaning is framed by the capital and the period without any reference to how, as Frake (1980) reminds us, plying frames can be dangerous or in any other way consequential for speakers.

An important, if partial, advance is made in the linguistic sciences when analysts start to look at the consequences of talk, at the effects speakers have one upon another. For a unit of analysis, speech act theorists stick closely to the sentence although they focus on what the sentence is doing in conjunction with other sentences. The utterance exchange is the purported unit of analysis, although the descriptions are deemed complete with the attribution of intentions. Talk is understood as being about the expression of intentions, and variations in utterance interpretation are chalked up to the complexities of organizing an identity in social situations; thus, hedging and mitigating can rule the discourse. The analytic product gives an appearance of being more complete than that of propositional analyses.

Dimensions of context are considered crucial to the description of the illocutionary force of speech acts. However, the use of context in the analysis is nonetheless an afterthought. There is still a reliance on a soup-in-the-bowl approach to context. According to this model, the soup has a life of its own; it is the substance which is placed in a bowl and accordingly shaped. In speech act analysis, propositional meaning is the soup (an alphabet soup, most likely, good for monologue, reference, and description) and the social statuses and roles of the speaker-hearer pairs are the contexts that organize the rewrite rules allowing the referential power of talk to be obscured enough to meet the demands of the social situation. Reference remains primary in the analysis, and the conditions of context are plied against what anyone could recognize as the canonical interpretation.

The problem with the soup-in-the-bowl approach is that it allows the assumption that the soup exists independent of the bowl, that the meaning of an utterance remains, if only for a moment, independent of conditions that organize its production and interpretation, that meaning exists "on the inside territory of an utterance." If, however, soup and bowl, behavior and its contexts, utterance and the hierarchy of scenes it serves, are all mutually constituted, then the utterance cannot stand alone; it cannot make meaning on its own any more than a fiber can make a rope, or a thread a fabric.[7] An utterance can only help to piece meanings together, and in so doing erases itself as the essential unit of analysis. Along with many other behavior sequences, an utterance becomes consequential in social facts, and it is to these facts we must turn for instructions on how to appreciate language as a social tool.

The collusion approach develops from a more reticular sense of context. It rejects the traditional notion of intention-to-mean as directly homing in on its object, but instead recognizes that the pathway of meaning of talk is by no means simple and assured. The behavioral stuff to which an utterance can make connections, and the connections the utterances make possible, are primary in the analysis. The irremediable absence of strict borders between persons and others, between acts and other acts, produces interactional puzzles that require constant alignment and collusion from participants (Plessner 1965; Wieder 1974). As we saw in some moments in Rosa's life, talk is primarily about alignments with others—alignments that run a moral order gamut from institutional manipulation to social transformation for the good of all, talk that runs the moral order gamut from hiding and lying to expressing a will to believe and consciousness-raising. An appreciation of talk as collusional raises the most basic human issues for our consideration. It is demeaning to the richness of talk and its talkers to limit its description to anything less than a consideration of the most fundamental issues facing people in social life.

REMARKS ON COLLUSION AND POWER

The necessity of collusion in conversation raises two issues for the analysis of power in discourse. The first issue concerns how an analyst can find power in talk. Linguists have not solved this problem, nor indeed have they tried very hard. The solution will not be easy. The interactional residue apparent in even the most obvious patterns of form use, for example, the use of address terms or honorifics (French *tu* and *vous* and Japanese *keigo* forms being classic), has produced little insight into the more complex constraints operative in a social structure. The more subtle interactional dynamics underlying differences in timing, for example, in the frequency of interruptions and strategic silences (as between men and women), although important for orienting us to power issues, have not been any more helpful in supplying us with an exact calculus for locating the dynamics of power in social relations.

By its emphasis on plurality, a notion of collusion suggests that we give up the question of *who* has particular powers and move instead to questions of how social institutions offer *access* to various kinds of power and how various conversational sequences supply instructions to their partici-

pants for acting consequentially for the institution of which they are a moment. We do not need to know who is powerful; rather, we need to identify the resources supposedly powerful people have available and the instructions within the power system that keep them, by simply following their nose, knowing how to wield their powers. By focusing on the collusion between the apparently powerful and the apparently impotent, conversational analysis may alert us to the institutional constraints on communicative activities.

By its emphasis on institutional treachery, a notion of collusion goes further to raise the question of what people have to arrange *not to talk about* in order to keep their conversation properly con-sequential with the institutional pressures that invade their lives from one moment to the next. Bateson once noted that the key question to be asked of any situation is what one would have to do to tell the truth while a participant (cited in Birdwhistell 1977). This is a crucial remark, for a description of the constraints on people telling the truth, indeed of their even conceiving what a telling of the truth might be, represents a good description of the powers made available, fought over, or shied away from in a conversation (which is but a moment in the life of a more inclusive set of constraints called an institution). Institutional analysis might proceed by addressing conversational data with questions about what can be talked about while at the same time being kept quiet, handled delicately, lied about in a pinch, or confronted only under the most dire circumstances.

The second issue concerns what linguistics would look like if it were to take seriously that matters of institutional access and power are at the heart of most conversations. Gone would be a preoccupation with propositions that carry their own self-contained meaning, between sentence capital and period. The lonely speaker would give way to a community of voices, the proposition to the social fact. Gone also would be the speaker-hearer pair totally circumscribed within their own competencies, jockeying intentions back and forth in the name of felicity (although often behind her back). Speakers and hearers would instead merge in a language collective, struggling to wrestle meanings to the ground and to sequence them into the harsh realities of institutional constraints.

This essay addresses both issues by way of an example of collusion in conversation taken from some classroom talk that is impossible to understand, at least as the participants understand it, without reference to the social structural constraints in terms of which some things not easy to say nonetheless seem to dominate the conversation. That it is an American school, first-grade reading lesson conversation, as significantly different, for example, from an American family conversation, a Hanunóo or Balinese reading lesson conversation, or even an American school lunch conversation, makes a great difference in the understandings available to the participants in their interpretation and use of their own talk. In American schools, children must learn that the borders between competence and incompetence are not clearly defined, but subject to constant social rearrangement. Classroom discourse is dominated by questions of "Who can?" and, just as importantly, but far less often stated, "Who cannot?" This fact about classroom life is ubiquitous in transcripts from classrooms and the key to their interpretation (the same key the participants can be shown to be using in their orientation to both the said and the unsaid).

NOTES

This essay was prepared in anticipation of the late Erving Goffman liking it. It is reprinted with revisions from *Text* 3 (1983): 277–97 by permission of the publisher, Mouton de Gruyter.

1. Under the guidance and likely authorship of M. M. Bakhtin (Holquist 1981).

2. Garfinkel (1963) has advanced the same point with his work on "trust" as a condition of stable concerted activities. Various other terms glossing the same phenomenon with varying degrees of consistency and success are "context," "frame," "key," and "working consensus." The term "collusion" adds to these, as Garfinkel would appreciate, a sense of institutionalization and even treachery that we believe essential (institutionalization as the arrangement of persons and commodities that have us necessarily trusting reciprocally in the ways we do; treachery as a measure of how far we will drive ourselves and others to believe in a world not well connected to our experiences).

"Collusion" has the further advantage of plurality, as is essential to any analysis of social behavior such as conversation. One cannot collude alone; it takes at least three persons (as if two to collude and one to interpret).

3. As Harvey Sacks (1975) has noted, there are numerous statements across varying occasions to which the "contrast set true-false" is not sequentially relevant. A description of the distribution of occasions for which the contrast set is relevant (and of the various statements that invite its application) might give us a revealing key to social structure. The important point is that talk seems well designed for making delicacy, avoidance, mitigation, and duplicity generally possible. Against this background, it appears that inviting a lie, lying, and catching a liar are socially structured games in which people together ignore the obfuscating powers of language to construct scapegoats and degradation ceremonies. The "outraged jeremiad is the mark of a moralistic rather than a moral society" (Shklar 1979: 24). In this view, conversational "delicacy," for example, an attempt to insure that "the fact that an answerer is not giving [some requested information does] not constitute a recognizable refusal to give it" (Jefferson 1978), represents a first attempt to escape the onslaughts of a true-false contrast set; lying is a next step for people in situations with fewer social resources for doing delicacy. An appre-

ciation of this fact can help move us from a cynicism about individual morality to a political involvement for making different kinds of morality possible; at best, the outraged jeremiad "is not without affect, because this type of antihypocrite does at least have a sense of what is wrong, rather than an urge to spread the blame" (Shklar 1979: 24).

4. The alternatives to the natural attitude have been important (Bernstein 1976). Robert Murphy has offered us a helpful guide in what he calls the first principle of Irish (at least in the sense of not British) social anthropology: "My theories do fit with the well-known Irish trait by which there is little correspondence, and indeed much contradiction, between what a person thinks, what he says, and what he does. Perhaps I can best explain the tenets of Irish Social Anthropology by reversing Durkheim's formulation of the relation between restless, shifting sensate activity and the collective world of norms. My own resolution of the problem, then, is: All things real are ephemeral; all things enduring are false" (1975: 55).

Edward Casey has directed a similar insight to our understanding of a descriptive enterprise as linguistics must be: "The surface at stake in description is a moving surface. It changes in and through time; and even if such changes are not detectable in a given time interval, their description is itself a temporal event" (1981: 199).

5. Grand theories of the world usually include an account of what has to be lied about. Timpanaro has offered a lovely account of a Marx-Freud contrast on the nature of the world that organizes collusion: "It is intriguing to imagine Freud's reaction if one of his patients—a neurotic, but a politically lucid one—in reply to the question which according to Freud was the best means of 'ensnaring' the patient: 'What would you consider was the most unlikely thing in the world in that situation: What do you think was the furthest thing in the world from your mind at the time?'—had answered: 'I consider the most unlikely thing in the world would be to see a capitalist renounce his own privileges without any use of force on the part of the workers he exploits.' At this point, there would surely have been an exchange of roles: Freud would himself have succumbed to the behavior typical of a 'patient,' he would have lost his temper or changed the subject—in short, have revealed 'resistances' so strong that he would not even have been aware of their existence" (1976: 59).

6. Owen Barfield (1962) has pointed out that the best of our talk, metaphor and poetry, thrives on saying one thing to mean another; the more one meaning lives as a modification of another, the richer the metaphor. Linguists have managed to avoid a careful look at how such talk is used in social life by giving great sway to the grammatical and referential workings of language. Nietzsche has bemoaned how deep this trend runs: "I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar" (1968 [1889]: 34).

7. Bateson is essential here: "It is important to see the particular utterance or action as part of the ecological subsystem called context and not as the product or effect of what remains of the context after the piece which we want to explain has been cut out from it" (1972: 338). Birdwhistell adds an equal wisdom in an account of what a context is: "I like to think of it as a rope. The fibers that make up

the rope are discontinuous; when you twist them together, you don't make *them* continuous, you make the *thread* continuous. . . . The thread has no fibers in it, but, if you break up the thread, you can find the fibers again. So that, even though it may look in a thread as though each of those particles are going all through it, that isn't the case. That's essentially the descriptive model" (quoted in McDermott 1980: 4, 14).

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