



# Communication as Performance and the Performativity of Communication

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## Proceedings of the 2014 International Colloquium on Communication

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Proceedings of the 2014 International Colloquium on Communication

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# Performance in Mass Mediated Interaction

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## 1. Abstract

This article focuses on the question how communicators build up a specific and distinguishable identity within mass mediated interaction. Or in other words: How do speakers *perform* by means of language within face-to-face conversation that is mediated to a dispersed audience? Besides the performance, “conversational style” plays a crucial role for building up one’s identity *by means of language*. The link between both terms will be presented and exemplified with the findings of a study on the conversational styles of three German politicians within a radio discussion. But first of all, the relevant terms have to be outlined.

## 2. Understanding and Outlining the Concept of Performance

The term “performance” is common and relevant in different disciplines. This article examines the linguistic perspective on and conceptualizations of performance. However, to start with, I will draw attention to a non-linguistic field, namely theatrical studies. The reason for this is quite basically understanding the given term in that field and its possible use for a linguistic conceptualization. Fischer-Lichte (2000) understands performance as the process of a representation by means of body and voice in front of a present audience.

Moving forward to the linguistic perspective, one has to notice the different definitions of the given term within the various linguistic subdisciplines. One of them is connected to the speech act theory of John Langshaw Austin and his student John Searle. Austin differentiates between constative and performative utterances. Briefly summarized, speakers may state “true” or “false” assertions with constatives; performatives are the kind of utterances with which speakers actually *act*, for instance, asking for a favor or a promise are performatives.

A different understanding of “performance” derives from Noam Chomsky. In the context of his theory on a Universal Grammar, he defines “performance” as the “actual observed use of language” (Chomsky 2000, 102). He furthermore states that:

Performance involves many other factors as well. We do not interpret what is said in our presence simply by application of an utterance. Extralinguistic beliefs concerning the speaker and the situation play a fundamental role in determining how speech is produced, identified, and understood (2000, 102).

All three of these perspectives on performance are relevant for the analysis of performance in (mass mediated) interaction. In order to do so, the actual focus on communication and interaction has to be strengthened; for this purpose. I will add Erving Goffman's insights to my framework.

When describing and analyzing natural interaction (that means non-fictional interaction), Goffman (1959) makes use of a broad range of terms originally derived from the world of the theatre. Thus, he compares individuals in ordinary work situations with actors in dramaturgical scenes – both act in a certain way in order to impress an audience. Since Goffman explicitly studies individuals and their behavior in face-to-face interaction, his definition of “performance” is closely linked to that type of interaction and, furthermore, fruitful for this article:

A ‘performance’ may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants (Goffman 1959, 15).

With regard to interaction, he states: “interaction (that is, face-to-face interaction) may be roughly defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence” (1959, 15).

Following his comparison of ordinary interaction to theatrical drama, Goffman differentiates between the front region (or front stage) and the back region (or back stage). Front stage is the region where individuals act according to their specific role in a situation. In other words, this is the region where individuals *perform* in front of an audience, in front of observers. While performing, individuals follow certain standards and act in a specific manner. Manner refers to “those stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation” (1959, 24).

### **3. Performance and Conversational Style**

This article will discuss performance in mass mediated interaction from a linguistic point of view. Consequently, the speaker’s language and communicative characteristics are of central interest. Concerning the analysis of such verbal, non- and paraverbal features within talk, the term “conversational style” is relevant. Deborah Tannen (1987, 251) provided an initial and broad definition: “Conversational style is a semantic process; it is the way meaning is encoded in and derived from speech.” Possible features of a person’s conversational style are: topic (e.g. whether a speaker shifts easily to a new topic or insists on a certain topic); genre; pace (rate of speech, rate of turn taking etc.) and expressive paralinguistics (e.g. pitch, strategic pauses) (Tannen 1987). However, there is neither a fixed set of certain features which are obligatory for a conversational style in general terms nor does one person have only one specific conversational style forever and in any given context. Conversational styles are rather formed anew in every conversation and the relevant features for a specific conversational style can only be derived from empirical data.

Going back to Fischer-Lichte’s very basic definition of “performance,” the notion of “process” is important. A communicator’s performance is a process of representation. Goffman emphasizes an actor’s activity on a given occasion in order to (try to) influence

others. With regard to the topic of “performance within (mass mediated) interaction,” the following features seem crucial to me:

- i. Performance is a process; hence, in interaction performance becomes an interactive process.
- ii. Performance takes place on a given (and certain) occasion; hence, an actor may perform in totally different ways and manners on different occasions.
- iii. Performance may be a means to influence others.
- iv. Performance in interaction consists of different communicative characteristics; the same is true for an actor’s conversational style.

In the following paper, I will exemplify this theoretical framework with empirical data.

#### **4. Questions/Assumptions**

The central question of this article is how speakers build up a distinguishable identity in a mass mediated interaction. I assume that in almost every conversation speakers seek to stand out as remarkable, distinguishable speakers. For this general purpose, the two concepts “performance” and “conversational style” seem to be relevant. Both terms emphasize a process and both concepts are aware of the fact that various communicative aspects constitute the performance and conversational style. Finally, the audience, or more generally speaking at least one observer, plays a crucial role in both concepts: performance takes place in order to influence others (Goffman 1959); a conversational style is connected with a recipient’s encoding (Tannen 1987).

Since a remarkable and distinguishable conversational style seems especially relevant for political actors – for instance in order to stand out against other politicians – I will analyze the interaction between as well as the conversational style of three German politicians. They were guests in a discussion, which was broadcast by German public radio. Thus, the situation is a special one. The interlocutors communicate, on one hand, with each other, with the host and with another guest in the discussion. On the other hand, they communicate in front of a dispersed audience. As Harald Burger (2001) notices, there are two circles of participants in interaction that are mediated by the mass media: one inner circle – consisting of the actual interlocutors – and an outer circle, which includes also the dispersed audience. Both “audiences” are important in the following study. The participants of the inner circle may influence with their own contributions, questions, paraverbal gestures (such as laughter) and nonverbal gestures (such as gaze) the way an actor performs and realizes his conversational style. The participants of the outer circle may influence an actor’s performance as well. Just imagine a political actor wants to impress the audience, or he wants to influence their voting intentions (these are very likely intentions for a politician). In order to enhance his success for both aims, he might anticipate what the audience would like to hear and consequently performs in the presumably valued way.

With respect to this special communicative constellation, however, Fischer-Lichte’s observation about the “present audience” has to be modified; in the radio interview examined in this study, the dispersed audience was obviously not present.

## 5. The Study

The study I will present in this paper was originally conducted for my doctoral thesis. In my thesis, the focus lies on the role conversational style plays in defining a person's credibility. However, within the study three very distinctive conversational styles became evident. Before analyzing and decoding the conversational style, the relevant discussion and relevant communicators have to be introduced.

The discussion is titled "The people's new power" (German: "Die neue Macht der Bürger") and was broadcast on March 31, 2011 by the public channel WDR 5 (series "Funkhausgespräche," see references). The whole episode lasts 54.50 minutes and the speakers are:

1. Judith Schulte-Loh (host); (JS),
2. Reinhard Schlinkert (manager of the opinion polling institute "infratest dimap"); (RS),
3. Bärbel Höhn (a German politician from the Green Party); (BH),
4. Armin Laschet (a German politician from the Christian Democratic Union/CDU); (AL),
5. Jochen Ott (a German politician from the Social Democratic Party/SPD); (JO).

The whole episode has been transcribed according to the conventions of GAT 2 (Selting et al 2009) and the conversational analysis follows the concept and steps that Selting (2008) suggest for such an analysis.

## 6. Analysis of the Conversational Styles

In this essay, one representative example of each conversational style will be analyzed for the three politicians named above. When I claim a "representative" example, I understand this with regard to the given interaction and explicitly only for that very discussion. Though the examples in this paper are very short sequences of the whole transcript, the manner in which each communicator interacts in the example can be used for generalizations on their conversational style in the named discussion (I considered the whole analysis in Kuhnhenh 2014).

Originally, the analysis has been carried out on the German transcript. In this article, I will focus on the main characteristics of each conversational style, aiming for a tight comparison and abstraction.

### 6.1 Analysis of Bärbel Höhn's Conversational Style

The first analysis regards Bärbel Höhn from the Green Party. In the sequence, Bärbel Höhn describes her political engagement on different political levels and, thus, argues for her competence.



### **EXAMPLE 1: Bärbel Höhn's conversational style**

#### **German (original) transcript**

1581 BH: ich bin ´ja (.) auf ´ALLen ebenen ˆtätich `gewesen-  
1582 ich hab ˆangefangen in der kommu´nA:lpoli`ti:k;  
1583 dann `in der `landesebene und ich bin jetzt auf `BUNDESebene;

#### **English translation**

1581 BH: i have been (.) active on ALL levels-  
1582 i have ˆstarted in the local government politics;  
1583 then on the state level and now i am on the NATIONAL level;

The politician refers to her own person, her broad experiences and her competencies. She refers explicitly and repeatedly to herself with the pronoun “I” (l. 1581, 1582, 1583). She then begins her argumentation with the information that she has been active on “ALL” levels, she emphasizes the universal quantifier by placing a focus accent on it. Thus, the word itself plus the paraverbal (in this case, an accent) feature strengthen the importance and the likely intended impressive message; namely, she is an experienced politician. Subsequently, Bärbel Höhn explains the precise levels on which she has been active. Within her statement, she states the different levels in an increasing way from the local to national level. The latter is emphasized with a focus accent (“NATIONAL”, l. 1583) and, consequently, seems a kind of evidence for her competence.

To generalize, Bärbel Höhn presents herself primarily as an experienced and competent politician. In order to do so, she refers explicitly to her own person. With regard to her performance and her possible intended influence on the audience, I differentiate between the influence on her interlocutors and on the dispersed audience. The dispersed audience seems to be the more relevant part of the audience, since Bärbel Höhn may try to convince some members of this audience to vote for her at the next election. If this is her main focus, she clearly tries to convince the audience by stating her experience. With regard to her interlocutors as audience, one possible reason for her performance could be the aim to impress and maybe to outmatch the other two political actors with regard to their experiences. With her “three-step-argumentation” and amplification about the political levels on which she has been active (local, state, national level), she makes it hard for the others to argue in a way that they could keep up with her experience.

Finally, paraverbal elements (in this case accent) strengthen the argumentation and, therefore, are an important element not only in her conversational style, but also for her performance as an experienced politician.

## **6.2 Analysis of Armin Laschet's Conversational Style**

Next, I will analyze Armin Laschet's (Christian Democratic Union) conversational style. In the sequence, the host (JS) stated the fairly provocative observation that in recent years politicians – especially from the CDU– have left the political sphere and have



gained high positions in the economic sector. In l. 1145, Armin Laschet responds to this statement:

### EXAMPLE 2: Armin Laschet's conversational style

#### German (original) transcript

- 1145 AL: [ja 'aber is 'das ~schlIMM? ich mein; ja aber das ham wir  
doch nun- ]  
1146 (-) ja aber das ham\_wa' äh' ich ~wUnder mich immer das man  
das `so:  
1147 (.) äh ~näga`tiv beschrEIBT?  
1148 das hat man eigentlich ^JAHRE`lang ge~fordert,

#### English translation

- 1145 AL: [yes but is this bAD? i mean; yes but well we have-]  
1146 (-) yeah but this we\_have err' i always wOnder that one  
describes this in a bad way?  
1147 actually one has been claimed this for YEARS,

First, the politician responds with his own opinion (l. 1145 “i mean”), but soon switches onto a general point of view, which he indicates with the pronoun “we” (l. 1145, 1146) and, finally, with the indefinite pronoun “one” (l. 1146, 1147), increasing that supposedly general level. He neither defines the “we,” nor does he make clear whom he means by “one.” So, when he argues that “actually one has been claimed this for YEARS” (l. 1147), the listener will not know who precisely has claimed a certain fact (in this case the claim that politicians should not only work as politicians, but also be active in the economy). Similar to Bärbel Höhn, Armin Laschet uses focus accents in order to emphasize central messages and evaluations. In l. 1145, he accentuates the adjective “bad,” which he questions in the relevant context; in l. 1146, he emphasizes the verb (to) “wonder”, also in order to strengthen his point of view, which presents a different opinion than the host’s provocation suggested. Finally, in l. 1147, he places a strong focus accent on the substantive “YEARS” in order to show the demand that seems to exist for years. Although, at first sight, Armin Laschet seems to argue in a definite way, his performance somehow seems not so definite. How come? Looking a second time at the features of his conversational style in this short sequence, the answer is that he performs rather in a vague way. First of all, he switches rapidly from his personal point of view to a general point of view, but without defining to whom he precisely refers, who is meant by the personal pronoun “we” and who is meant by the indefinite pronoun “one,” the indefinite pronoun especially seems to weaken his argumentation. Second, the hedge “actually” (German: “eigentlich,” the translation suggest more certainty than the German original) strengthens the vagueness as well. Finally, the fact that he formulates questions and raises his voice also may support the (intuitive) impression that he does not argue in such a forceful way as Bärbel Höhn does.

To sum up, Armin Laschet formulations and argumentations are far more vague and less personal, especially in comparison to Bärbel Höhn in this interaction. This might be interpreted as a professional way of speaking in politics. By not being too fixed about a

certain issue, a politician leaves room for flexibility without potentially contradicting past statements.

### 6.3 Analysis of Jochen Ott's Conversational Style

The final analysis focuses on Jochen Ott's conversational style (he is politician in the Social Democratic Party):

#### **EXAMPLE 3:** Jochen Ott's conversational style **German (original) transcript**

0505 JO: =darf ich n ^BEispiel ´sagen?  
0506 JS: bltte;=  
0507 JO: =ganz ´kONkret,  
0508 wir hatten vor wenigen mOna`ten;  
0509 (.) eine ^große demonstration vor dem ^rathaus mit  
^zweitausend leu`ten aus dem stadtteil (.) in `RIEL.  
0510 ´das is am [köllner ZO:-]  
0511 (JS): [mh; ]  
0512 JO: der ^eine oder andere von den hörern ´kennt ´DEN,

#### **English translation**

0505 JO: =may i say n EXAmple?  
0506 JS: please;=  
0507 JO: =really cONcrete,  
0508 we had a few mOnths ago;  
0509 (.) a ^big demonstration in front of the town hall with  
two thousand people from the district in RIEL.  
0510 that is at the ZOO: of cologne  
0511 (JS): [mh;]  
0512 JO: one or the other of the listeners knows IT,

Before starting his turn, Jochen Ott asks the host whether he may take the floor and state an “example” (l. 0505). After her permission to do so, he first adds the insertion “really cONcrete” and then begins to employ the example of a demonstration in Cologne. He formulates the example as a narration: he sets the time (“a few mOnths ago”, l. 0508), the actors (“two thousand people”, l. 0509) and the place (“RIEL”, l. 0509, “cologne”, l. 0510). As he indicated at the beginning of his turn, the example is a quite concrete one and he emphasizes the concreteness with adjectives (“*big* demonstration”, l. 0509) and precise descriptions of the place (“in front of the town hall”, l. 0509; “at the zoo”, l. 0510). Consequently, the example not only seems to be precise but also vivid – the listener (or the audience) may understand and follow the speaker easily and build up a picture of the unfolding situation in Riel. The formulation (in short, a detailed narration) as well as the example (a demonstration with a lot of people) represent one central feature of Jochen Ott's conversational style, namely his orientation to the audience. In this case, the orientation to the dispersed audience is obvious. Jochen Ott states an example, which many listeners may know from their life world. In addition, he refers

explicitly to the listeners (“one or the other of the listener knows IT,” l. 0512). As well as in the two examples regarding Bärbel Höhn and Armin Laschet, the variety of linguistic elements, which constitute a conversational style, become evident. Jochen Ott also uses focus accent in order to emphasize the meaning of message plus (in his case) in order to establish the narration paraverbal: “EXAmple”, l. 0505; “cONcrete”, l. 0507; “RIEL”, l. 0509; “ZOO:”, l. 0510. The modal verb “may” (l.0505) and the fact that he asks for the floor establish a picture of a respectful and polite communicator.

The comparison of the use of pronouns in the three examples seems relevant. With regard to Bärbel Höhn, her frequent use of the personal pronoun “I” is one element that establishes the impression of an assertive and self-centered/self-confident speaker. Armin Laschet, on the other hand, switches soon from his own point of view to a general level: he first uses the personal pronoun “we” (although he does not make clear to whom he precisely refers) and again emphasizes the general level with the indefinite pronoun “one”. Jochen Ott also makes use of the personal pronoun “we,” but since he states an example of a demonstration in Cologne the “we” could be understood as a reference and context cue ( Gumperz 1982) to the people in Cologne.

In the next section, the three conversational styles will be generalized and contrasted with respect to the speaker’s different performances.

## 7. Findings

Bärbel Höhn, Armin Laschet and Jochen Ott realize very distinctive conversational styles and, consequently, their performances as politicians in a broadcast discussion differ from one another. In general, Bärbel Höhn (example 1) presents herself as a very experienced, competent and also self-confident (or even self-important?) politician. She focuses on her experiences in the political sphere. Armin Laschet (example 2), on the other hand, does not perform as assertively and self-confidently as Bärbel Höhn. He does not define his very own experiences and opinions, but formulates and argues in a rather vague and general way. Thus, he maintains flexibility and acts as a professional politician. Jochen Ott (example 3), finally, presents himself as a respectful speaker and a politician who is oriented to the people.

Although the three politicians realize distinctive conversational styles and their performances as politicians differ from one another, the analysis indicates common aspects when it comes to performance and conversational style. It became evident that various elements constitute a conversational style: the use of pronouns, modal verbs, patterns of formulation (argumentation, amplification, narration) and focus accent are relevant elements in the examples. Second, with regard to politicians interacting in front of a dispersed audience, the different conversational styles go along with different ways of trying to impress the audience (and possible voters). A politician might act very assertively and stress her experience (as Bärbel Höhn does), he might be sure to maintain flexibility (as Armin Laschet), or he might perform as a politician who is close to the people (as Jochen Ott does).

In summary, to realize a distinguishable conversational style and to perform in a characteristic way are necessary in order to establish a distinguishable identity.

It goes without saying that the actor’s party has to be considered. Jochen Ott, for example, is member of the Social Democratic Party. Thus, his performance as such a people-oriented politician is plausible and expected.

## 8. Conclusion

When it comes to performance in interaction, the context has to be considered. An observer who encodes and interprets a speaker's performance (automatically) considers extralinguistic beliefs concerning the speaker and the situation (Chomsky 2006). The context of the interaction analyzed in this paper was a broadcast radio discussion with three German politicians from three different parties. Concerning Goffman's differentiation between front stage and back stage behavior, the context of the analyzed interaction is clearly the front stage and the actors make this explicit by means of context cues, such as referring to the listeners.

The politician's conversational styles in the interaction are very different from one another. Thus, by means of their interactional performance, the three politicians establish a distinguishable identity.

The link between the analysis of a conversational style in order to reach conclusions on an actor's performance seems fruitful to me and, as Goffman (1980, 319) declares, style is a fundamental issue and question concerning identification. Conversational style is crucial for speakers in order to perform as a distinguishable person. With regard to politicians, they might even use a conversational style as a specific rhetorical strategy: "Knowing what makes for a successful rhetorical strategy can tell us a great deal about the conditions for successful political action" (Jerit 2008, 17).

Although the three conversational styles differ from one another, there are common features when looking from a more theoretical point of view. In all three conversational styles, potential strategies to influence the audience (in this case the dispersed audience) became evident. Thus, Goffman's definition of performance has to be modified for the specific context:

"A 'performance' may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman 1959, 15). With regard to mass mediated discussions, I would suggest adding the following: "[... other participant] or the audience which might not be present but perceive the activity of a given participant."

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