



Communication as Performance and the Performativity of Communication

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Proceedings of the 2014 International Colloquium on Communication

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Verbal Art and Social Conflict

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1. The Problem and Its Cultural Matrix

The title, “Verbal Art and Social Conflict,” might suggest an opposition because we are used to thinking about social conflict in terms of interests, forces and other “serious” matters. On the other hand, we are used to thinking about verbal art in terms of play, entertainment, fun, and other “light” matters. But sometimes we notice some rift in this stable cultural-cognitive matrix of understanding life. We are trapped by artful bluff in the course of a negotiation, we are stunned by cases of ready wit in the course of a dispute. Could it be that our common way of thinking about conflict and artfulness requires critical reconsideration? The opposition indeed works only on the basis of peculiar, historically contingent assumptions sketched in what some scholars call a “Kantian aesthetics” (Baumann & Brigs 1990), which makes a sharp distinction between day-to-day life and art. The relation between them has been seen otherwise in different times and places. In the Baroque court, war and play were essentially interconnected – war was play and play was war (Geitner 1992).

The distinction we have to cope with nowadays is the result of a conception of communication or a “meta-pragmatics” (Lucy 1992) which is associated with the social rise of the bourgeois class and an accompanying ideology, the philosophy of enlightenment. This conception made written arguments the prototype of communication, degrading playful ways of speaking to social irrelevant spheres: entertainment and children’s talk. If ways of speaking in the public sphere show up which used non-argumentative elements, they were branded as “unmanierliche Polemik” or unmannerly polemics (Oesterle 1986).

2. Performativity as a Not So New Perspective on Communication

2.1. A Conceptual Reorientation to Language and Communication

It was at the beginning of the 20th century that in some disciplines and societal spheres concerned with language that scholars advocated for a change of perspective:

- The German literary scholar Max Herrmann argued with regard to theatrical play that it is not the text of the play which is crucial but the performance (“Aufführung”). He regarded theater to be a “social play,” with actors and audience as well as relevant participants. Long before a concept like “embodiment” attracted prominence, Herrmann stressed “that the decisive moment in theater play is the co-experience of the real bodies and the real space”

(“das theatralisch Entscheidende [ist] das Miterleben der wirklichen Körper und des wirklichen Raumes”) (Fischer-Lichte 2012, 20).

- The Russian theater manager Nicolai Evreinov developed the concept of “theatricality.” He saw cultural moments as being performed for other members of the culture. He found such moments not only in aesthetic segments of society, but in all areas of public life and institutions such as church, law systems, military and advertising. Evreinov regarded theatricality to be the central principal of socio-cultural development.
- The British theologian William Smith and after him anthropologist James Frazer reversed the perspective on myth and ritual, arguing that myth and religion have been developed from ritual. This reversal was quite irritating for the self-description of Western culture according to which culture was formed on complex systems of belief, whereas rituals were seen to belong to “primitive” societies.

It was in anthropology and sociology that those ideas of performativity remained fruitful.

In sociology, Kenneth Burke developed the concept of “social drama” as a central analytical concept to understand all phenomena of social life – social interaction as well as aesthetic productions. The concept of social drama and its related terminology enabled him to make aesthetic categories fruitful for the analysis of social interaction.

Erving Goffman and his seminal “presentation of self in everyday life” used the metaphorical field of theatre to describe social situations and the interactions therein. He could refer to the idea and cultural attitude of “world theatre,” which had an enormous impact on culture and behavior in the European 17th century.

In contrast to the information-centered conception of communication, Goffman was very clear:

All in all, then, I am suggesting that often what talkers undertake to do is not to provide information to a recipient but to present dramas to an audience. Indeed it seems that we spend most of our time not engaged in giving information but in giving shows. And observe this theatricality is not based on mere displays of feelings or faked exhibition of spontaneity or anything else by way of the huffing and puffing we might derogate by calling theatrical. The parallel between stage and conversation is much, much deeper than that. The point is that ordinarily when an individual says something, he is not saying it as a bald statement of fact on his own behalf. He is recounting. He is running through a strip of already determined events for the engagement of his listeners (Goffman 1974, 508).

It must be stressed that the scientific disciplines, which claim to have language and communication as their subjects, had no affinities to such concepts for a long time. Regarding linguistics, this is due to its meaning-centered approach, in particular, to the dominance of the concept of information in communication science. So nowadays the concept of theatricality (or performativity) penetrates these disciplines from “outside.”

2.2. The Methodological Challenge

This reorientation has at least one methodological challenge: if communication is not regarded as text and as production of meaning or interpretation but as performance, then, communication must be conceived on the basis of experience instead of meaning.

As anthropologist Edward Schieffelin writes:

Symbols are effective less because they communicate meaning (...) than because, through performance, meanings are formulated in a social rather than cognitive space, and the participants are engaged with the symbols in the interactional creation of a performance reality, rather than merely being informed by them as knowers” (1985, 707).

Brenneis (1985, 707) stresses that “a focus on the intellectual, sense-making role of symbols – on their meanings – can obscure how symbols and the rituals of which they are a part can speak so forcefully” (236).

Bauman sees the peculiar quality of performances in the “enhancement of experience, through the present appreciation of the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself” (1986, 133).

This methodological challenge is a crucial one for every scientific discipline because it touches the relationship between the nature of the object of investigation and the medium of scientific representation – written language. As long as the nature of the object – meaning – is regarded to be grasped by conceptually (cognitive) based uses of language (analytical discourse) there is a correspondence between the – assumed – nature of the object of study and the way to represent it. But if the object has the quality of experience or imagination, an analytical use of language fails to get the essence of the object of study. Experience and imagination back out of an analytical use of language. Their representation demands another use of language, a use to be developed.

View of communication	Focus on	Basic concept
text	fixation of meaning (Geertz)	interpretation
performance	co-experience of events enhancement of experience	impression imagination

2.3. The Conceptual Challenge

Efforts to link ‘social conflict’ together with “verbal art” are impeded by cognitive patterns which are deeply rooted in the ‘cosmology’ of modern Western civilization. For implications of this cosmology for communication studies see Nothdurft (2014). Binary opposing schemata like “reality – play,” “sense – nonsense,” and “rationality – irrationality” are powerful devices in understanding social reality – so powerful that they obstruct a proper understanding of phenomena which can be characterized as hybrids

(see Latour 1995). They seem to belong to both sides or better they demand alternative ways of description and understanding.

If communication is regarded as performance, then, the question is not if there is a connection between social conflict and verbal art but how this connection is adequately understood and properly grasped.

3. Suggestions for Understanding the Relationship between Social Conflict and Verbal Art

In this section, I present some conceptions that might be helpful for understanding the relationship between social conflict and verbal art. They were developed in different fields of study such as anthropology, conversational analysis, psychotherapy and theater studies. Correspondingly, they stress different aspects of the relationship between social conflict and verbal art.

These concepts are:

- Schechner's loop
- social aesthetics
- making music together
- performance of conflict

3.1. Schechner's Loop

Richard Schechner, a theater director and scholar, developed a conceptual schema relating social and political action with theatrical techniques. Schechner uses the concept of “social drama” by anthropologist Victor Turner. It received its most prominent representation in what Schechner himself calls the “infinity loop” (Schechner 2003, Fig. 6.2). The central assumption is that theatrical techniques are the hidden blueprints of political and other social processes, and that theatrical processes are influenced by social processes. So instead of working with the difference between social “reality” and aesthetic “play,” this model tries to detect the relationships between these two “ideologically” divided realms of reality.



Figure 6.2

Turner (1985, 300), who used this schema in his own work, stresses: "... the protagonists of the social drama, a 'drama of living,' have been equipped by aesthetic drama with some of their most salient opinions, imageries, hopes and ideological perspectives."

3.2 Social Aesthetics

Anthropologist Donald Brenneis (1987) introduced the concept of social aesthetics. The concept is designed to relate performances in a social community to social structures in this peculiar community. This concept fuses:

- sense making activity with
- local aesthetic criteria for coherence and beauty with
- ethnopsychological notions of personhood, emotion, expression and experience.

Social aesthetics is the medium through which participants conceptualize and articulate their experiences.

Brenneis stresses the importance of the *local* character of such a social aesthetics; in the case of a Fiji community he investigated, he found ethnopsychological categories inseparable from aesthetics, so that emotional experience is located in the events themselves.

Brenneis shows this fusion by using an example of a dispute resolution procedure.

There is a procedure of dispute management, called *pancayat*, which does not focus on the matter of dispute itself, but which provides an opportunity for the participants to share in experience culturally relevant feelings and moods.

Through *pancayat* testimony an official and definitive account of events crucial to the development of a dispute is publicly constructed. ... the public narrative is constructed through the propositions collaboratively stated by questioner and witness. The committee is not presenting an account of its own but is contributing to its composition (242).

A publicly accomplished account is provided, and interested villagers are left to draw their own conclusions and interpretations. Everyone's autonomy is maintained (242).

The *pancayat* is considered by Fiji Indians to be a powerful and satisfactory occasion for social mending, for repairing damaged interpersonal relations and enacting "amity" (243).

I presume that there are evaluative standards by which artful, witty, expressive, and puzzling ways of dealing with accusations are very highly evaluated. These are standards that work – so to say – "beneath" the official social values of rational disputing behavior, but nevertheless guide our experiences and sentiments of everyday communicative behavior.

3.3. Making Music Together

“Making music together” is a concept that Johannes Schwitalla and I developed some years ago to deal with what we observed to be artful ways of speaking in youth groups. We used this concept (or metaphor) to focus on the orchestration of simultaneous speaking, the synchronization of rhythm, the repetition and variation of phrases and words, the improvisation and the playful use of sounds. These obviously are elements of play, but in the field we studied this play matters because it is just by this play that the social identities of the teens in their respective peer-group and their feelings about “being in the world” are enacted and established. Axel Schmidt (2004) made similar observations in studying what in German is called “dissen” in peer groups.

I would like to demonstrate the fruitfulness of this concept for the study of social conflicts by showing the artful way of speaking in a segment of mediation talk. The data are from a research project on mediation talk (Nothdurft 1995), especially on mediation in neighborhood disputes, so called “Schiedsmann-Gespräche.” The presented segment is from such a mediation between residents of an apartment house. Resident A has a lot of complains against a couple, B1 and B2, who are the opponents in this case. C is the mediator (who does not show up in this segment). The segment starts after a passage in which A accuses B1 of having been rude and having called A names.

A:

B1: when did I say that (...) had I there been drunk again when I climbed up the stairs

A: of course you had been drunk every evening

B1: on all all all fours every evening

B2:

A: of course you blamed us and shouted at us

B1: o god did I do that

B2:

A: oh yes always always 'cause we were renovating my flat

B1: every evening

B2:

A: if you would to that of course you always had

B1: I had been drunk every evening and I did eh

B2:

A: been drunk

B1: no for heaven's sake than I must not drive as a tanklorry

B2:

A:

B1: you know why just think about when I drive the tanklorry

B2:

A: that doesn't matter the issue is that you

B1: I'll drink all the gas

The opponent uses the question, which he puts to himself, to introduce a scenario of his behavior which plays with itself and which gets a remarkably glittering status. It is obvious that this turn does not have the status of a “recollection of former behavior” as it would have as a sequentially expected reaction to the question. Instead of that, this expectation is used playfully and a different game is played. The opponent acts as if the applicant would speak. But the description of his behavior is so overdone that it caricatures the real scene and deprecates the real speaker, that is, the applicant. This caricature is carried out in remarkable way even in formulaic aspects of the utterance. See that by the stuttering “on all all all fours,” the typical babbling of a drunken person is exposed, at least, in German. The applicant picks up his scenario indeed and confirms it “you had been drunk every evening” and falls into the trap. From now on her contributions become subjects of his wit. The opponent takes up her confirmation: “every evening o god.” This comment as well as his further remarks are functional in a double way.

First, they are attacks against the assertion of her confirmation; these attacks could be reformulated as: “How in the world can you say something like that?”. They aim at undermining the credibility of the applicant.

Second, on the propositional level, the remarks create a context in which the defendant can refer later on in a surprising turn “then I must not drive a tank/lorry.”

For the establishment of this context, repetitions of already introduced phrases play an important role. Note that in oral speech repetition is an important means to create coherence and continuity, so to say, against time and volatility (Tannen 1989). By the speech-figure of “petrol-tank,” the opponent retrospectively performs the whole sequence as part of a process of growing insight from a phase of skeptical wonder to a phase of clear appreciation, but he does it in a modality of non-literal, playful speaking and simulated wonder.

The context of speech has changed meanwhile to that of a merry guessing-game. This guessing-game becomes obvious when the opponent asks the applicant “you know why?”. The opponent cannot seriously expect that the applicant will play this game so he answers his question himself: “I’ll drink all the gas.”

I regard this segment and its analysis as an example how intricate verbal interaction in disputes is and how in creating the vitality of disputes features of speech work together which haven been separated conceptually and methodologically or even neglected by a text-oriented linguistic analysis of everyday talk.

3.4. The Performance of Conflict

In this approach, the concept of “performance” is used in a strict and narrow sense. The idea is that dispute participants in talking about their dispute are enacting or performing this very dispute. I (Nothdurft 1997, 117f) made respective observations in studies of mediation talk. Similar observations have been made in coaching and psychotherapeutic processes in which the topics of these talks were reproduced in the interaction patterns in which the participants dealt with their topic – the topic was performed.

In the way of speaking about their dispute and the dynamics of negotiation, the disputing parties reproduce structural elements of the debated dispute. Dynamic

patterns, for example, “to turn round and round,” “to go back and forth,” and “to stick obstinately in another,” can be seen as performances of core features of the respective dispute: a problem of interpunctuation, a reciprocal exchange of offers and rejections, and highly emotional involvement.

In the context of Gestalt-Therapy, such phenomena are even crucial for the therapeutic process. They call them “here-and-now-correspondence” (Yalom 2002). Psychoanalytical “transference” is a related concept of course.

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