

Chapter 11

A Situational Theory of Disqualification: Using Language to "Leave the Field"

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Suppose person A has received a gift from a friend who lives in another city. The friend now wants to know, "How do you like the gift I sent you?" A writes the following reply:

1. Thank you so much for the terrific gift. It is something I have always wanted. Whenever I use it I will always think of you. Thanks again.

Person B has also received a gift from a friend, who wants to know, too, "How do you like the gift I sent you?" B replies:

2. Yes I received your gift. They say a person gives what he would like to receive. Hopefully one day, I'll be able to return the favor some way or another. Have a nice day.

Or, if the inquiry were made by phone, A might say, in an enthusiastic and pleased voice:

3. Oh, it was really nice. You obviously went to a lot of trouble to pick out something that I like.

While B says hesitantly:

4. Oh, um, it was, ah, not bad . . . [slight laugh].

Disqualification is a dimension that reflects the difference between the two messages in each pair. A's are clear, straightforward, and answer the friend's question. B's are equivocal, contradictory, even evasive. Yet they suddenly make sense when the evoking situations are revealed. A had received a welcome and suitable gift, whereas B's friend had sent a gift so bizarre that it was not possible to tell whether or not it was a joke.

This chapter will describe a research program aimed both at measuring the differences among messages on this dimension and at establishing the situational antecedents of disqualified messages. First, previous descriptions of the phenomenon will be reviewed as background. Then a conflict theory

from: J. P. Forgas (Ed.), *LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL SITUATIONS*.
New York: Springer-Verlag, 1985.

and a measurement procedure will be described. The rest of the chapter will be devoted to experiments conducted to test this theory and to examples of the messages—often strange and amusing but always skillful—produced by normal subjects in our experimental conditions.

Background

There is a tendency in most disciplines dealing with human communication to focus on communication as it “should” be—to gloss it as straightforward and logical, implying that anything else is error or deviance. However, a minority of authors have pointed out that our natural communication is not always thus, and they have not wished to dismiss such occurrences as deviant or erroneous. On the contrary, they have proposed that messages violating certain linguistic standards might still be lawfully related to the social context or situation in which they occur (see also Heikkinen and Valo, and Gibbs, this volume, Chapters 12 and 6).

From their clinical work, Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland (1956) described “double bind” communication in the families of schizophrenics, proposing that real-life communication can often be paradoxical and that even psychotic utterances make sense if considered in the context of familial communication patterns. Later, members of the same research group variously described “disqualification” as incongruent qualification of a message (Haley, 1959a); incongruence between levels of messages (Haley, 1959b); a contradictory message (Jackson, Riskin, & Satir, 1961); or an indirect negation of what someone else has said, so that statements are not really met (Jackson & Weakland, 1961). Other definitions of disqualification include: not letting a message stand clearly and unambiguously (Weakland & Fry, 1962); a technique that enables one to say something without really saying it (Watzlawick, 1964); and incongruent messages, that is, messages denying each other or, especially, the messages of another person (Sluzki, Beavin, Tarnopolsky, & Verón, 1967). Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) called disqualification communication that invalidates one’s own communication or that of the other, for example, “self-contradictions, inconsistencies, subject switches, tangentializations, incomplete sentences, misunderstandings, obscure style or mannerisms of speech . . . etc.” (p. 76). Such communications, they propose, are due not to individual pathology but to the social context in which the individual finds him- or herself.

Language philosophers have taken a similar position. Grice’s (1975) chapter is already a classic for his proposal that, in natural discourse, “illogical” communication is both common *and* understood by the participants. Our task, he proposed, is to understand how this happens. After Searle (1975) described “indirect speech acts,” Nofsinger (1976) developed the logic of indirect responses (e.g., “Do you want to help me with the dishes?” answered by “Do they like porcupines in a balloon factory?”). In a similar

vein, Bowers, Elliott, and Desmond (1977) analyzed "devious messages" that do not fulfill semantic demands but work pragmatically (i.e., between users). They went on to outline a class of circumstances that produce such messages.

In social psychology, Wiener and Mehrabian (1968) have described "non-immediacy" in verbal communication, noting that indirect language often serves to remove the user from the object of communication. They also presented experimental evidence that situationally induced negative affect is one factor that will increase non-immediacy in the language describing that situation. This is not, however, typical of the social psychological approach. When faced with incongruent or contradictory messages, social psychologists have usually sought to establish which was the "real" message. In doing so, they are implicitly eliminating the inconsistency by attributing it to unsuccessful deception (e.g., DePaulo & Rosenthal, 1979; Ekman & Friesen, 1969, 1974; Mehrabian & Ferris, 1967).

Theory and Measurement of Disqualification

It is indeed tempting to seek the cause of disqualified messages in the sender, to attribute such "poor" or "unsuccessful" messages to pathology, inability to communicate clearly, some furtive or evasive intention, or just plain error. The theory proposed here suggests that instead of concentrating on intrapsychic causes, we should examine the social situation in which such a message is generated. The consensus of the diverse authors reviewed above can be stated as two broad propositions: (1) There is a standard of direct and clear communication, which is often observed to be violated, and (2) such deviations are explicable in terms of the social context of the message.

We have translated the first proposition into an operational definition using Haley's (1959a) original analysis of disqualification. The second proposition was made specific enough to test by use of Lewin's (1938) conflict model. This model, which was suggested by Tamara Dembo's insightful comments (personal communication, March, 1978) on our early work, will be described first.

A Field-Theoretical Account of Disqualification

Lewin's is an interactionist theory (cf., Ekehammar, 1974), a phenomenological explanation of individual behavior in terms of the social situation or "field" in which it occurs. Lewin often used analogies to physical space and movement, and these can be extended to communicative behavior as well. A situation offers us a choice of possible messages. Some of these can be seen as direct routes—clear messages, conforming to a standard "path." Others are indirect routes, departing to some degree from a direct message. It is interesting that our colloquial terms use the same metaphor: Such messages

are not "straightforward" and "direct," but "tangential," "evasive," or "waffling" (probably from "waff" or "waver").

Why would messages ever stray from the straightforward, other than by an error or inability of the sender? To explain this, a second Lewinian concept must be added. If a message is a vector, then its probable effect gives it a *valence*; it is a good or bad thing to say, in the sender's view. For example, most people feel that it is good to pay a sincere compliment, and that it is bad to say something unkind or dishonest. Furthermore, both positive and negative valences show a *goal gradient*, that is, the closer they are, the greater their force on the individual. A positive valence becomes more attractive as it is approached, but a negative valence becomes even more repellent. Obviously, then, messages with positive consequences will be chosen, while those with negative valences will be avoided.

If the situation offers more than one message, all positive, this is an approach-approach conflict. As the individual moves, even randomly, toward any of the choices, it must (according to the model) become more attractive than the others and will quickly be chosen. Thus, such conflicts should be easily resolved. When the alternatives are all negative, this is an avoidance-avoidance conflict, and the same model predicts quite a different outcome: A move in any direction becomes *more* negative, while the alternatives left behind become less so. However, a reversal has the same result so that the individual is trapped—unless it is possible to "leave the field," that is, to avoid all of the negative choices. Thus, if communication is required but all possible messages are negative, they will be avoided and a deflected message will be sent instead, one that "says nothing while saying something, or says something without really saying it."¹

The Empirical Measurement of Disqualification

Having applied Lewin's theory to communicative behavior, it still remains to place our notion of disqualification in the same theoretical framework. To do this, it is necessary to have a more precise description of what it means for a message to be direct, as a standard by which to measure deflections. Haley (1959a) pointed out that all communication should contain, implicitly or explicitly, four formal elements: *I am saying this to you in this situation*. In other words, there must be a sender, some content, a receiver, and a context. Haley went on to point out that disqualified messages are those that render one or more of these basic aspects unclear.

Here, then, is a standard from which disqualified messages can be seen to depart. We can visualize these four aspects as the coordinates of a target, the

¹Note that such a message should not only be more indirect but should be preceded by a longer latency time than a response to an approach-approach conflict. Evidence for this will be offered below.

center of which is achieved by perfectly direct communication. Other messages avoid this directness, moving off one or more of the dimensions and missing the direct target, because of the consequences.

These four dimensions of directness can be measured by asking the following questions about any message:

1. How clear is this message, in terms of just *what is being said*?
(Content)
2. To what extent is this message the *writer's* (or *speaker's*) *own opinion*?
(Sender)
3. To what extent is this message *addressed to the other person* in the situation? (Receiver)
4. To what extent is this a *direct answer to the* (implicit or explicit preceding) *question*? (Context)

For example, recall B's thank-you note (message 2):

Yes I received your gift. They say a person gives what he would like to receive. Hopefully one day I'll be able to return the favor some way or another. Have a nice day.

This message is unclear in content because the sentences do not hold together well and because of its possible double meanings. It avoids giving the sender's opinion by use of "*They say . . .*" It refers very little to the friend who sent the gift and, indeed, after the first sentence seems to be addressed to anyone in general. Finally, it obviously changes context by answering a different question to the one that was asked.

We are assuming that, whether or not these four dimensions are truly the essential ones, they will act as a "filter," in that all nuances of disqualification will be drawn to our attention by one or more of them. They will be sensitive to departures from direct communication.

In our procedure, which is described in further detail in Bavelas and Smith (1982), eight to twelve individual lay judges learn to scale sets of messages on these four dimensions, using a magnitude estimation procedure. When each individual's ratings are standardized and averaged with those of the other judges, these scores are highly reliable. For example, five successive groups of judges had a median intraclass correlation of .96 on test sets, and the median r between groups was .95. Since the averaged standard scores still remain essentially Z scores, they have a mean of zero, with higher (positive) values indicating disqualification and lower (negative) values indicating directness. To illustrate, the message above has the following scale values:

<i>Content</i>	<i>Sender</i>	<i>Receiver</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Sum</i>
.29	1.02	.55	1.53	3.39

whereas the values for message 1 ("Thank you so much for the terrific gift . . .") are:

-.77	-.88	-.14	-.71	-2.50
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This method of scaling was first applied to brief, researcher-written messages, then adapted to those generated spontaneously by our subjects. These include written notes (such as messages 1 and 2), spoken messages (with both verbal and paralinguistic aspects, such as 3 and 4), and face-to-face messages (in which all verbal and nonverbal behavior is captured on videotape). All of these adaptations have gone smoothly; subsequent small groups of lay judges working individually continue to give us reliable and subtle empirical information about the extent of disqualification in a given message. This method is costly, in both the judges' and the supervising experimenter's time, but we remain convinced that these disadvantages are outweighed by the advantages of truly independent and well-focused judgments of each message. Furthermore, these judgments reveal the pragmatic impact of messages on naive receivers, rather than properties of the messages that may only be noticeable to experts.

Experimental Research

All of the experiments to be described here have tested simultaneously both the theoretical model outlined above and the construct validity of the measurement procedure (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Our experimental strategy is one of increasingly varied replication, moving along a hypothetical continuum from strict experimental control to more "natural" communication by a series of experiments that partly overlap and partly extend their predecessors. From forced-choice to subject-written to subject-spoken to in-person messages, some of the same and some different situations have been used to explore our hypotheses about the situational antecedents of disqualified messages.

Forced-Choice Experiments

Our first five experiments (cf. Bavelas, 1983) were focused principally on the nature of situations that lead to disqualification rather than on the messages themselves. We therefore used a forced-choice format, in which subjects were asked to imagine a situation and to choose from among the three or four possible replies offered. These replies were written by the researchers and intended to cover all of the possibilities in the situation, including the truth, a lie, and disqualification. Obviously, this is a highly artificial method; yet it can be argued (Bavelas, 1983, p. 133) that all effects of this artificiality would tend to go against our hypothesis.

The first experiment sought to establish whether or not normal subjects would ever choose disqualified responses; to show that the effects were general across situations; and to explore the effects of different instructions on choice of response. We presented avoidance-avoidance conflicts in three different situations: (1) A classmate has just given a very poor presentation and then

asks for an opinion, producing a conflict between lying and hurting another's feelings. (2) Someone well-liked has sent a gift that is awful, creating a similar conflict between lying and hurting the person. (3) One friend asks for a job reference about other friend, who worked for you and was incompetent; the conflict is between lying to the former and injuring the latter. In all three situations, we also varied whether the subject was instructed to choose what he or she *would* say versus what he or she *should* say. All possible orders of alternatives were used.

The procedure was as follows: The various combinations of situation, instruction, and order were printed on single sheets of paper, which were randomly permuted and distributed in large classes. Each sheet began as follows:

Try to imagine the situation described below, as vividly as possible. Then read all the choices and indicate *which you would write* in this situation.

Remember . . . (1) Try to really put yourself in the situation, and also (2) limit yourself to just the choices given. (3) We are not interested in what you think you *should* say, but in what you think you actually *would* say.

The other instruction reversed point 3 and asked for what the person *should* say. One of three situations followed, for example, the "class" situation:

Another student in a small class, which meets three times a week for the entire year, has just given a class presentation. It was very badly done—poorly prepared and poorly delivered. After he sits down again, he passes you a note: "How did I do?" You have to jot something down and pass it back to him. Which of the following would you write down?

The alternatives given are shown in Table 11-1, along with their scale values and the frequency with which each was chosen.

Similarly, in the gift and reference situations and in both instructional conditions, the frequency with which a message was chosen varied almost perfectly with the amount of scaled disqualification in the message. This simple experiment eliminated several previously "obvious" possibilities: that subjects would choose randomly; that they would rarely choose disqualified messages; that they would choose either the truth or an equally direct lie; and that there would be a difference between what people said they should or would do.

Indeed, since 90% of our 287 subjects chose a message with a positive summed scale value, two unwelcome alternative explanations now suggested themselves. It might be that people rarely communicate directly, regardless of situation, or that our scaling procedure did not in fact measure disqualification. Therefore, our next experiment introduced a control condition in which no conflict was present (i.e., the class presentation was good or the gift was well liked). Using the same procedure, we found that the disqualified message was overwhelmingly but specifically chosen in the conflict situation. When there was no conflict, the straightforward messages were chosen.

However, it could still be argued that no elaborate theory of conflict is

Table 11-1. Amount of Disqualification and Frequency of Choice ("Class" Situation)

Message	Disqualification scale values ^a				f
	Content	Sender	Receiver	Context	
You did very well. I really liked it.	-.35	-.78	-.38	-.63	3
You were terrible; bad job.	-.50	.10	-.32	-.58	5
Not well, but don't feel bad about it.	1.02	1.24	.79	-.21	48
You were braver than I would be!	.02	-.56	-.09	1.42	39

^aThese are standardized scores for the four dimensions of disqualification, as described in the text. Negative values mean that the message is relatively straightforward on that dimension, while positive values indicate disqualification.

Note. Table adapted from Bavelas (1983). Published by permission of Transaction, Inc. from *Human Communication Research*, Vol. 9, No. 4, copyright © 1983 by Transaction, Inc.

necessary to explain disqualification. Conflict is necessarily unpleasant, and it would be more parsimonious to conclude that *any* simply unpleasant situation leads to indirect communication (i.e., the sender loses control to some degree and is unable to communicate directly). Therefore, unpleasant but nonconflictual versions of the gift and class situations were created. The subject was to imagine having just done very poorly on his or her own presentation, while the person asking had done well; or having forgotten to send a present to the other person, who had sent a welcome gift. Note that in these control versions, the individual might feel miserable, but there is no communicational conflict about lying or hurting the other's feelings. These unpleasant, nonconflictual versions were rated as equally or more unpleasant than the conflictual versions (in which, for example, he or she had done well but the other poorly), yet disqualified messages were rarely chosen. It seems that conflict, and only conflict, leads to disqualification.

Recall that Lewin's theory distinguishes between different kinds of conflict, so that an even more precise test is possible. We had thus far presented avoidance-avoidance conflicts, where all direct messages were negative. So we introduced an *approach-approach* conflict, in which a choice must be made between pleasant but mutually exclusive messages. For example:

Someone you work with arrives at a staff meeting. She is wearing a new dress and also has a new hairstyle. Both are great—she really looks good. She sits down next to you and passes you a note: "How do I look?" You are going to write a note and pass it back to her. Of the choices below, which would you write?

I think your dress is really nice.
I think your hair looks great that way.
You've changed!

In the *avoidance-avoidance* version, the dress and hair both look awful, and the first two alternatives say so; the third alternative was the same as in the approach-approach conflict. In this and a second situation, the disqualified alternative was the predominant choice in the avoidance-avoidance conflict but was seldom chosen in the approach-approach conflict; see Table 11-2 for sample results.

In this series of five forced-choice experiments offering 30 different messages, those scaled as highly disqualified were chosen specifically in avoidance-avoidance conflicts. It is important to emphasize that, although disqualified, these are not "poor" messages. Each is the best choice in a bad situation; lying is worse, as is injuring someone needlessly. Indeed, Turner, Edgley, and Olmstead (1975) point out that a hurtful truth to a person one cares about is a relationship lie: "Is it honest to tell someone a truth that would sever or greatly jeopardize your relationship with a person if that is honestly not what you want to do? . . . In other words, being truthful and honest at all times may have consequences which are neither truthful nor honest . . . (p. 83).

Table 11-2. Frequencies of Choice in Approach-Approach vs. Avoidance-Avoidance Conflicts ("Staff" Situation)

Message	Disqualification Scale Values ^a				f^b	
	Content	Sender	Receiver	Context	Sum	+/-
I think your hair looks great that way. OR I don't think your hair looks good that way.	-.56	-.47	.03	-.61	-1.61	26 5
I think your dress is really nice. OR I don't think your dress suits you.	-.53	-.47	-.94	-.36	-2.30	6 4
You've changed!	1.09	.92	.91	.97	3.89	8 31

^aScale values for the approach and avoidance versions of messages were virtually identical and are averaged here.

^bFrequencies of choice in approach-approach (+/+) vs. avoidance-avoidance (-/-) versions. Chi-square for the first two versus the third (disqualified) message = 26.47, $df = 1$, $p < .001$.

Note. Table adapted from Bavelas (1983). Published by permission of Transaction, Inc. from *Human Communication Research*, Vol. 9, No. 4, copyright © 1983 by Transaction, Inc.

Since the disqualified messages avoid both untruths, they should be seen as a good solution to a difficult problem.

Subject-Written Messages

The next series of experiments (Bavelas & Chovil, in press) focused on *how* subjects solved these problems, that is, on messages actually written by them rather than chosen from ones written by us. It might be that people choose disqualified messages when they are offered but would never think to write them spontaneously. If so, our theory would have a very limited scope. Moreover, we were curious about these messages—what would they be like, and would the scaling method detect differences among them?

Consequently, we presented conflict (and control) situations to subjects and asked them to write a brief response. Four different situations were used: (1) A note to be written to a fellow student following a bad (vs. good) class presentation. (2) A telegram to be sent by the subject in the role of a Member of Parliament who must address an issue on which his or her constituency is badly divided (vs. completely in agreement); the conflict is to avoid alienating one side or the other. (3) A thank-you note to be written to a friend who has sent a gift so bizarre that it is unclear whether or not it is intended as a joke (vs. welcome and well-suited); the conflict is whether to treat the gift as serious or as a joke, either of which may be wrong and therefore offensive. (4) A car ad to be written for a car that must be sold but is in bad (vs. good) condition; the conflict is between lying and betraying one's own self-interest.

These four experiments were conducted successively, with a total of 70 subjects seen individually, randomly assigned to the conflict or control situation. All messages from each situation were given to judges to scale, with no indication of the experimental condition under which they were written.

For example, 18 subjects were individually given the following written instructions by an experimenter (who did not know which condition was contained therein):

Try to imagine the situation described below as vividly as possible. Please write your actual reply in the space provided.

Remember . . . (1) Try to place yourself in the situation. (2) We do not want what you think is the "proper" reply, instead we would like your own *actual* response.

Your car, a 1966 Volkswagen Bug, is in bad (or good) condition but you need to sell it because you are really short of money. Write the ad for the newspaper describing the general running condition of the car. (Three lines were provided for the ad.)

These 18 messages, retyped exactly as written and arranged in random order, were scaled by the judges, who were given an edited version of the situation and question so that they had no idea that the messages came from two different conditions. These messages are presented in Table 11-3, along with scale values and *t*-tests of the differences between the two conditions. The two sets of messages differed significantly on all four dimensions and their

Table 11-3. Subject-Written Messages and Their Scale Values ("Car Ad" Situation)

	Content	Sender	Receiver	Context	Sum
<p><i>Nonconflict condition</i></p> <p>MUST SELL: 1966 V.W. BUG. EXCELLENT CONDITION RUNS GREAT. ONLY 5000 MILES ON IT. BEST DEAL IN THE CITY! PLEASE PHONE SOON—THIS DREAM WILL GO FAST!</p>	-.60	-.48	-.59	-.62	-2.29
<p>For Sale! 1966 Volkswagen Bug in good operating condition. Any reasonable offer. Please phone xxx-xxxx</p>	-.67	.03	-.85	-.77	-2.26
<p>1966 VW—good running condition, new brakes, new tires OFFERS—PHONE 321-1234 after 5 p.m.</p>	-.67	.51	-1.00	-1.03	-2.19
<p>have to sell my good old buddy '66 VW Bug. Excellent runner, good mileage and good bargain!!</p>	.19	-1.26	-.60	-.48	-2.15
<p>Must sell 1966 VW Bug, good running condition, very good on gas. No reasonable offer will be refused.</p>	-.20	-.04	-.50	-.90	-1.64
<p>VOLKSWAGEN FOR SALE BODY AND ENGINE IN GOOD CONDITION. ONE OWNER, MUST SELL BEFORE DEC 15 PHONE _____ ASK FOR MARK</p>	-.16	-.35	-.64	-.39	-1.54
<p>For Sale—66 VW Bug, good condition, lady driven, must be sold quickly, asking about \$800 cash, good mileage on highways</p>	-.73	-.17	-.02	-.24	-1.16

FOR SALE 66, VOLKSWAGON BEETLE
GOOD RUNNING CONDITION EASY
ON GAS IDEAL SECOND CAR

Bargain! Student needs to sell much loved
VW. This 1966 Bug is a great old car. Perfect
for a mechanical tinkerer.

Conflict condition

For sale a 1966 V-W bug in excellent running
condition. Price is right for an egar (sic) buyer
in need of transportation.

For sale: 1966 Volkswagen Bug, in running
order, but would need some minor repairs.

For sale a 1966 Volkswagen bug, it is in poor
running condition, but just needs some tender
loving care and a mechanic (sic) mind.

1966 Volks Bug—student must sell to survive
summer, needs some body work, but
mechanically o.k.

Want to sell 1966 Bug, good body but some
engine trouble—needs work.

VW Beetle, 1966. Needs work. \$500.
592-1626 after 5:30 p.m.

1966 VOLKSWAGEN BUG AS IS
QUICK SALE FOR CASH
PHONE _____

-.65	.08	.63	-1.02	-.96
.60	-.96	.75	1.17	1.56
.22	.16	-.37	-.84	-.83
.05	.69	.09	-.15	.68
.46	.19	.92	-.72	.85
.55	-.39	.35	.50	1.01
.06	.40	.36	.28	1.1
-.58	.67	-.01	1.33	1.41
.92	.76	-.87	1.87	2.68

Table 11-3. *Continued*

	Content	Sender	Receiver	Context	Sum
MECHANIC'S DREAM—1966 Volkswagen—best year of the bug—however needs some bugs removed by caring mechanic. Sacrifice at \$2500.xx.	.47	.13	1.41	.73	2.74
FOR SALE 1966 VOLKSWAGEN. VERY CHEAP. PERSON WHO LIKES WORKING ON CARS WOULD BE WISE TO BUY THIS CAR.	.74	.03	.95	1.28	3
<i>t</i> -tests	nonconflict \bar{x} = conflict \bar{x} = t = (one-tailed) p <	-.32 .32 2.98 .01	-.31 .31 1.99 .05	-.48 .48 2.47 .025	-1.40 1.40 4.88 .0005

Note regarding means:

The conflict and nonconflict means are often "mirror images" with signs reversed, as above. This apparent coincidence arises because the message scores are standardized for each judge, then averaged across judges. Since judge agreement is very high, averaging leaves them as a set of standard scores which usually add to zero. When this is true, any partition into halves will produce means that add to zero.

sum. Thus, although each message is different, and the subjects often invented details not supplied to them, the property of disqualification can be measured in each, and this measurement shows the predicted difference between conditions. Note that all but one message in the control condition had negative sums, and all but one in the conflict condition had positive sums.

The disqualified messages are ingenious and systematic ways of neither admitting the car's real condition nor clearly misleading the prospective buyer. In each case, the sender could if challenged say that he or she had not actually said the car was in good condition. It is interesting that the message closest to a direct lie (the first of the conflict-condition group) is fairly clear, having a low negative sum. Even so, the second sentence gives a hint that is inconsistent with the first, which is why the value on the content dimension is positive. A perfect lie should be perfectly clear.

The control messages give a baseline of the amount of clarity that can be expected in this format. Compared to these, the ones with high (positive) values on the *content* dimension are ambiguous ("as is") or contradictory (e.g., containing "but" or "however"). Those low on the *sender* dimension contain some personal reference ("my good old buddy"), whereas the high ones avoid this and seem to stand at arm's length from their own statement ("Needs work"). (In other situations, where the format permits fuller expression, a key difference on the sender dimension is the presence or absence of a first-person pronoun.) The *receiver* dimension revealed an unexpected tactic by which the writer narrowed the implicit audience of "anyone reading car ads" to a "mechanic" or "a person who likes working on cars." Finally, the stipulated context of the ad is often avoided in that the general running condition of the car is not described, and other questions are answered instead ("very cheap," "good body").

In all four experiments, the differences on each dimension (and the sum) were in the predicted direction. This difference was always significant for the context dimension, usually significant for the content dimension, and occasionally for the sender and receiver dimensions. (This apparent priority of dimensions has been consistent in all of our subject-generated messages.) By whatever means, these messages managed to steer a careful course away from either outright fraud or full revelation. Indeed, they were much richer and more imaginative than those we had written and offered to subjects in the first series.

Subject-Spoken Messages²

By now we were eager to see (and hear) what the addition of a nonverbal channel would do. Not only would the theory be extended further toward

²These and the face-to-face experiments will be described in a forthcoming article by J. B. Bavelas, N. Chovil, J. Mullett, and A. Black, provisionally entitled "Truths, lies, and alternatives: Disqualification in verbal and nonverbal channels."

naturalistic situations, but new ways to disqualify would be available in paralinguistic tone, stress, fluency, etc. Furthermore, these may or may not be congruent with the verbal component of the message.

So the next three experiments were similar to those above but were conducted "live" over a telephone connection, with an experimenter in another room. The situations used were two of the old standbys, the class presentation and the bizarre gift, plus a new one (suggested by an earlier subject during debriefing), which will be described here. There were always two experimenters, only one of whom was seen in person by the subject. This experimenter gave the following instructions:

What you will be doing is having a telephone conversation with another person. The other person is next door in the other room. This conversation will be recorded.

Imagine that you work in a grocery store, and you know that Tuesday is the day they sell off all the old meat at a reduced price. Some of it is very old and of poor quality (*or, in the control condition*, This is just to make sure it doesn't accumulate; it is all fresh and good quality meat).

On this particular Tuesday, the telephone rings. You answer it, and it is someone who saw the sale of the meat at a reduced price advertised in the newspaper. They have never shopped at your store, so they have called to get some information before coming to the store.

Try to keep your response brief. When I leave the room, imagine that the phone has just rung, pick up the receiver, and say "Hello." The other person will be on the line.

When the subject had said Hello, the other experimenter said:

"Hello, I've never been to your store before, and I was wondering, the meat that is on sale today, is it good?"

The subjects' replies were transferred to a master tape in random order and scaled by the judges as usual. Transcriptions, scale values, and *t*-tests are given in Table 11-4.

All subjects in the conflict condition reported that they had felt "on the spot"; this was reflected in significant differences in disqualification in both content and context, as well as in the sum. The extent to which subjects put themselves into this situation is noteworthy. As the messages show, they often added their own details and new information. Furthermore, subjects in the conflict condition acted as though their bind were real: They were not really employees torn between honesty to a stranger and loyalty to an employer (or the risk of losing a job). Yet none were totally truthful *or* deceptive. All statements about the quality of the meat were highly ambiguous verbally ("It's fairly fine," "It's the usual") and/or nonverbally (e.g., the paralinguistic hesitancy in the third and fifth messages in the conflict group in Table 11-4).

Furthermore, this experiment was conducted in tandem with the bizarre-gift situation, using the same 12 subjects but with the conditions reversed. A subject who had been randomly assigned to the control condition for the gift inquiry was then presented with the conflict condition in the meat market, and vice versa. Yet both experiments showed strongly significant effects. This

virtually eliminates any explanation other than the immediate situation, because the clear and straightforward messages given in the control condition in Table 11-4 were generated by the same people who had given messages significantly disqualified on every dimension just a few minutes earlier. (Messages 3 and 4 at the beginning of the chapter are samples of control and conflict messages in this gift situation.)

All of the above experiments had used the device of telling subjects about a situation in which something was said to be good or bad (e.g., some meat, a gift, a car, a presentation, or an employee). The subjects had not merely repeated back what they were told, but had generated their own unique messages. Still, "in real life," information about which we must respond does not usually come to us already encoded. Therefore we next presented subjects with uncoded information from which they had to draw their own inferences, including the fact that a conflict existed. For example, one of these two experiments revived the employee reference situation, in which the subject in the role of a personnel officer is asked by a friend for a reference about another friend. The subject was given an "Employee Reference Form" with a mixture of either excellent and good or borderline and poor ratings on 13 items such as "knowledge of job" and "attitude toward supervisor." The other situation gave detailed information about the car to be sold. Both situations produced significant differences as predicted. Subjects had apparently inferred their bind and "escaped" it by disqualification.

Finally, spoken messages offer the opportunity to test another prediction from Lewin's conflict theory, namely, that avoidance-avoidance conflicts will take longer to resolve. The latency between the question asked and the message given in reply should be longer in these situations, presumably because the subject is approaching—and then avoiding—the various alternatives. In these five experiments involving a total of 48 subjects, the mean latency time was always longer for the conflict than for the control conditions; this difference was significant in three of the experiments. These means are less than 1 second in the control versus 1½ to 3 seconds in the conflict conditions. Although such latencies may be the closest we can come to observing the psychological process that Lewin proposed, some caution is needed in interpreting them. They are perfectly consistent with a conflict theory, but they do not establish it exclusively. A less intrapsychic interpretation would be that such pauses are simply another paralinguistic aspect of the message contributing to its ambiguity, especially on the sender dimension. Certainly our judges noticed these hesitations and saw the messages as less clear in part because of them.

Face-to-Face Messages

We have recently begun the extension of this research to face-to-face interaction in which all verbal and nonverbal channels are available. Such messages (on videotape) can be reliably scaled by judges (by now our eighth

Table 11-4. Subject-Spoken Messages and Their Scale Values ("Meat Market" Situation)

	Content	Sender	Receiver	Context	Sum
<i>Nonconflict condition</i>					
It's good quality meat, yes.	-1.35	-.47	-.37	-1.09	-3.28
It sure is, it's top-grade A meat.	-1.02	-.64	.47	-1.15	-2.34
Yes, it's very good quality.	-.20	-.68	.29	-1.15	-1.74
[We] wouldn't be selling bad meat, you'd only bring it back.	-.92	.68	-1.26	.02	-1.48
Oh yes, it's all very fresh. We just put it on sale to reduce inventory.	-.11	.31	-.53	-.52	-.85
Um, I can be ... be reasonably assured that it's good. I haven't had any fault with ... with the meat there before. If you ... if you find something, um, has gone bad like the chicken, ah, it can be exchanged.	-.65	-.57	.71	-.03	-.54
<i>Conflict condition</i>					
I think it's quite good, yes, for the price.	.66	-1.09	.59	-.11	.05
Well, it is on sale because it has been in the store for awhile but that doesn't mean that it's bad.	.09	.15	-.42	.31	.13

I, well, yes it is good meat, the, ah, I uh... I'd like you to realize though that it... ah, is day-old meat or older so that it may not have some of the color that, uh, the meat that you would find cut freshly today... so and it's, um, not top-quality meat, it's... There's nothing wrong with the meat but it's not your, um, cross your standing rib roast or your sirloin steaks that are on sale but it's all, um... there's nothing at all wrong with it, but the color may have gone out of it.	.36	.49	-.71	.77	.91
Oh, it's, it's fairly fine, yes.	1.07	.10	1.02	.41	2.6
Um... ah, the reason why they're selling is because it's, um, it's a little bit old.	.65	1.43	.15	1.29	3.52
It's the usual.	1.43	.27	.99	1.25	3.94
<i>t</i> -tests					
nonconflict \bar{x} =	-.71	-.23	-.12	-.65	-1.71
conflict \bar{x} =	.71	.23	.27	.65	1.86
<i>t</i> =	5.08	1.12	.91	4.08	4.38
(one-tailed) <i>p</i> <	.0005	n.s.	n.s.	.005	.005

group since the beginning of the project). Our first experiments using this technique were also successful: When an experimenter playing the role of a fellow student asked in person how her class presentation had been, subjects in the conflict condition produced messages that were significantly more disqualified on all four dimensions (and their sum) than those in the control condition. If this effect replicates across other situations, as has been true of the previous series, then the whole will form a coherent pattern of evidence for our theory.

Conclusions

These final “visual” experiments will be the last variation on the basic paradigm used so far, in which normal adult subjects have solved hypothetical situational conflicts by disqualified messages. We have shown that such messages can be elicited even in experimental conditions and that the eliciting situation is a good explanation—and predictor—of such messages. When the situation presents only messages that are negatively valenced yet communication is required, the sender will “leave the field,” at least communicationally, by avoiding direct communication. This avoidance can be measured as disqualification, which amounts to “saying nothing while saying something.”

Current and Future Research

For the remainder of the project, three major new lines will be developed. First, Jennifer Mullett is obtaining spoken messages from children in order to study the development of their ability to disqualify (as well as to perceive the interpersonal conflict in a situation). We suspect that children are much more skillful communicators in these situations than their popular image of tactlessness would imply. There is an important theoretical issue involved here: Linguists and psychologists have tended to see language acquisition as a purely cognitive process, whereas it is surely manifest and functional almost entirely in social situations (see Chapter 2 by Bruner in this volume). Children must learn not only to represent such situations by language but also to *solve* them by their speech acts.

Returning to adults, a second interest is the relation of this model to the nonverbal “leakage” model that dominates deception research (e.g., Ekman & Friesen, 1969). These models vary in two significant respects. Deception research classifies messages dichotomously, as “truth” or “lying” with no alternative such as disqualification. It is assumed that people intend to lie, but that the truth is revealed by nonverbal leakage. In contrast, we do not see disqualified messages as “leaky” versions of a lie but rather assume that the message sent is the one intended—an inseparable package delivered on all channels, with none having priority over, or less control than, any other. Our

evidence to date implicitly supports this interpretation. In the forced-choice experiments, subjects chose not to lie. In the written-message experiments, subjects had the full control of a purely verbal channel and, again, disqualified in preference to lying. Furthermore, disqualification occurs equally across channels; the transcribed verbal portions of our spoken and visual messages are not lies but disqualifications. Another problem with most deception research is its inattentiveness to the situations in which the messages are elicited. These are highly varied and questionably comparable (cf. Knapp & Comadena, 1979), and since the messages themselves are seldom reported, it is impossible to connect the actual language and the social situation with any precision.

Finally, we are beginning to gather naturally occurring messages in order to show that the theory extends past hypothetical situations in the lab. Rather than creating avoidance-avoidance conflicts by the use of confederates and deceptive experiments, we are looking around for actual instances of such conflicts, and their communicative sequelae. For example, televised political campaigns and real letters of reference are promising possibilities. The problem will not be finding disqualifications; it will be the methodological problem of making the same firm connection between situation and communication as has been possible in the experimental work to date.

Implications

If we step back from this particular project and phenomenon, what are the broader implications for the study of language and discourse, especially in natural settings?

First, language is a precise interpersonal act. The messages we call disqualified initially appear to be vague or faulty communication, to be dismissed or reinterpreted. Yet they are systematic and lawful, in two senses: Their "nonstraightforwardness" can be measured with precision and can be shown to vary with specific changes in the situation. We believe that the same is true for many aspects of natural language that at first appear to be careless, impenetrable, even nonsensical versions of what "should" have been said: the politician's double-speak, the militarist's euphemisms ("preventative retaliation"), the mental patient's verbal symptoms, or the amiable meaninglessness of polite conversation. We should resist glossings or inferences that assume that a different (better) message was intended and focus instead on the actual message.

Second, that focus should also include the situation, as the inescapable context that shapes our language, the context in which it is embedded and therefore best understood. This position is different from (but not incompatible with) a purely cognitive approach. In the latter, language is seen as the mirror of thought, as a representation of the situation, but not part of it. We would add that the language used is an integral part of the situation as well. It is elicited by, reactive to, and aimed at affecting the situation. Thus, especially

when natural language is studied, because the situation is not of our making nor in our control, its particulars must be recorded along with the language of interest. As noted above, the situational and cognitive approaches are not mutually exclusive, so long as the analysis does not isolate language from its social context or abstract it from its uses and users.

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