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Nonverbal and social aspects of discourse in face-to-face interaction

JANET BEAVIN BAVELAS

The smallest possible unit is not necessarily the appropriate unit for understanding complex phenomena. In linguistics, the shift to discourse was, at least in part, an escape from the confines of traditional linguistic units to larger units of study. These larger units were dictated by the nature of the phenomena of interest: text, monologue, or even dialogue. It is dialogue that brought some of us from social psychology and communication research to join in the enterprise called discourse analysis.

Here, I would like to consider two implications of the study of dialogue in face-to-face interaction for discourse analysis more generally. Both involve even further changes in traditional units of analysis: (1) to include *nonverbal*, as well as verbal, aspects of language and (2) to treat language in face-to-face interaction as *social* as well as cognitive. These two changes will be discussed separately below.

Even advocates of the study of nonverbal communication have treated it as a system separate from words — moreover as less precise and articulate, more global, more emotional, and less well controlled. Because of this bias, many of us welcomed McNeill's (1985) persuasive arguments that language does not equal speech alone, and many nonverbal actions, such as gestures made while speaking, function as part of language. Similarly, Chovil (1989) has shown numerous syntactic and semantic functions of facial expressions in conversation.

It is beginning to be obvious that face-to-face communication cannot be studied adequately through transcriptions of only the words (even words annotated paralinguistically, with stress and intonation). In these settings, what each individual 'said' is both auditory and visual. Especially the gestures and facial expressions, but also many of the head, body, and eye movements must be included, not as separate channels but as part of a precisely integrated whole. The participants use all of these actions together; we separate them analytically at our own risk. Perhaps we do so because (we believe) we have transcription systems for words but not for other aspects of performance, when in reality, we have only conventions

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for removing words from the context in which they were embedded. Even if verbal transcription were a good approximation, specialists should not be satisfied with approximations. If the tools do not exist, it is we who should be developing them.

(This is definitely not to say that discourse is only valid if it has nonverbal aspects. Written language is an established 'dialect' for literate populations, and it may be very useful for many purposes to elicit or to study only written discourse. My point is that we must maintain the integrity of the message in whatever form it occurs.)

While I believe that we have no choice but to study nonverbal aspects of language when they are present, my second change of unit is a matter of choice. We can study the individual as the producer or comprehender of language *or* we can study the dyad[1] as a social system in which dialogue occurs. However, we cannot study the individual in order to understand language as a social process any more than we can extrapolate from the geology of a planet or star to the gravitational field of a solar system. Just as the gravitational field between planets or stars is conceptually a completely different entity, so the 'field between' two individuals is different from the separate individuals (cf. Deutsch, 1968:413).

Yet it seems self-evident to many discourse analysts (and even more so to psychologists) that the individual must be the ultimate explanatory unit. The reasoning seems irrefutable: If we understand language production and comprehension in individuals, then we will understand dialogue, which is merely two individuals alternately producing and comprehending. One plus one equals two in the arithmetic of reductionism. Yet, as the Gestalt psychologists pointed out, it is sometimes the case that the whole is different from the sum of its parts. The whole, in this case, is the social framework within which language is generated.

As Parliamentary rules constrain and organize the nature of debate in that formal setting, so there are informal patterns that organize conversational dialogue. We already know some of these dialogical phenomena: orderly turn-taking (for example, Duncan, 1972); the creation of a joint frame ('ground rules') for collective narrative (for example, Edwards and Middleton, 1986); convergence of speech parameters such as pitch, volume, and rate (for example, Street, 1984); the generation and use of personal idiom (for example, Hopper, Knapp, and Scott, 1981); and the maintenance of topic-to-topic coherence by the dyad as a social system (Black, 1988). None of these phenomena can be understood monadically. Developmentally, Bruner (1985) proposed that social interaction is the scaffold on which (verbal) language acquisition is built. Rosenthal (1982) showed that, in infants only a few days old, the

onset and offset of vocalization for both infant and mother were interdependent; vocalization was predictable by dyadic, not individual, parameters.

It is worth examining the reasoning behind the traditional assumption that such social processes can (and, indeed, must) ultimately be explained by processes within the participants, for it is this reasoning that makes individual psychological processes 'primary' and 'basic' and social processes 'secondary' or 'surface' phenomena. Surely it is not just the biological packaging. Rather, this often unquestioned division seems to depend on implicit assumptions about theory-building. One such assumption is parsimony: It is more parsimonious to explain social processes by existing individual processes than to add a new level of explanation. But parsimony does not require that ecologists explain their phenomena by the principles of cellular biologists; completely different phenomena can have their own explanations without being unparsimonious. A second implicit assumption reveals a bias for psychological explanations as causes: Systemic explanations (such as Rosenthal's or Black's, above) may be seen as 'mere descriptions' precisely because they do not invoke intrapsychic mechanisms. Is it really theoretically more acceptable to model inner processes than to model observed patterns of behavior? In other words, expanding our analyses to social units raises healthy and stimulating questions about what constitutes a theory.

Again, I should emphasize that I am not saying that all discourse must be explained in social terms. Just as phonetics did not disappear when language began to be studied as discourse, the individual processes of production and comprehension will still exist even when some of us choose to look at the concurrent social processes. It is simply that there are some aspects of conversation that arise from and are therefore best explained by factors external to the individual, by the social nature of dialogue.

In sum, I hope that one of the ways in which the field of discourse analysis will develop is the legitimization of other, even larger, units of study — including the nonverbal and the social aspects of dialogue — and the recognition that the choice is dictated only by what we want to understand.

Note

1. The dyad is used here as the minimum social unit. Obviously, face-to-face interaction can involve three or even many more individuals.

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Janet Beavin Bavelas is by training an experimental social psychologist, and her specialization is experimental research into interpersonal communication, that is, face-to-face interaction including both verbal and nonverbal aspects. Her research group has recently completed projects on equivocation (evasive, ambiguous, or indirect communication), motor mimicry (for example, wincing at someone else's injury), and nonverbal mirroring; see for example, Bavelas, Black, Chovil, and Mullett, *Equivocal Communication* (in press, Sage) and Bavelas, Black, Lemery, and Mullett, 'Motor mimicry as primitive empathy,' in Eisenberg & Strayer, *Empathy and its development* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

They are currently beginning a program of research on how gestures function to maintain the conversation as a system. Ultimately, they would like to sketch out the whole picture — the specialization and integration of function of verbal and nonverbal behaviors in conversation.

She is most known for a theory book now over 20 years old (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, *Pragmatics of human communication*, Norton, 1967). In the next few years, she is going to rewrite this theory in light of newer evidence.