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Participation

In order for human beings to coordinate their behavior with that of their coparticipants, in the midst of talk participants must display to one another what they are doing and how they expect others to align themselves towards the activity of the moment. Language and embodied action provide crucial resources for the achievement of such social order. The term *participation* refers to actions demonstrating forms of involvement performed by parties within evolving structures of talk. Within the scope of this essay the term is not being used to refer to more general membership in social groups or ritual activities.

When we foreground participation as an analytic concept we focus on the interactive work that *hearers* as well as *speakers* engage in. Speakers attend to hearers as active coparticipants and systematically modify their talk as it is emerging so as to take into account what their hearers are doing. Within the scope of a single utterance, speakers can adapt to the kind of engagement or disengagement their hearers display through constant adjustments of their bodies and talk. This is accomplished by speakers through such things as adding new segments to their emerging speech, escalating the pitch of their voices or the size of their gestures, changing their facing formations, or possibly abandoning their talk.

In his early statement concerning the components of speech acts, Dell Hymes argued that “participant” was perhaps the most critical dimension necessary for an adequate descriptive theory of ways of speaking; a focus on the individual speaker or at best a speaker-hearer dyad (as elaborated in information theory, linguistics, semiotics, literary criticism, and sociology), he argued, was inadequate. Notions of the inadequacy of traditional models of speaker-hearer role structure were further elaborated in Erving Goffman’s essay on “footing.” Goffman argued that in addition to the concepts of ratified or unrated participants (overhearers), we need to consider forms of “subordinate communication” across the principal talk on the floor—byplay, crossplay, and sideplay. The concept of “participation

framework" he proposed embraces the relationship, positioning, or total configuration of all participants to a gathering relative to a present speaker's talk.

Goffman treated participation (hearers' involvement) and speaker's "production" aspects of talk as separable features of conversational interaction. In critiquing traditional ways of considering speaker roles he argued that speakers not only portray events, but also animate characters and provide indications of their own alignment toward the events being recounted. Goffman's major concern was with the array of roles available to a *speaker* as *producer* of an utterance— animator, author, and principal for example. He was less engaged in providing descriptions of how hearers actively engage themselves as coparticipants in ongoing talk. Work on mutual monitoring describes the ways participants attend to talk through various sorts of assessments and non-vocal displays (headshakes that express awe at what the speaker is saying, nods that enthusiastically endorse the speaker's talk). Alternatively, hearers can also choose to distance themselves from the speaker's talk through displays of disattention, byplay, or heckling. Rather than constituting an internal, psychological process, evaluation and assessment are embedded within the kinds of participation that hearers and speakers engage in. The public, interactive dimension of this process is important for issues posed in the analysis of culture; by focusing on participation we can begin to investigate the interactive processes through which members of a social group come to view the world through a similar lens.

The concept of participation shifts the focus from the *structure* of speech activities to forms of *social organization* made possible through talk. Stories are often treated as artifacts that can be abstracted from their local circumstances and examined in terms of their internal features. By examining instead the participation structure within stories, I have analyzed how in the midst of disputes children can strategically invoke stories to rearrange their social organization. Disputes frequently take the form of reciprocal counters that restrict participation to two focal parties; each subsequent challenge selects prior speaker as next speaker and restricts participation to a dyad. However, in the midst of a dispute by introducing a story, a participant can invoke a new multi-party participation framework that provides positions within it for all those present; differentiated forms of hearers can provide their own evaluation of the events being related. A protagonist can create a visible multi-party consensus against his opponent as hearers use the participation displays available to the audience of a story to affiliate to his position.

The analysis of participation within activities makes it possible to view actors as not simply embedded within context, but as actively involved in the process of building context. Among the African American girls with whom I did fieldwork in Philadelphia, stories about the past, present, and hypothetical future are crucial tools for bringing about engagement in an elaborate political event involving the entire neighborhood—a gossip dispute that the girls in the group call "he-said-she-said." In constructing a story, a teller crafts her narrative in light of the current hearers and the

alignment of the audience members to figures in the story. Listener response to stories is critical to the ongoing development of the event.

Goffman's insights regarding participation have been useful for linguistic anthropologists—for example, in understanding inter-relationships of participation frames and genres within Mayan shaman ritual performances (described by William Hanks) and participant roles and textuality in Wolof insult poem performances (described by Judith Irvine)—as well as for considering variation in communicative norms cross culturally. Susan Philips's early study of "participant structures" in American Indian classrooms in Warm Springs examined how ways of orchestrating student-teacher interaction, allocating turns at talk, and structuring student attention vary across different activities in the classroom. Philips analyzed the mismatch between contexts for learning at home and at school in Warm Springs, which lead to poor school performance. Similarly, Frederick Erickson's studies of black-white interaction during interviews show how different norms for interpreting "listening responses" (involving gaze and back channel cues) can lead to interactional "trouble." A focus on participation provides the anthropologist an opportunity to study from an integrated perspective how members of discourse communities use language and embodied action to constitute their social worlds.

(See also *body, community, competence, gesture, improvisation, identity, indexicality, oratory, power, theater, turn, vision, voice*)

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