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Framing and Face: The Relevance of *The Presentation of Self* to Linguistic Discourse Analysis

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Although Erving Goffman did not turn his analytic focus specifically toward language until later in his career (in the 1981 *Forms of Talk*), his work, beginning with *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, has been crucial for discourse analysts and interactional sociolinguists who study language in social context. Perhaps most influential have been his concepts of framing and face, which Goffman developed more fully in later work but presaged in *Presentation*. Moreover, these specific concepts refine and develop the approach to interaction that Goffman lays out in *Presentation*: the fundamental notion of self as social construction; the observation that expressions of self can be *given off*, that is, inadvertently communicated while an interactant is focusing on information intentionally given; and that conventions for such self-expression can be understood as socially agreed-upon rituals.

In order to show the influence and continuing relevance of *Presentation of Self*, I'll briefly define and illustrate the concepts that are key for discourse analysts: framing and face, and explain their relation to the theoretical underpinnings outlined in *Presentation*. I will then suggest the roles they play in discourse analysis, with specific reference to the work of John Gumperz, Robin Lakoff, Deborah Schiffrin, and myself. After that, I'll relate a personal encounter I had with Goffman and explain the insight and inspiration this encounter afforded me. Finally, I'll briefly note another source of inspiration: the wry inventiveness of Goffman's writing style in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

FRAMING AND FACE: WHAT ARE THEY?

Framing, as Goffman defined it in *Frame Analysis* (1974), refers to the ways humans in any situation communicate and discern,

"What is it that's going on here?" (8). The term and concept, which Goffman attributes to Bateson's ([1955]1972) essay "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," also corresponds to the related concepts of Gumperz's (1982) speech activity, my own interactional frames as distinguished from knowledge structure schemas (Tannen [1979]1993; Tannen and Wallat [1987]1993), and Davies' and Harre's (1999) "positioning." Face, as defined by Goffman in his 1955 essay "On Face-Work" which is included in *Interaction Ritual* (1967), is "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (5). Also in *Interaction Ritual*, Goffman locates the expression of face-work in presentational and avoidance rituals, the bipartite scheme that corresponds to Brown and Levinson's ([1978]1987) positive and negative face; Robin Lakoff's (1973, 1975) rules of rapport and their corresponding communicative styles; and what I have written of as the simultaneous and potentially conflicting human impulses toward involvement and independence. The specific terms and concepts, framing and face, do not appear in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, but they reflect and build on notions that do: that self is a social construction, that impressions of self are "given off" rather than "given," and that they are interpreted according to conventionalized or socially agreed-upon "rituals."

Framing takes center stage in *Frame Analysis* (1974), from which the definition I provided above is taken. But the concept of framing is implicit in the dramaturgical metaphor that pervades *Presentation*, with its theatrical nomenclature (performer, performance, audience, roles, scenes, backstage, staging talk, and staging cues) and in the observation that performers signal the roles

they intend to perform by “cues,” but that “the audience may misunderstand the meaning that a cue was designed to convey, or may read an embarrassing meaning into gestures or events that were accidental, inadvertent, or incidental and not meant by the performer to carry any meaning whatsoever” (51). The bipartite concept of face is found in *Presentation* (69) where Goffman cites a passage from Durkheim (1953:37): “The human personality is a sacred thing; one does not violate it nor infringe its bounds, while at the same time the greatest good is in communication with others.”

GOFFMAN AND LINGUISTIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The relationship between these concepts and current work in linguistic discourse analysis can be seen, for example, in the work of John Gumperz, a contemporary of Goffman (they were born in the same year). For Gumperz, cross-cultural communication provides a window on how meaning is signaled in all interaction, because examining instances in which communication goes awry sheds light on processes that are unnoticed when communication proceeds smoothly. He developed the theoretical framework and analytic methodology he later dubbed “interactional sociolinguistics” based on research he conducted in London analyzing interactions between speakers of British English (the variety of English spoken by London natives) and speakers of Indian English (the variety of English spoken by natives of India and Pakistan), with an eye toward identifying the role of language in social injustice as well as the broader theoretical question of how sociocultural knowledge enables situated interpretation in social interaction. Gumperz traced the source of situated interpretation, as well as the source of trouble, to the culturally specific use of “contextualization cues.” For example, Gumperz (1982) shows that in job interviews or other service encounters, speakers from the Indian subcontinent use heightened amplitude as a conventionalized way to get the floor, but are perceived by British English speakers as expressing anger. Similarly, the sentence-final falling

intonation that carries no special meaning in Indian English is misinterpreted by British speakers as evincing negative emotion.

Thus the linguistic phenomena Gumperz identified as “contextualization cues” and the consequences of their use in intercultural communication are precisely what Goffman described in the passage from *Presentation* quoted above: falling intonation and heightened amplitude were, for the Indian English speakers, cues which were “not meant by the performer to carry any meaning whatsoever,” and would carry no special meaning for other Indian English speakers. However, in cross-cultural communication, these cues are interpreted by the British English interlocutors as having “embarrassing meaning”—that is, negative emotional valence. The result is that the Indian English speakers are misjudged to be difficult characters and are unlikely to be hired or otherwise granted what they are seeking in service encounters. There is a confluence of influences here, no doubt tracing to the University of California, Berkeley, where Gumperz and Goffman were friends and colleagues in the 1960s, and to the wider *zeitgeist* in the social sciences, where notions of speech activity and the like were abroad, and sociolinguistics was aborning.

My own work (Tannen [1984]2005) extended the notion of cross-cultural communication to include Americans of different cultural and regional backgrounds who systematically use different linguistic cues to signal meaning. Rather than “cues,” however, I refer to linguistic elements of conversational style. Analyzing an extended dinner-table conversation among six American friends, I further grouped these linguistic elements as characterizing distinct conversational styles distinguished by the culturally relative value placed on interactive goals. In the style I call “high-involvement” you show you’re a good person by putting on record your connection to others (for example, by fast rate of speech and short interturn pauses, talking-along to show attention and enthusiasm, and relatively loud and quick displays of listenership). In the style I call “high-considerateness” you show you’re a good person by not imposing (for example, by relatively slower rate of speech and longer

interturn pauses, avoidance of overlapping talk, and relatively understated displays of listlessness).

My direct inspiration for identifying these two styles was Robin Lakoff's (1973, 1975) notion of communicative style and her "rules of rapport," each associated with a distinct communicative style. For Lakoff, Distance is associated with Rule 1, Don't impose; Deference with Rule 2, Give options; and Camaraderie with Rule 3, Be friendly (or Maintain camaraderie). A high-involvement style follows Lakoff's Rule 3: Maintain camaraderie. A high-considerateness style observes her Rules 2 and 3: Give options and Don't impose. These styles correlate with Goffman's presentational and avoidance rituals, which in turn correlate with, and I think can be traced to, Durkheim's positive and negative religious rites—things you must do, like say prayers, and things you must not do, like commit sins. Referring once more to the previously quoted passage from Durkheim that Goffman cites in *Presentation*, we see Lakoff's "Don't impose" and my "high-considerateness style" in Durkheim's observation that "one does not violate nor infringe" on another's bounds. In his observation that "the greatest good is in communication with others" we see Lakoff's "Maintain camaraderie" and my "high-involvement style."

My own theoretical framework combines the notions of framing (cues signaling meaning as well as sociocultural knowledge) and face (the cues combine in patterned ways to serve the interactive goals of involvement and independence) in the concept of conversational style: in deciding how to say something, a speaker must choose among a host of linguistic variables—not only which words to say but also how quickly or slowly to say them, in what sequence, with what pitch and amplitude, whether and how to cloak them in humor, how to signal the emotions associated with them (will anger be expressed in raised or lowered amplitude—or in silence?), and so on. All these are linguistic elements inherent in speech; one cannot speak without choosing among them. As I have put it elsewhere, conversational style is not something extra, added

on like icing on a cake; it is the very stuff of which the linguistic cake is made.

In Goffman's terms, as laid out in *Presentation*, impressions made by varying conversational styles are not "given" but "given off" (2). Signs that are given are what is conventionally thought of as "communication": using words to convey information. Goffman notes that his analysis is concerned primarily with signs that are given off—that is, aspects of a speaker's "performance" that give others an impression of the speaker's "self" (4). The notion that the way a speaker presents information communicates impressions of the speaker's self drives everything that follows in *Presentation of Self*; it also drives the work of linguistic discourse analysts. Put another way, the insight that in speaking one must make linguistic decisions, and these decisions carry social meaning, is fundamental to interactional sociolinguistics and linguistic discourse analysis, as it is to the approach Goffman formulated in *Presentation*.

The linguistic discourse analyst most directly influenced by Goffman is Deborah Schiffrin, who was his student at the University of Pennsylvania. In a recent paper (Schiffrin 2006) she emphasizes Goffman's distinction between signs *given* and signs *given off* in order to explain his notion of self as a social construction. She then outlines the influence of this distinction as well as his view of face and the related concept of ritual. Drawing on this theoretical framework, she demonstrates how reference—that is, choice of nouns and pronouns—intended to tell about individuals the speaker is talking about, also unintentionally express who the speaker is. A simple example would be the choice of "us" and "we" as distinguished from "them" and "they" to refer to actors in a narrative. Though the narrative concerns the actions of others, the pronoun choice also constructs an identity for the speaker *vis a vis* those others.

AN IMPROMPTU PRIVATE LESSON

Unlike Schiffrin, Lakoff, and Gumperz, I did not have the privilege of knowing Goffman as a colleague or teacher. However, I did have an opportunity to be directly influ-

enced by him during my last year of graduate school, when I was being considered for a faculty position at the University of Pennsylvania. While in Philadelphia for the on-campus interview, I was honored to be invited to lunch at the home of Erving Goffman and his wife, the linguist Gillian Sankoff. During conversation over lunch, I told of an experience I had had at yet another interview, a story I had already told a number of times, always with the same point—a point that, until then, my listeners had always agreed was self-evident. But when I told the story on this occasion, Goffman showed me a perspective that I had missed—a perspective that illustrates the theoretical framework I described above.

Here's the story: I was having an informal, preliminary job interview for a position at another university at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. The AAA meeting was taking place in downtown Los Angeles, and the faculty member interviewing me suggested we talk over lunch. She and I stepped into the shopping mall adjoining the conference hotel, and we decided to eat at the nearest establishment, a public cafeteria. Having selected food and moved with our trays along the cafeteria line, we were standing beside our trays awaiting the cashier at the end of the line, when a man approached us. Holding up an empty coffee cup, he indicated that we were standing in front of the coffee dispenser and graciously asked my interviewer if she would please refill his cup with coffee. She gladly complied. Taking the cup from her, he said, "Thanks, honey. I'll do the same for you sometime." She responded, "Okay, but don't call me honey." The man was angered by her remark and sputtered, "I'll bet your husband calls you honey, and you love it!" She said, "That's just the point. You're not my husband." The man left in a huff, and my interviewer and I were discombobulated. My take on this encounter was that before the man approached us, my interviewer had been framed as a university professor interviewing a job applicant, a relatively high-status position. When the stranger addressed her as "honey," he reframed her as a woman who can

at any moment be reminded of the lower status conferred by her gender.

On hearing this story, Goffman pointed out that had my interviewer been a man, the coffee recipient could have shown informal camaraderie by replying, "Thanks, buddy" or "Thanks, pal." The forms of address, "pal" or "buddy," reference and thereby establish a friendly relationship between speaker and addressee, thus communicating good will as well as informality. But he couldn't use those or any of a number of similar words when addressing a woman. "Honey" was no doubt his attempt to express and create the same friendly stance with a word appropriate to his current addressee. But this word brought along the unintended associations at which my interviewer took umbrage. Rather than failing to show appropriate respect, the man had been failed by language: there was no word he could have used with a woman that would do the same face-work that these informal forms of address do when used with a man. Here again is a situation precisely described in the section from *Presentation* that I quoted above: my interviewer had heard "embarrassing" meaning (sexist disrespect) in a cue by which the man probably had not intended to communicate any special meaning but simply to utter a conventionalized friendly acknowledgment.

This exchange was transformative for me in a number of ways. Goffman's insight encapsulated how, when we think we are using language, language is using us. It taught me to question interpretations that initially seem obvious, especially those that attribute malign intentions to others. And the brief cafeteria exchange is a paradigm case of a principle that recurs in innumerable anecdotes I have since analyzed in numerous books: the man became angry because he was accused of bad intentions when he had said something with obvious (to him) good intentions. This is the source of much pain and suffering when romantic partners have different conversational styles. Moreover, I would never forget the single-mindedness with which Goffman set me straight. He kept talking about it—and was still doing so when he and Gillian walked me to the door, bid me farewell, and closed the door behind me. It did not feel to me like he

was correcting me or making me wrong. Rather, it felt like he was enlightening me, showing me a perspective I had missed. And the single-minded persistence with which he continued to focus on it seemed to me just the sort of passion about one's work that I hoped would continue to inspire me as well.

In rereading *Presentation* for this essay, I came across another way in which Goffman provided a model of academic work. I was reminded of the sheer delight of his writing—his wry humor and surprising choice of words. He frequently sums up a concept with a slight twist on a familiar expression, as when, in connection with defining and illustrating “secret consumption,” he observes, “the performer is able to forgo his cake and eat it too” (41). He uses two variants of the same word in a single sentence: “This convenient fact has an inconvenient implication” (51). He sneaks in oblique literary allusions, as in “the Yorick-skull of philosophy” (57). He introduces surprising reversals and juxtapositions: “Rules regarding this laxity are quite strict” (190). I had not thought of this before, but I would be very surprised if I did not find inspiration and license in his writing to combine academic and colloquial registers, and to play with language, in my own.

In sum, the view of social interaction that Goffman introduced in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, and further developed in later writing, continues to be vital to the linguistic analysis of discourse. In particular, that early work contains the seeds of notions of framing and face that are fundamental to and pervasive in linguistic discourse analysis, notions that refine, reflect, and expand the theoretical foundation laid in *Presentation*: that self is a social construction, that expressions of self are given off, and that conventions for such self-expression are socially agreed-upon rituals.

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