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In Honor of Robert Hopper

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Interactive Methods for Constructing Relationships

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Increasingly in the communication field, scholars are coming to recognize that the character of a relationship is built moment by moment, by interactants, in and through interaction (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). Though compelling, this claim has proven difficult to document. Just how is the relationship between interlocutors constructed, and thus available, from the particular ways in which talk is produced?

In this chapter I describe two methods whereby the interactional construction of relationships can be documented. First, in a kind of conversational "tit-for-tat," one interlocutor produces a turn that could be heard to have "problematic," or "disconnecting" implications for the relationship. In the next turn, the other produces a similar turn that has the result of shifting the "disconnecting" implications to "connecting" ones. In the second method, conversational repair targets a turn that has possible problematic implications for the relationship. The speaker of the repairable's method for repairing the problem does not take up the relationship implications, though. These two methods for taking up turns with possible problematic implications for the relationship display the interactive process of relationship construction.

APPROACHES TO RELATIONSHIPS

In the vernacular, and often in scholarly work also, we take relationships to be things that we "have." That is, in the way that we talk about them, relationships are often reified, static entities. Relationship states are often treated as
"independent variables, with discursive consequences" (Hopper & Chen, 1996, p. 310). This approach to relationships treats them as social structural entities that "exist" outside of discourse, taking "spouse" or "supervisor," for instance, to be social categories, from which ways of talking follow. From this perspective, which dominates much research in communication, ways of talking could provide an index for intimacy, and ways of talking that are characteristic of "marriage," for instance, could be discerned. In practice, an approach that sees relationships as existing external to discourse presents problems, because even within relationships that have "objective," social categorical definitions, relational states shift. Even those who might describe themselves, and be described by others, as "happily married" have arguments or difficult interactions and problematic moments.

In contrast to this view, social constructionists and others make a strong case for seeing relationships as constructed in and through interaction. Goldsmith and Baxter (1996) emphasized the importance of this constitutive view of communication in relationships. They drew on subjects' diaries and recollections to identify a set of 29 speech events, which they then divided into six groups that constitute everyday relationships. They pointed out that "it might prove difficult to observe all the joint enactments of talk through which an individual's relationships are constructed" (p. 90). Therefore, they used diary studies so that individuals could "report on the events in which they engage in various relationships" (p. 90.). Conversation analysts have shown that detailed analysis of tape-recorded naturally occurring conversations provides a method for describing particular ways interacts may "do" relationships (e.g., Goodwin, 1990; Heritage & Sefi, 1992; Mandelbaum, 1987, 1989; Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997).

Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) proposed that all "messages" have both "content" and "relationship" levels. All talk then may be taken to contain proposals regarding the relationship between interactants. For the most part, though, these relational proposals do not become the main business of talk, and may not be taken up at all in any discernible or overt way. Their study often is speculative, because claims about the relational activities that interactants may be undertaking can be hard to demonstrate.

Goffman (1971) suggested that interaction contains numerous "signs" whereby interactants make available to one another the "current character of the relationship" (p. 184). He called these "tie-signs" "evidence about relationships, that is, about ties between persons, whether involving objects, acts, expressions, and only excluding the literal aspects of explicit documentary statements" (p. 184). Tie-signs may include holding hands, locking arms, using the same bottle of suntan lotion when coming to the side of the pool, and so on. For the most part, the production and noticing of these tie-signs are not focused involvements (Goffman, 1963) for interactants. That is, they are generally incidental to other ongoing activities. Goffman wrote of them as a sort of social obligation, a performance that we owe others who are in the co-presence of a "related" couple (a pair in a relationship). Through the performance of tie-signs, both relational partners and others are provided with evidence of the character of a relationship being enacted.

Pomerantz and Fehr (1997) recommended as a final step in analysis that the researcher examine the identity and relational implications of the way a particular action is packaged. For conversation analysts, it is critical that "relationship" be "procedurally relevant" to participants (Schegloff, 1987). Like identity, although theorized to be omnirelevant, it can be hard to document the relevance of relationship to the way talk is done. For this reason, conversation analysts often have been reluctant to address issues of relationship, using instead such terms as alignment, and affiliation. Despite this constraint, conversation analytic findings reveal important features of how talk may propose and/or construct relationships.

For instance, Heritage and Sefi (1992) showed how health visitors' methods for questioning new mothers can propose particular alignments between participants. Goodwin (1990) showed how the way that a directive is offered proposes a version of the relationship between the interactants. That is, when you ask someone to do something, it formulates who they are with respect to you—someone over whom you can assume unquestionable control, for instance. When I say to someone "Come here right now," I propose a relationship between us in which I have some legitimate jurisdiction over that person's actions. Some actions, then, lend themselves to fairly easy interpretation with respect to the relationship they propose between interlocutors. The "firmness" of this phenomenon is perhaps indicated by the fact that using a polite format to ask someone with whom we have a "close" relationship to do something for us may be a way of a proposing (current) "distance" between us. Some ways of talking to or acting with regard to others, then, have somewhat stable relational interpretations. With respect to how we ask someone else to do something, the extent to which we provide them with choice, or "self determination" over their own actions, is a fairly tangible index of how we see ourselves relative to them. It may indicate the kind of interpersonal "power" we take ourselves to be able to enact with respect to them.

Some conversation analytic work has looked at inexplicit relational proposals that can sometimes be disentangled in such features of conversation. For instance, the use of reporting to do such actions as blaming (Pomerantz, 1978), and inviting (Drew, 1984); the placement and nature of recipient turns in
storytellings (Mandelbaum, 1989), and complaints (Mandelbaum, 1991/1992) may enable participants to blame, invite, or complain in a collaborative rather than a unilateral fashion. However, conversation analytic work for the most part has not turned its attention to how relationships are constructed, specifically because this is frequently difficult to identify as the work interactants are actively undertaking. Two exceptions are the work of Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff (1987), and Morrison (1997).

Jefferson et al. (1987) showed that the use and uptake of obscenity may provide a way for interactants to collaborate on constructing intimacy, and in this way make sub rosa proposals of intimacy. Morrison (1997) demonstrated how interlocutors may use "tracking questions" and answers to these questions to enact involvement. She showed how by asking a question that in effect seeks an "update," relationship members talk in such a way as to display their involvement in the life of the other.

Studying relationships involves numerous complexities for the researcher. Among them are issues of unpredictability, privacy, and access. Scholars interested in how relationships develop note that transitions in the character of a relationship may occur at critical moments (e.g., Baxter & Bullis, 1986). It is hard to know when critical moments of relationships will take place, and harder to have a tape recorder or video recorder present at those critical moments in ways that will not change the character of the occurrence. Yet if we look at interaction closely, we see that, in line with the proposals of social constructionists, relationships are constructed and "negotiated" moment by moment in a delicate to and fro, some of which can be documented through close attention to the details of talk.

Both Goffman's tie-signs and Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson's "relationship" level of conversation may be present throughout conversation, but may not constitute a focused activity for interactants. In this chapter, I examine places where the often overlooked relational implications of talk are taken up in some way. I discuss two methods for doing this, "tit-for-tat" and repair, and contrast the apparent relational consequences of each. In both cases, I show how both "ends" of the relationship (Goffman, 1971, p. 188) work together to position themselves vis à vis one another.

**TIT-FOR-TAT**

During the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana in 1981, while she was uttering her vows, Princess Diana produced Prince Charles' name (Charles Philip

1Arthur George) incorrectly, confusing the order of the names. The significance of this repairable could be interpreted in many different ways. As a unilateral, presumably unintentional action, it has many possible (possibly negative) implications, both regarding Princess Diana's identity (the kind of person that she is), and regarding their relationship. It could be taken to have implications regarding her competence or her state of mind, for instance. Psychologists might take it to have symbolic significance regarding her feelings for Prince Charles, or about the wedding. In his vows, though, Prince Charles produced Diana's name in a similarly incorrect way. Until Princess Diana's death it was said that this was the last nice thing he did for her. His "tit-for-tat" here made available the implication, "getting names wrong during a wedding is something anyone could do." A reciprocal action of the same kind appears to be one way to take up a problematic activity. By doing the same thing (mixing up names, in this case), it targets the activity to which it is reciprocal. It may show that the initial action was noticeable. Interestingly, though, by doing the same action, a possibly problematic or "disjoining" action on its own is rendered benign or "conjoining," because the implications that "anyone could do it" or "it can happen to me" become available. It becomes a common occurrence, instead of a gaping breach of etiquette, for instance.

In the following segment, a telephone conversation is begun with an apparently playful exchange of name-calling. This tit-for-tat seems to work in a similar way to the previous instance. Though it is clearly not its "official" business, the first name-calling could be heard to set the couple apart. That is, although in the context the hearing is unlikely, it could be heard in this way. In response, the reciprocal name-calling proposes a kind of relatedness between the callers, undoing the possible disjuncture. Kip and Cara have been put on the phone by their roommates, who were talking together until Cara's roommate reported to Kip's that Cara wanted to talk to Kip. On the tape, we hear Cara waiting for Kip. His "ee"YEE::huh huh huh heh" starts their conversation.

```
1 Kip: "ee"Y [EE]: "k)?h huh huh heh=
2 ( )
3 Cara: "k":p?
4 Kip: "ehh. heee(h)e(h)e(oh)es?
5 ( )
6 Cara: "huh Yih queer w(h)at['re ya doin.]
7 ( )
8 Kip: uh "I dunno what 're you doin you queer bait.
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1I am grateful to Paul Drew for bringing this example to my attention.
After initial apparent difficulty recognizing one another (perhaps due to Kip's overdone "Yes" in Line 1), in Line 5 Cara calls Kip a name, "Yih queer," which could be heard as a teasing response to his redoing, in Line 4, of his over-exaggerated "Yes" at the beginning of their interaction. Though in its vernacular sense of "homosexual" queer has no apparent fit with Kip's behavior, it could be heard as a playful version of "silly" or "odd" — an original meaning of the term queer. This is immediately followed by an inquiry regarding what he is doing, presumably currently or immediately before he took the phone call. This can be heard as a conventional beginning to their conversation. His response is postponed by a post laugh inbreath. In Line 8, he gives a minimal answer to the question regarding what he is doing, "I dunno." He then asks the reciprocal question, "what're you doin,' and produces a reciprocal name-calling, "you queer bait." This name-calling is reciprocal in a special way. She has called him a "queer" that, if it were to be taken seriously or literally in the current vernacular, would make her not of interest to him. "Queer bait" in response to "queer" could be heard to be formulating her as "bait" for the "queer" — that is, bait for Kip. It thus proposes a possible relationship between them in which she is specifically attractive to him.

Thus a formulation of him ("you queer") that taken literally (in the sense in which it is presumably not intended) makes her of no interest to him, is recast in retrospect as making her specifically of interest to him. This is done playfully, but nonetheless might raise a glimmer of the possibility that there could be a relationship between them that involves a connection constituted by appropriate fit and special interest. In its aftermath, nothing is overtly made of the reciprocal name-calling and the possible connectedness it implies. As Kip laughs, Cara answers the inquiry that preceded the name-calling. As Kip's laughter continues, Cara makes a reciprocal busyness inquiry: "(s) go'n on." and talk proceeds.

In this instance, through a kind of conversational "tit-for-tat" interactants make available a connection between them. Immediately after talk that could be heard to indicate a reciprocated disjuncture between them (the difficulty recognizing one another), an action by one partner that could be heard to have possible implications for their relationship, but could equally, and more plausibly, be heard to be directly related to prior talk (Kip's playfully overdone greeting) is responded to in such a way as to constitute a reciprocation by the other. The reciprocation takes up possible relationship implications in the first speaker's turn and provides for a proposal of connectedness between them where her turn could have been heard to position them as disconnected. Talk simply moves on, and nothing is made of it overtly. Like Princess Diana's flub, Cara's name-calling makes available certain implications regarding participants' relative positioning although these relative implications are clearly not "official business" at all. In both cases, their relational partner's next turn has a similar format, yet counteracts those implications in an "off-the-record" fashion that nonetheless makes the relational implications of the first turn apparent. Here then we see a sort of advance on the tie-sign. An action that could be heard as a tie-sign with possible disaligning relational implications, but that could also simply be ignored, is targeted, made visible, and redressed simultaneously by a response-in-kind. Nonetheless, like Goffman's tie-signs, this remains an embedded action.

REPAIR

In the following fragment, the embedded relational implications of a turn are taken up in a more overt way, using repair. Nonetheless, the first speaker's response to repair initiation downplays the relational implications. This demonstrates interactants' alertness to problematic relational implications, and indicates the collaborative character of positioning activities in conversation.

Two couples, Vicki and Shawn, and Nina and Matthew, are eating dinner together. This segment occurs after about 14 minutes of recorded conversation. Vicki reports an activity she plans to undertake (Lines 24, 26, and 28). Shawn initiates repair in a somewhat overdone, teasing way (Lines 33, 35, and 37). Vicki completes the repair in an "underdone" way (Lines 39–40). The "underdone" character of Vicki's repair is noticeable in contrast to the overblown character of Shawn's repair initiation.

(2) CDII:39-40
1
2  Shawn: [Cars ih stranded 'bout thirday sump'n
3  people'v die d,
4  (0.8)
5  Nina: Noiw.
6  (0.4)
7  Shawn: "Becuz a 'that,'"
8  (0.3)
9  Vicki: Yesah.
10  Shawn: =O's the weather.
11  Vicki: Wir gunnah call [ u p ]
12  Shawn: ["T's in ga: n e .]
13  Vicki: [Wir g'nauh]
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she does what at the beginning she states she wants to do (call him), the result will be that the unnamed (and unknown-to-others-present) guy will come out. In previous turns, in Lines 10–16 Shaw and Vicki together enact what they are going to do ("We're gonna call up some friends")—calling people to tell them that it is 80. They synchronously report an action that they both claim and show themselves to be going to undertake together. In formulating the person who wants to call as "I," and in contrast with their joint enactment of calling someone to tell them that it is 80, her report of something she wants to do ("one guy that I wanna cawll," Lines 24–25, and her reference to "you j's tell 'm ...") (Line 27 and 29) could be heard to project an action she will do by herself. Given the way in which she refers to the person she will call, and her formulation of herself as the sole caller, it is potentially hearable that she wants to call someone unknown to members of the present gathering.

Immediately upon the completion of Vicki's report of her future plan, Shaw "stops" conversation in a very elaborate and overdone way. His "wai hey waah woah Woah a wafa" could be heard to indicate some kind of trouble, but it is not available from this turn what the trouble could be. He then produces a turn as though it were a repeat of Vicki's turn: "One: gu: you usually ca(h)ah(h)?" (Line 40). He combines elements from the beginning of her turn in Lines 24–25 ("one guy that I wanna cawll") and the second part of it in Line 27 ("he usually comes "out") to produce a most "incriminating" version of what she said: "One guy you usually ca(h)ah(h)?" He slightly misrepresents her talk in such a way as to make available an understanding of the strongest indication that there is a "guy" in her life about whom he does not know, whom she calls habitually. His "W'd'ss" ("What is this?") corroborates the impression that he is calling into question what is going on.

All of this is produced in a somewhat overdone, overblown fashion, which Drew (1987) suggested may be characteristic of teases. It is possible to hear this turn as taking Vicki to task in a teasing way for having produced the appearance that she is inviting out to see her "some guy" that he does not know. In Goffman's terms, he displays himself to be hearing her turn as offering a particular kind of tie-sign. Like the first turns in the tit-for-tat segments examined earlier, although it is clearly not its principal enterprise, Vicki's turn could be heard to be proposing that she has some involvement that suggests disassociation with Shaw because of association with a guy that Shaw does not know.

In Line 42, Vicki offers a disagreement token, "No," and then offers another version of part of what he, through its reenactment, has claimed her to have said: "we cawll" can be heard as a candidate replacement for "you usually call." The repair operation involves dropping the "usually" and replacing "you" with "we." In this way, the problematic character of the activity—habitually

In Line 24, Vicki begins a report about an unnamed "guy" that she wants to call. In using a nonrecognition reference (one that indicates she does not expect that her recipients could recognize the person to whom she is referring (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979) the implication is available that she does not expect any of those present to be able to recognize to whom it is she is referring. In Line 27, she tells what the guy referred to in Line 24 "usually" does. She then reports what "you" need to say to produce the result of this guy coming out—tell him about the warm weather. From this recipients can draw the implication that if
calling an unknown guy without him knowing—is removed, because the calling is an activity that they do together.

What is anomalous about this repair is that she does not stress the repaired item. Normally in response to other-initiated repair, the item that performs the repair operation is stressed, so as to be hearable as the repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks, 1977). She stresses "call," which does not appear to have been targeted as the repairable. At the same time, it is clearly the word "we" that has replaced the "I" from her turn and the "you" (meaning Vicki) from his turn. In stressing "call," a word that has not been repaired, it is as though she were indicating that the activity of calling were the repairable. In this way, she literally de-emphasizes the word that caused the trouble—the one that pointed to who was doing the calling. It was her use of "I" that made available the appearance or possible hearing that she might want to, or was engaging in, some activity independent of Shawn. Stressing the nonrepaired part could be hearable as "backgrounding" or playing down the relational implications of the repair. In this way, Vicki avoids "overtly" taking up the relational proposal his repair tries to make.

Shawn’s repair appears to be done as a teasing display of concern, yet Vicki gives a po-faced response to the tease. She treats it as though it were serious (Drew, 1987). After what appears to be a postoverlap resolution hitch, in Line 45 Shawn’s change of state token, "Oh" (Heritage, 1984), shows that he now has a new understanding of what Vicki meant. His "okay" shows that this shift makes what she had been proposing acceptable. He then reports a characteristic of the call-recipient that he now understands: "it wz: friend a’mine too." In explicitly stating that this is what makes it okay, Shawn makes available that it was indeed the problem posed for their relationship that constituted the problem his repair initiation addresses. In calling the group’s attention to it by doing a very public repair, Shawn calls this implication into question in an overdone, teasing fashion. In so doing, he shows that the appearance that Vicki’s talk could be heard to present regarding their positioning relative to one another—that there is a guy whom she will call, and who will then "come out" (presumably to California)—is what was problematic for him. Because it is a friend of his also, he can now re-hear this as unproblematic, and make that rehearing public.

In this way, Shawn makes a public display of having the right to call into question with whom Vicki associates without his knowledge. In her producing her repair with the stress that she does, Vicki emphasizes the activity of calling, and not the "we" on which the relational implications center. In this way, she seems to focus on issues of understanding, rather than relational concerns. There is no playing along with the tease, display of shame or embarrassment, of having been "caught red-handed," and so on. Rather, the way in which she offers the repair has more the air of annoyance.

Drew (1987) suggested that teases are often used to produce mild social sanctions, and that po-faced responses provide a way for the teased party to "set the record straight." Here Shawn’s repair initiation seems to target the problematic tie-sign, the appearance of illicit activity that Vicki’s turn makes. Though Vicki could play along with the tease, she sets the record straight in a way that seems to dismiss the tease. In playing down the relational implications, Vicki avoids "officially" entering into the positioning activity that Shawn’s turn takes up. Rather, her talk does relationship work by not officially taking up the implications Shawn’s repair indicates. For in treating it as a matter of course that it is his friend, and showing mild annoyance at Shawn’s action, she displays that the concern his repair indicates is not an issue. Here then we see an instance where the possible relational implications of a turn are taken up and made available by one participant, whereas the other participant downplays the relational implications. Though Shawn’s turn makes possible overt uptake of relational matters, Vicki’s shows that they are not relevant here.

CONCLUSIONS

These episodes demonstrate that relational implications may be taken up when they contain problematic proposals regarding the relative positioning of interactants. The management of these proposals is a collaborative process. In both conversational tit-for-tats, and in the repair episode, a second turn targets possible problematic relational implications in a prior turn. Thus we see interactants’ on-sight alertness to the "relationship" level of a conversation, and to the tie-signs that talk may contain. However, talk in third position indicates that even where relationship implications have been targeted by one speaker in the talk of the other, the speaker whose talk contained those implications need not take them up further.

This account suggests the subtle yet collaborative manner in which relationships are enacted in interaction. It seems that moments when there are mild problems for relationships (or the appearance of a relationship) can prove to be fruitful sites for documenting the interactive work of relationship construction. In this way, we can begin to see relationships as collections of communication practices, or things that we do through communication, in contrast to thinking of them as social structural things that we have.
REFERENCES


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