WORLDS *of* TALK

The
Presentation
of Self in
Everyday
Conversation

MARTIN J. MALONE

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Contents

The self ... is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience.

G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*

As a main focus of attention talk is unique ... for talk creates for the participant a world and a reality that has other participants in it.

Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*

Preface
and Acknowledgements

From 1974 to 1995, 19,341 social science books and articles have had "self" in their titles or abstracts or as key words (*Sociofile*, 1/74–4/95). The self is also a topic of major interest to philosophers, theologians, and literary theorists, as well as to the general public. Grocery store checkout lines display magazines entitled *Self*; "self-help" books are among the fastest growing sections in bookstores; and "self-esteem," "self-actualization," and "self-consciousness" are treated as major social problems. Oddly enough, the interactional creation of selves in talk has as yet been little studied.

This book is about how we present our selves in talk. It examines conversations as joint productions requiring trust, dependency, and coordination. If we recognize that the self is an interactional accomplishment, then we must also recognize that it is produced by multiple partners cooperating in the production of a social event.

Interestingly, perhaps the most fruitful avenue of inquiry into the nature of the self is only beginning to be traveled extensively. Talk is the principal way for others to know "who" we are. We are always aware that what we say tells as much about who we are as it does about the topic we are discussing. While language has been studied for thousands of years, the study of conversation (actual spoken talk) is a relatively new topic, with a history of barely 30 years. The

theory and methods whereby to construct an understanding of this issue are at hand. The time to understand how selves are created and transformed in everyday talk is now.

The study of self-presentation in conversation raises a number of theoretical questions. The most general questions are these:

How are selves communicated?
How does that communication affect the nature of interaction?
How do those effects on the interaction feed back to alter the modes of self-presentation?

More specifically, I would like to know:

1 What is the role of talk in constructing a self-presentation out of the resources available to an individual?
2 How are identities presented, negotiated, and changed in talk?
3 How is talk used as a strategic interactive resource (one which can accomplish desired goals) to tell others how we see the situation, who we are at the moment, and how we see them?

This study is about how individuals tell each other who they are and how this affects conversation. It is about selves in conversation. In fine-grained analyses of a few conversations, it looks at

1 how talk structures interaction,
2 how gender differences are displayed in identity presentation,
3 how individuals manipulate support, and
4 how conflicts affect self-presentations.

This book is designed to appeal to students and professionals in sociology (especially in ethnomethodology, qualitative methods, theory, symbolic interaction, and conversation analysis), social psychology, sociolinguistics, linguistic pragmatics, rhetoric, speech and communication, and any other areas concerned with language use in everyday life. It should also appeal to an educated audience interested in how conversations reveal who we are and how we deal with each other in everyday situations.

Chapter 1 discusses Goffman's notion of the "interaction order" (1983b) as a separate domain of sociological study. It is in the

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interaction order that self-presentation takes place. Chapter 2 provides some philosophical foundations for the analytical portion of the book and attempts to show the connections between the symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological approaches. Chapters 3–6 are analyses of conversation that attempt to show, as Labov and Fanshel say, "what gets done by what gets said" (1977, p. 71). Chapter 3 analyzes how pronouns are used to create interactional alignments. Chapter 4 enters the debate on gendered styles of talk. Chapter 5 examines how talkers line up support in conversation, and chapter 6 analyzes an instance of disagreement, its resolution and return to working consensus. The conclusions in chapter 7 return explicitly to the moral nature of interaction and attempt to provide an interactional account of how talk creates selves. An appendix provides information on the data employed here and the methods of collection and analysis.

The analytic portion of the book examines the fine details of how talk constitutes and is constituted by the interaction order and how in this order selves are created and maintained. It employs the insights of Erving Goffman, symbolic interactionism and conversation analysis to understand just what goes on when people come together. The goal is to provide an account of the self in interaction.

I owe thanks to a great many people whose ideas, criticism, encouragement, and support helped this project grow over many years. As a graduate student in anthropology at Southern Illinois University many years ago, I was first introduced to linguistics by Larry Grimes and Ed Cook. It was at a lecture by Dell Hymes at Southern Illinois University that I realized how fascinating and important the study of talk was. Though I did not meet him until many years later, it was his lecture that afternoon that changed the direction of my studies.

In 1979, I arrived in Bloomington, Indiana, to begin graduate training for a second time, this time in sociolinguistics. It was there that I met and began to study with Allen Grimshaw, Bill Corsaro, Donna Eder, Bonnie Kendall, and Charles Bird. Their influence on my work and on shaping my perspectives on language goes beyond my ability to offer adequate thanks. I continue to come up with

ideas I think are new, only later to realize that they are indebted to those excellent and caring teachers. Allen, Bill, and Donna have continued to read drafts and offer encouragement, and I still depend on their wisdom.

I owe perhaps the largest single intellectual debt to Allen Grimshaw, who, for the last 16 years, has continued to bully, cajole, criticize, challenge, and encourage me every step of the way. He serves as my model when I think about being a mentor to students. The Multiple Analysis Project that Allen directed and saw through to publication (Grimshaw, 1989, 1994) provided the data for my dissertation (1985) and has also provided much of the data for this book.

I would also like to thank Anthony Giddens, who, as a visiting scholar at Indiana in 1981, provided the beginnings of my reading of hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophers and my appreciation of their connections to American pragmatism and symbolic interaction.

In the ten years since graduate school, the help of colleagues, students, editors, and the anonymous readers we all depend on to get us into print has been vital for the development of this work. Within my own small college, I owe many thanks to my former chair and close friend, Chris Smith, and to the members of Mount Saint Mary's Writing Center, Steve Newmann, Carmen Schmersahl, Sarah Sinopoli, and Byron Stay. I am especially grateful to a former member of the Writing Center, as well as a coauthor, Meg Tipper, with whom I collaborated on work discussed here.

In my ten years at Mount Saint Mary's, I have had too many students to thank individually. But for special help on this project, especially with bibliographic and interlibrary loan work and with copying and all the other mundane tasks of preparing a manuscript, I owe particular thanks to our departmental assistants, Alison Gibbons and Jennifer Tinder. I cannot imagine two more helpful, cheerful, resourceful, and imaginative researchers and feel truly blessed to have had their help.

I would also like to thank our departmental secretary, Rosilee Litz, and the staff of the Hugh Phillips Library, especially Lisa Davis, who handled that necessity of small college libraries, interlibrary loans.

Colleagues at a distance are also necessary for survival, and I am grateful for the help of a number of scholars over the years. Jack Spencer, Doug Maynard, and Dede Boden have provided ideas, critiques, and intellectual stimulation. For a long, informative phone call he may not even remember having, I am indebted to Richard Hilbert, who helped me put together a book proposal when I was struggling to get started. Finally I would like to thank Bob Sanders, who, as editor of *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, devoted an extraordinary amount of time and energy to helping move an essay from ungainly draft to polished article.

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I am especially grateful to John Thompson of Polity Press, who first accepted the proposal for this book and gave me the time and encouragement to finish it, and to Polity's anonymous reader who provided me with a very careful reading and critique of the manuscript and excellent suggestions for revision.

Finally, as always, I am more grateful than I can say to my wife Jane, my son Brady, and my daughter Megan for all of our talk and for their years of patience with what seemed like a never ending project that took me out at nights and kept me away on weekends. It's the talking we do in our families that teaches us what talk is really about and for. It's in that talk that selves are first formed.

Transcription Conventions

[– overlapping talk and simultaneous turn beginnings
] – end of overlapping talk
( ) – unintelligible stretch of talk
(.) – each period indicates a pause of one tenth of a second
(3.0, etc.) – length of pause in seconds and tenths of seconds
CAPITALIZATION – stress, increased volume
:::: as in we::::ll – elongated utterance
= – no pause between utterances
? – rising inflection, not necessarily a question.

Lengthy blank spaces within turns occur when square brackets indicate alignments of overlapping talk.

{ } – author's inserted comments

_____ – underscoring is used to highlight a word being discussed, and does not indicate any characteristics of the talk.

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The Interaction Order and the Self

If indeed "each person's life is lived as a series of conversations" (Tannen, 1990, p. 13), then it is in the flowing, reciprocal exchange of conversation that the self becomes real. Without such talk, the self would be inconceivable, because it would lack the symbolic medium necessary for self-presentation.

The self is immanently social: an interactional achievement, a "performed character," a "dramatic effect" (Goffman, 1959, pp. 252–3) that is the result of crafting our behavior so that it makes sense to others. Conversations and selves are both interactional accomplishments requiring trust, dependency, and coordination. They are produced by multiple partners cooperating in the production of social events. Talk is both the machinery and the product of such events. Selves live in the worlds that talk creates.

Talk is the principal way for others to know "who" we are. This book applies Erving Goffman's insights about the interaction order to our self-presentations in talk.

SELF-PRESENTATION AND TALK

Sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, linguists, and philosophers all devote attention to the nature of the self, the social actor

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who produces thought, emotions, rational and irrational actions, language, and society. What the self is and does, how it comes about, and its relation to other selves and the society around it are questions basic to all these disciplines. Like most important questions today, their study is not and cannot be confined to a single discipline. Understanding the self requires the integration of many lines of inquiry.

One of sociology's most serious omissions in its claim to be a "science of society" is the scant attention it has traditionally given to spoken interaction.[1] Linguistics has been a little better at recognizing the reciprocal problem – that the complex code it studies is in fact used by people in social situations to achieve real practical goals. However, most mainstream modern linguistics (with the exception of pragmatics) has more in common with mathematics and logic than with any study of how humans communicate.

One would expect that these two fields would tell us about how people communicate with each other in everyday life. But traditional approaches have resulted in a lack of interest in both the theoretical and practical aspects of the problem. Neither traditionally trained sociologists nor linguists are generally prepared to deal with the complexity of conversation, with its multiple meanings, taken-for-granted presuppositions, situational rootedness, and the many other minutiae of interaction which conversation researchers have described over the last 30 years.

One also searches in vain in the psychological literature on the self for a sophisticated treatment of conversation in self-presentation. Two recent works in which one would expect sympathetic treatment of these topics (Berkowitz, 1988; Gergen, 1991) are nearly devoid of interest in conversation. Carl Backman (in the Berkowitz volume) notes the absence of concern with conversation and its dismissal from studies of friendship and courtship, where one might assume that talk played a significant role (pp. 253–4). Talk and conversation are simply nontopics for Gergen's study of "identity in contemporary life" (1991).

Contemporary philosophy provides us with useful approaches to the problem, but its own biases toward written as opposed to spoken discourse create a peculiarly distorted picture of the nature

of the self. Whether we turn to Ricoeur's hermeneutics (1981), Taylor's moral philosophy (1989), or Kerby's semiotic/narrative approach (1991), we find the same underlying assumption that the self is like a written text, worked over and composed like a narrative. Their preference is for language not talk. They ignore the rough-and-tumble of conversation for the more orderly confines of the text. Their work is stimulating and provoking but is not about spoken interaction, the place where selves are created, developed, and reshaped on a daily basis.

The study of conversation stands at an exciting threshold of discovering the connections between informal talk and the meaning of the worlds it creates. It is at this juncture that the reciprocal creation of society and self takes place. But crossing that threshold requires combining insights from a number of disciplines. We are ready to begin to understand how conversational talk constructs a social self. The work must be interdisciplinary. As Geertz has said, the most important, fruitful, and exciting work today is going on between disciplines, not within them (1983).

Theoretical bases

Four sets of related ideas provide the intellectual foundations for this study. Broadly, they come from ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, symbolic interactionism, and semiotics.

1 *Actions are designed for recipients* The first assumption, from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, is that social actions are designed to "make sense," to be "accountable," to those who are their intended recipients. The meaning of actions is not transparent. Actions must be constructed and performed in such a way that a particular intention is conveyed, based on the actor's knowledge of "shared background expectancies" (Rawls, 1989a, p. 16).

2 *Talk is multi-functional* The second assumption, from sociolinguistics, as well as speech-act theory, is that talk is multi-

functional. Because utterances refer not only to an external world, but also to the person who makes those utterances, talk is always self-referential (cf. Ricoeur, 1981).

3 *Self-presentation is semiotic* The third assumption, from semiotics and also from symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology, is that the self should be understood from a semiotic perspective as an "assemblage of signs" (Perinbanayagam, 1991, p. 12). Because talk is always self-referential and, as such, is metonymic, hearers interpret utterances as signs which stand for a larger self. Similarly Goffman recognizes that the "available repertoire" of "culturally standard displays" used in face-to-face interaction (whether gestures, postures, facial movements, or utterances) is composed of "sign vehicles fabricated from the depictive materials at hand" that actors use to create their presentations (1983b, p. 11).

4 *The self is the product of a moral order* The fourth assumption is basic to both Goffman and ethnomethodology and is also influenced by the work of Charles Taylor (1989). For Goffman, the sacred nature of the self, the respect for the self-presentations of others, the seriousness of presenting and protecting one's own face, and a commitment to the "involvement obligations" of interaction (1959, 1967) point to interaction as a moral order. For Garfinkel, social life is based on a belief that others are behaving toward us sensibly (accountably) and with goodwill. Social life works not because people follow normative rules, but rather because they follow constitutive rules which make sense of what is going on. Breaches of these rules do not result in chaos (or "anomie"), but rather in insult and anger (1963). For Taylor, "selfhood and morality turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes" (1989, p. 3). Identity is meaningless without connection, without an orientation in a "moral space" (ibid., p. 28) composed of questions about and attachments to valued goods.

These assumptions lead to a theoretical perspective in which it is understood that social actions are designed to make sense to those who participate in them. Self-presentation takes place in encounters, situations of co-presence in which "persons must sense that they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are

doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived" (Goffman, 1963a, p. 17). It is these face-to-face interactions that structure our behavior and our need to present our selves. Thus social actors are aware of the need to organize their actions so that they are recognizable tokens of the meanings they intend to convey or the actions they intend to pursue. They are "designed for the recipient," as Sacks said (1992, vol. 2, p. 230).

Mutual understanding results from a sensitivity to the necessity of *making sense* to others. Shared assumptions about sense-making lead to an exquisite sensitivity to the self-referential nature of talk. We are always aware that what we say tells as much about us as it does about the external world. For that reason, conversational talk always provides metaphorical information about the self. It offers others *signs* of who we are. Interactionist approaches to social analysis must be sensitive to this collaborative construction of face-to-face encounters, to the mutuality of conversation; to what Boden calls "the consequentiality of sequence" (1990, p. 254). For both Goffman and Garfinkel, it is this mutuality, this interdependence, that make interaction moral. This morality is not the result of external social organizational features, of norms, or values, or folkways. It is a morality intrinsic to interaction that is constitutive of interaction. Because interaction is meaningful, action is moral, and the self is of necessity a moral creature.

ERVING GOFFMAN AND THE INTERACTION ORDER

Over a period of nearly 30 years, from the early 1950s to the early 1980s, the work of Erving Goffman explicated the role of a third order in social life, neither institutional nor individual – what he named "the interaction order" (1983b).[2] From his earliest to his final writing, Goffman sought to describe how the interactional demands of situations are the primary source of structure for the social self. Interactional constraints are the product not of social