

Two 'linguistic devices'

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**TWO 'LINGUISTIC DEVICES' THAT REQUIRE SOCIAL CONTEXT:  
INTEGRATING SOCIAL AND LINGUISTIC ANALYSES**

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**Introduction**

There have been repeated calls in sociolinguistics to add more social context to analyses but much of the literature still writes of 'linguistic' devices rather than 'social' devices. Two sociolinguistic devices are outlined that explicitly require social context in order to analyze their functioning within conversation or writing. The first is a common 'bluff' game that presents readers or listeners with a great deal to challenge thereby dissuading the listener or reader from challenging at all. The second is the use of consistency as a linguistic substitute for monitoring what people do. Examples are given of both.

There have been repeated calls in sociolinguistics to add more social context to analyses (Milroy & Milroy, 1992) but much of the literature still writes of 'linguistic', 'evaluative', 'fishing', or 'interactional' devices that require analysis of words but without mention of social analysis (Pomerantz, 1980; Goodwin, 1987; Halkowski, Potter & Halliday, 1990; 1990; Nilan, 1995; Stubbe & Holmes 1995; Peterson & Biggs, 2002). More recent conversational or discourse analyses have also taken such 'device' terms on board despite calls for adding more social context to sociolinguistic analysis.

## Language in research

The main issue with talking about devices for conversation or text is that the analyses seem to reside in the words rather than in the social context or social relationships, as if we can analyze the words without the social relationships. While most sociolinguists would not agree with such a statement put this boldly, the view remains implicit and easily taken on board by others. This is exacerbated by published analyses of texts with most of the social context removed.

The real problem, then, is how do we integrate social analyses with 'linguistic' analyses, rather than just to add a bit more social context to texts, or to analyze linguistic devices as words and then demonstrate that they can be found plugged strategically into social conversations. The Milroys began this by using one form of social analysis called social network analysis to show how accents were utilized and changed through networks, but this was only one form of social analysis and only one linguistic measure.

There is not room to describe the way I have tried to integrate a broader range of social analyses with conversational or discourse analyses (Guerin, 2003a, 2004; Guerin & Miyazaki, in press). The idea was to draw out the social analyses from all the social sciences and then show how language can be used as another strategy, but one with very special properties, to accomplish the same social functions. In this paper, though, I wish to illustrate the general point by considering two social strategies of conversation that cannot be analyzed easily only as words, and which show the full social nature of any word use. These could be described as 'devices' except that in these cases, as opposed the 'devices' listed earlier from other literatures, the social basis is very obvious rather than obscured.

Both social strategies of conversation were noticed when compiling the integrative summary of other research in this area (Guerin, 2003a, 2004). There was one pattern I noticed of a speaker presenting too much for the

listener to challenge successfully, and another pattern in the strategic social uses of consistency.

### **Presenting too much in conversation for listeners to challenge easily**

The first verbal strategy is to present a lot to the listener, and this has a social property that if the speaker is to be challenged on what they have said then there is a lot extra to challenge at the same time. This can dissuade listeners from challenging at all.

In terms of social analyses, this constitutes a bluff or chicken game in which an image is presented of knowing a lot, or being able to refer to a lot, and thereby bluffing that the listener will not challenge or criticize this (Guerin, 2004). Such games are very common and can be done purely without words, or with a mixture of actions and words.

An important point to remember from this, mentioned earlier, is that the social analysis does not reside in the words. The real events happening in such situations are in the social relationships and the histories of social relationships. If I remark, "Put that down or you are going to be in a lot of trouble", it is not the words that make things happen here, but our relationship and history and the likely consequences to our relationship or the immediate situation between us if you were to *not* put it down. So even though words might be used, the power for anything to happen comes from the social relationships and their past and present consequences (Guerin, 1997). This is what game theory is all about, and provides a good way to analyze the 'verbal' strategies being highlighted here. But the analysis is more than the words.

Within this form of strategic game, there are many variations. Below are eight of the ones noticed when reviewing a range of material. The basic strategy is the same, however, presenting a lot to confuse, deter or side-step any challenge from listeners.

*"..And stuff like that"*

One strategy of adding more and bluffing the listeners uses the familiar phrases of "and stuff like that", "actually", "and things", "etc.", "and that sort of thing", "and everything like that", "and so on and so forth", or "and the like" (Dines, 1980). An example might be for someone to say, "I know all about the sun and planets and stuff like that." While there might be other functions of such phrases, one is to bluff the listener to inquire no further, although, as I have argued above, the power of the bluff does not just come from saying the words but from the context of the social relationship and its history (which is true of any bluff game, Guerin, 2004).

*Emphasize consistency*

Another strategy in this group is to emphasize the consistency between facts presented, and the unspecified range of other consistent facts, so that listeners must not only challenge the facts you state, but also all those consistent with what you say (or ones you persuade them are consistent). "So my story fits exactly with everything that has been written about this topic!" means that listeners need to deal with all these other, written facts if they wish to challenge.

*Logic and logical Inferences*

Another form of this strategy is to emphasize any facts that are logical inferences of what is being presented. Logic is the extreme of consistency, and has another function of taking attention away from the 'truth' of the propositions and putting attention on the inference (Guerin, 2004). "But if I had stolen the jar I could not have run anyway quickly enough to hide it and I would also have lost my chance of taking anything else." In such cases the listener must now challenge all logical inferences of what is said as well as the basic proposition.

### *Use of consensus*

In social psychology the use of consensus information in explanations has been seen as a byproduct of cognitive understanding of the world. In discursive terms, consensus is a strategy and it falls under the present category. "Everyone knows that John is the most likely to steal money." "Most people don't think you are evil." While it likely has other functions (Guerin, 2003a), the strategy of including others in your persuasion means that any listener challenging what you say is also challenging everyone else mentioned, which can be daunting. If you disagree with the speaker, you also then disagree with all the others supposedly in consensus.

### *Social categories*

A related version of the last strategy is to use social categories of kinship or identity so that challenging the facts is also challenging the whole group: "This family has always stood for honesty so what do you think you are doing?" and "But the teachings of Jesus tell us to be humble and not to steal."

### *Behavioural consistency*

Social psychology has also studied use of consistency information about a person and their actions, and this again can be seen as a strategy. "John has always stolen things so it seems likely he did it this time". Using consistency evidence in explanations about a person means a challenge must also challenge every consistent action as well.

### *Stories*

There are many reasons why people might use stories or narratives in influence attempts (Guerin, 2003a), but one is related to the present strategy. Stories usually have many components and to challenge the moral or point of a story means challenging all these components. This can also be daunting, and people often do not know where to begin to mount a challenge against a long story.

***Bluffing with your relationships***

Many strategies use the social relationship between speaker and listener as the resource that is bluffed, so that challenging what the speaker says is challenging your relationship at the same time: “Of course, it’s obvious that...”, “Surely you see that...”, “Isn’t it clear to you that...”, “I would hate to think that you disagreed with this”, “I would be so hurt if I thought for a moment that you disagreed”, “I sincerely hope you are well”, “It means so much to me that...”

In many ways this is an insidious strategy because a relationship is put in question unless the listener gives in, and it probably requires a certain matching of people for it to work. Having said that, it is also probably quite common, and can often be found between parents and children, and in the emotional games adults play.

**Consistency as the functional verbal equivalent of monitorability**

When integrating across the social sciences, one of the large units of analysis was found to be monitorability—the ways in which we check and observe each other and adjust our own behaviour accordingly (Guerin, 2004). This was coupled with multiple strategies to stand out or be salient when resources were available, and to be anonymous or withdraw when punishment was likely.

When looking at strategies that involved the use of language, the same broad units can be found. Talk can make you (or your group) stand out or it can hide you and put the responsibility elsewhere for what is said. Hedges and mitigators are a good example of the latter: strategies using language to avoid potential negative consequences of what is said (Guerin, 2004).

A lot of what we say and talk about, however, cannot easily be monitored or observed by others. There are a few reasons for this. First, we most often talk about things and events not present, so they cannot be

immediately checked. Second, we often talk about abstract things and events, and conceptual and 'perceived' ideas, and these cannot be checked on at all really. Finally, we can lie or mislead quite easily with language and find many ways to cover our tracks verbally. This is easier if abstract or conceptual things and events are being talked about.

In these cases, when talk cannot be monitored by observation, the listener has little choice but to monitor for consistency. The argument is that consistency becomes an important social strategy for speaker and listener alike, and becomes the verbal equivalent of the major analytic unit of monitorability. [It is important again to note that the strategies that arise from this are socially-driven, and are not a property of the use of the words themselves.] What we find, then, is that conversations can become entwined in consistency information because it is substituting for monitorability and checking across a range of conversational areas. This leads to at least two further strategies.

First, speakers will anticipate being checked for consistency and might add bits to their stories, or even lie, to make the overall account more consistent—even if they are basically telling the truth. Consistency becomes an end in itself in some cases. Second, both speakers and listeners are likely to remember details to check consistency: "But didn't you say earlier that you had gone to the shops around lunchtime?" This will exacerbate the first point immediately above. In all, monitoring for consistency leads to new conversational strategies for beliefs, stories, explanations, accounts, attitudes, logic, and category use.

A friend will tell a story which involves the two of you in such a way that you know it did not happen so at all, but the way he tells it is more amusing than the reality, or reflects better on the two of you, and so you say nothing, and soon others will tell the story, altered again, and before long you may find yourself telling it the way you know for a certainty it simply did not happen. (Banks, 1998, p. 339)

## Conclusions

The main point of this paper is that we must find ways to integrate 'linguistic' and social analyses. The analyses presented here obviously require an analysis of the social context:

1. The lot-to-be-challenged strategy is part of a Chicken or Bluff Game analysis based in the social context of relationship. Whether it works depends upon the social relationship between the two people, not the words used.
2. Conversational consistency is not a function of relationships between words but of the social relationships and the need for monitorability within the relationships involved.

For most analyses, however, the social control is not so obvious, for a number of reasons given elsewhere (Guerin, 2001a), so it appears as if the analysis only requires discussion of the linguistic 'devices' being used and the outcome can be predicted from these alone.

This apparent lack of requiring social context is also aggravated by researchers selecting situations and texts for their 'linguistic' analyses that involve cases for which it is easier to ignore the social context. This is especially in the almost exclusive use of western populations and social relationships for which we are allowed to talk as if there are agentive individuals controlling the talk, rather than a social background (Guerin, 2001b, 2004). In dealing with other cultures and social organization details, it is more difficult to ignore the social context of individual actions than for western populations (Guerin, 2003b).

So by analyzing these 'linguistic' devices it is hoped that readers can look beyond the analysis of other 'linguistic' devices to the social relationships that really drive the events that are occurring. In doing this we will be able to integrate social and linguistic analyses better, as well as the social sciences as a whole.

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