

## Part 2: Theoretical Background and Further Information

Identity and self-concepts have an enormous influence in decision-making processes. When people talk, they communicate information but also images of themselves, as sociologist Erving Goffman has illustrated in his work (see, for instance, Goffman, 1959). Moreover, the way people talk results in judgements about personality. Tannen, (1984: 9) elaborates this idea, long ago expressed by Sapir, (1958: 542). Another important issue raised by Sapir, is that “it is necessary to know what is “unmarked”, that is, what is conventionalized within a community, in order to know what is special meaning an individual may be intentionally or unintentionally communicating by diverging from convention”, (Tannen, 1984: 9). The way people talk differs not only from person to person but also from group to group, as Gumperz (1982a & b) has illustrated. Differences lie in features such as:

- pausing
- turn & overlap management (when to start/stop talking; talk at the same time than others; interrupt)
- rate (speed)
- tone of voice
- indirectness
- preference for particular lexical or syntactic forms
- preference for particular politeness strategies

These are some of the *conversational style features* that we can observe in people around (including our students and ourselves).

Gender, ethnicity, class, regional background and individual habits, are some of the factors that account for conversational style differences. Regarding gender differences, Tannen found that, due to differences in the education of women and men, they show different conversational styles. *Conversational styles* are “ways of speaking”, (Tannen, 1984: 8). Tannen uses *style* including the term *register* (Hymes, 1974: a,b), accounting for what is often thought of as *formal vs. informal* speech, but also rules of alternation, i.e. choices resulting in the mix of devices that speakers use in different contexts. Therefore, conversational styles could be defined as “ways of speaking characterized by the speakers’ choices of linguistic and paralinguistic devices used in different contexts and featuring different degrees of formality”. For instance, women and men show different conversational styles in their orientation to the expression of troubles and, consequently, feel frustrated by the other’s way of responding to their trouble telling. Moreover, they are frequently further hurt by the other’s frustration. When facing a problem, men acquire a tendency to offer solutions to problems (and women resent this tendency) while women report problems asking for understanding instead of solutions (and men resent that women do not take action to solve their problems). Tannen (2001: 51-53) reports several cases such as the following:

One man reported disappointment when his girlfriend talked about problems at work but refused taking his advice.

Another man says he always changes subject when his girlfriend tells problems: “What is the point in talking about that anymore?” “You can’t do anything about it”.

Yet another man commented that women seem to wallow in their problems, wanting to talk about them forever, whereas he and other men want to get them out and be done with them, either by finding a solution or by laughing them off.

Once different conversational styles are identified, it is essential to explore the reasons underlying speakers’ choice of style. According to Lakoff (1973) there are two basic and contradictory human needs in conversation accounting for speakers’ choice of style:

1. to be connected to other people (responding to danger of isolation)
2. to be independent (responding to danger of being engulfed by others)

Lakoff (1973) observes that speakers regularly refrain from saying what they mean in service of the higher goal of politeness, and devises a system in an attempt to explain the logic underlying specific linguistic choices (i.e. indirectness, preference for particular lexical or syntactic forms). The system includes 3 strategies oriented to maintain the basic human needs in conversation.

1. Don't impose (Distance)
2. Give options (Deference)
3. Be friendly (Camaraderie)

In choosing the form of an utterance, speakers observe one or another of these rules with a particular *stylistic effect* (indicated by the terms in brackets). That is preference for honouring one or another of these politeness principles results in a communicative strategy that makes up style.

Examples:

- Don't impose (Distance)  
Speaker A: Would you like something to drink?  
Speaker B: Thanks, that would be nice

In B, we can see indirect expression of preferences, so as not to impose one's will on others. However this kind of response is considered friendly among people who expect this strategy.

- Give options (Deference)  
Speaker A: Would you like something to drink?  
Speaker B: Whatever you are having/ Don't go to any trouble

In B, the option of decision is given to the other. These kinds of responses are considered friendly among people who expect this strategy.

- Be friendly (Camaraderie)  
Speaker A: I'm so thirsty, dude! Do you have any juice?

The speaker assumes the addressee will be pleased with the closeness of the relationship.

Brown and Levinson (1978), building on Lakoff's work on *politeness* and Goffman's (1967) notion of *face*, identify two aspects of politeness as *negative* and *positive face*. Their notion of negative face corresponds to Lakoff's defensive function of the distance strategy and the principle "don't impose":

*Negative face* is "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction –i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition".

*Positive face* corresponds to deference and camaraderie: "the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of", Brown and Levinson (1987: 61).

When speakers use a fast rate of speaking, with almost no pausing between turns, and with some overlap or even completion of other's turn, together with camaraderie, the style is characterized as high involvement style. On the contrary, speakers who use

longer pauses between turns, do not overlap, and avoid interruption or completion of other's turn, use a "high considerateness style" Yule (1996: 76).

Conversational style, then, results from the need to serve basic human needs in interaction, as Tannen (1991: 19) points out. Each person's decisions about which strategy to apply and to what extent in a given situation results in her/his characteristic *style*. The impression made by the choice of strategy will depend upon the extent to which speakers share the expectation that it is appropriate to employ a particular strategy in a particular situation. For instance, in 3 above, ("I'm so thirsty, dude! Do you have any juice?") the speaker's utterance may give the impression that s/he is pushy.

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