Everyday Talk
Building and Reflecting Identities

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EVERYDAY TALK
Acknowledgments

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Preface

The first edition of this book sought to bring the findings of discourse analysis—a rich, interesting, and too often overlooked area of study—into the mainstream of communication coursework. Its aim was to draw attention to talk as the focal activity of ordinary life and to highlight how talking is the means by which people express who they are and who they want to be, and how it is the vehicle through which people build relationships, as well as create relational problems. At work, in public meetings, and in everyday social occasions, talk is the instrument that creates, exacerbates, and—not quite as often as we would like—solves troubles.

*Everyday Talk* assumes that some students will be reading this book with no prior coursework in communication. As such, core concepts are explained, key vocabulary is highlighted, and each chapter has a preview and summary. In addition, references are used sparingly in the body of the book. Although the intended focal audience is undergraduate students, the book should also be useful to novice scholars (graduate students and academics new to discourse studies) as well. To facilitate scholarly engagement, there are extensive notes, which identify authors responsible for ideas, differences in terminology, and current debates. The notes also discuss how we adapted or combined different viewpoints, our reasons for doing so, and likely criticisms of the choices. Our hope is that this book will be useful in a variety of teaching venues: in classes exploring social interaction, language, and discourse analysis; in interpersonal and intercultural communication classes; in introductory courses in communication departments; and in communication classes that are required as part of business, education, or health science curricula.

The second edition, in which Jessica S. Robles joins Karen Tracy as a coauthor, introduces a number of changes. First, examples have been
updated to draw on the discourse research that has appeared in the past
decade. Second, a new chapter on genre has been added. After introducing
the idea of genre in everyday talk, six genres are described and linked to
identity-work. Third, an expanded concluding chapter features two case
studies composed of transcripts, Internet links to audio or video files, and
discussion questions. The cases are intended to help students integrate and
apply the ideas about identities and talk developed throughout the book.
Fourth, we have added discussions of texting, conversations on mobile
phones, and other social media in different chapters as they relate to the
concepts being discussed. Fifth, we have added more examples from non-
Western cultures to underscore the wide applicability of notions of talk and
identity. Sixth, we have provided a glossary that contains brief definitions
of all the terms introduced in boldface in the chapters. Finally, we made
a host of small changes throughout in an effort to explain concepts more
clearly and build greater cohesion with later chapters by referring to con-
cepts introduced in the earlier chapters.

A final note: The examples of everyday talk that we use in this book
are taken from studies appearing in discourse-analytic journals and books,
as well as from our own research and teaching materials. Whenever we
could, we have used actually occurring instances of talk to illustrate the
point being made; however, when we could not, we invented exchanges that
seemed plausible. We have labeled instances in the book as either excerpts
(actual instances of talk) or examples (imagined but plausible instances) to
make this distinction clear.
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PART I

THE ARGUMENT
You are sitting in a restaurant, waiting to meet a friend. To pass the time, you go into people-watching mode. Based on what you see and hear, you create mini-stories about the individuals in the restaurant. You decide who the people are, what they must be to each other, their purpose in meeting, what kinds of political commitments they must have, and so on. Then you begin to focus on the man in the booth across from you. He looks Asian—you think maybe he’s Japanese. He’s drinking coffee and watching the door. After a few minutes an American-looking couple join him. The woman introduces herself and her companion. You hear the following conversation:

**EXAMPLE 1.1 (9:06 A.M., Turley’s Restaurant. JI = Jolene Incar, LY = Lee Yamada, RL = Robert Lester)**

JI: Mr. Yamada? (Yamada nods.) I’m Jolene Incar (offers her hand) and this is my husband, Robert Lester. (The two men shake hands.) I’m sorry we’re a little late. There was a car accident and we had to go the long way around. I hope you didn’t have to wait long.

LY: No problem—I’ve only been here a minute myself. Please join me. The coffee is great.

RL: (as they slide into the booth) Jolene has been telling me about the difficulties your office has run into and I think we may be able to help you. . . .

The woman’s speech is accented; you conclude that your initial assumption about her being American was wrong. But the other two certainly
sound American.\textsuperscript{2} From this short exchange, you infer that (1) the men are American but the woman probably isn’t; (2) the three had not met previously in person, although Ms. Incar and Mr. Yamada probably had spoken on the phone; (3) the husband and wife work together in a business; (4) the trio are meeting for business rather than for pleasure; (5) Jolene Incar cares about being perceived as a polite person; and (6) Jolene and Robert are not a traditional married couple.

In creating this story—in making these particular inferences—you have drawn upon extensive knowledge about how people in American culture talk to and about each other. To know whether your inferences are accurate, you would need to question the three people. However, it is likely that many people would make the same inferences. This is the case because there are ways of talking that routinely go with being a certain kind of person, doing particular activities, and having certain relationships.

Most likely you are already aware of some features of the conversation that contribute to the inferences we have made; probably there are others that you would have a hard time naming. That both of the men are native-born Americans but that the woman probably is not is suggested by the way the three speak English, especially the dialect each person uses. That Jolene and Robert are married is cued rather obviously by Jolene’s introduction, in which she refers to Robert as her husband. That they do not have a traditional marriage is suggested, although perhaps more ambiguously, by their differing last names and the fact that a husband and wife having different last names is unconventional in American society. That the trio are business acquaintances is cued by Ms. Incar’s formal term of address (“Mr. Yamada” rather than “Lee”) and Robert’s topical reference to Mr. Yamada’s office. That they are first-time acquaintances seems probable because Jolene introduced herself, an act that would be quite strange if she and Mr. Yamada had met previously in person. In addition, the noticeable absence of pleasant inquiries (“How have you been since I last saw you?” or “How’s your new system working out?”) makes the most sense if the trio has had no prior relationship in which they had an opportunity to share information about each other. The impression that Jolene is a polite person can be tied to what she said and some specific features of the situation. Ms. Incar offered an apology for the couple’s tardiness, a reasonable excuse for why it happened, and a statement that indicated her concern about inconveniencing Mr. Yamada. Given that it was only 5 or 6 minutes past the hour—a conventional time when appointments start—it seems likely that Jolene was no more than 5 minutes late. That Jolene did all this conversational work rather than offer a perfunctory apology creates a sense of her as a polite person.
Our purpose in this book is to look at the myriad ways everyday talk reflects, sustains, builds, and challenges who people are. Everyday talk refers to the ordinary kinds of communicating people do in schools, workplaces, and shops; at public meetings; and when they are at home or with their friends. It also includes the conversations people have on mobile phones and by text, through e-mail, and in online chats. Who people are is what communication theorists call identity. Identity includes the most personal aspects of people, what in ordinary life we refer to as a person’s character (honest, considerate, sleazy), personality (overbearing, quiet and thoughtful), or attitudes (for the Tea Party, against fracking, a passionate Buffs basketball fan). It also includes characteristics we take to be relatively fixed, such as ethnic and racial background, age, sex, or nationality. In addition, identity includes the roles we take on with another in particular situations (e.g., supervisor–employee, friend–friend, coach–player, sister–brother, discussion leader–participant).

Why Is Understanding the Link between Everyday Talk and Identity So Important?

Because you have participated in family, school, and work life for many years, you already possess a wealth of experiential knowledge about links between different identities and communicative practices. Much of the knowledge you possess is tacit; that is, it is knowledge you routinely use to make sense of other people’s actions and to inform your own communicative choices. But it is not a kind of knowledge you could articulate easily; it is hidden and below the surface.

That knowledge is tacit is unproblematic when exchanges between people go well. But when people have difficulties with each other, it is crucial that they are able to analyze explicitly what went wrong. Only by being able to accurately analyze the character of an interactional difficulty is it possible to create more effective ways of managing such difficulties in the future. The central purpose of this book is to help you transform your tacit knowledge about everyday talk into explicit knowledge. With explicit knowledge of how talk links to important identities, you should find yourself better able to be the kind of person you are seeking to be and to more satisfactorily manage the social, work, public, and intimate relationships about which you care. In addition, you will be better able to avoid the inevitable and serious danger of tacit knowledge: presuming that what you know is natural and universal, and that what you take for granted is the only way that a particular identity could be linked to a communicative practice.
The Logic of Conversation: Information Exchange?

One of the most influential views of conversation is the one articulated by the language philosopher Paul Grice. Conversation, he suggested, has many purposes, but its major one is the exchange of information effectively. To accomplish this informational purpose, communicators in their roles as speakers and listeners orient to the cooperative principle. The cooperative principle guides how people both talk and interpret, and it specifies that participants should “make their conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”

In describing conversation as “cooperative,” Grice did not mean to say that conversation is only and always nice and pleasant. Conversation is a cooperative activity in much the same way that football is cooperative. For the game of football to work, players need to assume that other players will adhere to the basic logic of the game. Players, for instance, are expected to run toward a particular goal post, not toward the other one, nor up into the grandstands. Moreover, every move in football is to be interpreted by assuming that all players are adhering to this logic.

Conversation’s cooperative principle, however, does not stand by itself; there are four maxims that give it meat. These maxims (i.e., rules) specify more particularly what it means to be cooperative. Speakers are expected to (1) say just the right amount (quantity maxim), (2) say what they believe to be true (quality maxim), (3) make their comments relevant (relevance maxim), and (4) be orderly and avoid ambiguous, obscure phrases (manner maxim). These rules, rather obviously, do not provide a straightforward description of how people talk. People, rather frequently, make irrelevant comments, say too much or too little, and assert things that are not literally true. If Grice’s claim were simply “This is how people talk,” he would have been wrong, and his views would not have been very influential. However, his argument was subtler than this. According to Grice, rather than straightforwardly describing conversational action, the cooperative principle with its maxims furnishes an interpretive logic.
for conversation. Thus if a man, upon walking outside into pouring rain, comments, “Beautiful day, isn’t it?” his partner will assume that he is cooperating to convey information but that he is ignoring the quality maxim. She most likely will hear his remark as giving information about how awful the weather is.

Blatantly ignoring (flouting) a maxim is a way conversational implicatures are generated. Conversational implicatures are meanings that differ from what a person said explicitly. For instance, assume that Len has applied for a job as manager of a small store. As part of the decision-making process, his possible future employer telephones his past employer. The past employer says, “Len is a great person. He’s always on time.” The new employer interprets this comment about Len as being less informative than would be expected for this type of job reference. The meaning she takes from the comment, as she assumes the past employer is following the cooperative principle, is that Len has some habits that might make him ineffective as a manager.

Grice’s view of conversation is a powerful one. It begins to explain some of what happens in conversation. Yet, as we hope will be clear to you by the end of this book, information exchange is not the most important reason that people talk with each other.

**Interactional Meanings and Identity-Work**

Although people do talk with each other to give and receive information, other activities are always getting done. Most important for our purpose is the ongoing way talk is doing identity-work. Identity-work refers to the process through which talk makes available to participants and observers who the people doing the talking must be. There are two sides to identity-work:

1. Talk does identity-work. Through a person’s choices about how to talk, identity-work is accomplished. That is, people’s ways of talking construct pictures of who people must be.
2. Identities shape talk. That is, people are embedded in various communities (e.g., by nationality, ethnicity, age, professional, recreational), and this results in their learning and using distinctive expressive styles. These community-shaped styles become markers of identity categories. Being an American, a teenager, or a Latino leads one to talk in ways that differ from those of speakers of other nationalities, ages, or ethnicities.
We explore this twofold process in detail in subsequent chapters. At this beginning point, however, we need to say a few things about the meaning-making process.

**Utterance Content versus Interactional Meaning**

In talk the smallest meaningful unit is the utterance. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian scholar writing in the early years of the 20th century, was the first person to argue for the importance of distinguishing the basic unit of speech from the sentence in writing. Utterances, what a speaker utters, may be as short as a single word or phrase or as long as a couple of sentences. But unlike sentences, utterances are always situated, occurring at particular times and places, and directed toward particular someones. For instance, in Example 1.2 there are four utterances.

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**EXAMPLE 1.2**

Yvonne is walking toward Jared and they catch each other’s gaze.

Y: Hello, how are you?
J: Not bad, you?
Y: Good.
J: Good. Got time to go get coffee?

Utterances are responses to other utterances (Jared’s “Not bad, you?” is a response to Yvonne’s greeting) or to events in a local environment (Yvonne’s “Hello, how are you?” is a response to catching Jared’s eye). The audience for any utterance is particular. Jared and Yvonne were addressing each other. Because utterances are units of social life, as well as linguistic expressions (words, phrases, and sentences), they will always have two levels of meaning.

The content of an utterance, the first level, is the conventional meaning of the words or phrases that were said. It is the literal or dictionary-level meaning that exists apart from any particular context. For instance, the conventional meaning of the word hello is a greeting, a friendly token one person uses in meeting another. But hello also has other meanings. If a person says “hello” in the middle of a telephone call, its interactional meaning may be to check that the other person is still on the line. If “hello” is said in the midst of a face-to-face conversation, particularly if the syllables of the word are elongated (“he:h-lo:h”), it may be intended as criticism for making
an unreasonable remark. The interactional meaning of an utterance is its meaning for the participants in the situation in which the utterance (or, more usually, a sequence of utterances) occurred. Interactional meaning arises from and depends on the context and may be given or given off.

Communicators may consciously work to create a certain impression or may do so inadvertently. Erving Goffman\(^6\) describes this as the difference between meanings that are intentionally given and those that are given off. For instance, a person speaking to a group may work to present herself as relaxed and confident and do so by smiling, gazing at everyone present, telling a joke to get started, speaking extemporaneously rather than reading, and so on. However, if in speaking her voice cracks or she pauses after just a few words, members of the audience might see her as being a bit more nervous than she is trying to show. The cracked voice and the inappropriate pause would be meanings that were given off, that is, not intentionally planned by a communicator but revealing nonetheless. In considering the relationship between everyday talk and identities, we are interested in both kinds of meaning.

**Linking Content and Interactional Meaning**

Every utterance, then, can be analyzed in terms of its literal meaning (the content) and its meaning in context (interactional meaning). Of importance is the linkage between the levels. For the most part, the content level is relatively straightforward and unambiguous. If people share a common language and the physical communicative situation is not noisy and confusing, it is pretty easy to agree on what the content of an utterance was. In contrast, its interactional meaning is not only dependent on what was said but also considerably more ambiguous.

Arriving at the interactional meaning of a sequence of utterances requires examining what was said (the words) in light of how it was said, the people who said it, the situation, and what had previously been uttered. Put another way, the interactional meaning of an utterance arises from the content of a message in combination with the context. **Context**, then, references all the background kinds of information that shape how interactional meanings get assigned to what is said.\(^7\)

For instance, “thanks for your help” means something quite different when it is uttered by one student to another one after sharing notes from a missed class than it does when uttered by a woman panhandling on a corner of a city street to a pedestrian who gazed away and shook his head when she requested money. Saying “thanks” is a conventional way to show appreciation of another. It is also, as Jonathan Culpeper shows, a common
way to criticize.® Thanking a person in a context in which she has spilled food on you, commented that your new haircut is “different,” or shows up an hour later than promised is likely to be taken (and meant) as sarcasm. That “thanks” can mean the opposite of its literal meaning is humorously cued by a website that offers “Semi-Hostile Thank You Notes for Every Occasion.”

ExcERPT 1.3

Dinner Party: Dear Host, Thank you for dinner on Friday. We had a nice time, so please don’t worry that the chicken was dry and the piecrust had obviously been overhandled. Best, Guest

Wedding Present: Dear Present Presenter, Thank you for the wedding present. How creative of you to select something yourself when we had such an extensive registry from which to choose! Cheers, Newlyweds

Job Interview: Dear Job Interviewer, I wanted to thank you for meeting with me the other day. Even though based on some of the questions you asked, it doesn’t seem like you really know what you’re looking for in a candidate. I wish you the best of luck with the process and hope to hear from you soon. Regards, Job Seeker

It is also the case that absence of thanks, given a particular context, may convey negative interactional meanings to certain participants. A school district had “lost” (not accurately budgeted) 14 million dollars. In the public meeting that followed immediately after the crisis was reported, the board announced that a past superintendent known for his financial savvy (Roger Driver) would be returning to help the district sort through what the district needed to do. Consider the concluding comments in two speeches of citizens addressing the Board and the superintendent. In each speech, the citizen had extensively criticized the district for allowing such an error to be made. Then in the final moments each thanked Driver.

EXCERPT 1.4

Mr. Driver I’m very reassured that you came back. The district ran very well when you were here financially, everybody knows that. And we appreciate your effort ((applause)).
Finally, uh, I’d like to close by thanking Mr. Driver. The air smells better in here already uh having Roger on board. And uh that’s the best dollar this board has ever spent.

The citizens’ thanks sound sincere. Driver had offered to help out at a difficult time, agreeing to be paid only one dollar in compensation. Speakers’ comments recognized his generosity and his ability, and the applause underscored that the audience felt likewise. At the same time the context of the meeting made obvious another interactional meaning of the thanks. The absence of thanks addressed to other district leaders became interpretable as an additional criticism of the Board and superintendent’s conduct. This is particularly obvious in Excerpt 1.5, in which the speaker metaphorically references the air quality, but with contextual knowledge of the prior talk and who is being addressed, it is easily inferable in Excerpt 1.4 as well. The particular setting and identities of participants, as well as a person’s tone of voice, facial expression, the order in which parts of the message are sequenced, and so on, will shape the situated meaning of an utterance. Importantly, context is not restricted to features of the people and situation; it is also cued through the design of utterances, how they are said—that is, their particular vocalic quality—and the choice of one content-similar word over another (e.g., inexpensive vs. cheap). John Gumperz refers to these within-speech aspects of context as contextualization cues.11 Figure 1.1 portrays the relationships among utterance content, context, and meaning.

When people use the same contextualization cues—a likely state when people come from the same sociocultural background—a speaker’s intended meaning is more likely to be in alignment with the one that a listener assigns. But if people do not share contextualization cues, a problem can arise. For instance, in American English a central way that speakers convey interest in a person or enthusiasm about an issue is through their tone of voice. Thus, if a speaker, in responding to an invitation, said in a monotone voice, “Thank you for asking, perhaps another time,” a different meaning would be attached to her utterance than if she emphasized the phrase “Thank you” and had a strong upward vocal inflection at the end of the phrase “another time.” In the former case, the American English-speaking listener is likely to infer that the person is trying to be polite but does not really want to spend time with him. In the latter case, the listener may infer that the other person really does want to get to know him.
but cannot accept his invitation at this particular time. The use of voice inflection to signal attitude is a contextualization cue. But voice inflection, as well as other contextualization cues, is not universal. Consequently, if speakers come from communities that use different contextualization cues, they may very well misinterpret each other.

Gumperz describes a number of problems that have arisen between Indian English speakers and British English speakers because of just such different contextualization conventions. For instance, Indian English-speaking women working in a cafeteria were getting complaints from British English-speaking patrons about their rudeness. In looking at their conversational action, Gumperz discovered that the British English patrons were attributing rudeness to the staff because of the workers’ intonation patterns when they offered services. Instead of saying “Gravy?” with a rising intonation, as British English speakers would to offer a service and be polite, the Indian English speakers were saying “Gravy” with a falling intonation. For British English speakers, this conveyed an identity message that suggested you’re not important, so just take it or leave it. This was unintended by the Indian English speakers, whose communicative practices did not include using intonation to convey these relational attitudes.
So far we have discussed interactional meaning as if it were a single thing, but this is not the case. Interactional meaning is best thought of in the plural: interactional meanings.

**The Multiple Layers and Kinds of Interactional Meanings**

In every communicative situation there are at least two versions of interactional meaning: (1) the meanings intended by the first person speaking and (2) the meanings assigned by the conversational partner. Should there be observing, nonfocal participants, there could be a third set of interactional meanings. Put simply, interactional meanings are positioned and likely to differ across participants. When communication goes smoothly, we tend to think about meaning as unitary and seamless—that what a listener understood is what a speaker meant. But to be able to manage communication well, it is important to recognize that there are always two or more views of what an interaction meant. Often parties’ views are similar enough that the difference can be ignored. Nonetheless, they are always there. Differences in interactional meanings may lead to awkward moments or small confusions and sometimes even serious conflict. Consider an ordinary, end-of-the-day exchange between a boyfriend, Don, and his girlfriend, Heather.

### EXCERPT 1.6

1. D: How was school today
2. H: Okay
3. (pause)
4. D: Hhh just okay?
5. H: Ayup
6. D: Why what happened?
7. H: Nothin. It was kinda boring. We left for lunch though
8. D: Who did
9. H: Me and Maria and Sean and- and Max Clancey
10. D: Sean who?
11. H: Sean ah (1.0) Peters. Maria’s- you know Abruzzi
12. D: Yeah
13. H: Maria’s new boyfriend.
14. (pause)
Anita Pomerantz and B. J. Fehr analyze this recorded exchange to illustrate the complex layers of meaning inherent in this most ordinary of conversations. They had many interesting things to say; we would highlight just one point. A typical event for families or roommates is for each person to inquire at the end of the day about the other’s day. Asking a person how her day went is a small way for one person to show interest in another. Doing so (usually) expresses concern, as it displays that one person cares enough about the other that he is tracking events in her life. At first glance this seems the most obvious interactional meaning of this exchange. Don is engaging in a small caring ritual common among people who live together. At line 19, however, when Don’s responds to Heather’s recounting of her lunch with the trailing-off comment, “Yea well you better tell Max that uh:” we are led to suspect another interactional meaning. Don’s remark sounds like the beginning of a threat, something like “you better tell Max that you’re my girlfriend” or “tell Max to leave my girl alone.” We, of course, do not know exactly what Don was going to say. He may have intended something quite different. But because utterance conclusions are projectable from what’s said initially, it seems likely that the projections we offered could have been meant by Don. More certainly we can say that Heather interpreted Don’s comment in this way and took what he said as an expression of jealousy. Her response cues that she assigned this interactional meaning. Telling one’s boyfriend that another man already has a girlfriend displays Max’s likely lack of interest in her. By adding that Max wears “disgusting earrings,” Heather can be seen as doing even more work to reassure Don: Not only is Max not looking for a girlfriend, but Heather doesn’t like his appearance.

Interactional meanings are not fixed but can be revamped across time. As a different interpretation comes to mind, one can inspect an exchange
to see whether there were earlier signs that one’s interpretation was valid. Heather’s lack of response (line 2) after Don’s initial inquiry—not treating his question as an invitation to talk about her day—suggests she might have been interpreting his question from the start as sensitive, an act of fishing for information about her connection to other men. Whether a person in an intimate relationship is expressing care for the other, actually being jealous, or is assumed by one’s partner to be jealous will be crucially important to the parties. This is the stuff of interactional meanings.

Interactional meaning is positioned and shaped by each participant; it involves layers. These layers can be thought of as answers to three interrelated questions about the meaning of an interaction. At the first layer, the question to ask is, “What act is being performed by uttering a particular set of words?” If a speaker says, “Excuse me,” is the action apologizing or reprimanding? Speech acts name utterances in terms of their purpose. Is what a person saying (1) giving information, (2) making an offer, (3) complimenting, (4) criticizing, (5) requesting a favor, (6) ordering another to do something, (7) apologizing, or (8) something else? We have more to say about speech acts and how they do identity-work in Chapter 4.

A second layer of interactional meaning is the situation frame. This idea, initially developed by Gregory Bateson and expanded by Goffman, refers to the understood label for an occasion. Were Don and Heather doing friendly end-of-the-day checking-in or jealousy-motivated monitoring and responding? Frames are broader than speech acts; they are the everyday names we give to speech occasions. Frames include such things as a therapy session, two friends chatting, an interview, a lecture, an advising session, a prayer group, a team meeting, or a coffee break. Some frames would also be described as distinct genres of discourse. We explore these types of frames more in Chapter 11. Frames typically go unnamed, seeming self-evident to participants. It would be quite strange indeed for a college teacher to begin a class by announcing: “The situation we’re in is a lecture. This means I’m going to do most of the talking and you get to do most of the listening. If you want to make a comment or ask a question, raise your hand.”

Frames are inferred from the physical situation and change through the ways people talk with each other. For instance, imagine a group of eight people in a room. There’s a large rectangular table with chairs around it, and off to the side is a small table with coffee and sweet rolls. At one point in time people are standing up, sipping coffee, milling around the room, and chatting in small groups of two to three about such topics as their baseball team’s recent loss, a good movie that someone saw, and a coworker’s recent engagement. At a later point, all eight people are sitting
around the large table, one person is speaking at a time, and the person at one end of the table is directing the talk of the others with phrases such as “The next item on our agenda is . . .” or “Does anyone have anything else to propose?” The frame for the first kind of interaction is a coffee break; the frame for the second is a work meeting. The coffee-break frame changes to the meeting frame when participants purposefully change how they talk with each other. In a college lecture, if a group of students stood up, shouted at the instructor, held up placards, and shook their fists, the understood frame would change from a lecture to a student protest.

Most often communicators assume the same frame as their partner, but this is not always so. For instance, if one person sets up a meeting with a colleague to talk about a joint project, the expected frame is likely to be a work meeting. However, if in the course of the meeting the person comments positively about the colleague’s appearance, touches the colleague’s hand a couple of times, asks about the colleague’s past weekend, and holds the colleague’s gaze for slightly longer than is normal, the colleague might wonder whether the other is flirting. Frames are suggested by the physical context (meeting in a teacher’s office vs. meeting in a coffee shop) but are modified and redefined through ways of talking.

Third, a final set of questions we could pose about the meaning of an interaction focuses directly on the people doing the talking. What kind of person is each communicator? How does each one regard the other? What kind of relationship do the two have? Identity-work refers to this kind of interactional meaning; it is the way a segment of talk implicates who the people must be. Consider a segment of talk that Frederick Erickson taped between a physician (an intern) and his supervisor (a senior physician). The situation frame was a “patient presentation,” a talk occasion in which one physician (or physician in training, i.e., medical student) presents information to another physician about a patient and gives his or her tentative diagnosis as to what is the patient’s likely medical problem. Consider what the intern initially said (Excerpt 1.7), as well as one exchange (Excerpt 1.8) with his supervisor.

**EXCERPT 1.7**

This is Ned Nagon, a twenty-nine year old black male. He was referred from emergency room with complaints of lower abdominal discomfort, super-pubic discomfort. It’s sorta hard to get a clear history. I’ll sorta go from the top (the intern goes on to say that the patient had normal health until two months ago. Then he had a swelling in the right eye—be
has a prosthesis in the right eye from a gunshot wound—no neurological damage from that wound. He went first to the eye clinic and to the ear, nose and throat clinic.) He was treated five to seven days with “Amox.” Intern notes how patient had had a new sex partner and had recently been tested for sexually transmitted diseases by another doctor.

At one point in giving the patient’s history, the intern begins to describe medications and the following exchange occurs:

**EXCERPT 1.8**

I: Let’s see, medications. He doesn’t take anything. He hasn’t taken anything over the counter. No home remedies. He doesn’t smoke. He does do, he does smoke some marijuana, thirty dollars a week.

S: (smiles) How much is that?
I: (no smile) I have no idea.
S: (smile) It used to be an ounce (smiles).
I: (smile) It’s probably a little more depending on where you live (serious face). NO IVDA, no cocaine. He, he’s had multiple episodes of sexually transmitted diseases.
S: He’s straight or gay?
I: He’s straight. He has a girlfriend but sounds like he has other partners as well. His support is, he’s on SSI for the gunshot wound.
S: Any history of colonic cancer?

The first thing to be said about this presentation and exchange is that the talk reflects and constructs the two as medical personnel, either both doctors or a doctor and a medical student. These identities are constructed through the accurate use of acronyms and medical jargon (Amox, IVDA [intravenous drug administration]), as well as vocabulary related to social services and funding that are common in urban hospital settings (e.g., SSI). In addition to the jargon, another aspect of the talk that reflects that they are doctors is the patient presentation frame in which they are participating.

This type of impersonal style of describing a patient, in which age and race are mentioned first, followed by a general category description of the person’s complaint, implies not only that the speaker is a doctor (or doctor in training) but also that the addressed other is. This is not the style doctors would use in talking with a patient’s family to tell family members what
was wrong with their relative. In the language of identity-work, we could say that this segment of talk presents the speaker (I) as a physician and altercasts his conversational partner (treats the person he is talking with) as also a doctor. Anyone with familiarity with this kind of talk could rather easily guess which party is the supervisor and which is the junior doctor. By and large, it is medical students and junior physicians who present patient cases to senior physicians. Thus, in this situation, the amount and content of I’s talk is doing identity-work that cues that he is junior to S.

There are other, more subtle identities at stake in this interaction. Case presentations are a major site in which medical students, interns (beginning doctors), and residents (a doctor with several years of experience) seek to present self as medically competent for their level. In case presentations, medical students are quickly corrected by their seniors for errors. They are expected to use, and thereby display that they have command of, the vast array of medical terms. But as interns gain experience, their style of doing case presentations takes on a different flavor. The sign of an experienced physician is the ability to switch back and forth between technical medical terminology and casual everyday vocabulary. “Part of what the intern in residency needs to learn and practice is how NOT to appear as a beginning medical student performing a hyper-correct, stilted version of a case presentation.” 17 In Example 1.7, then, through the way the intern mixes the everyday and the technical vocabulary—the phrase “eye clinic” rather than ophthalmology in one breath and in the next the shorthand name of the drug amoxicillin, “amox”—he enacts himself as a relatively advanced doctor.

Finally, we must comment about the most subtle level of identity-work that occurs in the exchange. The intern is an African American man about the same age as the presenting patient; the supervisor is a white middle-aged man. Both men hail from middle-class family backgrounds and have had similar professional experiences (20+ years of school). The patient who is being presented is African American. Given the history of race in the United States, even recognizing the major changes that have occurred in the past 50 years, there is often a degree of tension in encounters between persons of different races. This is especially likely to happen when an upper-middle-class African American professional is in the position of speaking for an underclass African American to a senior professional who is white. Erickson puts it this way:

The African-American professional may feel a special obligation for advocacy on behalf of the less powerful racial co-member or may feel an obligation to take the position of an institutional officer/professional (the
vast majority of whom are white) and distance him- or herself from the racial co-member. Whichever side of this tension the African-American professional chooses to play in a given situation there is the potential for face-threat. 18

**Face** is the view of self each person seeks to uphold in an interaction. **Face-threat** is the challenge a person experiences to a facet of identity that he or she cares about in a particular situation. We say more about these concepts later. In this exchange, the intern experienced a face-threat related to his racial and professional identities. Erickson works through a detailed analysis of how this happens. Suffice it to say that in Example 1.8 the intern could have used the casual everyday terms (“pot” rather than “marijuana,” “shooting up” rather than “IVDA”) along with the medical ones, thereby displaying the terminology mix that is the sign of an advanced intern. He did not do this.

Interestingly, though, the intern appeared to be going to use the informal forms. When people change what they are saying in midstream, it is often possible to infer what they started to say but decided against. Consider how the intern began to describe the patient’s marijuana use: “He doesn’t smoke. He does do, he does smoke some marijuana.” It appears, then, that the intern was about to say that the patient “does do pot” but rejected this word choice and used the more formal term. In essence, the intern’s choice to use a formal term at this juncture made him sound more like a medical student than like an advanced physician. Why might he have edited his talk toward the more formal style? Why was he willing to let his talk imply that he was more of a novice than he actually was? There is no way to know for sure, but one consequence of using the informal drug names is that it could be seen as somewhat dismissive or unsympathetic to a fellow racial member. Or he may have edited what he was saying to avoid displaying the kind of familiarity with street drug usage that could be negatively linked to being African American.

What identity-work was accomplished by the white supervising physician in making the casual remark about the “price of an ounce”? One possibility is that the white physician may have been involved in a moment of stereotyping, presuming the intern’s knowledge of street drugs because he was African American. Or the remark may have had nothing to do with race. It may have been meant as a small gesture of bonding, a recognition of similarity between the two men. From this perspective, the supervising physician’s remark about the cost of an ounce was an identity-work move that referenced both men’s college experiences in which knowledge of marijuana could be presumed commonplace. We do not know what either
doctor intended or interpreted, but we do see that the conversation displayed a moment of interactional discomfort. As Erickson concludes, “It is through just such subtleties—the attribution of a whiff of a hint, whether intended by the other party or not—that interaction can become racialized in collegial interaction in the helping professions in the United States.”

Talk reflects who people are and is also the instrument through which people build who they want to be. Talk does identity-work and identities work to shape talk, yet the process is by no means straightforward and certain (if a person says X, it means that he or she is a Y kind of person; or Y kinds of people will always talk in an X kind of way). Identity-work is an inherently uncertain process. It is a cueing procedure that involves guesswork, a bit like a detective working to figure out the most likely culprit in a crime. As clues begin to add up and point in the same direction, an interpreter can have greater confidence in the conclusion that is being pointed to. Identity-work, then, is the glue linking identity with ways of talking. Let’s examine the concepts that are glued together.

**What Does “Identity” Mean?**

*Identity* is a term with many meanings, both in ordinary life and in academic study. It includes the most personal aspects of who people are, as well as group-level identifications. In everyday conversations we routinely talk about people having “identity crises”—being confused about who they are. We also treat identities as things that belong to individuals, possessions that may be stolen—“identity fraud.” The term also references the boxes societies use to categorize their members. It is the descriptive stuff that is treated as informative and necessary when people fill out forms (male/female, black/white/Hispanic, gay/straight). When people from these groups fight over who is or is not entitled to resources and respectful treatment, we call the process “identity politics.”

Researchers who study communication and identity draw on these meanings, with theories extending and systematizing different aspects of the concept. Some scholars, such as social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner or those influenced by sociolinguist William Labov, adopt a category approach, equating identity with group-level categories such as ethnicity, nationality, and social class. Category approaches treat identities as stable aspects of persons that shape how they communicate. In contrast, other scholars adopt a social constructionist approach. Social constructionists assume that who people are is created through the actions they choose, particularly their expressive choices. That is, rather than seeing
identity as fixed and stable, identity is regarded as fluid, better referred to in the plural (identities), with various pieces of it often at odds with other pieces. People change identities to suit the needs of the moment. Having an identity is an accomplishment, not a preexisting fact. In 2000 Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argued that the term identity was being used in so many different ways that it had become useless. Given the many books that have been published since Brubaker and Cooper’s article that have “identity” in the title, it appears that their argument was not persuasive. Most truly influential concepts, we suggest, will have contrary threads in their meanings. In an interesting book about the nature of everyday thought, Michael Billig argues for the importance of recognizing how contradictory impulses are not only typical but also a virtue of ordinary thinking. Common sense, as he puts it, “is not unitary but is composed of contradictory aspects.” Communicative life is messy and complicated. Contrary proposals about what identity is offer a way to capture that complexity.

Identities, then, are best thought of as stable features of persons that exist prior to any particular situation and as dynamic and situated accomplishments, enacted through talk, changing from one occasion to the next. Similarly, identities are social categories and are personal and unique. There is no agreed-upon system for describing types of identities. Exactly how identities are categorized varies by authors in light of the purposes they have. Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe, for instance, distinguished six main kinds of identity—conversational, institutional, narrative, commodified, spatial, and virtual—whereas Andrew McKinlay and Chris McVittie distinguish seven kinds, only one of which is the same as the ones that Benwell and Stokoe name. In addition to virtual identities, which both sets of authors include, McKinlay and McVittie identify (1) national, (2) ethnic and religious, (3) gender, (4) health, (5) law-linked, and (6) workplace identities. For the purpose of understanding everyday talk, we divide identities into three main kinds.

The first kind, master identities, references those aspects of personhood that are presumed to be relatively stable and unchanging: gender, ethnicity, age, national and regional origins. Any particular person is male or female; Asian, Hispanic, European, or African American; 20, 40, or 60 years of age; and so on. Master identities do not change from situation to situation. But although master identities are fixed and preinteractionally given in one sense, in another they are not. That is, what it means to be young, middle-aged, or old or an American, a Colombian, or an Egyptian person shifts across time and interactions among people. Through the ways people with different master identities deal with each other, the meanings
of particular identities are established. Meanings can, and do, change over time and across situations. Of note is the fact that master identities frequently are conceived as contrastive sets. The meaning of being male is deeply bound up with the meaning of being female; each gender category informs and contrastively defines the other. Similarly, what it means to be a southerner is understood in terms of the visible ways it contrasts with being a midwesterner, a northerner, or a westerner. Don Zimmerman characterizes master identities as transportable ones, facets of self that are visible to others and carried from situation to situation.28

The second kind of identity, interactional identity, refers to specific roles that people take on in a communicative context with regard to specific other people. For instance, Jason may be a friend in one context, an employee of Pizza-Plus in another, a college student, a hospital volunteer, a son, or a husband in yet others. Interactional identities may be formulated at different levels of abstraction. They may be formulated at the level of social roles, as just illustrated, or they may be formulated to make visible the particular discourse actions a person is doing. For example, rather than identifying a person as a student, at any moment we could think of him or her as a questioner, a presenter, a discussant, a debater, and so on. Interactional identities are situation- and relationship-specific.29

Interactional identities are distinct from master identities but are not independent of them. In American society, for instance, the interactional identities of elementary school teacher, secretary, or nurse are expected to go with the master identity of being female, whereas the interactional identities of surgeon, engineer, or airline pilot are expected to go with the master identity of male. To the degree to which an interactional identity is strongly associated with a master identity, whether it is gender, race, or age, that interactional identity takes on some of the broader master identity features with which it is associated. One consequence of society’s deep-seated expectations about which identities are natural partners is that persons who take on identities that are not seen as going together (e.g., a male nurse, a female police officer) may experience some communicative difficulties in enacting both identities satisfactorily.

The third kind of identity is what in ordinary life we think of as individuals’ personality and character, their relationships with others, and their attitudes about events, issues, and other people. Personal identities include features of self that are treated as relatively stable, even though they may vary from situation to situation. Personal identities reference the “personality” aspects of self: as tolerant or bigoted, serious or fun-loving, friendly or aloof, abrasive or tactful, timid or aggressive, honest or deceitful, competent and deserving of respect or not. Personal identity also includes the
kinds of relationships people have with others—warm or hostile; equal, superior, or subordinate; close or distant—to name but a few of the most important dimensions of relationships. Personal identities related to one’s relationships, what we could label relational identities, are negotiated moment to moment and are variable. They are what people monitor most to see whether a relationship is improving or disintegrating. As with the other types of identities, relationship-linked identities do not exist apart from other kinds of identities. Persons in an employee–supervisor relationship, for example, would be expected to enact an unequal relationship at least part of the time. However, there may be other occasions—having coffee in the morning, drinking beers after work—in which the personal identities enacted between the two become equal. For many Americans, having equal (or near-equal) relations with a superior on at least some occasions is the mark of a good work relationship. A final piece of personal identity involves the stances people take: Does a person favor or oppose, or have no opinion whatsoever about, same-sex marriage, gun control, or a local governance initiative to raise taxes and build a rail system? We return to the notion of stance in Chapter 9 and explore it more fully. At this point we would note that stance is a more interaction-grounded way to refer to attitudes.

Personal identities are bound up with master and interactional identities in two ways. First, other people hold expectations regarding what kind of personal identities are likely depending on existing master and interactional identities. Cultural beliefs about these links are the strongest for gender but operate for other facets of identity as well. In American culture Hispanics, for instance, are expected to be more emotionally expressive than Anglos. Conservative Christians are expected to oppose same-sex marriage more than Unitarians, Jews, or agnostics. Arrogance is more likely to be attributed to a doctor or a person in some other high-status profession who disagrees with another person than to a construction worker. Being cantankerous or spry are identities likely to be assigned to older people, whereas 20-year-olds are likely to be (and be described as) naïve or impetuous.

Second, what counts as expression of a personal identity is going to depend on a communicator’s master and interactional identities. For example, although being fair may be valued across situations, the communicative actions that realize fairness will shift across interactional identities. Being a fair judge is going to be different from being a fair friend or a fair group member for a school project. Moreover, what a culture may count as adequately enacting a personal identity may depend on one’s master identity. The judgment that a person is supportive or aggressive, for instance, rests
not only upon the person’s communicative actions but also upon whether that person is male or female.

In everyday talk situations, then, communicators have multiple identities of three broad types: master, interactional, and personal. Some of these identities are visible, are brought to interaction, and shape how people talk; others are built up in the interaction through the particular ways each person expresses self and treats the other.

**Face, a Particularly Important Facet of Identity**

Closely related to the concept of identity is the notion of face. *Face*—a term initially popularized by Goffman, who adapted the original Chinese idea to Western societies—refers to the positive image of self that is desired in a particular situation. Communicators have face wants prior to an interaction, but it is through the interaction that face is either established or threatened. The face that each person achieves, then, depends on what the partner does. This means that face is constructed in an interaction through the self’s and others’ conversational moves. The kinds of face people seek to construct relate to their desires to be liked, appreciated, and seen as competent and to desires to avoid imposition from others. Debates about whether and how Goffman’s ideas should be revised are many, but in all views people’s concerns about their own and others’ face are seen to be a central shaper and motivator of everyday talk.\(^{30}\)

Face can be thought of as a kind of personal identity—it concerns people’s desires to be regarded as competent, likeable, and deserving of respect. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, in fact, distinguish between two aspects of face—one kind that focuses on competence and likeability, what they label *positive face*, and a second kind geared to seeking respect and avoiding imposition (*negative face*).\(^{31}\) What face adds to understandings of identity, whether we think of face in the singular or as comprising two aspects, is summed up in the following:

1. It is grounded in interaction. Face emphasizes what is wanted, as well as accomplished, within specific communicative encounters, and it underscores the importance of others’ actions.

2. As face may be attacked as well as supported by the actions of self and others, a focus on face helps us to give attention to how identities are endangered and challenged, as well as supported or maintained.
3. Finally, face is bound up with a strategic view of communication. In highlighting how face may be lost or gained based on what parties do, it draws attention to the consequentiality of communication choices and the importance of choosing wisely.

None of these features is entirely absent in concepts of identity, but they are backgrounded and less visible. For these reasons, we use the term face when we want to draw attention to the particular kinds of personal identity noted previously, when a situation involves identity threat or endangerment, and when we want to highlight the strategic character of people’s talk. By analogy, then, facework refers to how everyday talk practices support or challenges one or the other party’s face.

**What Are Discursive Practices?**

Scholars who write about everyday talk most commonly refer to talk as “discourse,” in which discourse means nothing more than a multiutterance unit of talk. Interpreting and analyzing a conversation, a meeting, or a speech, such as we did in the conversation between the two doctors, is the doing of discourse analysis. The concept of discursive practices links to discourse but puts an emphasis on the communicators performing the practice. Discursive practices are talk activities that people do. The reason we use the label discursive practices rather than talk is that it leads us to see talking not just as a single thing but as an activity that has many different parts and kinds.

A discursive practice may refer to a small piece of talk (person-referencing practices), or it may focus on a large one (narratives); it may focus on single features that may be named and pointed to (speech acts); or it may reference sets of features (dialect, stance). Discursive practices may focus on something done by an individual (style), or they may refer to actions that require more than one party (genre). Table 1.1 offers a beginning definition of the discursive practices with which you will be familiar by the end of this book.

**Linking Discursive Practices and Identities**

The relationship between discursive practices and identities is a reciprocal one. The identities a person brings to an interaction influence how that
person communicates. At the same time, the specific discursive practices a
person chooses will shape who he or she is taken to be and who the partner
is taken to be. Figure 1.2 presents a visual display of this reciprocal rela-
tionship.

Thus far we have primarily focused on the self-presentational side of
talk. It is also the case that a person’s talk, his or her selected discursive
practices, shapes the conversational partner’s identities. Identity-work (or
facework) always has two sides, a self-presentational side and a partner-
directed one. For example, imagine you are sitting outside someplace on a
university campus. You hear two people ask for directions to the commu-
nication department’s main office.

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<th>TABLE 1.1. Kinds of Discursive Practices</th>
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<td>Talk’s building blocks</td>
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<td>Person-referencing practices</td>
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<td>Speech acts</td>
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<td>Sight and sound of speech</td>
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<td>Dialect; ways of using one’s voice (loudness, rate, pitch quality)</td>
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<td>Interaction structures</td>
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<td>Narrative</td>
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Go to the UMC on the fountain side, across from the door where all the student organization tables are. Across from that door is the university museum, and next to it is Helmus. Go in that door on the ground floor and you’ll be right by the communication office.

Go straight up this street. You can see you’re going west because it’s toward the mountains. Follow this path, you’ll have to go around several buildings until you come to the University Memorial Center, that’s the student union. On the northwest side of the building, you’ll see a fountain area with water spurting up in several places. Kitty-corner to the fountain area, you’ll see Helms. It’s right next to the university museum and a bunch of bike racks. Go in the door on the ground floor and you’ll be right by the communication office.

In Examples 1.9 and 1.10, the speaker’s talk altercasts the recipient of the asked-for directions differently; that is, the speaker’s directions create or suggest a picture of who the person must be. In the first case the directions altercast the recipient as a regular member of the university community, a fellow college student, a faculty member, or staff person. That the direction asker is taken to be a university insider is implied in the first set of directions (Example 1.9) by the use of an acronym to identify a major campus building (“UMC” rather than “University Memorial Center”), the reference to a door where certain activities occur (student organization tables), which presupposes familiarity with the setup of the UMC, and the less detailed style. All of these features contrast with the directions in
Example 1.10. As such, the second set of directions alterscasts the asker as a visitor, a stranger to the university who is unlikely to be familiar with its landmarks.

That a speaker’s talk alterscasts a partner to a certain identity does not mean that the partner has to accept that identity. Conversational partners can respond in ways that reject or seek to modify the identity that a speaker implies. In the first case, then, if the direction asker was actually a visitor, she might interrupt the direction giver to say, “What does UMC stand for?” In the second case, if the direction asker was a member of the university community, he might interrupt to say, “Yeah, I know where the UMC is.” Thus, although the identities that get constructed are negotiable, each exchange simultaneously offers a picture of who the self is and who the other is taken to be.

**Altercasting**, then, references the work a person’s talk does to maintain, support, or challenge the conversational partner’s identities. *Altercasting*, a term initially used by several social psychologists that we have adopted and expanded, highlights how the way we talk to and act toward others (alters) puts them in roles (casts them). Consider a second example of altercasting. Ellen, a student in a communication class, goes to talk to her teacher about some course materials that she did not understand. In this type of communication situation, two identity-relevant issues are likely to be at stake: (1) what kind of student–teacher relationship the two have, which is an aspect of each party’s personal identity; and (2) the particular speech acts that are being performed and what the acts signify about the teacher and the student.

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**EXAMPLE 1.11**

Excuse me, Dr. Trintash, I was wondering if you could go over the systems perspective with me again. I wasn’t feeling well in class the other day and didn’t listen as closely as I should have.

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**EXAMPLE 1.12**

Hi, Jean, how’s it goin’? I was getting lost in class when you were talking about the system perspective. Could you explain it to me one more time?
In Example 1.11 Ellen altercasts her teacher as having higher standing than she has and as being distant. She conveys this view by her selection of a titled address form (Dr. Trintash), by beginning the exchange with a token apology for intruding (“excuse me”), and by her lack of a friendly personal greeting. In addition, Ellen’s request for help uses a conventional tentativeness marker (“I was wondering”) that speakers use when they are not fully sure they are entitled to request something. She also justifies why she needs to make the request—because of unfortunate personal circumstances (not feeling well)—a justification that sidesteps the possibility that the teacher had done a poor job explaining. But if Ellen had talked as we see in Example 1.12, she would be altercasting her teacher very differently. In calling the teacher by her first name (“Jean”) and using a friendly greeting that is also quite informal (“Hi, how’s it goin?” rather than “Hello, how are you?”), Ellen treats her teacher in a friendly, close-to-equal way. She altercasts Jean as a near-peer, we might say. The speech act of requesting help that Ellen performs after her greeting also has a different inflection. In this case, Ellen is not at all tentative in making the request (a straightforward “could you explain” with no softeners). As in Example 1.11, she justifies why she is asking, but the justification has a critical edge absent from 1.11. In reporting to the teacher that she “was getting lost in class” without offering an account that in any way blames herself, Ellen makes interpretable that the teacher had done a bad job explaining the concept. To imply that a teacher is a bad explanation-giver, although possibly true, is at least a small face-threatening act.

Which way should Ellen have spoken? There is no way to answer this question without knowing more about Ellen and Jean. Either comment could have engendered positive or negative feelings from Jean. If Jean Trintash is a fairly formal teacher who appreciates student displays of respect, she is likely to prefer Example 1.11 and see Example 1.12 as disrespectful. If on the other hand Jean Trintash values connecting with her students—building friendly near-peer relationships—then she is likely to prefer Example 1.12. She may even feel that the slightly critical way the request is made cues that she has been successful in making students feel comfortable. All teachers fail to explain ideas clearly at least now and then, and Jean may be pleased that Ellen feels comfortable enough to make that small criticism. In contrast, if Ellen approached her in the fashion of Example 1.11, she may feel saddened that she hasn’t done a good job in her class connecting with students.
Summary

A crucial part of the meaning of everyday interaction has to do with the views of self and other that are being built up and reflected in talk. Talk does identity-work; it presents who people are, and it altercasts the partner. Talk includes a variety of discursive practices—some quite simple, easy to see and label, and others more complicated, bigger units created though pairing and patterns among the simpler units. As we explore in the next chapter, focusing on the way preexisting identities shape discursive practices is taking a cultural perspective; focusing on the way discursive practices shape people’s situated identities is taking a rhetorical perspective.
Two Perspectives

Typical Comments People Make about Others

1. (One roommate to another) “Lee never says anything about everyone’s dirty dishes because Koreans avoid confrontation.”

2. (One middle-aged woman to another) “The group next to ours at the fireworks was a bunch of college boys. They were acting like jerks, but what would you expect? ‘Wow,’ ‘Big deal, huh?’ They kept using the F-word—loud and obnoxious after every display.”

3. (One student to another) “Tim makes it a point to ask a few questions in class discussion period so that the teacher will see him as serious. Seems to work, doesn’t it?”

4. (One server to another) “You can count on Randy to do whatever the managers say. She wants them to think she’s a good worker but she’s only sucking up to get better shifts.”

The preceding comments exemplify the routine kinds of remarks people make about each other. In all four comments, a discursive practice is linked to a facet of identity; however, the interpretive perspective taken in (1) and (2) differs from the one adopted in (3) and (4). In comment (1), Lee’s not speaking up about household issues is explained by a single master identity (he is Korean); in (2) the group’s loud talking and use of obscenity are explained by a combination of master and interactional identities (being young, male, and college students). In contrast, remarks (3) and (4) explain the talked-about person’s communicative action (asking questions, sucking up) in terms of what each speaker is seeking to achieve. Tim asks
questions to be (and be seen as) a serious student. Randy jumps to comply with her managers’ orders in order to establish herself as a *good worker*, even though, by the speaker’s estimation, these actions lead to her being (and being seen as) a *brownnoser*. The last two comments, then, tie Tim’s and Randy’s communicative choices to particular personal identities each is presumed to be seeking.

These remarks are an everyday version of the explanatory perspectives that are developed in this text. The first two comments illustrate a cultural interpretation, the second set a rhetorical one. Such interpretations are commonplace, and you have probably thought or said similar sorts of things about people and their communication before. In this chapter we describe a more analytic version of rhetorical and cultural explanations for communication that you would make as an observer or researcher of communication rather than as a participant. We begin this by describing the rhetorical perspective—the main approach we take to understanding how talk and identities link. Then we describe the cultural perspective, arguing why it is necessary to have both viewpoints rather than just a single one.

**The Rhetorical Perspective**

In the media, as well as in much informal talk, the term *rhetoric* has negative connotations. Politicians are described as spouting empty rhetoric. A boss’s avowal that “everyone will receive a fair shot” may be described by employees as “mere rhetoric.” These uses of the term do capture a part of its meaning, but the comments do not do justice to the term’s full meaning. To be rhetorical is a virtue. A *rhetorical* person is thoughtful and reflective about how to act; she considers others and the occasion in making choices about how to talk.

Rhetoric is an important tradition in the field of communication, having deep historical roots. In the fourth century B.C., Aristotle defined *rhetoric* as the art of discovering the available means of persuasion in a given case. As an area of academic focus, rhetoric has been most interested in exceptional and nonordinary communication, events such as speeches of presidents or other political leaders. Nonetheless, a rhetorical perspective can be taken toward everyday talk. In an introduction to rhetorical study, Jerry Hauser highlights this fact. He defines rhetoric as “finding things to say that will advance our own purpose with an audience” and as “the management of symbols in order to coordinate social action.” Theorists such as Robert Sanders and Steve Duck have applied a rhetorical perspective to studying close relationships such as marriage. In this book, we show how and why a rhetorical approach to everyday talk and identity is useful.
Key Features

A rhetorical perspective assumes that people talk in particular ways in order to accomplish desired identities (or avoid disvalued ones). Talk is presumed to be instrumental and goal-oriented, and people are presumed to be strategic and purposeful. Communicators select one way of talking rather than another in order to present themselves and altercast others in particular ways. But people do not just talk: They talk to specific others on particular occasions for specific purposes. In attempting to accomplish certain goals (and avoid others), an individual’s smallest communicative actions are often consequential: Every word used can make a difference. Debates over same-sex marriage and particularly the definition of “marriage” demonstrate the critical importance of relation terms to people’s everyday lives. In Karen Tracy’s analysis of U.S. Supreme Court oral arguments regarding same-sex marriage, how judges and attorneys referred to persons and relationships (gays and lesbians, homosexuals, same-sex couples) distinguished their positions on the issue, as well as the ultimate decision made by the court. Whether person references (discussed more in Chapter 3) cause or are caused by social changes is not the important question; rather, “we need to think of language practices and attitudes as closely connected intimates who at times of social change take turns at leading the way. Would a rose by any other name smell as sweet? Not necessarily,” argues Tracy.  

Analyzing discourse rhetorically foregrounds three things. First, it highlights individual agency. People are not cultural dopes, merely enacting scripts. They are strategic: choice-making, planning agents tailoring their communication for particular settings. Conceiving of people as strategic is likely to seem natural in some situations—for example, job interviews, giving a presentation, a first date—but, as we show, the perspective can also be applied to the most ordinary exchange. One qualification is needed. In saying that people are choosing, it should not be assumed that they are always highly conscious about their choices. But referring to a particular way of talking as a choice makes visible the hidden truth that some other way of talking could have been selected. That is, using the language of choice is part of how an action becomes a choice.

Second, a rhetorical perspective is a normative and evaluative one. If an action is an expression of some natural (or cultural) order, then a suitable response is to try to understand it; it is not something to be evaluated as “good” or “bad.” However, if actions are choices, then moral and/or practical evaluation is appropriate. There are better and worse choices to make, and people are responsible for what they choose. This means that some ways of talking will be judged as evidencing positive personal identities—for example, reasonable, moral and trustworthy, competent—whereas
others will be judged in negative ways—for example, \textit{self-important}, \textit{out to impress}, \textit{dishonest}, \textit{obnoxious}. A rhetorical perspective, then, emphasizes how choices about how to talk build people’s identities as desirable or problematic.

Finally, a rhetorical perspective involves \textit{phronesis}. Communicative action is sensitive to practical challenges. Because it emphasizes that people can cultivate an ability to choose how they will respond to moral demands in everyday life, the rhetorical perspective brings together strategy and normativity. Phronesis thus also highlights how a rhetorical perspective is problem-centered or, to put it more strongly, attentive to the dilemmas of social life. In many communicative situations, participants’ interests will not be fully aligned. If one party accomplishes her desired identity goals, it is quite possible that her conversational partner may not. Differences between people, and hence some amount of interactional tension, is part of the business of talking. In institutional encounters between doctors and patients, students and teachers, reporters and public figures, clerks and patrons, and so on, parties can be expected to have at least slightly different aims. This does not mean that people in these roles cannot enjoy and have satisfying encounters—they often do—but it is to mark this outcome as an accomplishment.

\textbf{Dilemmas and Interactional Identities: Students and Professionals in College}

Ideals for many interactional identities provide their own dilemmas: They contain contrary beliefs about the best way to talk. College campuses are a site of numerous interactional identities, where students interact with each other as classmates, roommates, friends, acquaintances, teammates, even coworkers or customer servers in service situations (cafes, the library, the bookstore, nearby restaurants). Students also interact with institutional others, including administrators, advisors, and professors. In this section we consider some of the dilemmas students and professionals on college campuses face when dealing with typical university business. In particular, we explore research that has looked at challenges in student–academic advisor and student–instructor interactions.

Academic advisors are first and foremost \textit{gatekeepers} for society and the institutions they represent. As institutional gatekeepers, they have the authority to make decisions that affect the future of the people they serve. In a college advising situation, advisors “decide” whether a student’s past work will count for institutional credit; whether a person’s credits match the graduation requirements; whether her or his grade point average meets
the entrance requirements for certain majors; and so on. Advisors also guide students toward (or away from) certain majors, jobs, or graduate schools. In opening or closing the gate, advisors are expected to use objective criteria and treat all students fairly. Merit, not personal connections, should guide their decisions about individuals’ futures.

At the same time, an academic advisor is expected to be a person who looks out for the individual welfare of each student; a good advisor is expected to be a friendly helper. A good advisor is someone who genuinely cares about the students he or she serves. The difficulty with this two-part ideal—(1) being a fair gatekeeper and (2) being a friendly helper—is that the communicative actions that ensure that one is attending to the first part of the ideal are just the communicative actions that endanger the second part of the ideal.

Evidence of this dilemma is nicely displayed in Frederick Erickson and Jeffrey Shultz’s study of academic advisors in a 2-year community college.8 They recorded advisors talking with students in regular once-a-semester meetings that lasted about 15 minutes. In these sessions, the primary way advisors worked to establish themselves as friendly helpers was by showing interest in a student. In the opening moments, through the small talk both parties engaged in, advisors worked to create a personal link with students. Through such discourse moves as noticing a person’s home address and inquiring whether he or she knew someone or someplace (e.g., a neighborhood restaurant) in that area of the city, or commenting favorably on a sports team displayed on a student’s T-shirt, advisors sought to build common ground. But advisors could not always find commonalities with the students. This was particularly likely to happen when students and advisors came from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Thus advisors were most likely to establish rapport with students whose social/ethnic backgrounds were similar to their own.

That individuals will be more successful in their friendliness attempts with some people than with others is a fact of interpersonal life. One might argue that it is a good thing for advisors to pursue friendliness even if they cannot achieve it fully with all the students they advise. This would be a reasonable position if friendliness attempts did not affect the fairness of the institutional gatekeeping. Unfortunately, Erickson and Shultz found that they did. It was particularly in sensitive situations—for instance, when a student might be failing out of school—that the authors found differences in how the students with whom advisors had created rapport were treated. With students with whom they had created rapport, advisors were much more likely to give strong caring messages oriented toward wanting the student to succeed; advisors also gave these students more advice and
I. THE ARGUMENT

suggestions. When rapport had not been created, advisors were much less likely to give advice. Thus, in seeking to be friendly, advisors created situations in which not all students were treated in the same way. Some students were given more encouragement, advice, and attention than others.

In a nutshell, the dilemma that academic advisors face is this: To be a fair gatekeeper, treating all students similarly, it is best to use a distanced, impersonal, formal style. This can be achieved with everyone. In contrast, to be a friendly helper, it is best to use an interest-showing style that seeks to build rapport. The more an advisor uses the impersonal style to ensure fairness, the less he will succeed as a friendly helper. The more a person seeks to build rapport and to be interpersonally friendly, the less likely she is to be a consistently fair gatekeeper. Thus the ideal of a “good” academic advisor involves a pair of contradictory beliefs. Being fair and being friendly sound like reasonable expectations for advisors but may actually be quite difficult to accomplish. A rhetorical perspective would encourage communicators to be creative, to consider whether there are conversational actions that might enable them to fudge this apparent contradiction.

Office-hour meetings are in some ways similar to student meetings with advisors. Office hours in university settings are times when students and professors or teaching assistants have the rare chance to meet one-on-one in relative privacy. The purposes of office-hour meetings can be varied, involving simple questions or clarifications, as well as more complex issues related to course material, assignments, grading, studying abroad, recommendations, academic advising, and other practical matters. In a study of U.S. university office-hour meetings, Shiao-Yun Chiang found that students display sensitivity to teaching assistants’ face needs, as well as to their own goals of getting the answers and explanations they are looking for. Specifically, North American students speaking with Chinese teaching assistants tended to make their requests indirect to show politeness, and if the response they sought was not clearly given or deemed in some way insufficient, students followed up with more specific, direct questions. These follow-up questions were delivered in such a way as to treat the lack of responses as troubles the Chinese teaching assistants might have with the English language rather than with their subject matter. This simultaneously achieves the goal of getting the students’ questions answered and also protecting the teaching assistant’s competence face. In a study of office-hour interactions in German universities, Holger Limberg noted that students coming to office hours with more complicated issues and questions are in far greater danger of running into problems if the student and teacher are not able to find common ground in the meeting. This indicates that some of the sociality that can be present during office-hour interactions can also be
crucial to accomplishing the academic purposes office hours are designed to serve.\(^\text{11}\)

Students and instructors spend most of their on-campus time together in the classroom, a place with its own interactional demands and challenges. Important differences are that in classrooms there is an audience for all talk and that the audience consists largely of student peers. This makes for a more sensitive communication event in some ways, particularly when disagreement is possible. Instructors have to balance being seen as competent with being open to contributions and challenges; students have to balance the benefits of contributing in class with the potential of coming across as face-threatening to themselves, the instructor, or other students.

A key component of many Western university classrooms is that they are “discussion-based,” expecting (and sometimes incorporating into grades) the ideal that students will contribute in class by asking questions and offering comments. The “livelier” a discussion, the more successful it is seen to be; indeed, one of the ongoing debates around online courses is precisely their limited ability to capture this space for students to share ideas together in conversation. Most instructors would probably agree that discussion allows students the opportunity to get something out of course material that they wouldn’t just by listening to a lecture or reading something by themselves. But not all students make this assumption.

Some students elect to remain silent rather than risk saying something “wrong” or seeming disrespectful to the instructor or other students.\(^\text{12}\) Other students, however, are dealing with a more general dilemma bound up in being a student. Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe\(^\text{13}\) have called this “doing education” versus “being a student.” “Doing education” refers to the sorts of presentations of self that are consistent with the goals of universities and that are most likely to be impressive to instructors: acting engaged in class, involving oneself in intellectual pursuits, displaying effort in completing tasks such as studying and writing essays, and various other endeavors. “Being a student,” however, refers to acting like what is presumed to be a typical student: someone who does not stand out, who is not too clever, and who is indifferent to coursework. It is not necessarily the case that students privately have no enthusiasm for college or don’t work hard but that they must publicly not show too much enthusiasm for doing so, acting instead as if college is something they “have to do” rather than something they “want to do.”

Because classroom discussions are the most explicit space in which public displays of preparedness and enthusiasm for coursework could be highlighted, students experience a dilemma between participating (which will reflect well on them from the perspective of their instructors and potentially
increase their grades in cases in which participation is assessed) and not participating (which would be a public display of not caring too much). Benwell and Stokoe found that in small English university classrooms called “tutorials” (with one instructor and just a few students), students resisted participating in discussions whether or not the instructor was present.\textsuperscript{14} They provide one example in which a student in a group tried to defend their group assignment, but her comments were not met with agreement:

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**EXCERPT 2.1**

S3: Why, why do we have to do it?
S2: I don’t know.
S3: What so you know you’re writing an essay properly and-
S1: Just to get us used to writing.

(brief pause)
S5: Yeah it does help though I think cos, I mean like after doing this last night, I was- I felt a lot better about like the stuff we done on attitudes. Cos I never remembered it from lectures. And all I done was like copy it down and have a look at the lecture notes till the essay. But cos we’re not=
S2: Yeah.
S5: =writing an essay social, I thought this helped a lot. Cos it helped me to understand. I mean you do understand things better if you write them up as well. Well I do anyway.
S4: Yeah.
S5: So

By the end of the discussion that student (S5), too, joined in in showing disinterest in the task and questioned its usefulness:

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**EXCERPT 2.2**

S4: That’s ridiculous. (pause) Well if you’re not gonna use it then I mean what’s the point of doing it?

(brief pause)
S5: Just seems useless to me. You wouldn’t write an essay plan in a group anyway. That’s why I wouldn’t write an essay like this
Similarly, Frederick Attenborough found that students who wrote clever comments in library textbooks were mocked by subsequent written comments. In this way, students regulate one another’s behavior and negotiate displays of different personal and interactional identities. Rather than seeing these performances as straightforwardly problematic—as evidence, for example, that students feel pressure to publicly “dumb down” to be accepted—the authors reflected that such practices might constitute a form of irony. In being detached, students contribute to Western ideals of equality by completing their tasks while avoiding seeming so invested that it negatively altercasts other students’ identities.

To summarize, a rhetorical perspective toward talk is one that highlights talk as strategic, seeing discursive practices as chosen in order to accomplish some ends and to avoid others. It presumes that some choices will be difficult because there are conflicts between self and others’ wants or because an interactional identity may implicitly pit one desired personal identity against another. A rhetorical approach emphasizes that talk constructs identities. Through the moment-to-moment choices people make about how to talk, the identities of the self and others get built.

Reconciliation, Mediation, and Therapy: Metaphor as a Rhetorical Device

Reconciliation is a practice that straddles conversational and institutional contexts. Though there are institutional settings and organizations that support and develop reconciliation programs for perpetrators and victims of violence, reconciliation is not necessarily “run” by institutional members. Reconciliation processes tend to be more private and to last much longer and are not tied to other institutions, such as legal or political bodies, as clearly. Lynne Cameron presented an analysis of a 4-year reconciliation process between Pat Magee, a member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) who planted the bomb that killed British politician Sir Anthony Berry and five others in 1984, and Sir Anthony Berry’s daughter, Jo Berry. Beginning in 2000, a year after Magee was released from prison, Magee and Berry met several times in private and in public, some instances of which were recorded. In her analysis of the recordings, Cameron highlights a number of uses of metaphor which seemed to have contributed to the success of
Magee’s and Berry’s meetings. In particular, their language conceptualized their meetings as journeys, their goals as connecting and telling stories, and their outcomes as seeing more clearly.

Metaphor uses different contexts and ideas as a way of talking that implies that two compared items are similar or nearly the same. Metaphor can be thought of as a way of framing something in a nonliteral way. For instance, describing a traditional classroom situation as a “lecture” may sound like a straightforward description, but calling the front of the classroom a “stage” implicitly compares the class to theater. On the basis of such a comparison, the teacher is an actor, and the students are the audience. This language framing makes a difference in how interactions in a classroom are interpreted and can be consequential for how people will (or won’t) participate.

In reconciliation talk, people come to the situation with knowledge of the metaphors that are embedded in their society. In the history of the conflict between the IRA and the British government, a lexicon of metaphor characterizes each side from the point of view of the other in certain ways. Irish Republicans have referred to the period of unrest between the IRA and the British government sometimes as “the troubles” or “the struggle,” other times as “the war.” The British government has often called the IRA “terrorists.” Each of these terms frames the situation and positions the identities of participants differently. With such vocabulary at their disposal, Magee’s and Berry’s meetings could have gone very differently.

Instead, Magee and Berry used alternative ways of talking about their pasts, what they were doing, and why. Berry used the term journey to describe the process of healing after her father’s death, as well as the distance (geographically and ideologically) that Magee and she would have to travel to have their meetings. Magee used journey to describe his history with the IRA, his meetings with Berry, and his process of accepting responsibility for the death of Berry’s father. Both used a connection metaphor through repeated references to bridges and bridging. Berry used the term as a symbol of overcoming the barriers to understanding Magee’s actions or seeing him as another human being. Magee began by using the term as a symbol for the distance in understanding between himself and Berry, but over the course of the conversations he more often used the concept of “building bridges” to emphasize the sense of connection in which Berry used the term. Throughout, both also used the concept of sharing, telling, and listening to stories as a way of accessing the other person’s point of view. In talking about the outcome of their meetings, Magee and Berry talked about being able to see one another more clearly.
In this example, Magee uses the word “seeing” to highlight the difference between viewing people as human beings (which emphasizes their commonalities) and seeing people as enemies (which highlights their opposition). By putting it this way, the difference is highlighted as a perceptual error in which an important component of a person (his humanity) is being missed due to a flawed attribution of “enemy.” Thus Magee implies that the reconciliation process between himself and Berry—the journey, the bridging, and the telling of stories—resulted in the correction of this perceptual error.

Divorce mediation is another setting in which members’ language choices can have important interactional effects. Mediation, unlike reconciliation, is nearly always guided by at least one third-party mediator who helps people seeking to dissolve their marriage negotiate the process. As an alternative to the legal system, divorce mediation offers a method for working out disagreements about child custody, finances, and property settlement in a way that is expected to be less costly in terms of money, time, and emotion. Styles of mediating vary, and how a mediator talks about the mediation process and the activities within it affects how the mediation process unfolds. In Robert Emery’s book on his experience as a divorce mediator, he notes that he would offer different metaphors for participants’ problems to try to reframe what was going on. He oriented to an “issues, not emotions” ideal; while acknowledging participants’ characterizations of their marriage dissolution as a “roller coaster” or “train wreck,” he would attempt to shift them to focusing on the “job of raising their children.”

This style was similar to one observed by Karen Tracy and Anna Spradlin in their analysis of simulated mediations. They proposed that mediators’ language use varied the root metaphors employed to talk about mediation. A first metaphor that was used was mediation as a business. In talking about mediation as business, mediators drew upon economic metaphors to describe the activity of mediation. Attention was drawn to time and cost, relationships were described using organizational charts, and the decision to select mediation as an option was presented in a sales-oriented manner. (“Now here’s your choice and here’s what mediation is all about, quick and simple.”) In contrast, other mediators used therapy as the root
metaphor. Mediators using a therapeutic root metaphor emphasized longer term interactional consequences and spoke more about listening, reflecting, and feelings.

Metaphors exist within institutional settings, but the settings, too, can be associated with certain qualities and thus become metaphors themselves. When lawyers counsel clients seeking divorce, they may talk about the process in terms of mediation or litigation, where these are presumed to be adversarial and collaborative, respectively. Similarly, *therapy* is often associated with certain ways of talking, and *therapeutic discourse* is its own kind of metaphor and style. Dennis Tay has written several articles on metaphor and therapy and noticed interesting relationships between metaphors and discourse markers—“little words” such as *so, like, um, you know,* and so forth (discussed more in Chapter 6)—in therapeutic contexts. Tay proposes that these discourse markers occur at strategic moments in therapists’ talk to develop and advance goals in the session through the use of extended metaphors. The metaphor “therapy is a journey” is a common one, which Tay proposes could be useful across institutional contexts and in different kinds of analyses of therapeutic discourse.

To summarize, this study of metaphor in reconciliation, mediation, and therapy illustrates a rhetorical approach to identity and communicative practices. Consider, now, an alternative way to analyze talk and identity.

**The Cultural Perspective**

In looking at how the interactional–personal identities of students and instructors on college campuses were enacted, the rhetorical perspective downplayed the cultural frame within which the interactants’ choices came to have meaning. Many of the university settings discussed occurred in student–instructor interaction in different places—Australia, England, Germany, the United States, and Japan. The ways in which students and instructors manage situated dilemmas in college settings is unlikely to be separate from cultural context. A rhetorical perspective, then, tends to ignore, or at least to downplay, how communicative choices are deeply cultural. Individual communicators may be agents making choices, but they are bound agents. Communicators are acting within larger systems of meaning, social structures that are not of their own making. It is important to take account of the structural constraints that shape the categories of choice and, to a certain degree, the choices themselves. A cultural perspective helps us do this.

*Culture*, as defined by Kristine Fitch, is an invisible system of symbolic resources that shapes people’s daily interactional practices. To adopt
a cultural perspective on everyday talk is to foreground the fact that groups of people will speak and interpret the actions of those around them in patterned ways. To understand talk, we need to recognize how groups channel communicative action.

**Key Features**

To understand why people talk as they do, it is important to look at the groups in which people have spent large amounts of time. The groups in which people live, first as children and later as adults, Dell Hymes calls *speech communities*: professional, school, work, and recreational groups other scholars have labeled “discourse communities,” or “communities of practice.” In these different kinds of communities individuals acquire beliefs about appropriate ways to speak and interpret. The system of beliefs that one person in a community has is not going to be idiosyncratic but will be shared by other members of that same community.

Speech communities share ways of talking—*speech codes*—and ways of making sense (interpersonal ideologies). These two are deeply bound together such that the ideology furnishes the logic behind a code. *Interpersonal ideologies* are communities’ beliefs about interpersonal issues: people, relationships, and communicative action. In particular, an interpersonal ideology includes beliefs about (1) the values people should pursue in intimate, work, and public relationships (e.g., establishing closeness between people, respecting individual autonomy, validating people’s basic equality, respecting status and social rank differences); (2) what communicative acts count as being reasonable, fair, friendly, and so on, and why they count as such; and (3) what are appropriate communicative practices for persons of different master and interactional identities. Interpersonal ideologies are answers to the question of how people should resolve the myriad dilemmas that confront them in everyday interaction. In that regard, speech communities can be seen as developing distinctive ways of prioritizing among desirable but competing values.

Similar to political ideologies, then, interpersonal ideologies are as much about what they devalue as they are about what they esteem. In this sense, both the rhetorical and the cultural perspectives attend to dilemmas. In the cultural perspective, however, the societal dilemma gets transformed into a community-linked distinctive conversational style. This style is the community group’s resolution to whatever competing values are at stake.

Dell Hymes developed a mnemonic device for organizing the sort of contextual observations to which analysts taking a cultural perspective should attend. He used the acronym “S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G” to remember
these elements of a cultural scene: Setting, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, Genre. Setting refers to the time and place—the environment. Participants are the people in the situation. Ends involve the purposes, goals, and outcomes (official and unofficial). Act sequence refers to the structure of what happens in what order in the situation. The key is the tone (such as playful or formal). Instrumentalities are particular ways of speaking, and norms are the social rules governing the event and what people do. You can think of speech codes as a combination of instrumentalities and norms. The genre (discussed further in Chapter 11) is the kind of event or label for what’s going on—like what we’ve before called frame. Taken together, all of these elements incorporate a broad array of material to consider when analyzing communication from a cultural perspective. Let us consider three analyses of identity and talk conducted from a cultural perspective.

**Ethnic Identities: Finnish, Blackfeet, Athabaskan and Caucasian Americans**

Donal Carbaugh and colleagues have done research on particular speech communities. In research on Finnish culture, Carbaugh noticed a distinctive Finnish orientation to silence. In interaction and in interviews, Finnish people valued *olla omissaoloissaan*, or “being undisturbed in one’s thoughts.” This view sees having quiet alone time as a crucial part of life that everyone in Finland understands—in other words, if people want to be by themselves to think for a while, no one sees this as strange or as needing an explanation. Instead, this is seen as *luonteva tapa olla*, or a “natural way to be.” This is different from other contexts, such as the United States, where people are more likely to assume that others want to be social most of the time. Carbaugh relates the story of a Finnish exchange student, Tiina, living in the United States, whose host family saw her silences during car rides as unusual. They would question whether she was okay, and on one occasion the father became angry and demanded to know why she wasn’t saying anything. In Finland it is expected that people don’t want to interact at times, whereas in the United States it is the norm to talk, and silence may be seen as awkward or as communicating something negative.

Research on Native Americans has found a similar valuing of silence. For the Blackfeet silence is a way of connecting with others, whereas speaking may disrupt or cause problems. In this context, listening is an important form of communication and is something that is oriented to other people, as well as to places and objects within them. Listening as a way of being involves beliefs about people, relationships, and places, as well
as being a significant response to others and to the world. Again, Carbaugh contrasts this with the U.S. assumption that talking is the primary communicative medium and the most persuasive way of relating to others. Such differences between people who claim different ethnic identities can result in intercultural communication trouble.

Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon\textsuperscript{31} compared Caucasians (English speakers) with another Native American speech community, the Athabaskans, and noted that they had different ways of coding pauses between speaking turns. When two people talk to each other, they try to avoid interrupting each other. One key to accomplishing this task successfully involves reading the turn-taking signals that indicate that one’s conversational partner is finished. Across speech communities, pausing is one of the major ways speakers signal that they are at the end of a turn. However, the length of a pause that is used to signal “I’m done talking” versus “I’m in the middle of a thought” is not universal. By and large, the kind of short pause that English speakers would understand as a signal meaning “I’m done talking” would be understood within the Athabaskan community as a signal meaning “I’m in the middle of a thought.” The upshot of this is that, from the Athabaskan point of view, English speakers seem to be constantly interrupting a speaker when he or she is talking. From the English speaker’s point of view, Athabaskans are overly slow in talking. The differences described here are not the only ones that distinguish the two speech communities, but they do begin to suggest why communication between Athabaskan and English speakers so frequently is experienced as problematic. Consider a second example of a cultural perspective.

\textbf{Nationalities: The Case of the Roma}

National identities are different from other cultural identities in important ways, yet they overlap, too. Depending on where you live in the United States you might expect most people around you to identify with Caucasian, African American, Latino, or Chinese ethnic identities. Whether you live in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland is a strong predictor of whether you will claim a Protestant or Catholic religious identity. If you live in South Korea you’re likely to have a considerably higher income than if you live in North Korea—even though the countries are right next door to one another. If you live in the United Arab Emirates, you are twice as likely to be male than female (due to labor migration patterns).\textsuperscript{32} But compared with other speech communities, nations can be incredibly diverse, incorporating multiple smaller speech communities and people of different master identities. National identity is, more than many other master
identities, given to you: You may, for instance, have the option of claiming different ethnic identities on an official form, but your “citizenship” is legally defined in ways that other identities are not.

Almost all people are given a national identity at birth. An exception to this norm are the Romani people, formerly called “gypsies” (this term is now considered derogatory). Romani is a general name for a group of dispersed people who share some ethnic ties and a common point of origin from the Indian subcontinent in the 11th century but who are not associated with national borders. They are the largest nomadic population in the world, and many who are settled do not have legal citizenship in the countries in which they live. Roma usually refers particularly to Romani who live in Europe, where the population is most concentrated. The Roma have endured a long history of discrimination in Europe. They were one of the largest groups killed in the Holocaust during World War II and over the years have been forced to assimilate into, or were forcibly deported by, several European countries.33

Susana Martínez Guillem has looked at how people in European news stories talk about the Roma, focusing on a controversy that occurred in Italy in 2008.34 In that year the Italian government undertook a census to document every Roma living in Italy through the recording of personal data, fingerprinting, and in some cases photographs. Though at first this move was denounced in European presses as an example of racial profiling, condemnations from the European Union were retracted after the Italian government insisted that their census goals were aimed at documenting anyone who could not otherwise be documented, not just Roma (in other words, noncitizens or others who didn’t have official files).

During the period leading up to the controversial census, politicians were quoted in the media labeling the Roma in derogatory ways. One councilman said “nomads, they are animals” in a television interview. The prevalence of this way of talking about the Roma among Italian government members calls into question the government’s claim that the census was an innocent record-keeping enterprise. But Italy is not the only place in which Roma are not considered full citizens (even when they technically are). In Slovenia, people in a village, with help from the local authorities, prevented a Roma family from moving into a house there despite the fact that they had legally purchased the house. All of the newspaper reports of the incident framed the villagers as defending themselves from a threat. One villager was quoted as saying, “we all know that those people [the Roma] have different values and their behavior is not in accordance with ours.”35 As with the Italian case, it seems that in Slovenia, too, the Roma are not seen as citizens or as having commonality with others who live in the country. Referring to
them as “nomads” and “animals” contrasts them implicitly with what is considered the preferable way to be a citizen of a country (being “settled,” “human”). The other quote too contrasts “those people” with “we” and “our” and explicitly states that the Roma have different values and behavior. The Roma are seen as having different speech codes (behavior) and different interpersonal ideologies (logic for the behavior). Even people who present themselves as not strongly political or against the Roma tend to talk about them in ways that carry these cultural assumptions. Cristean Tileaga related this point regarding an interview with a Romanian woman, Carla, who did not present herself as racist or extreme:

**EXCERPT 2.4**

I: Hm do you think that there is discrimination against against Romanies or- or not really?

(8 lines deleted from original transcript)

Carla: Yes, there is probably. Cos’ we are not giving them a chance. But to integrate into society and- But I think that they don’t really want- really want it either.

Though Carla agrees that there may be discrimination against the Roma and that the majority of Romanians might be in some way responsible (“we’re not giving them a chance”), she also states that they “don’t really want it [to integrate into society] either.” The way the Roma talk about how others see them and interact with them indicates a similar assumption that the Roma and those around them are different. In a video recording of a translated interview, a Roma woman named Emilie contrasts the Roma with others who live in the Czech Republic:

**EXCERPT 2.5**

Emilie: The problem is that Czech people think that Roma people don’t have any intelligence . . . They speak to us like we’re idiots.

Here, too, although the Roma and others all live in the Czech Republic, Emilie does not refer to her people (“us,” “we”) as Czech (the national identity) but as Roma, whereas “they” are “Czech people.” In Hungary, where seven adults and two children were killed in a series of 49 attacks between 2008 and 2011, one instance of violence was caught on camera (both a
Prior to the attack in which several people—Roma and members of a Hungarian nationalist group—were injured, the Roma and nationalists accused one another of intimidating behavior. The following conversation occurred when a police officer (Off) was taking statements from a Roma man (R) and members of the nationalist group (Nat 1–3) about the alleged intimidation.

**EXCERPT 2.6**

1. *Nat1:* Really, my friends are here, celebrating a birthday, drinking and chatting and they [Roma] start shouting at us.
2. *Off:* Did you go further outside?
3. *Nat1:* We did not. We were here at the swings and up there. And they were shouting at the house.

(two lines deleted)

4. *R:* One of the men had a pistol. Him ((pointing to a man)) in the blue shirt.
5. *Nat2:* I had a pistol?
6. (brief pause)
7. *Nat3:* Prove it, mate ((extending hand toward R))
8. *R:* For god’s sake! You told him to leave me be because I’m different. I was coming from work ((said to officer))
9. *Off:* Yeah? And what did he say?
10. *Nat3:* If you’re coming home from work, go home, shower and rest. Stop lying, okay?
11. *Off:* How far was he? Did he insult you?

If we apply the SPEAKING mnemonic to this situation, we see the following:

**Setting:** The conversations take place on the street, in a neighborhood, outside people’s houses.

**Participants:** The scene involves the Roma and nationalists who are making the statements, the officers taking them down, and various bystanders who are watching the situation play out.

**Ends:** The officers are trying to determine what happened, as well as potentially assign blame and figure out whether anything illegal has
occurred. You can see this in turn 2, in which the officer asks after having been shouted at whether the nationalist went outside (which could have been seen as a provocation).

**Act sequence:** The Roma and nationalists are giving descriptions and telling stories about what happened in response to the officers’ questions; both sides are also defending themselves against accusations.

**Key:** The situation is both formal (because it involves an official report) and informal (it is unscripted). It is also noticeably tense. In turns 4 and 7 speakers also used gestures directed at particular people, which further the tension.

**Instrumentalities:** The participants use a number of ways of speaking that fit with the situation. The officers ask questions and follow-up questions, which are aligned with their institutional role. The man at the beginning refers to “friends” and “celebrating a birthday,” along with other descriptions to set the scene of his narrative as an innocent, happy one that was disrupted by the Roma man’s shouting. The utterance of the nationalist member on line 7 is interesting because it contains a term that is usually considered friendly, “mate.” In this context, however, it comes across as a challenge and as unfriendly. The gesture he makes is also interesting. He holds his hand out with the palm facing down. It almost seems as if he is about to shake the accuser’s hand, although it could also be a symbolic gesture to show he isn’t holding a pistol.

**Norms:** It is expected in this setting that the officials will guide the conversation and that the others will have the chance to state their sides of the story through their responses to officers’ questions. In turns 4-10 the accuser and accused talk back and forth and accuse each other more directly. The officer cuts in with a louder tone to ask a question in turns 9 and 11, and his questions ignore the talk the others have been doing to each other, focusing instead on the line of questioning. This indicates that a norm of this sort of interaction is that the participants who are giving their stories should address themselves to the officials and not to each other.

**Genre:** The genre of this situation is an on-the-street police interview.

Using the SPEAKING model gives a sense of the “picture” of what was going on in this interaction. In a cultural approach, a rich description of the scene is sought so that the various aspects of the context can be considered when analyzing what is going on. The Roma are often treated as
cultural outsiders from the point of view of national identity. The Roma sometimes view themselves as outsiders who are not accepted by the majority of people around them. On the other hand, the non-Roma living in the same countries see the Roma as outsiders who violate norms and refuse to integrate. The norms or social rules for how people interact, and why they should act one way versus another, are powerful influences on how people do identity-work. Thus part of what makes intercultural communication challenging is that the norms guiding speakers are usually tacit, with each party assuming their norms are universal.

**Gender from a Cultural View**

Rules for how to appropriately do gender in an interaction vary across cultural settings. How people express their genders on the Internet is one area of relatively recent focus. Some authors have proposed that in the freedom afforded by the Internet, gender would become fluid and experimental; others argued that the Internet would merely be a place for reproducing the same gender roles and relations that existed offline.

One popular reason for being on the Internet is to find dates, love, or sexual partners. Marisol Del-Teso-Craviotto has studied English and Spanish chat rooms and found that participants have a number of ways of presenting themselves as authentic men or women based on the cultural gender norms that exist in society. Some of these practices are relatively direct, such as choosing a particular screen name (“SingleMDgrl”), listing the information (“19yr old m va” = 19-year-old male from Virginia), or choosing a masculine or feminine noun form in Spanish (“gallega” vs. “gallego” for Galicean). More subtle practices involve associating one’s name with certain animals (with kittens and cats being an example of feminine animals and roosters and dogs of masculine ones) and the use of emoticons and symbols (people presenting female identities tended to use more emoticons and symbols). Other researchers have noted that men seem to make more invitations and to do more “flirting” in chat rooms. How people refer to themselves and the speech codes they employ online cannot always be linked to what gender identities they have offline. Instead, people make use of their cultural knowledge about what men and women should say in order to convincingly portray these identities online.

In an analysis of an online forum, Lori Kendall analyzed how the (male) participants talked in ways that portrayed themselves as heterosexual men. In this example the participants are discussing attending science fiction fan conventions:
EXAMPLE 2.7

Mike Adams says “that’s half the reason I go to cons. Sit and have these discussions with people”
Bob .oO (no it isn’t)
Mike Adams says “well okay it’s to ogle the babes in barbarian outfits”
Drog says “*BABES*?”
Drog says “you need new glasses”
Drog says “pasty skinned blubbery pale nerettes”
Locutuslaaaaaugh

Though the participants identify as “nerds” who value intelligence and share hobbies, they also “act like (heterosexual) men” by assessing women largely on the basis of physical appearance. These different ways of talking online are not necessarily done “because” a participant identifies offline as a man or woman; rather, participants online draw on cultural assumptions about what men and women are like and use them to interact and to interpret one another’s communication in certain ways.

To summarize, a cultural approach to everyday talk highlights how people’s preexisting identities (but especially their ethnicity, race, gender, nationality, age, and social class43) constrain how they will talk. Because of each person’s membership in some communities (and not others), people acquire identifiable ways of speaking and interpreting. As most speech communities are formed around master identities and, to a lesser degree, interactional identities, identities that exist prior to any particular situation will shape how people will talk. To state it a bit differently, we could say that the cultural perspective highlights how everyday talk reflects identities.

The Relationship between the Rhetorical and the Cultural Perspectives

In terms of adequately understanding how discursive practices and identities are linked, the cultural and the rhetorical perspectives provide complementary views. Each perspective highlights one part of the process and downplays the other. Each is the counterpoint for the other. The cultural perspective draws our attention to how people’s ways of speaking are
shaped by preexisting identities; the rhetorical perspective leads us to focus on how people’s choices about how to talk will shape who they become. The cultural perspective makes visible the influence of social practices and structures that are outside of an individual’s choosing; the rhetorical perspective highlights individuals as choice-making agents. Each of the perspectives is essential. Each is also problematic when taken alone.

The rhetorical perspective draws attention to how the discursive actions people choose realize the self as one kind of person rather than another. As such, the rhetorical perspective makes salient the uniqueness of individuals and the ways in which each person is a master of his or her destiny. However, this emphasis on choice can skew analysis toward focusing on people’s intentions, which cannot be accessed. Though earlier in the chapter we cautioned against seeing choice as always a conscious, rational, or deliberate act, it is still possible to overemphasize individual intention, and sometimes this can lead to attempts at “mind reading.” In the examples of metaphor uses, for instance, it is true that employing certain ways of talking can be quite deliberate, and this practice is perhaps more likely in institutional settings. However, metaphors are cultural objects. Many of them are deeply embedded in the way people relate to the world, and people may use them not to accomplish a particular end but because where they come from that is seen as a “natural” way of looking at the world.

Furthermore, in highlighting people’s abilities to choose, the rhetorical perspective fails to recognize that choice is given meaning within a cultural frame. Moreover, in highlighting choice, the ways in which the communicative playing field is unequal are often ignored. A person’s lack of success in attaining valued interactional and personal identities may be due to bad choices (ineffectiveness), but that outcome may also occur because particular kinds of communicators face dilemmas that others need not confront. The invisibility of women, ethnic minorities, and working-class people in high-status positions did not occur merely because these categories of individuals chose not to pursue valued interactional identities or did so in ineffectual ways. There are systematic and subtle institutional practices that make achievement of desired interactional and personal identities difficult, if not impossible, for persons of certain master identities. In ignoring how cultural group membership shapes individuals’ sense-making practices, as well as the implicit interactional rights that will be given to some and withheld from others, the rhetorical perspective distorts the picture of how communication and identities are linked.

The cultural perspective helps right this imbalance. It reminds us that ways of talking are patterned and culturally rooted. At the same time, descriptions of cultural patterns—what can be called cultural
**generalizations**—can and often are used inappropriately. They can become stereotypes that get used interactively to blame and to keep people in undesirable places. Assuming a cultural generalization is accurate—for example, more people in Speech Community A act in X way than people in Speech Community B—it is always necessary to problematize the scope of a generalization. To what sets of people does a generalization apply? In what local circumstances? At what points in time? In Japan there are currently two competing cultural generalizations relevant to student–professor interactions such as those described earlier in this chapter. One is the assumption that, as a hierarchical society, Japanese students will be categorically deferential to their instructors and use politeness forms (*keego* or *keigo*) frequently in conversation. Another is a common complaint among older Japanese that younger generations (such as college students) are using fewer and fewer of the ritualized politeness forms owing to increasing Americanization. However, Mutsuko Endo Hudson discovered through research that the use of politeness forms is much more fluid and does not follow the strict rules most assume it would. Instead, the forms seem to be employed strategically in the moment, on a person-by-person basis, to attend to different aspects of face and manage how formal or informal a conversation is. In this case, a rhetorical perspective gives a better explanation for *keego* in Japanese universities than does a cultural perspective.

Of note is the fact that generalizations are always problematic with regard to individuals. As Scollon and Scollon note, “Cultures do not talk to each other; individuals do.” Thus the cultural perspective, by highlighting the similarities among people of particular backgrounds, downplays the diversity that will exist within all cultural groups. The dictionary treats generalizations and stereotypes as different kinds of things. Generalizations are necessary reasonable tools for sense making; stereotypes are either (1) a conventional oversimplified belief or opinion or (2) the belief that a person typifies or conforms to an unvarying pattern and is lacking any individuality. Cultural generalizations are not the same as stereotyping; nonetheless, generalizations can easily feed stereotypes. Cultural generalizations link categories of persons to specific discursive actions. Statements that highlight similarities among members of a group implicitly promote seeing and understanding people as products of their nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, age, social class, and so on. The cultural perspective captures a truth, but it also distorts the truth. It suggests that there is a greater degree of uniformity among people of some identity than ever actually occurs. To minimize the cultural perspective’s limitation, we need a rhetorical one.

To understand everyday talk we need to keep both perspectives in mind. Whichever analytic lens is dominant at any one moment, the other
should be no farther away than in the next room. In presenting some of the cultural-focused and rhetorical-focused examples in this chapter, we sought to highlight their different ways of looking at things; however, this does not mean that both perspectives were not potentially present in those examples. One could attribute the rhetorical choices in the section on students and instructors to master identities such as generational differences, as well as noting differences in student–instructor interaction cross-culturally. One could also see the presentation of gender online as a rhetorical strategy as much as a reflection of gender norms.

In the next two parts of the book—Talk’s Building Blocks and Complex Discourse Practices—we show how different discursive practices do identity-work, as well as identifying the kinds each practice does. In addition, we consider how some set of preexisting identities works to shape the unfolding of the focal practice. Our starting point for reflection and analysis is middle-class American culture.47 This is our home culture, the one we know the most about, as well as one that has been studied extensively. After unpacking the rhetorical consequences of discursive choices among middle-class American speakers, we describe how the focal practice varies in other communities.

Summary

This chapter introduced the two perspectives on everyday talk that are adopted and developed in the book: the rhetorical and the cultural perspectives. Drawing upon mediation and student–instructor interactions at universities, we saw how the rhetorical perspective treated talk as strategic action and communicators as choice makers whose actions could be assessed for practical effectiveness and moral reasonableness. The second perspective, the cultural viewpoint, highlighted how people live in speech communities in which they learn how to talk and interpret others’ talk. It is in these communities that individuals develop distinctive and relatively fixed beliefs about what are reasonable ways to treat others (their interpersonal ideology) and ways of actually doing so. Both the cultural and rhetorical perspectives express important truths. At the same time, using either perspective in isolation from the other distorts how everyday talk works.
PART II

TALK’S BUILDING BLOCKS
During the spring of 2000 an unusual naming dispute erupted in Boulder, Colorado. The controversy concerned the label to use for people who had pets. Should people in the community continue to be referred to as “pet owners,” the existing designation in city regulations, or should official documents be changed to refer to people as “pet guardians”? Over several months citizens of the community and staff at the local newspaper weighed in. “Names make a difference,” advocates of the change argued; the label “guardian” conveys more respect for nonhuman species and better recognizes the importance of the relationship between dogs and their human families. Opponents of the change decried it as silly and stupid—-dogs aren’t going to care—and as having no legal consequences. As with most controversies, this one did not appear out of thin air. A dog had died because its owner had chained it outside, where it was unable to move out of the sun. Although the pet owner had been tried and convicted of animal cruelty, many members of the Boulder community wanted to prevent future occurrences of this kind. Changing the label for pets’ people seemed one small way the city could encourage others to treat their animals better. In this controversy, the pro arguments triumphed; Boulder is now a city that has “pet guardians” rather than “pet owners.”

Was this particular name change silly or sensible? How would we decide? In what ways do reference terms for self and others have implications for speakers and their targets? In this chapter, we examine an array of person-referencing practices, considering how terms vary culturally, what different choices accomplish rhetorically, and several societal controversies. The chapter focuses upon marital names, personal address, and group-level terms that refer to ethnicity and gender. In the conclusion, we show how Harvey Sacks’s membership categorization device is an especially helpful concept for understanding the importance of person-referencing practices.
II. TALK’S BUILDING BLOCKS

Personal Address

That married couples in the United States do not all use the same naming practice means that when people meet for the first time, there may be moments of tension. For instance, at an office party, if you address your female coworker’s husband as “Mr. Silver” because her name is “Mary Silver,” you may be calling him by his wife’s last name and not by his own. Moments of discomfort may occur related to other forms of address as well. The discomfort arises because address choices convey how speakers see themselves in relation to the other. When a person initially meets his or her significant other’s parents, to address them jointly as “Tom and Lisa” conveys a different sense of the speaker’s relationship than calling them “Mr. and Mrs. Broadfoot.” This discomfort occurs in public encounters, too. In a department store, when a clerk takes a woman’s credit card that has her full name printed on it (e.g., “Jessica Traut”), the clerk could thank “Mrs. Traut,” “Ms. Traut,” “Miss Traut,” or “Jessica” for her purchase. Any of the choices may be reasonable yet could be responded to with irritation. These moments of tension arise because decisions about forms of personal address are interactionally consequential. As several scholars have noted, people are hardly ever indifferent to what they are called.

Personal address is the label we give to terms used to refer to a person in his or her presence. They include five main types. The first and broadest type is versions of proper names, including a person’s first name (FN) (e.g., Timothy, Susan), last name (LN) (Reston, Frand-Ellis), and informal or diminutive versions of a first name (e.g., Timmy, Suz).

A second form is kinship terms. These include the different names given to mothers (e.g., Mother, Mama, Mom), fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and so on. In addition, in many groups, kinship terms get used as forms of address with nonbiologically linked others. Close family friends, for instance, might be addressed as “Auntie” or “Uncle” by younger family members. Among Malaysian speakers, in fact, kinship terms such as “Big Sister” and “Little Sister” are the preferred forms, used more often than proper names or pronouns (e.g., “What does Little Sister want?” rather than “What do you want?”).

A third form of address is titles. In English, the most common titles for men are “Mister,” usually combined with a last name, or “Sir.” Typical title terms used for women distinguish whether a woman is single or married (“Miss” or “Mrs.”), although “Ms.” now makes it possible to avoid making this distinction (though it is often associated with older unmarried women). If a woman’s name is unknown, the titles “Miss,” “Ma’am,” or “madam” are common, with the speaker’s selection depending on the woman’s age.
Other titles are occupationally tied. Religious leaders might be addressed as “Rabbi,” “Father,” or “Pastor,” either alone or in conjunction with a first or last name. “Mayor,” “Professor,” and “Doctor” are other common titles. In the United States, the title “Dr.” is usually reserved for people who have a medical degree, a Ph.D., or the equivalent, whereas in Colombia, “Doctor/a denoting male and female forms of ‘doctor,’ traditionally designated any person with a college degree. Nowadays, it is extended to any adult of middle to high social status, especially by members of the working class.”

A fourth form of personal address includes nicknames and endearments. Although there are certain terms that are used by many people within a community (e.g., “sweetie,” “honey,” “Junior” for a son with the same first name as his father), many are idiosyncratic to persons and relationships. Nicknames might include playful variations on a person’s name (“Katiebug” for Katherine or “Lizzo” for Elizabeth) or references to where they are from (“Texas,” “Hawaii”). Nicknames can also have multiple references, such as “Nutmeg” for Megan, which includes a reference to the name (Meg), a spice, and the name of a soccer move. Nicknames can even be incorporated with brand names, as with a man named Matt whose friends called him “Matty Ice,” a reference to a beer called Natural Ice which is often shortened colloquially to “Natty Ice.”

A final form of address, actually not significant in English but consequential in most languages, is the choice of second-person pronouns. In English, you is the only option. In German (du, Sie), Italian (tu, Lei), French (tu, vous), and most other languages a speaker has to chose a pronoun that fits the situation and the relationship. Use of one of the pronouns frames the situation as unequal or informal, possibly altercasting the other as intimate. Usage of the other form positions the recipient as being in a distant relationship or the participants as being in a formal situation. Selections that a recipient does not see as reasonable will lead to negative evaluations—for instance, that a speaker is disrespectful, overly chummy, arrogant, or patronizing.

Names

Far from being trivial or arbitrary, names make a difference. There’s a reason why businesses obsess over product names, why some brand names become iconic while others are forgotten, why not every woman wants to give up her last name when she gets married, and why naming a child is such serious business. Names do identity-work and are deeply linked to
the people, ideas, and objects with which they are associated. Kleenex, band-aid, and hoover have become general terms for tissues, bandages, and vacuums in some countries, and Ford, Mercedes, and Jeep conjure up very different kinds of cars. Naming a child after a famous celebrity or pop culture character will surely have consequences, and how you introduce yourself to your new employer will, too. No one likes to have his or her name consistently mispronounced or forgotten, and doing an Internet search and seeing how many hundreds of people have your name can be as humbling as realizing your name means something unflattering in another language. In short, names matter. Consider the naming issues involved with naming children and with marriage.

Selecting a Child’s Name

For most people, the name you are given at birth is the name you will have for the rest of your life. This means that for most parents, naming a child is not something to be taken lightly. Can the name be shortened to or rhymed with something offensive? Is the name too ordinary or too strange? Does it sound good with the last name? Can both parents agree on it?

Names evoke master identities—some names are considered more “old” (Agnes, Charles), whereas others are more masculine or feminine (John, Mary). Of course, this has changed over time, with old-fashioned names such as Emma and Jeremiah coming back in style and names that were once for boys (Lindsey, Hilary, Jordan, Cameron) becoming popular girls’ names (though, curiously, girls’ names do not seem to become boys’ names). Names also have cultural qualities—they can evoke religious affiliations or ethnic background. Some religions have ceremonies for naming (such as the Namkaran Sanskar in Hindu), and some religious parents name their babies after saints or biblical characters. Names cue ethnic identities, too. Some names or spellings of names are associated with African Americans (for example: Lebron, Kobe, Asia, Erykah). Names such as José or Lupe are associated with Latino communities. In many Asian countries, children are assigned alternate “English” names in school that they might use in English classes but that they also frequently use if traveling to English-speaking countries to study, work, or live—someone named Xie (pronounced “Zee”), for example, might introduce himself as Steve.

Names can also be associated with personal qualities. Naming websites online may claim certain names as sounding “tough or strong,” whereas others sound “unique.” Some parents even look up the origins or meanings of names to find one they hope will fit their future baby’s character. Parents also choose names with interactional concerns in mind—a name such as
William, for instance, after which a young boy might be called “Billy” by his parents, “Will” or “Bill” by friends and equals, and “William” in formal situations—or names with a lot of potential nicknames such as Alexandra (Alex, Alexa, Allie, Lexie, Sandra).

Aesthetic, cultural, and practical concerns shape naming; names can shape a child’s life, and prior associations with a name can have an impact, too (imagine giving the name of someone you really disliked in high school to your baby!). But given names are not the only names that are used to refer to people on a daily basis; last names, or surnames, have their own associations. Surnames also have cultural and religious histories. In the United States, immigrants have often shortened or simplified surnames for practical purposes or to avoid negative associations during times of prejudice. The next section considers the impact marriage, divorce, and remarriage can have on surnames.

**Marriage, Divorce, and Naming**

When people marry, they need to decide what names they will adopt or retain. Should each person keep his or her birth name? Should one or both parties change their names? If so, which party and to what? Traditionally in U.S. culture, it has been expected that upon marrying a woman would take her husband’s last name. As a wife of more than 30 years noted, “Back then, we just assumed that the married name would be the husband’s last name. Nobody challenged that idea.”

Thus Sally Frand would marry Mark Ellis and subsequently she would refer to herself as “Sally Ellis,” “Mrs. Sally Ellis,” or “Mrs. Mark Ellis.” Mark Ellis would continue using the same name he had before marriage.

In the last 40 years, though, social commentators have criticized this conventional practice. Laurie Arliss, for instance, describes women who upon marriage adopt their husband’s name as taking “the coward’s way” and losing “more than a little of themselves in the process.” Rosalie Maggio describes the practice as “one of the most sexist maneuvers in the language.” Many other scholars, while recognizing that marital name selection is no longer a no-choice issue, are less critical, seeing considerable complexity in the potential meanings associated with marital name selection. As Donal Carbaugh notes, names are cultural resources used to say something about one’s personal identity against a backdrop of the more and the less typical choices. In the United States name selection has become a rhetorical choice. Let’s consider the personal values and commitments that the three marital naming practices used most often in American society reinforce.
The traditional option, indeed the one selected by the vast majority of Americans of all ages and educational levels, is for the husband to retain his birth name (e.g., Mark Ellis) and the wife to change her surname to that of her husband (e.g., from Sally Frand to Sally Ellis). In discussing the significance of taking her husband’s name, a wife said, “It is my identity. It’s my connectiveness to my husband. . . . The whole purpose of taking your husband’s last name is to become identified with your husband.”

Considerably less usual as a choice is what Carbaugh labeled as the “modern option” in which the wife retains her birth name (e.g., Sally Frand and Mark Ellis). A woman whom Carbaugh interviewed who had selected the modern option explained her choice this way:

[It reflects] a certain view that I have about being married, that I am still my own person, that my life is not just created by my husband, that I am a person with my own profession, my own friends, and my own values, and all that stays. So, while in some ways it reflects that, I’m not really making that statement. Mostly I just feel like I don’t know why you would change your name unless you were [pause]. It just doesn’t make sense to me, which is mostly why I did it [kept my birth name] . . . but I do think it reflects a certain kind of marital relationship when I am fairly independent from my husband although we’re interdependent with each other.

This interviewee went on to comment about how she remembered her mother sending notes to school for her and signing them “Mrs. Steve Jones.” She concluded, “I always thought that was real bizarre because it was like she had no identity of her own. . . . I possess my name and my identity, not my husband’s.”

But couples adopting the modern option face a choice that traditionals can avoid: What name should they give to their children? Most commonly, such couples give their children a hyphenated last name that combines the wife’s and the husband’s names (e.g., Lee Frand-Ellis), or they give the father’s name but perhaps use the mother’s surname as the child’s middle name. Traditionals often see the hyphenated name combinations used by moderns for their children as silly and cumbersome.

A final choice, labeled “integrative” or “combiners,” involves a woman keeping her birth name as her middle name or changing her last name so that it is a hyphenated combination (e.g., Sally Frand-Ellis). Although it is possible for a man to adopt the same hyphenated name, it is quite rare. The more typical move is for the man to make no change to his birth name. A woman who opted to retain her surname as a middle name
and to take her husband’s last name explained the marital name’s meaning in this way: “[it] says I am a person, the same person that I’ve been since I was born. I’m also a married person. . . . I am a part of a family that I’ve chosen and, uhm, but I’m still the person that I always was.”

Each of these name choices (traditional, modern, and integrative) conveys a distinctive interpersonal ideology. For couples selecting the traditional option, their joint name conveys a valuing of conventionality and a strong sense of identity as a connected couple rather than as separate individuals. In addition, especially for the woman, it conveys a conciliatory, noncritical stance toward existing social practices. Wives and husbands who select the modern option are paying greater attention to the independence and equality of each member of the couple. In addition, this choice signals that the woman is taking a more assertive stance that includes being critical of traditional social expectations related to men, women, and marriage. Finally, for wives and husbands who combine their names in some fashion, the conveyed meaning is a hybrid, more attentive to social change than the traditionals and more conventional than the moderns.

The reasons that wives (and husbands) give for marital name choices involved factors other than the previously noted value commitments. People chose to keep or change names because of identification with their families of origin or ethnic groups (e.g., Jewish, Irish), their professional identities, or for practical reasons such as how a particular name combination would sound. In addition, although these three practices are the most common, husbands and wives make other choices, such as naming themselves after a long-deceased ancestor or selecting a name that captures a commitment that they both share (e.g., peace, gaia).

The “choice” in American society that is regarded as challenging convention—giving a child a surname that includes the wife’s as well as the husband’s last name—is the conventional option in many other societies. In Colombia and other Spanish-speaking countries, children receive both parents’ surnames at birth with the father’s name first. Women typically keep their father’s last name and drop their mother’s name, replacing it with “de” (of) and their husband’s last name upon marriage. “Teresa Pérez López would thus become Teresa Pérez de Torres (wife of Torres) upon marrying Juan Torres. When identifying herself or signing her name, however, she could choose to do so as either Teresa Pérez or Teresa de Torres.” As Fitch notes, although there has been some discussion about naming practices in Colombia, by and large there is much less tension about this issue than in the United States. In Colombia, because husbands and wives routinely have different last names, a wife who has a last name different....
from her husband’s is not regarded as a woman taking a stand for women’s rights or against patriarchy.

In the United States and other English-speaking societies, marital naming tends to be thought of as a “women’s issue”—husbands may have strong feelings about what their wives should do, but it’s not something that affects them directly. But in some other countries, such as Japan, for instance, this is not the case; under certain circumstances a man who marries has to decide whether he should take his wife’s name. The most common practice, as is the case in the United States, is for women to take their husbands’ names. But, if a wife comes from a household that owns a small business, her family has no son, and her husband comes from a family of limited means, the wife’s family may “adopt” the man. “Adoption” occurs at the time of marriage and involves the bridegroom taking the wife’s last name while the wife retains her birth name. In so doing, the man becomes a son of the household and a potential successor to the family business.

In addition to the cultural and practical reasons for dealing with marital naming, other considerations have arisen as a result of the changing structure of families. Divorce is more common than it used to be, as are remarriages and step- or blended families. When a woman divorces, assuming she has made the traditional choice and taken her husband’s name, she has to decide whether to keep his last name or to revert to her original last name. Then if that woman remarries, she must decide whether to take the new husband’s last name. Some women who have children from a first marriage elect to keep the last name of the children’s father even after they remarry so that they have the same surname as their children. Others change their last names and their children’s last names. The issue of marital names is also complicated by the increased acceptance of same-sex marriages and children of same-sex partners. With gender taken out of the equation of who-takes-whose-name, other factors become more important in deciding what to do about names.

To summarize, when viewed culturally, we are led to see that societies vary regarding naming practices at marriage, what aspects are taken to be choices, and who has to make them. Once a cultural practice is criticized, as happened in the United States with women taking husbands’ names, some people begin to do things differently. When the number of people becomes a visible minority, what had been a convention (i.e., no one did anything differently and it required no thought) becomes a rhetorically informative choice. Rejecting the convention becomes a way to present self as unconventional, uncomfortable with, or challenging of traditional assumptions about marriage. Similarly, choosing the conventional naming
practice conveys that, at least in this instance, one is a person who sees no need to question what has been done traditionally.

**Identity Implications of Address**

Although many aspects of identity can be important, two facets of a relationship are usually of prime concern: (1) the degree of closeness or distance between people and (2) whether the parties are equal or not. In a non-equal relationship, it also matters which of the parties is more powerful, of higher rank, or deserving of more polite regard or respect. By the forms people select to address others and refer to self, they present how they view themselves in relation to actions and others. Uses of different pronouns, for instance (I, you, he/she, they, we, etc.) can indicate closeness to or distance from others, as well as claims of personal responsibility and moral judgments. Such pronoun shifts are subtle and not often consciously noticeable. A more obvious way of referring to selves and others—one that sometimes carries more explicit rules—is how people use personal address forms such as titles and names. Within American English, address forms can be arrayed in a rough continuum of formality. Nicknames and endearments anchor the informal and close end, titles are at the formal end, and use of first names or last names falls somewhere in the middle.

The choices noted in Figure 3.1 by no means exhaust address possibilities. Communicators are rhetorically skillful and are able to generate hybrid forms (e.g., title + FN [“Dr. Bob”] creates a respectful informality) that draw upon the meaning of common choices but put them together in novel ways for new relational meanings.

The second key dimension, equality, is marked in relationships through the use of reciprocal terms of address. If both parties use FN, or both use title + LN, they are framing their relationship as a roughly equal one. In contrast, when one speaker uses the other's first name (e.g., “Jeffery”) and the other addresses the first person by title (e.g., “Ms. Gruning”), they are enacting a nonequal relationship in which the person being addressed with the more formal term is being treated as the higher ranking individual. The likelihood of selecting any particular address form is shaped by a person's region and nationality. In the South, it is more common for people to combine Mr., Mrs., or Miss with a first name (e.g., “Miss Dorothy”). And in contrast to British speakers, Americans are known for informality and friendliness (also for inappropriate chumminess). Part of this reputation derives from the widespread use of FN–FN address.
Personal address is one important part of the way people attend to each other’s face. As we noted earlier, the dominant logic within mainstream American culture is to pursue mutual solidarity. In many other cultures, including Native American groups and most Asian ones, the dominant face logic is one that favors the giving of mutual deference and respect. These different impulses—to be friendly or to be politely respectful—create problems when persons from these different cultures come together. Moreover, as Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon note, the difference invariably disadvantages the communicator who assumes the importance of granting autonomy and showing respect. If there is not mutuality in the selected face system (i.e., solidarity vs. autonomy face, or positive vs. negative politeness), then the identity enacted by the person using the more formal selection to address the other is that of being lower status. For this reason, Scollon and Scollon argue, it is a culturally more sensitive practice to use formal address terms and strategies that display respect to others when meeting strangers.

Together, the names and titles and pronouns people use for selves and others has important contextual considerations. Whom you are speaking to and around whom makes a difference. Parents will often refer to each other by the names their children do (Mommy, Daddy, etc.) when the children are present, and mothers with very young children will refer to themselves as Mom or Mommy, in the third person, when speaking to their children. Cultural and rhetorical perspectives can also be applied. In countries with different pronoun forms, using the correct title will not be enough if you use the wrong pronoun. Patricia Covarrubias investigated how Spanish pronouns and verb forms are used in Mexico. The use of *tu* and *usted* (the first a more informal “you,” the second more formal) were not used strictly
according to status but varied with the situation and with gender. Covarrubias linked the uses to speech codes of _respeto_ and _confianza_ (respect and confidence/trust) that guided people’s uses of the pronouns. Within a cultural context, rhetorical situational goals concerning the kind of relationship one has or wants to have with a person matter.

### Ethnicity- and Race-Linked References

When a citizen calls the police to report a problem involving a person, whether it be for loitering, fighting, or something more serious, one of the first requests from the police call taker will be to describe the person’s race: “Was she black, white, or Hispanic?” Put simply, “labeling” is an inescapable requirement of everyday talk. Situations in daily life require us to refer to another person, and to do so in a way that distinguishes that person from others. Although there are many ways to refer to a person—describing him or her in terms of size, assumed age, smell, dress, and so on—racial and ethnic labels are a key part of our vocabulary for describing persons in public life. Of interest is the fact that the labels, whether they are used in a police call or on forms for employment or the census, are social constructions. Just as the social construction approach to identity mentioned in Chapter 1 sees identities as multiple and changing, seeing ethnic categories as social constructions emphasizes that ways of categorizing people in different situations and at different times have been different.

Historically, in the United States, race has been a central category affecting decision making. From the beginning of the history of the United States, not being a white person has had negative consequences. To determine how many congressional representatives a state should receive, people had to be counted. Although since amended, the Constitution initially had a counting principle in which a white person counted as one person and a black person equaled three-fifths of a person. In addition, who could be counted as white has varied across time. In the early 1900s, for instance, Irish Catholic immigrants were treated as a category different from white. People from anywhere in the Middle East are sometimes considered “white” and other times “Asian” in the U.S. Census, partly because there is not a clear line between what counts as the “Middle East” and the “Far East.”

The social constructive aspect of categories is especially visible in the changing categories used to reference persons that the Census Bureau now refers to as “Hispanic.” Not until the late 1970s did the label “Hispanic” become a popular one. According to Laura Gomez, the emergence of
Hispanic as the preferred category arose from influential Mexican American groups’ criticism of the undercounting of their people that occurred in the 1970 census. As a result, an advisory committee was formed, headed by the chair of the ethnic and Spanish division, to consider better ways of categorizing people. Out of this committee emerged the label “Hispanic” as the preferred category for future use. “Hispanic” offered a way to create political clout. Rather than Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and Mexican Americans conceiving of themselves as different groups, the label “Hispanic” highlighted the shared language heritage of these previously separate groups and bound them together as a single ethnic group. It also avoided the confrontational and political edge to the label “Chicano” that was then being used by many Mexican Americans to refer to themselves.

Not everyone, however, was happy with the “Hispanic” label. Martha Giminez, for instance, argued that the label, as is true of any label, led people away from noticing all of the differences among people in the category. A New York Puerto Rican and a new immigrant from Chile were “Hispanic,” and yet the two people were pretty different. In addition, the category “Hispanic” reinforces what the author sees as a negative tendency in the United States: seeing everybody in terms of their race and ethnicity rather than, say, in terms of their country of origin or their social class. The label also devalued the Indian heritage that is a significant part of many Mexican Americans’ identity: “Hispanic” privileges the colonial Spanish link over the Native American one.

Categories are a way to divide the social world. They are lumping and excluding devices—implicit assertions about which differences among people are of small account and which are big. Put another way, names are rhetorical devices, conveying individuals’ commitments and histories. Consider what four of these names do for Dolores Tanno, a communication teacher, often asked by new acquaintances “What are you?”

_I am Spanish:_ Behind this label is the story of my childhood in northern New Mexico. . . . My parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents considered themselves Spanish; rightly or wrongly, they attributed their customs, habits, and language to their Spanish heritage and I followed suit. . . . [B]eing Spanish incorporates into its plot the innocence of youth, before the reality of discrimination became an inherent part of the knowledge of who I am.

_I am Mexican American:_ Behind the name “Mexican American” is the story of classic colonization. . . . The name itself signifies duality; we are, as Richard A. Garcia (1983, p. 88) argues, “Mexican in culture and social activity, American in philosophy and politics.”
I am Latina: The name “Latina” is grounded in cultural connectedness. The Spaniards proclaimed vast territories on North and South America as their own. They intermarried in all the regions in which they settled. These marriages yielded offspring who named themselves variously as Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, Mexicans, and so forth, but they connect culturally with one another when they name each other Latinas.

I am Chicana: This name suggests a smaller community, a special kind of Mexican American awareness that does not invoke others (Cubans, Puerto Ricans, etc.) . . . the most intense form of ethnic identity because . . . “Chicano/a” is the only term that was selected by us for us.

Other racial and ethnic groups also have multiple names by which to reference selves. The issue of what people call themselves turns out to be more complicated than one might think. Giving people more options to choose their own terms would seem to be a good thing. On the other hand, many of the rights and advances that minority ethnic groups have made are due to being able to band together and share one group name—something that is difficult to do if everyone chooses a unique label. Tiger Woods caused a controversy in 1996 on the Oprah Winfrey Show when he referred to himself as “Cablinsasian,” a term he invented to describe his Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian ethnic background. Many African American activists found his choice alienating, something which seemed to distance him from African Americans. Interestingly, it is those people in the most socially powerful group that are the most resistant to having a name to identify their group. As a white student being interviewed about choice of categories to reference his own group noted, “Labels have negative meanings a lot of the time. Any label—Black, African American, nigger, honkey—any of them so I don’t use labels. I’m just me—white.”

The irony of the student’s statement is that “white” is treated as not a category label. Judith Martin and her colleagues noted how many white college students are reluctant to label themselves. The authors remark that “labeling was somehow different for whites than other ethnic/racial groups.” But when white students are pushed to identify names for their group, seven labels emerged: “white,” “Caucasian,” “white American,” “European American” or “Euro-American,” “Anglo,” and “WASP” (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant). The most preferred labels were “white,” “white American,” and “Caucasian,” with “European American” and “Anglo” in a second tier, and “WASP” the least favored. Martin argues that the preferred terms are the ones that are the most naturalizing and universalizing (“white is white”), whereas the others highlight the historical and symbolic ties of the category. Put another way, whiteness is invisible; being white is
understood as not having ethnicity. But when a white person’s ethnic-racial
group is named, it is less easy to think of only nonwhites as ethnic or racial.
As a respondent in Martin’s study noted:

It was refreshing to see White Americans get defensive about a racial
connotation, especially when the class is mostly Anglo. I first heard the
term Anglo from friends of mine who are Latino (Chicano) who referred
to Whites as Anglos back in 1983. When they started the term it was
more or less a slang word in the barrio. Since then I’ve been using it ever
since because it catches Whites off their guard.\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{Gender-Linked References}

Although it is possible in many situations to avoid referring to someone
else’s race, it is virtually impossible to avoid categorizing people by gender.
When we refer to others, we identify them as men or women (rarely as per-
sons) or use first names that are deeply gender-marked (Joshua, David vs.
Tricia, Jenny). Moreover, in contrast to Asian languages,\textsuperscript{43} English requires
identification of a person’s sex whenever a third person pronoun is used: \textit{she}
smashed the window; \textit{he} ran away. English cannot be spoken without
repeatedly marking the gender of the person being mentioned.

When groups seek to bring about societal change, they often focus on
language practices, and especially on ways of addressing or referring to
people. During the French Revolution, which sought to replace hierarchi-
cal relationships with equality and brotherhood, there was a movement
to replace the more formal second-person pronoun, \textit{vous}, with the inform-
al second-person pronoun, \textit{tu}. Similarly, the rise of communism in East-
ern Europe and China led to a set of address practices whose goals were
to promote more egalitarian relationships.\textsuperscript{44} In the last several decades,
feminists have been arguing for the importance of changing our ordinary
person-referencing practices in English in order to bring about fairer, more
eyQUITO relations between men and women. In particular, two routine
linguistic practices have been identified as unfair and as instances of sexism
in language.\textsuperscript{45}

A first practice was person referencing that ignored women and made
them invisible. Words such as \textit{men} and \textit{mankind, chairman,} and \textit{fireman} or
\textit{policeman} were supposed to be terms for both men and women, as was the
\textbf{generic} \textit{he} (i.e., the use of the pronoun \textit{he} to refer to a person of unknown
geneder: “If a student wants credit, he can stop by the teacher’s office”). The
second practice regarded as sexist was the defining of women in terms of
their roles to men. The best example of this is the personal address titles that distinguish women in terms of marital status (“Miss” and “Mrs.”) but that do not do so for men.

Language reform, then, seeks to replace ordinary talking practices with better, fairer ones. For instance, most language reform proponents argue that fairness would be better served by using pronouns that explicitly recognize women (he or she or they for the generic he), by using address forms that do not describe women in terms of their linkages with men (Ms.), and by replacing male-linked terms with those that do not presume the sex of the referred-to person (chair, firefighter, humanity). The rationale for such language reform flows out of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis postulated that the language a person has at his or her disposal affects his or her thinking. Although research has pretty clearly demonstrated that people are able to notice distinctions and formulate ideas for which they have no words, it has also shown that language options (e.g., vocabulary choices, grammatical categories) do shape understanding and meanings. Changing the words we routinely use, not always but sometimes, can make a difference to thought and action. People who routinely think of themselves as “guardians of their pets” very well may treat their pets better than if they think of themselves as “pet owners.”

But there are also arguments for opposing language reform. Three key reasons, quite different in their import, have been offered. A first argument, and perhaps the least persuasive, is that the existing state of affairs between women and men, although not perfect, is reasonable. As there is no problem, there is no need for language change.

A second reason for opposing language reform is that it is advocating something linguistically suspect: being ungrammatical (e.g., they and their for the generic he) or awkward (he or she for generic he, humanity for man). This view tends to treat language as a relatively fixed system that should be preserved whenever possible. Societies should not be in the business of changing language. In fact, terminological changes often do make a language messier, with less clear rules. Thus, if a person sees the keeping of a society’s language (e.g., English, French) orderly as a higher priority than the advocated change and what it is expected to accomplish, then he or she is likely to oppose language reform.

A final reason for opposing language reform grants the existence of gender inequality and admits that such inequality is harmful but sees language practices as symptoms rather than causes. Treating a symptom, using this line of reasoning, will not cure the problem. Some evidence for this position is seen in the evolution of the title Ms. The term was initially introduced to allow women to be referred to in a way that did not make their
marital status key. Over time, however, this purpose was turned on its head. In the United States in everyday speech Ms. came to be interpreted as a form single women used to hide the fact that they were unmarried. In Canada, it came to be regarded as the term to refer to a woman who was divorced. Thus the impetus for introducing the term Ms.—to make things more equitable—was subverted by the usual way speakers used it. As Susan Erlich and Ruth King note, whether a language change takes in its intended way seems to depend very much on whether high-status members of a relevant group support it. In contrast to what happened to Ms., the elimination of generic he and “man words” in written prose has been highly successful in universities, especially in departments such as communication, sociology, and psychology. By and large, because key players (social science journal editors and professors) were persuaded of the importance of language reform, it happened. Unsurprisingly, attitudes toward language reform are related to a person’s gender. In general, women are more positive about gender-linked language reform than men.

Referring to others in ways that make salient their ethnicity or gender (and certain attitudes toward it) is one ongoing feature of talk. However, everyday talk is more complicated than this: Speakers routinely refer to people in ways that draw upon cultural knowledge and set in motion complex conversational inferencing. Let’s next consider how this works.

The Membership Categorization Device

A sociologist named Harvey Sacks coined the term membership categorization device (MCD) to refer to “collections of categories for referring to persons, with some rules of application.” These MCDs include collections such as sex (male–female) and race–ethnicity (black, white, Hispanic, Asian), but they also include other groupings of people that we think of as going together. For instance, take a simple comment, “The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.” In this case, “baby” and “mommy” are part of what we think of as the family category (which includes moms, dads, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, etc.). It is also the case, however, that “baby” is part of other membership category systems. Besides the family category, “baby” is a member of the stage-of-life category (e.g., baby, toddler, teenager, adult, senior). It is also part of what we might label as an emotional connection category. If an 80-year-old woman looked at her 50-year-old son and said, “You’re still my baby,” we would understand the term “baby” in this way. The sentence about the 50-year-old man being a baby, taken alone, makes sense. Yet if it had preceded the one about the baby crying and the mommy
picking it up, it would seem quite bizarre. Although the term is the same, the meaning category that is called up, and therefore what activities reasonably will go with it, is very different.

What Sacks did in his writing was to display the power and significance of a selected membership term and its category. In a nutshell, the membership term a speaker selects does all kinds of work to channel thinking in certain directions, to make actions seem sensible or potentially problematic. Membership categorizations, in Sacks’s terms, are inference-rich: They highlight certain features of a situation and downplay others. By using certain membership terms (and avoiding others), a speaker can accomplish having a referred-to person be seen positively or negatively. It is not the case, though, that use of membership terms is necessarily a conscious and highly strategic enterprise. Consider our two-sentence example: “The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.”

To see what is being accomplished by membership terms, it is helpful to consider what other terms could have been selected and how they would have led to different inferences. Suppose the speaker had described the baby as the male, or even the boy or the child. Assuming that all of these descriptors technically fit, nonetheless they do not shape thinking in the same way. Each of the membership terms, but especially male, makes crying as an activity an action to be disapproved of (i.e., it is not natural or reasonable). This is an example of what it means to say that a membership categorization is inference-rich. It pulls up associations with activities, some of which are taken to be reasonable and others that are implied as not reasonable if a party is a member of that category.

Let’s go a bit further with this example. Another inference most listeners will draw is that the mommy who picked up the baby was in fact the baby’s mother, not some other woman who was also a mother. Sacks argues that the reason we hear it this way is that if a reference to another person can be heard as a member of the same category (i.e., family in this case), then other references should be heard as members of that category system. This explains, for instance, why we as listeners assume that the mother is the baby’s mother, but we would not make the same assumption if the second membership categorization term were changed to woman (“The baby cried. The woman picked it up.”). One feature of MCDs is that we expect them to be used together if they can be. Because a second family membership term is not used, listeners will be led to infer that the woman must not be the baby’s mother, for otherwise a different membership form would have been used.

MCDs can refer to a lot of different kinds of categories, and of course, categories can be related to one another. The traditional U.S. category
“family” cues the sorts of things discussed in the preceding example—parents (one man, one woman) and a set of biological children (at least one, but rarely more than four) of a certain age. But modern families are considerably more complex, including adopted children, blended (step-) families, same-sex parents, and older children who continue to live at home (as young people move out and marry later than they once did); furthermore, families in many different cultural or regional contexts (within the United States and outside of it) can include what are usually considered extended family members such as grandparents and cousins. In all of these cases, the family collection includes overlapping categories based on age, gender, relationship, and other criteria. It is hard to overestimate how these categories and their associations are built into everyday language use. Terms such as mother, husband, and brother include relationship designations as well as gender; even when more neutral terms are used (partner, sibling), traditional gender or heterosexual assumptions will be made unless the speaker says otherwise.

Race is a category ascription that is particularly sensitive. For this reason, people sometimes go out of their way to avoid identifying people by racial or ethnic terms, particularly since popular movements toward color blindness and political correctness impelled people to watch what they said (in public if not in private). Because being stereotypical or racist is often legally and socially defined by (pejorative) uses of ethnic labels, people who worry about being insensitive may seek to avoid using those labels. This does not actually mean that people don’t make connections between categories based on race and negative activities—they usually just use different terms, relying on listeners to infer through category associations to whom they are referring. Because it is socially unacceptable to say negative things about people based on explicit references to race, people may refer to certain regions, countries, schools, or other categories in which a particular race is perceived as dominant. An example of this practice would be making negative comments about people based on their immigrant status or English language skills without mentioning a corresponding racial or ethnic identity.

References to people will almost always be linked with aspects of identity—with the sorts of things people are presumed to do and be like. When people refer to categories based on race while trying to avoid explicitly labeling race, it is often because what they say associates the category with a negative identity attribute. Though categorizing people is a common way of making sense of the world and can at times be unavoidable, there are also situations that are designed to categorize people for practical or legal purposes. Carles Roca-Cuberes analyzed how psychiatrists talk to
patients in such a way as to determine whether they fit into categories of “insane” or “mentally ill.” She found that rather than drawing on specialized or expert knowledge, many of the psychiatrists’ ways of talking drew on everyday inferences based on membership categorization, contrasting “normal” activities and behavior with the deviant possibilities assumed to correlate with a “not normal” identity. In one example of her data, which come from interviews in a large Spanish hospital, the therapist (T) questions the patient (P) about the patient’s recent desire to commit suicide (English translation):

**EXCERPT 3.1**

1. P: I decided well just like this to kill myself. It was the most- the most to stop suffering. I didn’t want to live any longer.
2. T: So how did you think to do it?
3. P: Then I thought to cut my wrists. But it seems that I have a guardian angel because ((laughs)) I heard my mother going up stairs and I thought now it’s my opportunity. But I didn’t realize that my aunt was in the stairwell.
4. (3 lines deleted)
5. P: And I didn’t do it. So then um I had a kind of spasm.
6. T: Did you cut yourself?
7. P: No I couldn’t because-
8. T: Mh hm.
9. P: So then um I had a kind of strange spasm.

The questions the therapist (T) asks are about how the patient wanted to kill herself and whether she made the attempt (went so far as to cut herself) (turns 2 and 6). Her questions go beyond accepting the patient’s self-ascription (as someone who has wanted to kill herself) and seek more confirmation for assigning the label of “suicidal” to the patient. Specifically, the first question orients to the idea that someone who “really” wants to kill him- or herself will have thought about it or planned it and perhaps have chosen a particular method; the second question connects the category label of “suicidal” with the actions not just of thinking about suicide but attempting it to some extent. In this way, the therapist negotiates how well the patient fits into the suicidal category versus another sort of category, such as “attention-seeking.” The therapist’s inquiries draw on ordinary distinctions between people as having a legitimate problem or not.
Summary

Everyday talk is replete with references to self and other people. The terms we select in ordinary exchanges are an important way in which we build our own identities as a certain kind of person (e.g., traditional or nontraditional, a feminist or not into feminism). It is also a fundamental part of how we altercast others. Through our use of particular membership categorization devices we frame another and his or her actions as reasonable, stupid, cruel, and so on. In addition, these terms enable us to build relationships with others in which we are distant or close, equal or differing in social rank and status.

The options people have for person referencing are shaped by their language and national community. Because not all speech communities have the same options, the meaning of the same conversational action (giving a child both parents’ last names) will differ. Moreover, within any community, some person-reference practices are relatively invisible, whereas others are perceived as a matter of choice. Nonetheless, even for practices that a group at one time perceives as invisible, as was the case in the United States with the use of the generic he and ethnic labeling of whites, over time a particular person-reference practice can become visible. That is, a person-reference practice can change from being perceived as the natural way to express oneself—not a matter of choice—to an identity-implicative option requiring thought and justification.
Early in the 1980s, an Oklahoma horse breeder named Don Tyner was arrested and tried for extortion. The charge against him was brought by Vernon Hyde, a man who had been working for Tyner’s organization. Hyde believed that he had purchased a share of a horse; Tyner disagreed. Over a period of time the men had had several angry conversations. Hyde had taped the telephone conversations with Tyner in the hopes of gaining evidence that would lead to Tyner’s conviction. The following conversation was introduced at the trial as evidence that Tyner had threatened Hyde. The exchange occurred in the middle of a 30-minute conversation. It had come after a heated exchange between the two men concerning who actually possessed shares of the horse. There was a pause, then the conversation continued:

EXCERPT 4.1

TYNER: How’s David?
HYDE: Do what?
TYNER: How’s David?
HYDE: You mean my son?
TYNER: Yep.
HYDE: Don, don’t threaten my son. Do a lot of things but don’t threaten my son.
TYNER: I didn’t threaten anybody. I just said, “How’s David?”
During the trial, the prosecution and the defense claimed radically different speech acts were being performed by the utterance “How’s David?” Drawing on an FBI expert witness, the prosecution argued that the utterance was intended as a threat, with a meaning something like “if you don’t drop this matter, something could happen to David.” The defense stated that this utterance was not intended as a threat; it was meant as a request for information whose purpose was to rebuild a pleasant connection with a coworker who was angry and tense. One way friends or acquaintances can close down a conflict they are having is to switch to small-talk topics. Was Tyner doing this? Prior to their dispute, Tyner had had a friendly relationship with Hyde, as well as with his son, David, whom he had taken to baseball games. At the trial Tyner’s attorney argued that this friendly intent was what Tyner’s question meant; it was not intended as a threat. Tyner was eventually acquitted. Nonetheless, it is not at all difficult to imagine the circumstances in which an ostensibly benign speech act, such as this question, could have been meant as a threat.

Determining what speech act a communicator means by uttering a phrase is a recurring concern in everyday exchanges. Intimates routinely dispute whether a partner’s comment was supporting or criticizing, asking or telling, warning or threatening. Interpretive differences such as the one just discussed do not usually end up in court, but they do affect how people feel about each other. In this chapter we (1) provide background on speech acts, (2) examine how speech acts link to a variety of identities, and (3) take a close look at a small set of speech acts that are especially face-threatening.

**Philosophical Background**

Some years ago a philosopher named J. L. Austin noted that people use words for more than describing and representing the world. Words are used to criticize, praise, request, account, beg, warn, threaten, and so on. The social act that an utterance performs is one aspect of communicative meaning; it is the answer to the question “What is a person doing in saying \( X \)?”

The number of potential speech acts a person could perform is infinite. Austin suggested that there are as many speech acts as there are verbs in a language. In English, for instance, we distinguish between a person ordering, demanding, suggesting, requesting, hinting, pleading, begging, and so on. Although these acts are clearly related—each is an attempt to direct the actions of another—they involve a host of subtle differences. What speech act an utterance means is a matter that is open to interpretation, and sometimes people disagree. This is the reason that interactional meaning is not
4. Speech Acts

objective but is negotiated by people in the ways they do speech acts and label each other’s speech acts.

John Searle, also a language philosopher, divided speech acts into five categories. Speech acts such as those just mentioned (ordering, demanding, suggesting, requesting, hinting, pleading, begging) he categorized as directives, utterances that attempt to get another person to do something. Saying “hey, give me a ride,” or “would you mind picking me up later?” are different directive speech acts—one more of a command or order, the other more of a request—but both seek to influence another’s actions. A second category of speech act is representatives, utterances that report a state of affairs in the world. Representatives include speech acts such as informing, reporting, commenting, and describing. Examples of representatives include “It’s raining outside” and “Randy was 20 minutes late to the school board meeting.” In contrast to other speech acts, representatives can be evaluated as to whether they are true or false statements about the world, but often they, too, do more than merely present a fact. A third kind of speech act is commissives. Commissives commit a speaker to a future course of action with regard to another. Threatening, promising, and offering to do something are examples of commissives. Saying “I’ll pick you up on my way home” is an example of offering to do something for someone, which is a kind of commissive. The fourth category of speech act is expressives, talk the primary function of which is to display or reveal a speaker’s feelings. If a person apologizes or starts shouting at another, he or she is engaged in doing an expressive speech act. Saying “I’m so pissed at you!” is an expressive speech act, but so is saying “I’m not angry” when it is clear by tone and facial expression that you are. Searle’s fifth kind of speech act is declaratives. Declaratives transform people and situations from one type to another. For instance, in an official situation, if a rabbi or priest says, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” a single man and woman are transformed into a married couple. The christening of boats (or babies) and the swearing in of government officials are other instances of declaratives. By virtue of identifying and distinguishing five important functions of talk, Searle’s typology provides a helpful frame. Nonetheless, as is true with any frame, attention is directed toward some features of what people do and away from others.

In this chapter, our analysis of speech acts combines Searle’s notion of speech act with the notion of speech act/speech event developed in the ethnography of communication tradition. Drawing on these two traditions, then, a speech act will be defined as the social meaning of a short segment of talk. Rather than assuming that every act falls neatly into one category, we assume that speech acts are multifunctional. The act of criticizing, for
instance, often both expresses a speaker’s negative feeling (an expressive) and functions as an attempt to direct the actions of others (a directive). Speech act types also go together in various ways. A directive speech act (requesting a ride somewhere) may be met with a commissive speech act (promising to give the ride). A commissive speech act may be a way of doing a directive (‘‘Clean your room right now or no dessert!’’). Second, though speech acts are accomplished by single utterances, we also look at speech acts that can be done through sequences of speech acts. Within this broader perspective, gossiping or griping are also speech acts, socially meaningful speech actions that make sense of a short stretch of connected utterances. Finally, as Dell Hymes shows, and as we develop later, the meaning of individual speech acts is not universal but is community-flavored. In addition, although most speech acts are defined from the point of view of the doer, speech acts can also be defined from other perspectives. Thus, although it would be unusual for a person to set out to brownnose, brownnosing is a meaningful speech act in institutional situations; American students and workers routinely accuse each other of doing this act and seek to avoid doing it themselves.

**Links between Speech Acts and Identities**

Speech acts and identities are tied in multiple ways, each both affecting and being affected by the other. The range of relationships that exist between people’s identities and speech acts can be stated as four principles. For each of the principles, we provide evidence for its reasonableness.

**Principle 1: Preexisting Identities Shape Speech Act Performances**

Interactional and master identities will constrain which speech acts will be expected, allowed, or prohibited. Imagine that two people (X and Y) performed the following sequence of speech acts:

1. Y asked permission of X to stay at a friend’s house for the night.
2. X denied Y’s request.
3. Y complained that X was not fair.
4. X ordered Y to quit badgering and threatened to withhold TV-watching privileges.
5. Y began to cry.
6. X relented and gave permission for Y to stay at the friend’s house, but only after Y fed and walked the dog.
Imagine, now, that you are asked to make guesses about X’s and Y’s identities: What age is each of them? What gender or social class might each be? Are they strangers or acquaintances? If they know each other, what kind of relationship do they have?

We cannot assign X and Y exact identities, but given the speech acts they performed, we can rule out some identities as being highly implausible. It is not likely, for instance, that the parties are college roommates. In American culture it would be strange indeed if a college roommate asked for his roommate’s permission to spend the night at a friend’s house; it would be even stranger if the other took it upon himself to deny such a request and if the person cried in response.

Y’s asking permission to spend the night at a friend’s, complaining, badgering, crying, and being told to feed and walk the dog make it hard to imagine that Y is anything but a child. Probably, too, Y is neither very young (under 5 years) nor very old (a teen). A request of this type is unlikely to be made by a toddler, and although it is plausible that a teen would ask permission to spend the night at a friend’s and repeatedly complain if denied such permission, it is unlikely that he or she would burst into tears if reprimanded. Not only is it likely that Y is a child and that X is older, but these particular speech acts suggest that X and Y are closely related. Children do not ask just any adult for permission: parents, much older siblings, grandparents, or guardians are the ones likely to be asked about overnights.

For the preceding sequence of speech acts, it would be a bit more difficult to guess X’s and Y’s genders. In American culture these acts are ones we would regard as typical of caretakers of either gender, as well as typical of both male and female children. In particular speech communities, crying, ordering, and relenting may be gender-tied, but they are at best weak ties. Perhaps less obviously, this set of actions implicates X’s and Y’s social class identities. A dispute over a child spending the night at a friend’s house is common in middle-class families but unlikely to occur in a poor family living in a crowded apartment.

Speech acts both go with and become difficult when a person has particular interactional identities. It is far easier to order, praise, criticize, or advise another if one is of higher status than one’s conversational partner. Parents with their children, teachers with students, bosses with employees, police officers with citizens, and coaches with players are expected to engage in these kinds of speech acts. In contrast, children, students, and employees are likely to feel constrained in performing these acts, perhaps not avoiding them entirely but putting effort into planning how to do the acts. In addition, persons with a lower status identity will need to recognize
that deciding to perform authority-related acts may make negative interpersonal consequences unavoidable. A player advising a coach how he could coach better may receive a poor response, regardless of the wisdom of the advice.

Similarly, a boss who wants to give an employee a real choice about whether to do something will need to do conversational work to avoid having what she says interpreted as an indirect order. For instance, if the head honcho of a company (Althea) says to the accounts manager (Ann), “Could you complete this report before leaving today?” Ann may feel that she has no choice even though the boss's remark was framed as a question. She may regard the question as a polite way of ordering her to stay. If Althea really wanted Ann to feel free to refuse, she might have said something like: “Don't feel like you have to do this, I want you to feel free to say no, but would you be able to complete the report before you left tonight?” Although this extensive conversational prefacing work might do the trick—cuing Ann that it really is a request and not an order—it might not. Ann may still feel as if she has been ordered. At the same time, Althea may be meaning her request as an order, albeit a nice one, and might be angered if Ann were to actually refuse to do it.

Just as certain speech acts seem reasonable (or problematic) with interactional identities of particular statuses, so too do certain speech acts with identities of intimacy or distance. A person cannot tease, flirt, or ask favors of just anybody. Each of the speech acts implies who one is and thereby can become difficult when a person is not interpreted as being in the appropriate identity category. This type of linkage also applies to master identities. Not too many decades ago in U.S. society, being a certain race, religion, or gender completely foreclosed certain interactional identities. Today this is no longer the case, but the historically long association has had communicative repercussions. Men of non-European ethnicity—especially Hispanic, Native, and African Americans—and women of any race may find their performance of authority-related speech acts (criticizing, directing, advising), especially if addressed to white men rather than women, children, or nonwhite men, more difficult than their Anglo male counterparts. Not only may subordinates resist a person’s doing of authority-related speech acts that may be accepted in a matter-of-fact manner from a person with the expected master identities (i.e., male, white, middle class), but also performing the authority acts may call forth other kinds of negative feelings. Thus, if a speaker’s authority is accepted, other master identities may feel challenged, either by the partner or within a speaker herself. A white woman or a Hispanic man may comfortably enact authority identities but
experience trouble related to their gender or ethnic identities: Is the female superior being an adequately feminine person? Is the Latino boss selling out and acting white?

At the same time, persons with those master identities that are routinely granted status in a society will find it difficult to perform speech acts that are associated with subordinate status and limited power. Too frequent expression of sad and out-of-control feelings, or easy and frequent acceptance of direction (at least from women), could lead men in many speech communities to question whether they are being men.

**Principle 2: Doing Speech Acts Builds and Changes Identities**

People's relationships are not fixed but change over time. Strangers become acquaintances, bosses and employees become friends, acquaintances or friends become sexual intimates, intimates become exes (ex-girlfriend, ex-boyfriend, ex-spouse), and so on. In large measure, relational change is accomplished through beginning to do, or refraining from doing, particular speech acts. A request for help can change a pair of acquaintances into people in the beginning stage of a friendship. Invitations and compliments of certain types can transform a friendship into a love relationship. Refraining from polite chitchat or voicing one's criticisms may bring about a new level of relational intimacy, and not inviting someone to go on a vacation may signal a demotion from friend to mere acquaintance.

Identities related to distance and intimacy are especially open to negotiation and renegotiation. But just as intimacy-related identities are particularly fluid and constructed through talk, status-linked identities are also modified this way. For instance, it is through different ways of talking that parents and children move from relationships in which parents are authorities to ones in which parents and children are equal or nearly equal. Gradually, over time, parents refrain from asking for reports, offering advice, and ordering actions and themselves disclose their feelings and fears to their children; just as gradually children stop asking for help or for permission from their parents and themselves provide support and advice to their parents. Thus the parent–child relationship becomes one between equals. Moreover, the speech acts a person selects, as well as his or her characteristic style, is key to how people build personal identities: as tactful or blunt, critical or supportive, trustworthy or unreliable, humorous or serious, and so on. We focus on this topic later in the chapter when we consider the sensitivities in performing face-threatening speech acts.
“Teasing” is an example of an interesting and sometimes delicate speech act that can contribute to the closeness or distance of interlocutors, as well as their relative status. One marker of equality or closeness is the ability to tease someone. Without that component, “teasing” can end up with a more negative hue: as mocking or even bullying. But teasing is also a way of attempting to make a relationship more equal or getting close to others; teasing can be an important component of flirting, for example. A tease from someone of lower to someone of higher status might be seen as disrespectful, whereas a tease from someone of higher to someone of lower status can seem mean-spirited. Research has indicated that teasing between guests and interviewers on talk shows or in news programs is part of what creates a sense of mutual regard even between participants who have opposing views or who have been arguing most of the time—it is a way of injecting light-heartedness, even respect into a contentious interaction. On the other hand, someone who teases in a position of power can come across as insensitive.

Part of what makes teases difficult is not just who does them and when to do them but the widely accepted cultural assumption that teasing is linked to “truths” about people’s personal identities. Teases are not irrelevant and do not come out of nowhere but tend to make connections to aspects of people’s actual activities and thus can be face-threatening. On the other hand, teases are not meant to be taken literally, so they walk a fine line. People who are teasing, therefore, may exert some work to mark their speech acts as teases, with a wink or by adding “just joking.” This seems particularly to be the case with teases toward children, partly because of the status difference mentioned and partly because very young children may not have the inferencing skills needed to interpret utterances nonliterally. A tease that is well received will probably be responded to with laughter (of a “genuine” rather than forced or uncomfortable kind), whereas a tease that is not well received may be met with silence and a sort of sour-faced expression (what Paul Drew calls “po-faced”).

When teases are “successful” (taken as playful and funny by both/all participants), they bring people closer. But when are not successful, they can push people apart. Using claims to teases or markers of teases to convey genuine criticisms, complaints, or insults, for instance, is the sort of interaction that can signal the end of a relationship. This is particularly true if certain sorts of teasing that convey personal information are done in public. Because the interactional meaning of teasing is negotiated, it is not necessarily the case that teasing is affectionate or aggressive because one person meant it to be or the other person interpreted it to be; the meaning
may be contested and change over the course of a conversation. An argument over whether someone meant something seriously or jokingly is a sign that the meaning of a tease is in progress of being decided.

Over time, people can develop relationships based on teases. Certain family members may become the regular victims or “butts of the joke,” and others can take on a sort of “joker” role in different situations. If someone is regularly teased about making “dumb blond” comments, that can get incorporated into the person’s identity: Recurrent teasing creates, recreates, and emphasizes that person as being “ditzy.” When people regularly enact the teaser–teased relationship with the same person, that too becomes a significant part of a shared identity.

**Principle 3: Speech Acts Are Distinctive to Speech Communities**

A speech community evolves ways of talking that are prized within that community and distinctive to it. Sometimes this involves a particular kind of speech act unique to people or places, and sometimes it involves particular ways of doing a common speech act. The Akan, an ethnic group in Ghana, have particular taboos on certain topics (e.g., menstruation) and a general value for silence; additionally, greetings are highly valued. Greetings follow specific rules and require the suspension of other communicative activities during their completion. Even the simplest greetings of four to six turns (a culturally specific version of the Western “hi”–“hi,” “how are you”–“fine”) have their own prescribed responses and regulations: An initial “hello” is always followed by a response signaling the name of the other person and the relationship to him or her; and you cannot, for instance, greet someone on your way to the toilet. Often, however, greetings in Akan become extended speech events of several turns—miniconversations in their own right. Greetings are almost always an indication of status (younger or lower authority people, as well as guests, greet first) and change norms according to the situations in which they occur (greetings during eating, for instance, vs. greetings during gravedigging or greetings to specific community members such as the blacksmith). To refuse or ignore a greeting is a serious social transgression.¹⁰

Donal Carbaugh and colleagues studied terms for speech acts with similar meanings to the English *dialogue* in Japanese, Korean, and Russian. In each linguistic context, the one or two terms that could be translated as “dialogue” in English nonetheless had their own specific meanings, uses, appropriate contexts, and other norms. In Korean, for instance, *daehwa*
refers to a sort of open-minded discussion about problems or different viewpoints, whereas *hwedam* is used for political talks and negotiations.\(^\text{11}\)

Religions have a number of important speech acts. The act of confessing in many religions (in Catholicism, or teshuva in Judaism) is not just an expressive speech act of repentance or apology but a declarative speech act that can involve being absolved of sin. “Sharing the gospel” (evangelism) and “praying” are other important speech acts in religious communities that do not merely express a religious sentiment but (1) share a message and potentially convert others to the religion or (2) are believed to affect the actions of others through spiritual intervention.\(^\text{12}\) In Arabic, *maašaalah* is a religious invocation that also serves speech act functions in ordinary conversation, including complimenting, expressing gladness, being sarcastic, and as a marker that one is listening.\(^\text{13}\)

Speech acts particular to one’s own society are much harder to see than those in other societies. One speech act that is quintessentially American is what Tamar Katriel and Gerry Philipsen\(^\text{14}\) have labeled communicating. *Communicating* is the term Americans use to refer to talk about personally important matters in which each person experiences a feeling of being deeply understood by the partner. *Communicating*, or really *communicating*, as many Americans refer to this speech act, has an emotional and therapeutic function: Its purpose is to make people feel good about themselves and their relationship. In contrast to the Israeli act of griping, which also has a therapeutic function, communicating focuses on problems, feelings, and events in one’s personal life. Griping and communicating can also be distinguished in terms of the bodily postures that accompany them. As Katriel notes, “one can slouch and gripe, but one can hardly slouch and ‘communicate’; one can gripe while doing dishes, but one cannot accomplish the purposeful, concerted activity of communicating under these circumstances.”\(^\text{15}\)

Online communication has led people to incorporate a number of different ways of doing speech acts or marking how speech acts should be interpreted. Emoticons, for instance, are one way of indicating the sort of nonverbal cues that are usually missing in Internet text and that would otherwise demonstrate whether one is serious, teasing, sarcastic, and so on. Something that looks like a criticism might be softened through the inclusion of a smiley or winking face.\(^\text{16}\) On Facebook, “liking” someone’s posted comments or pictures is its own speech act, represented by a “thumbs up” button (though people can also comment or even say “like” in a comment). Getting a lot of “likes” on Facebook is seen as a status marker; people and businesses will even request likes. It is usually seen as a speech act in the expressive category that indicates enjoyment of, agreement with, or support
for something. In 2012, a federal district court ruled that liking something on Facebook is not a form of protected free speech. In other words, clicking the “like” button was not seen as the same as expressing an opinion through actual text in a comment.¹⁷

One consequence of speech acts being local to particular speech communities is that communicators with different backgrounds run into difficulties in dealing with each other. It is all too easy to see communicators who perform unfamiliar speech acts as weird, pompous, obscene, and so on. Similarly, it takes considerable mental effort to realize that speech acts that seem clear and reasonable to self may be local and idiosyncratic, ways of talking that have been acquired through immersion in a community rather than being universal categories of meaning.

Although some speech acts are community-distinctive, many others are common across communities but are performed or interpreted differently. Marga Kreckel, for instance, showed how two families in Britain interpreted the act of warning differently.¹⁸ In Swahili, as is also true in Akan, much longer greetings are expected among acquaintances than would be typical in Britain or the United States.¹⁹ Additionally, through changing the length of a greeting (making it shorter than usual by not inquiring about certain people or events), a Swahili speaker can altercast a conversational partner negatively, an option not available for English speakers.

To summarize, speech community differences seep into speech acts.²⁰ Beliefs about what count as reasonable to include in compliments, greetings, or apologies and when a particular act type should happen can distinguish one culture from another.

**Principle 4: Form and Function Need to Be Distinguished**

The utterance “I’m sorry” is a common way people apologize and take responsibility for having done something wrong. An apology, according to Erving Goffman,²¹ is an attempt to split off the current good self from the bad self. Apologies acknowledge that one’s action was bad (e.g., thoughtless, unfair, unreasonable) while suggesting that such action is unusual for one’s self, not normal or ordinary. Yet although the act of apologizing can be accomplished by the phrase “I’m sorry,” it may also be accomplished by other words. Even more important, the phrase may not be an apology at all.

To be an apology a speaker must take some responsibility for an action and express regret. Imagine, for instance, that without an explanation a man (Jim) ran out and left his friend in the middle of having coffee and conversing at a local shop. The next day, Jim sees his friend and says, “I was a real jerk. ((shaking his head)) I shouldn’t have left you like that.” Although
Jim did not say the words “I’m sorry,” his friend probably would hear what Jim was saying as an apology. Apologizing, then, is often done with other words than the phrase “I’m sorry.” American speakers who were interviewed about how they used and interpreted this phrase, in fact, noted how “I’m sorry” was one of the less suitable things to say when a person was really apologizing. "I’m sorry" more than other words could be taken as conveying a lack of sincerity, being formulaic, and indicating that a speaker did not really feel regret.

Not only are apologies accomplished with a variety of words, but also the phrase “I’m sorry” has other functions besides apologizing. Four other functions have been identified. A first use is as a ritualistic remedy, a token comment or politeness device to be used when, for example, one lets a door slam on another or when one bumps into someone else when a bus lurches to a halt. A second function is to manage and repair minor conversational difficulties. Communicators use this phrase when they have not heard what another said. In this case “I’m sorry” functions as a request for repetition. Speakers also use this phrase when they make minor errors in pronouncing a word or incorrectly retrieving the name of a place or person. The third function of “I’m sorry” is to express sympathy. People use the phrase when something bad or sad happens to another, even though they had nothing to do with it. “I’m sorry” might be said as a response to a coworker who mentions that her bike was stolen. A final function of “I’m sorry” is to express gratitude and indebtedness. Mariko Kotani, a communication researcher, identifies this function as especially common among Japanese speakers using English. It is well documented that Japanese speakers use the phrase “I’m sorry” more often than American speakers. Whether Japanese actually “apologize” more frequently is more difficult to assess. In an interview an American student who had spent a semester in Japan was asked what he thought of Japanese speakers’ use of “I’m sorry.” He said the following:

**EXCERPT 4.2**

It’s funny, amusing, I got used to it. First I didn’t know what to make of it. “Sorry,” “Thank you,” “Yes,” “Please,” “No.” I got conditioned to a little polite thing. So when Japanese are straightforward, I’m taken aback.

A Japanese student studying in the United States had this to say about why Japanese speakers say “sorry” even when they are not in the wrong:
EXCERPT 4.3

It’s perhaps a cultural difference. The Japanese have honne and tatemae. In tatemae people try to put a good face on a matter and have a good relationship with others on the surface.26

In contrast to what needs to be expressed to create a good relationship on the surface (tatemae), honne expresses what people think inside. Tatemae legitimizes an official and public self that is not necessarily consistent with the private self. Sincerity is not, nor should it be, the main issue affecting what people say. Care about the other person and keeping a smooth relationship should often take priority. To say “I’m sorry,” then, may be a way to show recognition of the others’ feelings in a situation (e.g., that they feel put out, upset, or offended). It need have nothing to do with whether a speaker feels responsible for that action.

These five functions of the phrase “I’m sorry” are available to both Japanese and American speakers, but which one is intended by speakers or attributed by listeners is likely to differ by speech community. The upshot of this small difference in understanding how a form is likely to link to its potential functions can be quite consequential. Kotani expresses it this way:

English speakers may interpret Japanese speakers’ frequent use of “I’m sorry” as polite, ritualistic or excessively formal depending on situations. They may think that Japanese speakers are “over polite” in their day-to-day encounters but do not admit responsibility when they really need to do so. In contrast, Japanese speakers may interpret English speakers’ limited use of “I’m sorry” as the lack of goodwill.27

When people apologize, considerable work is done to both convey and interpret the extent of sincerity. Whether a relational partner or a political figure is apologizing for a transgression, people place a lot of importance on determining whether the apologizer “really means it.” Zohar Kampf looked at how apologies made by Israeli political figures were judged. When a celebrity or public figure apologizes, the sincerity of the apology may be discussed by multiple people, from particular individuals toward whom the apology is directed to various other famous people in the media, and of course by ordinary citizens watching the drama unfold in the media. Apologies can be difficult because they assume that the transgression needs to be apologized for (not something everyone necessarily agrees about) and constitute a moment of embarrassment for public figures. Having needed to apologize may lower one’s status as much as or more than does the
original error. Thus avoiding apologizing is one way to avoid or contest the requirement to take responsibility for a wrongdoing. One way in which public figures in Kampf’s research softened the “apologetic” nature of apologies was by using terms such as “sorry” or “regret” and avoiding saying “apologize.” They also would apologize for very specific instances within a situation to avoid apologizing (and claiming responsibility) for an entire problematic event.\textsuperscript{28}

In 2012 Matt Arnold, a Republican candidate for the University of Colorado Board of Regents, was compelled to apologize when his campaign leaflets, distributed during the primary election, displayed him as being endorsed by a local group of Republicans. This leaflet made it look as if the Republican group were taking sides in the race between Arnold and the other Republican candidate, which it was not. In a letter Arnold used strongly apologetic language, describing what he was doing as “an emphatic, unqualified apology” and characterizing himself as “wrong” and “taking complete responsibility.” The Republican group nevertheless questioned his sincerity. That they did so seems tied to how Arnold had described his failing. In the body of the apology letter, Arnold specifically stated that this leaflet error occurred as a result of his delegating tasks to campaign supporters and not checking mailings sent on his behalf. By describing the error in this way Arnold minimized his own responsibility, most likely affecting the Republican group’s assessment of his sincerity.\textsuperscript{29}

Principle 4 applies to other speech acts as well. Wayne Beach and Terry Metzger,\textsuperscript{30}for instance, show how the phrase “I don’t know,” which on its surface is a claim of insufficient knowledge, functions to accomplish other actions than asserting limited knowledge. “I don’t know” may be used to indicate that a communicator was giving a matter only partial attention or to preface a refusal of an invitation or a request (e.g., “I don’t know, I don’t think I can make it”). Consider, now, the interactional challenges involved in doing several particularly sensitive acts.

\section*{Especially Face-Threatening Speech Acts}

In ordinary family and work situations people view talk and action through a moral lens. They hold themselves and others responsible for what is said and done, as well as responsible for how something is said or done. Valued personal identities are at stake when speakers perform speech acts, although exactly what will be at stake varies by act. In the pages that follow we examine some speech acts that can be particularly delicate.\textsuperscript{31} For each, we give a sense of what the act looks like and how it may threaten valued personal identities for the self or for the conversational partner.
**Advising**

Giving advice involves presenting information to another for the purpose of helping him or her. This makes *advising* a sort of directive speech act, because it aims to influence another’s behavior; asking for advice is a sort of directive as well, as it involves getting someone to “give” you something. When people seek out advice from professionals (e.g., nurses, attorneys, consultants for beauty or computers), the giving of advice is relatively unproblematic. But Daena Goldsmith and Kristine Fitch found that advice giving can be sensitive and involves a number of dilemmas. Advice giving is a staple talk activity among friends, family, and peers who work together. In these relationships, “advice could provide expert opinion on how to solve a problem, another point of view in making a decision, and assistance in laying out options.”

When advice is taken this way, the giver is seen as helpful and caring. However, givers of advice may be perceived as being critical of the other’s competence. Giving advice implies that someone would not have done an activity if he or she were not explicitly told. Thus a wife advising her husband to “make sure to lock up when you leave” can be heard by the husband as implying that he often fails to do this basic safety activity. Advice givers may also be judged to be intruding where they should not.

In an interview study, a small set of Americans were asked about advice episodes that they had experienced. Consider what two women had to say:

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**EXCERPT 4.4**

When I was in college, I was thinking about moving in with this guy and I asked my parents for their advice. My dad wrote this long pros-and-cons letter that amounted to saying he wasn’t happy about the idea. My mom just refused to comment, and I felt like she didn’t care at all about me. 

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**EXCERPT 4.5**

I have a friend who drives everybody wild. . . . The other day someone at work was talking about her daughter, she was so upset, and Mona said, “Well what you should do is . . .” and the person said “Listen, Mona, I don’t need you to butt in. I just need to kind of talk this through and cry awhile and feel sad.”

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These women make visible a dilemma involved in the act of advice giving. If one offers advice, a person may be seen as butting in where she
should not, but if she refrains from doing so, she may be judged to be uncaring.

Advice giving also involves a second dilemma. In situations in which a friend clearly wants advice, so that giving advice won’t be perceived as butting in, the advice giver still might need to decide between being supportive or being honest. Sometimes when a person asks for advice, what he actually wants is for the other to support and comfort him (tell the asker what he wants to hear). At other times, the advice seeker actually wants an honest opinion, even if it disagrees with what may be the asker’s initial inclination. Among close friends, being known as honest and as supportive are both valued personal identities. When a friend asks for advice and a speaker feels that she can only be one or the other (honest or supportive), giving advice becomes difficult.

**Reproaching**

Reproaching is the term used to reference the family of speech acts in which one person raises a question about the goodness or reasonableness of another person’s actions. Reproaches can fall under expressive (expressing a feeling of dissatisfaction with another’s actions), representative (describing a problematic activity someone does), and directive (often trying to get someone to change their behavior) acts. Everyday terms used to refer to reproaching include criticizing, reprimanding, finding fault, accusing, questioning someone’s judgment or decision, asking for an account, and confronting. Excerpts 4.6 and 4.7 give two instances of reproaches (and responses to them). Excerpt 4.6 offers a segment of a conversation that occurred between Matt and Kelsey, college students in a romantic relationship who live together. In this conversation, Kelsey begins by accusing Matt of taking a sassy tone in a prior telephone conversation. Excerpt 4.7 offers a conversation between 18- and 21-year-old sisters in their kitchen.

**EXCERPT 4.6**

**KELSEY:** Ya you were kind of sassy.

**MATT:** I was not sassy. Maybe I was- I was sassy because you always call right when I’m on my way. Or right after I say that I’m on my way, you call and see where I am. Like, I’m driving, in the snow.

**KELSEY:** Fine we don’t have to worry about it in the future because I have my own car hm.
MATT: I know you do. But it’s like I dunno do you think it’s courteous to call somebody and check in on them every 5 minutes? I mean, don’t take it the wrong way.

KELSEY: You just took that to a whole other level. Screw you. I don’t want to talk about this.

EXCERPT 4.7

MILLY: People don’t like you putting down other people [to make yourself look good

CLARA: [I did not

((slow deliberate voice)) put [ANYONE (pause) DOWN

MILLY: [yes you did

Margaret Cody and Michael McLaughlin\(^6\) found that people reproached each other in four primary ways. A first way was to directly rebuke the other, a second was to request an account, a third was to imply the other’s moral/intellectual inferiority, and the fourth was to express surprise or disgust. Table 4.1 illustrates these different kinds of reproaches.

These are not the only ways to perform reproaches. Excerpt 4.6 illustrates a common and especially subtle way to reproach: Reproaches can also be done by describing another person’s action using words that imply

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4.1. Types of Reproaches</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct rebuke</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request an account</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Imply moral or intellectual superiority</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express surprise or disgust</td>
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</table>
the action’s unreasonableness. We see this when Kelsey describes Matt’s tone as “sassy” and implies it was unwarranted. After beginning to refute the accusation, Matt’s subsequent explanation for the sassiness turns the criticism onto Kelsey, implying that he was justified in taking a sassy tone because Kelsey’s phone call to him was unreasonable. He expands on this by specifically questioning the courteousness of her actions, and Kelsey ends the conversation by commenting that his reproach is itself problematic and unfair.

Reproaching, or criticizing, is invariably relationally sensitive. A reproach altercasts the conversational other as possessing a problematic personal identity—for example, being unusual or immoral, doing questionable things or not doing reasonable things, holding strange or nasty opinions, and so on. Although reproaching is a sensitive act, it is also a necessary part of everyday life. People need to let others know when they say or do things that cause them difficulties, and people need to know when their own actions are causing problems for others. William Rawlins sees the management of reproaching as one of the basic challenges of friendship, what he labels the dialectic of judgment and acceptance. People value their friends because they are accepting of one’s self as is—for example, as a balance of charming and irritating qualities. Friends give friends acceptance and support and expect the same in return. At the same time criticizing can convey caring; criticizing affirms that the criticized person is important enough to a speaker that he is willing to judge her, as well as deal with the consequences.

Reproaching may be done well or badly. In one study Karen Tracy and her colleagues asked college students to describe situations in which another had criticized them in a reasonable way and situations in which others did a bad job giving criticism. In these open-ended accounts five features distinguished good and bad criticizing. Criticism regarded as poorly given was more likely to include cursing and strongly negative labels (e.g., “stupid jerk,” “idiot”) and to be given in a vocal manner that sounded like hollering, screaming, or yelling (i.e., especially loud). In contrast, criticism judged to be effectively given more often provided detail about how the other could improve and included an offer to help. Additionally, good criticism provided reasons that took the criticized person’s point of view. For instance, compare an instance of bad criticism (“If you keep eating like this, you will get fat”) with an example of good criticism (“Your client, who is paying money for the project, will treat you better if you would wear a tie and jacket”). Finally, criticism perceived as good tended to address smaller problems and have a complimentary flavor that was absent from bad criticism. This last finding is interesting because it suggests that serious
reproaches are especially likely to be resisted by a conversational partner and treated as unfair and off the mark.

These sorts of reproaches tend to be directed to the speaker, but people can do more indirect reproaches by complaining about the conduct of others, either in the presence of the target or to third parties when the target is not present. Complaining or whining\(^{39}\) can be done about a number of things in the world that have no agent (the weather, the traffic), but complaints can also be attributed to persons, and in this way they can accomplish the speech act of reproaching. Complaints or communication about dissatisfaction in Chinese Malaysia distinguishes two different goals of this sort of speech act: \textit{thou soo}, which focuses on resolving the problematic issue, and \textit{ai auan}, a lamentation that designates the problem as beyond one’s control. Although the latter is most likely to be seen in complaints about general situations, the former is more likely to occur when particular people are held responsible for wrongdoing. Chinese Malaysians avoid doing direct reproaches, and so a \textit{thou soo} complaint can be one way of more indirectly reproaching someone who is seen to be at fault.\(^{40}\)

In a study of heated arguments, Ian Dersley and Anthony Wootton\(^{41}\) found that communicators denied that they had done the reproachable act, as was seen in the exchange between Milly and Clara (Excerpt 4.7), or they justified why doing the act was reasonable, as was seen in Matt’s response about why he was sassy (Excerpt 4.6). This second kind of response to a reproach ties into a family of speech acts that have been given more attention than just about any others.

\textbf{Accounts and Accounting}

\textbf{Accounts} are speech acts designed to mend social trouble; they are conversational devices used when people’s actions are subjected to evaluation.\(^{42}\) \textbf{Accounting}, or reason-giving, links to the speech act of accounts but references the broader activity of describing and explaining. Accounting is a pervasive feature of communicative life. Any time a person explains a choice, he or she can be seen as accounting. If a woman tells a friend why she decided to have rose gowns for her wedding rather than yellow ones, a coworker mentions why he is going to work late rather than leaving at 5:00 p.m., a husband tells his wife why they should camp at Rocky Mountain Park rather than the Grand Tetons, accounting is occurring. Accounting, then, includes both explaining problematic events—what is most often meant by the term \textit{accounts}—and the kind of reason giving that occurs whenever a speaker explains why he or she did (or wants to do) something. Figure 4.1 illustrates this relationship.
The distinction between problematic and nonproblematic events is not straightforward; people often do not agree on what counts as inappropriate conduct. Thus it is not unusual for accounting that started off as simple reason giving about a presumably unproblematic event to become an account in the narrower sense. According to Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman, accounts are ways of repairing potential trouble. Whether an event is in need of an account will be negotiated by the people involved. Sometimes you can tell when a situation is problematic because someone will give unsolicited accounts: When you are pulled over by a police officer for speeding, for instance, you may begin explaining the violation before the officer ever asks for a reason. Similarly, students who e-mail a professor about a missed class rarely do so without providing some sort of reason for the absence. Accounts may sound like simple descriptions or reports of facts, but if the situation is seen as more complex or problematic, the function of what would otherwise be a representative takes on a distinctly face-saving tone.

Accounts for problematic events are of two main types. They may try to excuse a problematic action, or they may seek to justify it. Excuses admit that an act was bad but deny that the speaker had full responsibility for the action. Justifications, in contrast, accept full responsibility for an action but deny or minimize its presumed badness (e.g., what Matt did with Kelsey). For instance, if a man (Reid) was late for a meeting, he could excuse himself by mentioning oversleeping, bad traffic, or an earlier meeting running late. Each of these comments would imply that he saw his lateness as problematic but refused to take full responsibility for his action. On the other hand, Reid could justify his lateness. He would be doing this if he said that the real substance of the meeting always begins after folks had their coffee and caught up on small talk.

To take another example, imagine Len and Rudy are roommates. One day when Len comes home from work, he snaps and makes a hostile
remark to Rudy. When Rudy reproaches him (“Why are you yelling at me?”), Len might offer an apology and an excuse: “Sorry, I’m exhausted. We had a long, excruciatingly tense meeting at work today.” Or he might justify his behavior: “I’ve asked you multiple times not to call me unless it’s urgent,” or “What do you expect given the way you’ve broken your promises lately?” Although excuses and justifications (also apologies) are considered alternative options, it is possible to do them all in a single exchange. In the preceding situation, for instance, Len might have said: “What do you expect given the way you’ve broken your promises lately? I’m sorry, though, we had a long, excruciatingly tense meeting at work today, and I’m really feeling out of sorts.” Accounts, then, are one of several possible responses to reproaches. Table 4.2 describes the most common types of responses and how they relate to accounts.

Criticizing is often a way of requesting an account, but people regularly ask for reasons in everyday life. Sometimes these requests are not seen as challenging; in fact, in many institutional settings it is expected that people will ask these sorts of questions, and other participants may even have prepared explanations in advance. When one goes to the doctor, for instance, the doctor assumes the patient has come for a reason and may ask for it if it is not immediately provided. However, even in these settings, things can get complicated. In medical settings, a patient’s explanation can potentially map onto a medical diagnosis. Sharing feelings of weakness, nausea, headache, achy bones, and a fever can potentially add up to and be identified as a formal diagnosis of the flu (influenza). Because diagnoses are associated with treatments or prescriptions, how doctors request an explanation and how patients give one can be consequential for the result of the meeting.46

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Account</th>
<th>Apology</th>
<th>Denial</th>
<th>Excuse</th>
<th>Justification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Speaker acknowledges doing act.</td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Speaker accepts some responsibility and blame for act.</td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Speaker denies doing act.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Speaker denies full responsibility for act.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Speaker denies or minimizes the act’s badness.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>×</td>
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</table>
Tanya Stivers, for instance, found that parents who bring their children to the doctor are more likely to receive a prescription if they offer a candidate diagnosis for their child’s illness (not just listing off symptoms but saying things like “maybe it’s a sinus infection”). When parents “diagnose” their child’s problem rather than listing the child’s symptoms, doctors prescribe antibiotics more often. The upshot of this parental accounting practice is twofold: Children get antibiotics even though they do not need them, and this overprescribing contributes to people building resistance and the antibiotics becoming less effective.

Medical settings are also interesting because they are a place where personal information is routinely solicited: information about sexual practices, including sexually transmitted infections; drinking and smoking habits; and other health practices—in short, various sorts of things that have a potential to be morally judged by others. Though medical professionals ask about these things in a way that requests facts or mere reports (falling under the category of representatives), patients will sometimes provide accounts for behavior that may be seen as problematic, as in the following example:

---

**EXCERPT 4.8**

DOC: Any drug use?

PAT: No.

DOC: No, any in the past?

PAT: Uhhh let’s [see here

DOC: [((Not writing)) mhmhmh [mh

PAT: [No um probly I- I think I took uhhh back in the early eighties. (It) was uh occasional marijuana.

---

In this example, rather than answering the doctor’s question about “Any drug use?” in the past with a “yes” or “five to six times” or “occasional weekends,” the patient displays having to “think” about the answer and downgrades the frequency (“occasional”), as well as marking the time frame to show it was a long time ago, during the patient’s youth, and perhaps during an era when it would be more expected (“the early eighties”). In answering the question the patient doesn’t merely offer facts but enfolds the information in an account of why and under what circumstances the drug use occurred.
The accounting process does not end when a person apologizes, excuses, or justifies. The other person responds, evaluating the speaker’s attempt to fix the problem. Responses may either fully or partially honor what the speaker has said, reject the account that has been offered, or drop the topic and start talking about other things. As with many communicative actions, the process of honoring is accomplished implicitly. A partner is unlikely to tell a person after she excuses her lateness that “I honor what you told me.” Instead, communicators convey their acceptance of an apology and/or an excuse by saying such things as “No problem” or “You didn’t miss much.” In contrast, the rejection of an account is often more explicit. In response to an excuse about lateness, a conversational partner could say, “That’s a new one! Haven’t heard that excuse yet” or “You always have a reason, don’t you?” At times people refrain from either explicitly honoring or rejecting an account. This is done by changing the topic from the problematic event focus (“Let’s get down to business, shall we?”).

Some accounts do the work they are officially about—mending troubles—but others do not. G. H. Morris and Marta Coursey identified two factors that affected managers’ likelihood of accepting an employee’s account at work. Employees whose reputations were good (i.e., they had rarely done inappropriate things) were more likely to have their accounts accepted than those who had a history of error and wrongdoing. In addition, the plausibility of the circumstances affected managers’ likelihood of accepting an account. If the manager could envision herself in similar circumstances, she would be more likely to accept the account. Thus an employee who jammed the office copier and excused her act by saying she didn’t know that she had to change a copier setting might be more plausible than the same employee attempting to excuse her borrowing from the office’s petty cash container by saying she didn’t know it was not to be used for personal purchases.

Accounts are highly rhetorical: They are speech acts crafted to accomplish the interactional goal of being seen to be reasonable. The “crafting” aspect of accounts is particularly visible when one has an opportunity to look at the accounts a person offers over time. Valerie Manusov had college students tape-record their talk with five different people about one event in their lives that needed explaining. Such events included canceling a trip, not winning a sorority election, not getting a job, breaking up with a boyfriend, and not wanting a girlfriend to go on a planned trip. As speakers explained the event in their lives a second and then a third time, they often changed their accounts to deal with disagreements that had arisen in earlier tellings. For instance, in explaining why he had canceled out of a trip with
a friend, a student initially mentioned his lack of money. The person to whom he offered the initial explanation challenged it, but then went on to ask him how his girlfriend felt about his taking a trip without her. In subsequent accounts, in addition to mentioning his lack of money, the young man excused his pulling out of the trip because of his girlfriend’s negative reaction. Accounts and accounting often arise when certain speech acts are expected in communication. If you just got back from vacation and are meeting a friend for the first time, it is presumed you will share your experiences; if not, someone may ask “What about your trip?” or “Why aren’t you talking about your trip?” If someone invites you to go somewhere and you decline the invitation, it is expected that you will give a reason for doing so; if you don’t, the inviter might ask why you cannot participate. If someone is known to have experienced something significant, they are expected to do expressive speech acts (negative ones in the event of a tragedy, positive ones in the event of joy). One way of providing a reason for not doing such expressive speech acts is to say that one is unable to—that the experience is too great for words or cannot be captured in talk.\(^{52}\)

Let us conclude by highlighting a nonobvious feature of accounting. Anytime a person gives a reason for his thoughts or actions, he marks what has been talked about as a choice. People do not account for what they regard as natural, inevitable, or culturally given. It is quite difficult to respond to questions that ask for accounts of events that a person has never thought of as needing to be explained. In these situations, the most typical response is either to treat the question as a joke or the other person as hostile. In American culture, for instance, if a 15-year-old girl were asked why she wore shorts on a hot day, she would probably treat the question as a joke: Who would do otherwise? In other communities, though, wearing this type of garb would be a highly problematic action that required an account. What actions are routinely accounted for or treated as not needing an account provide a window into what a speech community takes to be normal or questionable. In that sense, accounts expose a cultural group’s beliefs about what it means to be a reasonable person.

Kristine Fitch calls the sorts of activities that are seen as accountable cultural persuadables—events, ideas, arguments that are available for negotiation in a cultural context.\(^{53}\) Cultural persuadables comprise the stuff that is not obvious in life, the stuff people disagree about or could have multiple views toward and reasons for doing. Beyond the culturally persuadable lies the sort of tacit knowledge that is so deeply embedded in a cultural context that it is seen as obvious and in no need of an explanation or discussion. This domain is rhetorically difficult because the “normalness” of what is going on is not seen as open to interpretation.
Disclaiming

Disclaimers are verbal devices to deflect others from assigning negative or inappropriate personal identities to self. They are conversational moves that are done at the time a person says something potentially problematic. Whereas accounts tend to focus on actions, disclaimers are most strongly linked to conversational expressions of opinion. Table 4.3 provides examples of typical disclaimers.

Usually disclaimers come before a problematic utterance (seen in Examples 1–3 in Table 4.3), but on occasion they may come immediately after (Example 4 in Table 4.3). Of interest is that disclaimers simultaneously make visible that a speaker regards something as potentially problematic—in the examples in Table 4.3, that she might be regarded as silly, as lacking the skill or expertise to offer advice, or as prejudiced—and are acts to keep others from thinking that the particular problematic identity should apply to the self. Teun van Dijk and others have done various studies on how people use disclaimers to avoid being labeled as racist by saying things like “I have nothing against black people, but . . .” or “I’m not racist, but . . .” Other common disclaimers in ordinary conversation include “no offense, but . . .”, “not to be mean or anything, but . . .”, and “I don’t know . . .”; such disclaimers are almost always followed by speech acts that are assumed to sound like reproaches or other face-threatening acts.

In contrast to disclaimers that preface problematic talk, those that come immediately after a comment suggest a different thinking process. Rather than being devices speakers build into their talk to ward off a forthcoming negative assessment, postutterance disclaimers suggest that speakers initially are unaware of an utterance’s potential sensitivity and become cognizant of it as they hear themselves making the comment. “I’m just saying” or “just saying” is a sort of disclaimer that can come before or after an utterance and seems to mean something like “that’s just my opinion; don’t take it the wrong way.” Excerpt 4.9 shows a disclaimer after an utterance that includes a racial slur.

### Table 4.3. Examples of Disclaimers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Disclaimer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>“This may sound silly, but I feel as if my great-great-grandfather has been trying to communicate with me in my dreams.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>“I’m not great at directions, but I think we should turn left at the next corner.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>“I’m not a lawyer, but I think you should sue him.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>“Ellen Ross is not to be trusted. It’s not that I have anything against Jews; some of my closest friends are Jewish.”</td>
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</table>
Everyday talk is peppered with disclaimers; after all, almost any comment can be problematic for some audience. Although the use of a disclaimer does not necessarily secure a speaker’s desired goal—to have the other see him or her in a personally positive way, or at least to avoid giving the other a negative or inappropriate impression—they illustrate the considerable effort communicators give to building desirable personal identities.

**Complimenting**

Some speech acts (e.g., complimenting, expressing interest through a query, making an offer) are almost always considered a nice thing to do. People who routinely do these kinds of actions are seen as helpful and pleasant, someone others like to be around. Compliments tend to be seen as positive in most English-speaking countries, but this is not always the case. One difference that can arise is cultural. In Egypt, for example, being complimented is a double-edged sword, because if you have something worth complimenting, then you are open to envy and jealousy (the “evil eye”) from others.58

But compliments are not always straightforward even in contexts in which they are valued and frequently offered to people, partly because they can be difficult to respond to. Agreeing too much with a compliment can make a person seem pompous, and sometimes giving compliments can even be seen as a way of indirectly fishing for a compliment yourself.59 Whereas Western English speakers tend to accept compliments, many Asian communities reject them for this reason.

In the following example, one friend tells another what her ex-boyfriend recently said to her on the phone.
In this example, Carrie delivers fairly effusive self-praise (that she’s trustworthy, that she’s always right, and that she’s “the best”) but does so by quoting an ex-boyfriend. It seems as if it is still notable that she’s actually complimenting herself, however, because Molly’s “ha” and “you’re always right” seem to be commenting on either the strength of the compliments or the strangeness of whom they’re coming from (an ex-boyfriend). The preference in interaction seems to be for compliments to come from another. Once they do come, depending on what is being complimented, they may be downgraded. However, one would not want to downgrade another’s compliment so much that it seemed ungrateful or potentially to insult the other person (e.g., calling into question the style of someone who has commented on one’s clothing choices). Compliments are also not necessarily assumed to be sincere all of the time. Compliments can be a way of “buttering up” someone before a request or can be seen as “empty,” as searching for a way into a conversation.

Another side to compliments is that they are not always directed only toward individuals. In Singapore, parents of children who are praised will respond to the compliment by complimenting the praiser’s child (“but so-and-so is so much smarter”) or even insulting their own (“my child is dumb”). Danielle Pillet-Shore analyzed how complimenting and praising student performance in parent–teacher meetings caused difficulties for parents. The reason is that student performance is often linked to parents, so that if the teacher praises the student, a parent agreeing or adding to that praise of the student is seen as a way of praising themselves. We discuss this example more in Chapter 6. Complimenting by association exists not just in families but also in workplaces and institutions. Individuals may accept compliments on behalf of businesses or ingratiate themselves with others by praising self, other, or others with whom the self is known to be
Compliments are important ways in which people construct identity. Your positive face is built through the good things others say about and to you. But this does not make giving or receiving compliments easy. One would not want a compliment to be seen as insincere flattery, nor would one want to seem ungrateful when one is complimented. Complimenting is a sort of balancing act that requires not doing too much or too little. Consider, now, the sensitivities that surround a last speech act, the giving and receiving of personal information.

**Gossiping**

From antiquity to the 19th century, gossiping was denounced as evil and as a sign of weak moral character. In today's society gossip's profile is more complex. On one hand, gossip is regarded as innocuous, a pleasant and minimally harmful way for neighbors, coworkers, and friends to pass time. It can be seen as a fun activity or a safe way of "venting" with friends. On the other hand, gossip continues to carry a moral sting. Being known as a gossiper is not an identity people desire. But what exactly is gossip? What kinds of talk count as gossip? To whom is gossip directed? When, for instance, would talk about an extramarital affair count as gossip? When would it not?

Because gossip is a complex speech act accomplished through multiple utterances among multiple participants, it can include many speech acts and can itself fit into various speech act categories. It can be presented as a representative speech act informing on certain events; it can be an expressive, combining complaints about others' behavior with the speaker's feelings. Jorg Bergmann supplies an interesting and detailed analysis of this morally controversial speech act. He suggests that for talk to be regarded as gossip, it must be about certain topics and directed to others who stand in certain relationships to the initiator. For instance, a husband talking to a divorce attorney about an affair his wife has had would not be considered to be gossiping. Nor would the husband telling his sister about his wife's affair count as gossip. In addition, the sister telling a close friend about her brother's difficulties is also unlikely to be considered gossip. However, if the sister's friend passed the information on to another friend, it undoubtedly would be judged as gossip. Gossip is about absent parties (people who are not participating in the conversation) who are not intimately linked to the speaker (intimates include family members and relational partners). In addition, gossip both presupposes relationships of rough equality and further cements them as such. To gossip with another is to convey a certain amount of trust in the other's judgment, an act unlikely with a stranger.
Similarly, to gossip with someone who is not roughly equal to the self may be seen as an attempt to curry that person’s favor.

Gossip focuses on private matters, giving special attention to the gulf between what people do and say publicly and what they do and say in private. However, because knowledge about people’s private affairs is not equally distributed, not all individuals are equally able to gossip. In earlier times, for instance, servants’ work gave them access to details about the private lives of those they served. In doing the wash, a servant would come across the physical stains that cued sexual indiscretion. In working for another, assistants get to see what bosses espouse to be proper conduct, as well as how they actually treat others when they are unobserved. Unsurprisingly, those categories of people who have access to the private lives of others (servants, organizational staff who assist others, and women generally) have been regarded as especially susceptible to being gossips. Gossiping, although perhaps more frequent among certain types of people, is a speech act practiced by everybody. Gossiping is an act initiated by one person, but it requires the active participation of a partner. A gossip initiator will test the conversational water to ensure that his or her partner is willing to gossip. Example 4.11 illustrates a typical way a gossip sequence occurs.

EXAMPLE 4.11

COWORKER 1: Do you know what’s happening with Jim?
COWORKER 2: I don’t like to say anything bad about people.
COWORKER 1: Come on, tell me. What’s the dirt? You know you can trust me.
COWORKER 2: Well, if you promise . . .

Gossiping, then, is a sequence of talk that implicates both parties. Gossip gets done through one person’s act of telling and the partner’s active encouragement and elicitation of what is being told.

Gossip serves an important moral function in society by helping to preserve the norms of a community. It is partly because people fear being the object of gossip that they do desirable activities and refrain from doing undesirable ones. At the same time, to talk about others’ shortcomings and peculiarities, as gossiping requires, is to be involved in a somewhat sleazy activity. Gossip is both good and bad. This contradictory quality, which is its essence, raises a particular challenge in friendship. On the one hand, being loyal—respecting a friend’s confidences (no gossip)—is central
to what being a friend is all about; on the other hand, trusting a friend is being willing to share information that officially one is expected to keep private. In the latter case, trusting Friend A is displayed by one’s willingness to reveal private information about Friend B (selectively gossiping). Bergmann sees gossip as a form of “discreet indiscretion.” For gossip to serve its desirable functions, it must be engaged in selectively. As he notes, “It is only as something bad that gossip can be something good.”

Bergmann’s view of gossip is a European and American one. Although gossip is a speech act found across communities, it also is an act that takes distinctive shapes within different communities. Daena Goldsmith compared speakers in St. Vincent (West Indies), the Zincanetecos of Mexico, and three other communities and found that all five societies were ambivalent about gossip. They differed, however, as to what kinds of people they saw as most likely to engage in gossip, what could be talked about, how they divided gossip into subtypes, and the reasons that communities had for evaluating gossip negatively.

Summary

In this chapter we have examined a family of face-sensitive speech acts—gossiping, complimenting, disclaiming, accounting, reproaching, and advising—to consider what each act looks like and how it may challenge communicators’ personal identities. In addition, we highlighted how performing (and refraining from performing) speech acts is a primary way people enact and change their relationships. In examining how communicators built closeness (or distance) and the better and worse ways to criticize, we adopted the rhetorical perspective, emphasizing each person’s ability to shape close relationships in a direction he or she desires. In highlighting how gossiping or apologizing is done differently when speakers come from different communities, we took a cultural look at speech acts, reminding us that evaluation can never escape being a culturally inflected activity.
One summer morning a 9-1-1 call taker in a large city received a sobbing call from a 12-year-old boy who had run across the street to a neighbor’s house in his underwear. The boy was calling because his 15-year-old brother was “beating him” up for “little things.” The boy wanted the police to come take the brother away. After determining that the older brother was not drinking or on drugs, not using a gun or a knife, and that the two boys fought with each other fairly often, the police call taker tracked down the mother’s telephone number and called her at her place of work. The police call taker explained to the mother that there had been trouble at her home and her younger son had called the police. The call taker then connected the telephone lines so that the mother could talk directly with the boy, who was now at the neighbor’s house. The mother ordered her son to go home. Excerpt 5.1 offers part of the conversation that occurred between the mother and her son. Symbols have been added to capture the sound of their talk; these symbols are explained subsequently.

EXCERPT 5.1. Telephone Exchange between Boy and Mom

1 BOY: I would, NO: I ain’t going back home I’m ((sobbing))
2 MOM: Raymond, I (. ) am (. ) at (. ) work.
3 BOY: Mum I’m [in my boxer sh-
4 MOM: [I (. ) am (. ) ar:f (. ) work
5 BOY: [I kno:w I’m in my boxer shorts,
        I ain’t goin no= ((less pronounced sobbing))
6 MOM: =you are gonna hafta wait until I can get home.
One of the most distinctive features of everyday talk is that it has a sound—it is not just a set of words and phrases. How something is said affects what speakers are taken to be meaning. However, to move beyond this commonplace truth (*it’s not what was said, but how it was said that’s important*), there needs to be a way to represent the sound of speech. Without a written system to represent the subtle ways people use their voices, it is difficult to discuss how meaning making, and identity-work more generally, is accomplished through vocal cues.

Another distinctive feature of everyday talk is that it incorporates visual elements. Utterances are accompanied by nonverbal activities such as eye contact, head and body movements, facial expressions, and gestures. Speech acts can even be accomplished by such bodily actions alone, as with nodding or shaking the head side-to-side, flipping someone off, waving, or winking. More often, such practices occur alongside everyday talk to contribute to interactional meaning. For example, one way in which communicators indicate “teasing” is by smiling, winking, or incorporating a playful gesture during the saying of what would otherwise sound silly, ambiguous, or even insulting. This is how something like “you’re such a dummy” is presented as nonserious, or even affectionate.

In this chapter, we explain the most commonly used symbols for the different nonverbal sounds and sights of talk. Then we consider how certain communities of people use their voices to portray themselves and their conversational partners as having positively valued personal identities (e.g., *I’m a kind, loving person*) or negatively valued ones (*I see you as a real jerk*). In addition, we examine the assumed identity linkages of more stable features of voice quality and gesture. Finally, we explore the meaning of accents and consider how a person’s accent both reflects his or her speech community membership and, on occasion, may be used strategically to present the speaker as a certain kind of person.
5. The Sound (and Sight) of Talk

Transcription

A number of researchers have developed transcription systems to make written records of the sounds of talk. Each system has advantages, highlighting somewhat different features. The one used most often in communication is the system developed by Gail Jefferson, commonly referred to as the conversation analysis (CA) transcription system.

Consider the meaning of the CA symbols used in the conversation between the boy and his mom (Excerpt 5.1). A first feature to note is that words are written as they are pronounced: turn 3 “mum”; turn 5, “goin.” The “NO” in capital letters (turn 1) indicates that the word is especially loud. Underlined words (see, e.g., turns 2, 4, 5, and 6) are words that have been stressed, although not as much as the word in capital letters. The series of “hh” symbols preceded by a period indicate in-breaths; the more b’s, the more pronounced is the in-breath. Lowercase “hhh” without the period (there are none in this transcription) indicate out-breaths, like those that occur in small laughing sounds. Double parentheses (( )) describe broader features of talk such as extended sobbing, laughing, or a distinctive voice quality (see turns 1, 5, 7, and 11). In transcribing talk, punctuation is not used as it would be in writing. Instead, it captures vocal intonation patterns: A period is a falling intonation, a question mark is a rising one, and a comma signifies continuing intonation.

When a sound in a word is prolonged, colons are used to mark the lengthening. An example of this is seen in turn 11 in the word “shorts.” When short recognizable pauses occur between words, they are marked with parentheses and a period: (.) If the pause were longer the parentheses would include the number of seconds (e.g., (3.5)). Partial words that are cut off are marked with hyphens, as we see in turn 3 where the boy starts to mention that he is in his boxer “sh-. “ Finally, an important part of the sound of talk relates to the timing of what was said. Letting a speaker finish rather than interrupting or overlapping has different meanings. The point at which a person starts speaking relative to the person already talking is indicated by square brackets that are aligned in successive lines of the transcription: The brackets show who was speaking simultaneously and when (e.g., whether the overlap started at the beginning or middle of a word). Multiple overlaps between the mother and the boy occur in turns 3–5. When one person starts to speak at the end of another person’s talk with no noticeable pause, this is indicated with equal signs (=; see turns 5 and 6). Table 5.1 summarizes the meaning of these symbols, as well as a few others.

Other nonverbal communicative practices can also be captured in transcription. In addition to indicating features of talk such as ((laughing)) or a
table 5.1. most commonly used transcription symbols

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>symbol</th>
<th>description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>(period) Falling intonation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>(question mark) Rising intonation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>,</td>
<td>(comma) Continuing intonation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>(hyphen) Marks an abrupt cutoff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>::</td>
<td>(colon(s)) Prolonging of sound.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>never</td>
<td>(underlining) Stressed syllable or word.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORD</td>
<td>(all caps) Loud speech.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>word</em></td>
<td>(degree symbols) Quiet speech.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$word$</td>
<td>$ or £ (pound sign) indicates a smiley voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;word&lt;</td>
<td>(more than and less than) Quicker speech.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;word&gt;</td>
<td>(less than and more than) Slower speech.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hh</td>
<td>(series of h’s) Aspiration or laughter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.hh</td>
<td>(h’s preceded by dot) Inhalation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>(brackets) Simultaneous or overlapping speech.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>(equals sign) Contiguous utterances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.4)</td>
<td>(number in parentheses) Length of a silence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>(period in parentheses) Micropause, 2/10 second.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( )</td>
<td>(empty parentheses) Nontranscribable segment of talk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(word)</td>
<td>(word or phrase in parentheses) Transcriptionist doubt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((gazing toward the ceiling))</td>
<td>(double parentheses) Description of nonspeech activity or sound quality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

((sarcastic tone of voice)), double parentheses can also be used to describe actions such as ((smiling)) or that someone ((raises eyebrows)). Some transcriptions will even include a sketch of an action or, when having the benefit of video data, images from the recording. The inclusion of these details is based on interests among many communication scholars in how gaze, gesture, and ways of talking interact—how they are used by participants in relation to their environment. People don’t speak in ways that are oblivious
to their surroundings; rather, they often refer to objects and people in the space around them through pointing and handling. The drawings in Figure 5.1, from a study by Jurgen Streeck, offer a couple of examples of what this might look like.

In Figure 5.1, the two drawings illustrate hand gestures that accompanied the conversation between two men who work at an automotive shop. Hussein is the man on the left and the owner of the shop. Uncle Ahm is the man on the right; he is a welder whose first language is Chinese and who speaks only a bit of English. In the picture on the left, Hussein is checking that Uncle Ahm has all the parts he needs for the car he is working on. As Hussein says “everything you need we got, right?” he gestures back and forth with his hand to reference the “stuff” around them. This helps Uncle Ahm get a sense of what Hussein is talking about. When Uncle Ahm responds, he does so without speaking; instead, as shown in the second picture in Figure 5.1, he points to the front end of the car, in the area where a headlight would go, and traces the shape of a horizontal line with his index finger. Hussein correctly interprets this as Uncle Ahm saying he still needs a part to finish working on the car.

A second way of using visual data is to bring in screen shots or stills from video rather than illustrations. For instance, Curtis LeBaron and Jurgen Streeck analyzed bodily configurations during the interrogation of a murder suspect. They show that in a first photo, before the interrogation began, the suspect’s and the detectives’ body positions mirror each other, with the parties sitting back in relatively equal positions. However, once the detectives have read the suspect his rights and began challenging his story, their positions changed drastically. The photo displays the detectives

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leaning over the table, encroaching on the suspect’s space. The detectives’ shift in bodily positions changed both the frame of the situation (from one of sharing/listening to stories to an interrogation) and the emotional tenor of the interaction (from relatively relaxed to tense and hostile). The meaning of what is going on, the roles participants take on, and emotional qualities in interaction are built through the way talk sounds in concert with the actions people do with, for, and toward one another.7

The Identity-Work of Paralinguistic Devices

One important part of each person’s personal identity is how he or she appears to be feeling at a particular interactional moment. Is he annoyed? Feeling proud? Bored by the conversation? Is she working hard to be patient and not show her anger? Excited? Feeling shame or embarrassment? Amused? Expressions of emotion are done through multiple channels: They are conveyed through voice, through the content of what is said, through the particular words selected, and through the speaker’s co-occurring facial expressions and bodily gestures. Arriving at the correct interpretation of other people’s feelings about us, the activity being done, and the subject of talk is important but often difficult. Speakers rarely give explicit labels to their in-the-moment feelings. As Gerrod Parrott and Rom Harré noted, “Words that we use for emotions do not usually figure in displays of emotion. When we hear someone say, ‘I’m very angry with you’ the chances are that this is a ritual rebuke rather than an expression of genuine anger.”8

Until recently, most studies of emotion focused on big feelings (e.g., anger, sadness, fear, happiness) and were carried out in laboratory settings.9 Communication scholars have found systematic relationships between paralinguistic markers (which can include audible sounds and the vocal quality of speech, as well as facial movements10) and feelings such as pride, delight, shame, and so on. In their article “Language Has a Heart,” Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin treat the communicative display of emotions as a sort of affective orientation or stance one takes toward objects, people, or situations in the world through a range of linguistic practices. Features such as word choice, intonation, speed, emphasis, fluency, and sentence structure specify what emotions are being displayed in talk and also the intensity of those emotions.11 Specifically, being “embarrassed” seems to involve random physical gestures that are actually highly patterned,12 and, as Margaret Selting showed, the use of head shakes, slapping, and chopping gestures indicated anger and frustration in storytelling.13 Charlotte Bloch’s research found that a high level of repetition and nonfluent speech (e.g.,
frequent and long pausing, “uhs” and “ums”) and stretches of especially quiet speech expressed negative feelings and that positive self-feelings were evidenced by rapidly flowing speech, often melodic in sound, and by laughing and audible inhalations midstream; other paralinguistic markers were ambiguous, with their emotional meaning dependent on what was being said. In a study of a child’s communication with a parent, a toddler displayed a negative response to parental actions by using a raised voice, elongated vowels, and a “tearful” vocal quality, which were accompanied by flailing arms. Children learn from an early age to assess and display facial expressions, being able to tell a “mere look” (shift of attention in a child’s direction) from “the look” (a warning or threat regarding something the child is doing that may require intervention unless the child changes his behavior).

Many of the tiny facial and bodily movements that are judged and responded to in interaction are so subtle and fleeting that they fall below the level of awareness. People usually associate emotions with more obvious activities: smiling with happiness, scowling with unhappiness. On the other hand, a face may be flushed with excitement or flushed with anger, and trembling hands might indicate nervousness or fatigue. And such expressions can be manipulated in sophisticated ways to communicate nuanced emotions, such as “trying not to be sad” (as when one smiles through tears) or “holding back one’s temper” (as when one clenches fists and grits teeth while otherwise smiling politely).

The complexity of a single expression is illustrated in Philip Glenn’s study of laughter in job interviews. In Excerpt 5.2 Marissa, the interviewee, explains to Sheila, the interviewer, why she is applying to be a photographer.

EXCERPT 5.2

1 MAR: In my heart of hearts I’ve always wanted to be a rock star or an entertainer. Um and by taking those pictures you get to capture a moment of that entertainment or that stardom

2 (1.2)

3 MAR: Y’know what I mean=

4 SHE: =Mm hm=

5 MAR: =An’ somehow make yourself (.) a little star. U::m

6 SHE: °Mhhmmh[hhmmhh°

7 MAR: [Which is so cheeky
In this moment, the laughter between Marissa and Sheila accomplishes some sense of their feelings toward the interaction. Sheila’s quiet laughter in turn 6 seems to be seeing humor in what Marissa said before in turn 5, and Marissa identifies this in turn 7 by framing what she said as “cheeky.” Sheila’s subsequent laughter in turn 8 seems to agree with this, and when Marissa follows with a further justification of her response in turn 9 she also follows that with laughter. The laughter in this instance is multifunctional. It expresses humor but may also be doing some embarrassment, as Marissa’s comment could be seen as overly confident (this interpretation is strengthened by the fact that Sheila never quite agrees with it). Laughter can communicate tension but also communicates the easing of tension, and it may be doing so in this case.

In conveying emotion, paralinguistic devices evoke stances (see Chapter 9), manage how people take turns in interaction (Chapter 6), and are involved in doing expressive speech acts (Chapter 4).17 The reason in part is that paralinguistic markers overlay or accompany verbal formulations. Particularly in very brief turns, the emotional marking of the utterance can make a big difference. This is the case in the common discourse marker “oh,” which can function to correct a prior utterance, to acknowledge someone’s news delivery, or to comment on a rejection, depending on where it is placed and how it is vocally produced.18 Sometimes, however, sound or gestures are a turn in their own right and include no verbal content, as when someone laughs, gasps, screams, nods, winks, shakes her head, puts a thumb up, and so forth. The gesture or sound itself can express an emotion in what Erving Goffman called “response cries.” Though largely taken to be unintentional “floodings” of emotion, Goffman showed that such expressive exclamations or gestures are in fact guided by social norms.19 People do response cries at strategically appropriate moments.

In arriving at a judgment about a person’s in-the-moment feeling state, it is important to take account of the person’s baseline conversational style. A baseline is a person’s normal style of speaking. It includes the person’s usual loudness level, speaking rate (fast vs. slow), fluency style (smooth vs. lots of repetitions, fillers [uh], pauses), as well as her average pitch and the usual amount that she varies her intonation. It also involves a person’s typical use of gaze (whether he ordinarily looks a person in the eyes while talking and listening), facial expressions (being smiling and expressive vs.
more taciturn), and gestures (someone who is relatively still or someone who “talks with their hands”).

In the exchange between the boy and his mother in the 9-1-1 call, the mother’s voice cues that she is irritated with her son. This is accomplished not only by her pattern of stressing individual words, seen in turn 8 (“I will (.) be home.”), but also by her use of controlled enunciation, a practice that involves distinct pronunciation of each word followed by a brief pause, seen in turn 12 when the mother asks if the boy can hear her: “well I (.) I will hafta get home do (.) you (.) hear (.) me?” Controlled enunciation is a way of presenting oneself as “working” to be patient but nonetheless feeling irritated. At the same time, the practice altercasts the conversational partner as unreasonable and irritating. As with other paralinguistic practices, this is not the only meaning. Controlled enunciation may also be used in talking to non-native speakers, the young, the elderly, or the mentally impaired. In these contexts controlled enunciation altercasts the other as not fully normal, as having a limitation of one kind or another that requires slower, more deliberate speech.

In everyday talk, emotions tend to be treated as if they were genuine expressions of what people are feeling inside. Yet emotions, like other aspects of personhood, are communicatively constructed and strategically chosen. Nowhere is this more common than in workplace settings. Service and professional roles routinely require personnel to express certain positive feelings (e.g., liking, enjoyment, respect) and to repress negative feelings (e.g., impatience, irritation, disgust). To construct oneself as a good sales clerk, waitperson, telephone operator, and so on requires a significant amount of emotion labor—the monitoring of emotional displays to provide the institutionally expected version. As Arlie Hochschild remarks, “Real-time emotions are a large part of what managers manage and emotional labour is no small part of what trainers train and supervisors supervise. It is a big part of white collar ‘work.’”

The face and body are very much a part of emotion labor. To maintain a cheerful or welcoming disposition, salespeople and some food service workers are expected to smile frequently and greet everyone whom they encounter (some companies even specify the distances in feet at which a potential customer should be smiled at and greeted). Even for telephone salespeople, employees are told to smile while talking so that the person at the other end can “hear the smile in their voice.” Such expectations, Deborah Cameron notes, are part of the “stylization” process that workers who deal with the public are expected to undergo. She also argues that the style of speech that is favored in service occupations is the style that is considered most “feminine.” There are aspects of ethnicity that are incorporated
into service training, too, particularly in countries in which the service is assumed to be primarily for white English speakers (as in Indian call centers). In their training, call center employees are told to answer the phone with a smile, to speak in a pitch that connotes “sincerity and confidence,” to talk at a reasonable volume, to keep a steady pace (not too fast or slow), and to make “acknowledgement sounds” (continuers such as “m hm”).

The emphasis on service, which demands a strong control of emotions (not displaying anger, fear, or annoyance while displaying friendliness, enthusiasm, and cheerfulness), is sometimes linked to Western ideals of service, which have slowly been globalizing through the increasing development of international corporations such as Starbucks.

A complexity, though, is that the use of voice cues and gesture varies by speech communities. Not all people use voice in the same way that native English speakers do to indicate feeling states. John Gumperz and Jenny Cook-Gumperz showed how in a public meeting in Britain an exchange between a native English speaker and a West Indian speaker of English went poorly, with members of each community judging each other negatively. To show the consequences of different vocal styles, the authors draw upon a considerably more complicated transcription system than the one we described in this chapter. Their system captured breath groupings (marking exactly where a speaker took a breath and whether or not it was hearable) and prosodic patterns (combined speed, loudness, stress, and pitch changes). Table 5.2 illustrates what members of each community had to say about each speaker when they were interviewed about their impressions. These negative impressions, Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz argue, are strongly affected by the different ways members of each speech community use voice to convey meaning.

### Table 5.2: Identity Impressions Based on Speech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Of British English (BE) speaker</th>
<th>Of West Indian English (WIE) speaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>By BE participants</strong></td>
<td>BE speaker’s talk was “calm, factual, and reasoning.” He may have had a somewhat bureaucratic tone but “points were well made and the argument hangs together.”</td>
<td>WIE speaker’s talk was “abrupt, impulsive, and perhaps somewhat rude.” While some of his metaphors were “quite apt, his statement as a whole lacks clear connections.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>By WIE participants</strong></td>
<td>BE speaker exhibited “excessive stiffness and redundancy” and at one key place used a “condescending style.” He also “beats around the bush.”</td>
<td>WIE speaker was “direct, but not at all impolite.” He “says what he means, making clear how he himself feels.” His reasoning is “quite clear.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
community use their voices to signal what is important information in what is being said and whether voice inflection is used to cue feeling states toward the other.

In addition to the meanings of how talk sounds, the meanings of absences of talk also have cultural dimensions. Much of the West tends to be a “talking culture” that views silence as something to be avoided. In Finland and among the North American Blackfeet, as Chapter 2 showed, silence is a “natural” and even protected part of everyday life, something all people are assumed to need in order to be “undisturbed in one’s thoughts.” This means that expectations for nonverbal practices are in some ways culturally variable. People from different parts of the world may have different norms for uses of gestures, ranges of facial expressions, or ideas about personal space. These are part of what lead to the sorts of stereotypical judgments people make about people from other places, as well as the common travel experience of “culture shock.” Western travelers to places such as Saudi Arabia can find that others will stand nearly nose to nose with them during conversations, whereas Dutch visitors actually prefer a bit more space than North Americans. In his study of Korean retailers and African American customers in Los Angeles, Benjamin Bailey found that the Koreans’ valuing of interpersonal restraint led to their nonverbal behavior being judged by their African American customers as cold, distant, and even disrespectful. Similarly, African American customers, who valued interpersonal engagement, tried to decrease personal distance with the Korean retailers while the Korean retailers attempted to increase the distance. This resulted in at least one instance in which a Korean storeowner was all but followed around his store in a sort of advance–retreat pattern.

Meanings of Stable Features of Voice

When we first hear someone on the telephone, it is pretty easy to tell whether a caller is a man or a woman and his or her relative age (child, teen, adult, senior). The reason is that voices have an average pitch (mean fundamental frequency), with children’s pitch generally higher than women’s pitch, which in turn is higher than men’s pitch. It is also the case that certain particular vocal features are taken to go with certain kinds of people. In general, men use a more restricted pitch range than women. Thus speaking with a lot of vocal variation is regarded as a more feminine talking style. Patches of a quavering voice or a creaky one—technically, a low-pitched staccato sound produced by slow vibration of the vocal folds—are more common in elderly speakers.
A contrasting intonation pattern found commonly among young speakers, especially females, is what has come to be called **uptalk**, or *talking in questions*. In uptalk a speaker makes a statement as if it were a question (e.g., “Yesterday? I went to Dillards?”). Uptalk, as Deborah Cameron notes, “is held to have originated among young women (typically in the ‘Valley Girl’ mold, which is to say affluent white girls who are or present themselves as shallow and unintelligent and who do a lot of shopping).” Many listeners see uptalk as “mak[ing] the speaker sound as if s/he does not know what s/he is talking about, or as if s/he cannot express the most straightforward thought without looking to others for approval.”

Uptalk is an even more widespread feature of Australian English and seems to have developed separately from the U.S. English variety. David Britain’s research in New Zealand suggests that the use of such “high rising terminals” is a marker of politeness and solidarity. Other studies suggest that despite public denigrations, uptalk has been found to be more common among assertive speakers and group leaders than among lower status speakers in organizational and institutional settings. Breathiness—a vocal quality produced by the laryngeal muscles not closing tightly, accompanied by a slightly slower speech—is also more common among women, so much so that it is a voice quality presumed to be feminine. Breathiness is culturally taken as cueing passivity, submissiveness, and a relaxed, sexy style; when it is situation-specific rather than a general style, it is taken to indicate sexual arousal. Although breathiness is biologically linked to sexual arousal and hence is a quality that will be found in both men’s and women’s voices on certain occasions, this vocal quality has been used strategically to sell sex and sexiness. Kira Hall, a linguist, did a study of sex telephone call-in services to which men call in and pay to have a woman talk sexily to them. Hall interviewed the women answering the phones. Consider what Shelia, a European American woman who identified her sexual orientation as butch bisexual, had to say about why her talk was so marketable.

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**EXCERPT 5.3**

I feel like definitely the timbre of my voice has a lot to do with it. I don’t know, the ability to sound like, I hate to say it, feminine and kind of that lilting quality, and to sound like you’re really enjoying it, like you’re turned on and having a good time. I think that has a lot to do with it because they’re always telling me, “Oh yes, you have such a great voice! God I love listening to your voice!” I think that’s a big part of it, it’s just the sound of the person’s voice.
To sell the phone service on the fantasy line, callers would get a free taste of the kind of talk they could get if they paid for the service. Excerpt 5.4 offers part of such a sample. Notice how a breathy voice is a key talk tactic to entice men to pay money to have these conversations.

**EXCERPT 5.4**

Oo::h:: I’m so ((breathy voice)) excited. - I just got a hot new job (0.8) well, ((in slight Southern accent)) I’ve been bored lately..hh -I live in a small town and my husband travels a lot, (0.5) I have lots of time on my hands. - .hhh of course I’ve always managed to stay busy. (0.4) lots of girlfriends, you know ((whispered)) I love to shop, I ((laugh)) ^pract^ically live at the mall it seems but still .hhhh ( 2.0) anyway. - this friend told me about this job I can do at home. - all I need is a phone. - and a lusty imagination. ((laugh))yeah, you’ve got it - .hh I’m doing h::ot sexy phone calls these days. (0.5) I rea lly get into it too. - .hhh I love that sexy hot fellows from all over the country call me and enjoy my ((whispered)) voice and my fantasies. (0.4) I like to dress the part too. - I went to my favorite lingerie ((in hoarse, breathy voice)) store, - Victoria’s Secret? And bought s::atin bikinis . .when I dress up and look in the mirror ((slower, breathy voice)) I - get - so - crazy .hhhhh I just can’t wait for that first ca::ll.35

Other aspects of voice also reflect desired (or disdained) personal identities. For instance, a low-pitched voice is regarded as much more commanding and authoritative than a high-pitched one; slow speakers are presumed to be slower thinkers than their faster speaking counterparts; and loud speakers are presumed to be more dominant personalities than quiet ones.36 As a result of these cultural beliefs, despite the fact that actual evidence for them is thin, members of our culture hold to certain occupational generalizations. Radio announcers and television broadcasters, for instance, are likely to have voices that have a lower average pitch than is typical for their gender.37 People also make judgments about identity based on the correlation between voice and master identities. If someone is visibly of a particular race, they may be expected to speak in a certain way. When it comes to gender, men who have higher pitched voices are likely to be seen as more feminine or might be seen as gay. Certain vowel sounds are associated with male speakers who identify as gay; these features can correlate also with regional dialects, such as sounding “Californian,” or personal or interactional identities such as being “a partier.”38
When people typically speak in certain ways, those ways of speaking are assumed to reflect what they are generally like. The assumption that ways of speaking correlate with identities can be seen in the patterned ways people imitate one another. In the following exchange, one woman imitates a nonpresent woman’s voice in a way that builds a certain picture of her character in addition to the actual content of the quoted utterance:

EXCERPT 5.5

1 Halley: And she’s like (0.5) hh (0.8) um (.). “I went to the bar tonight (.). and (0.5) I had this guy buying me drinks all night because I was like flirting with him and making it seem like=

2 Liz: [hhh

3 Halley: =I would go home with him? but I wasn’t going to. (.).

4 Liz: [ <"Oh: my: go:d" >

5 Halley: And I was like (0.5) “n(h)o”=

6 Kayla: =hh[hhh

7 Liz: [hhh (.). game

8 Kayla: [Y(h)eahhhh

9 Halley: [“What game” and she was like “the game of flirtation” and I was like (.). “?O::hr?=a::lly”

10 Kayla: [hh no way, (0.8) I don’t think it is=

11 Liz: =Nah\(^\text{39}\)

Though Liz, Kayla, and Halley comment on the sorts of things the nonpresent woman has said, most notable is how Halley represents her speech in turns 1, 3, and 9. She adds a nasal quality, breathy laughter (“sho good at the game” turn 3), elongated vowels, and uptalk to present the woman as having a “dumb party girl” identity. Speaking in certain ways is often strongly tied to personal identities within cultural communities. Scholars who have studied the personal identity of “cuteness” in Japan and Taiwan (kawaii and sajiao, respectively) have characterized it as a sort of speech act built up through a variety of paralinguistic and nonverbal displays. Often these displays do (assumedly feminine) emotions such as whining, pouting, acting babyish, being coy or cutesy, being bratty, and so forth. Doing this
cuteness involves aspects of style (clothing, aesthetics), vocal qualities (having a high-pitched voice, giggling, squealing, or speaking in “baby talk”), widening the eyes and smiling or pouting, and even writing in certain ways (usually a “curly” style with many hearts and embellishments).%

Importantly, judgments that a person is fast or slow speaking, loud or really soft-spoken use a communicator’s own speech community to create a baseline and make judgments. The result of communities viewing each other through their baseline is that the negative beliefs one group holds about another get evidenced. Because most Native Americans use a softer, more modulated voice than Anglos, Anglos are likely to judge Native Americans as overly submissive. In contrast Native Americans regard the usual Anglo as shrill and abrasive, a speaker who is always shouting.

Dialect or “Accent”

A distinctive feature of how talk sounds relates to the dialect a person speaks. A dialect is the name for an identifiable and characteristic way of speaking a language. Dialects are associated with communities. The community of speakers may be quite large, as when we distinguish Australian, Jamaican, and American English dialects, or it may be quite small, as when distinctions are made about the dialects in one region of the country (the South) or even a single city (Philadelphia). Generally, if two speakers can understand each other, even if it takes a bit of effort, they are speaking dialects of the same language rather than two distinct languages. The distinction between a dialect and a language, though, is not a hard-and-fast one. Some ways of speaking that are typically treated as two languages (e.g., Spanish and Portuguese) have been argued by language scholars as better described as two dialects of the same language. This demonstrates also that in many ways “languages” are designations tied as much to the borders of a nation as to any formal linguistic definition.

A dialect involves three main features: (1) vocabulary, (2) grammar, and (3) pronunciation or accent. Dialect differences in vocabulary refer to differences in everyday word usage. An example of a dialect difference is seen in how American speakers would describe *lining up* at the post office to *mail* a letter. In contrast to his American counterpart, a British speaker is likely to describe himself as *queuing up* to *post* a letter. Grammatical features that vary across dialects of English include presence or absence of double negatives (“it ain’t no good”), usage or omission of “s” in third-person singular (“she go away” or “she goes away”), and many other practices. Typically, the forms of expression that are preferred in written
expression of a language are the dialects that will have the most social prestige.

Although all three features contribute to what is meant by dialect, pronunciation is the feature of which everyday people are most aware. Although people are described as having an accent or not having one, from a linguistic perspective this characterization is inaccurate. Everyone has a distinct way of pronouncing words, so everyone has an accent. What speakers usually mean when they say someone has an accent is that (1) a person talks differently than she does or (2) the person’s pronunciation differs from what is most often heard on U.S. television news (broadcast English) or coming out of the mouths of institutionally high-status speakers.

The specialized vocabularies that go with occupations, sports, or hobbies are labeled jargon. Jargon is a category that exists within communities and cuts across them: Not all English speakers can tell you what a crankshaft is, and not all people who can tell you what a crankshaft is necessarily speak English, let alone the same version of it. You can speak sports jargon, academic jargon, computer jargon, gamer jargon, and so forth in any dialect or language. Particular terms or ways of speaking that are shared by social groups are sometimes called slang, or sociolects. Slang involves phrases and words that are typical of particular groups within speech communities but that do not extend throughout or stick around long enough to be considered part of the dialect. Often slang correlates with age (it is used among younger speakers), and it tends to be short-lived and associated with a “fashion” or “style” of speaking.

Of course, the line between slang and dialect is fuzzy. Terms such as “hella” in Northern California or “wicked” on the East Coast of the United States tend to be regarded as slang because they are usually only spoken among teenagers, but they are nonetheless a pervasive feature of their respective regions and characterize popular conceptions of how people in those places talk. They may not have reached the iconic status of “y’all” in the Southern states or “fixin’ to” in Texas, but who’s to say they won’t eventually? Part of what makes slang slang is that it changes over time. Often when slang develops it is at first a “secret” way of speaking that adults cannot understand and that they might be scandalized by if they did. Over time, when spoken often enough, some slang does disperse through the population and gets picked up by older speakers. English slang such as “spunk” (having spunk or being spunky) and “hit the spot,” which were once considered vulgar, are now seen as harmless.

In France there has developed a sociolect called verlan, a reversal of the term l’envers, which means “backward.” The verlan slang is spoken by young French people in cities and suburbs and in hip-hop music and
involves uses of particular words with inverted syllables, borrowed words from other languages (such as Arabic and English), and archaic French words. Because it only employs certain ways of shaping language within a language or dialect, it is not considered a separate dialect or language (much like Cockney rhyming slang in England or “Valleyspeak” in California). Other “coded” ways of speaking similar to verlan include podaná in Greek and šatrovački in the region that includes Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, and Macedonia.

Using slang can locate a person regionally and in terms of age but also in terms of ethnicity or even gender. Ways of speaking are associated with places, people, activities, occupation, hobbies, and style. This is why the concepts of dialect, slang, and jargon mix in interesting ways among groups of speakers. Nikolas Coupland highlights some of the complex ways identities and speaking styles come together. Coupland proposes that people create their social identities through various ways of speaking—from the language they use (see Chapter 7) to styles and stylings of speech (see Chapter 9) to everything we’ve been talking about in this chapter: the way people pronounce certain words, their intonation, their grammatical and lexical choices, and so forth. All of these aspects of how people sound and move when they interact can display particular identities. It is not the case that one can always link a certain identity to a certain way of talking, even if people tend to do so in everyday life.

Dialects can be evaluated linguistically or socially. From the linguistic viewpoint, all dialects are equal. Every dialect is a rule-governed system. Every dialect has pronunciation patterns, grammatical rules, and rules about expected vocabulary. No dialect is better than any other; each reflects coherent rule-governed ways of expressing meaning. Yet while all dialects are equal linguistically, they are not equal socially. Certain dialects will be judged as “better” than others. Social assessments of the goodness of a dialect are tied to the relative value given to different kinds of people in a society. In general, middle-class people are valued more than working-class people; urban residents have more status than rural residents; and whites have more status than blacks. So too are the different dialects valued. The differential valuing of communities’ dialects is even reflected in the terms linguists and other language scholars use to refer to kinds of dialects. Those dialects spoken by the elite group(s) in society not only get referred to as standard dialects but also are likely to have become what is expected in good writing; dialects that differ from this small set are grouped together and referred to as nonstandard. These labels (“standard,” “nonstandard”) are not neutral; each strongly implies whether a particular way of speaking is to be desired or avoided. Baldly stated, those groups of
people who already possess power and influence will have their ways of speaking assessed as the better ones.

Interestingly, American accents are on their way to becoming the accent of English that speakers worldwide prefer. Until recently, the variety of English that has been spoken by the educated elite in Britain, called *received pronunciation* (RP), has been the favored accent worldwide. RP English was the version that most non-native speakers of English in Europe and Asia would learn. A study by Donn Bayard and colleagues had college speakers from four English-speaking countries (New Zealand, Australia, England, the United States) read the same message (a letter to parents). Australian and New Zealand college students listened to these different accents and then rated each of the speakers in terms of how friendly and likeable they saw the speaker and how competent they thought the person would be. Speakers using an American accent were preferred over the British-accented speakers, sometimes even more than speakers with the listeners’ own nationality. The explanation for this, the study authors argued, is the widespread use of American media outside the United States. Increasingly, talking like an American, even in places where the United States is strongly criticized, is common. In the BBC’s program *The Story of English*, the narrator concluded by saying, “American English seems to be winning hands down” and “American English, not British English, will remain the major global form of English into the indefinite future.”

In any English-speaking country, there will be a most-favored dialect. In non-English-speaking countries, however, someone who can speak any variety of English may be admired. A person can speak a variety of English that accords him or her high social status in his or her own country but that is stigmatized in primarily English-speaking countries. The positive or negative evaluations of a variety of English have a lot to do with the histories of non-native speakers in different English-speaking countries. For instance, the relationship between India and England has resulted in complex associations with Indian-accented English in England, as well as among the varieties of English spoken in India, where it is accorded official status alongside Hindi. Aaron Cargile and Howard Giles found that American English speakers evaluated British English, Malaysian English, and Japanese English more favorably than other accented varieties, while Eileen Brennan and John Brennan found that both Anglos and Mexican Americans judged Mexican American speech with increasingly stronger accents as increasingly lower in status.

Some have suggested that “accent bias” may deny work or educational opportunities to people who speak nonstandard dialects. Accent can be correlated with personal and interactional identities, including competence
and various stereotypes. Many group ties shape the dialect a person will use. As already mentioned, a person’s nationality and local geographic region will shape his or her accent. One of the most important other influences is social class. Social class is a composite way of classifying people that takes account of education, occupation, and income. In the United States class is an uncomfortable way of describing people; to describe someone as not middle class to many Americans feels judgmental and intolerant. In surveys, just about everybody—whatever a person’s education or occupation—will check that he or she is middle class. How researchers assign a social class category to a person depends on whether the researcher’s classification system gives greater weight to education, occupation, or income. In most cases, of course, the three go together, but there are many instances in which they do not. When questionnaires give people the option of choosing working person (as in regular working person) rather than working class or lower class, a large percentage of people comfortably identify as not middle class.

Speakers from working-class communities speak differently than those from middle-class backgrounds and, in turn, are responded to differently. A middle-class speaking style will be described as “sounding educated.” To sound “working class” will lead many listeners to assume that a speaker is not able to do jobs that primarily involve intellectual labor. In addition to social class, and partly related to it, are the race and ethnic communities of a speaker. Speakers originating from Hispanic, Hawaiian, Asian, and African American communities are likely to have accents distinctive to their groups, especially if the speakers are from working-class communities. By and large, as members of different ethnic groups move into the middle class, their speech patterns become increasingly similar to those of other middle-class speakers. That is, middle-class speakers have a more homogeneous style than persons from working-class backgrounds.

Nancy de la Zerda and Robert Hopper asked employment interviewers in a variety of large businesses in Austin, Texas, to listen to a tape of several Mexican American speakers using either standard or Spanish-accented English dialects. Employers were asked to rate the suitability of each speaker for three kinds of positions: as an unskilled worker, as a skilled technician, and as a supervisor. Perhaps unsurprisingly, standard-sounding speakers were most favored for the supervisory position; they were also least favored for the unskilled position. At the same time, Spanish-accented speakers were most favored for the unskilled job. In one analysis of interviews with companies in Australia about non-native workers, the dialect, accent, or way of speaking (Australian) English was frequently invoked as a reason for hiring or not hiring someone or for
someone’s success or lack thereof. As one respondent commented about a Filipino candidate: “he’s very articulate and he sounds as though . . . his accent’s very good.” Being able to “fit in” with the natives was seen as an important criterion for success in organizations but also served as a rhetorical device for explaining why someone was successful or not rather than considering the possibility of racism. Though it is not necessarily the case, speaking with an accent that is linked to countries other than the native one is correlated with being a foreigner or immigrant and often with being an “illegal immigrant.”

Black English Vernacular (BEV), also called African American Vernacular English or Ebonics, is undoubtedly the most studied ethnic dialect. There are a large number of BEV speakers in the United States, and the number appears to be growing rather than shrinking. According to William Labov, who has studied BEV since the 1960s, BEV is not an endangered language. Rather than being a single dialect, BEV is best conceived as a family of dialects with a set of grammatical and pronunciation features that can be part of any individual dialect. The roots of BEV can be traced to the Creole language of the first African American speakers. Among the distinctive-sounding features of this family of dialects are the weakening of final consonants in words, such as saying “coal” for “cold”; pronouncing the “th” sound as a “d” (“dis” and “dat” for “this” and “that”); and stressing the first syllable of a word where other dialects stress the second (e.g., PO-lice, DE-troit). Dialects change over time, as do the frequency and meaning of usage of a specific feature. Pronouncing the word “ask” as “axe,” a visible feature of BEV, has become more common in recent years. This change may be a way for African American speakers in predominately white environments to say, “I’m black and I’m proud of it.”

This brings us to an important question: Why do dialects that have low prestige and economic disadvantage persist?

The Value of Devalued Dialects

Howard Giles and Nikolas Coupland offer several reasons why speakers keep a low-prestige dialect and do not choose to learn one that has higher prestige. As we noted before, dialects are visible and clear markers of group membership. A dialect is a central means by which speakers display who they are. Distinctive dialects, therefore, facilitate in-group cohesion: They are audible signs to mark who is inside or outside the group. An upshot of this is that speakers who want to retain their standing within a group will continue to speak in the way the group values. At the same time, changing one’s dialect carries the risk of being judged to be a group traitor. Just about
every ethnic group has a derogatory term for members who seek to pass into the dominant group: African Americans use the label oreo, Chicanos use coconut, Native Americans use apple, and Asians use the term banana. The latter three terms imply that a person’s ethnicity goes no deeper than the skin of the fruit. It accuses a person of changing his or her values and attitudes—made visible through dialect switching—to reflect the white dominant majority.

Another reason that low-prestige dialects persist is that a dialect is an emotionally charged aspect of identity. The dialect a person learns in his or her home is deeply tied to very basic feelings: of being oneself, of what counts as natural and unpretentious, of feeling warmth and a caring connection with others. Prestige accents, if they are not a person’s home dialect, will never have this kind of emotional connection. These, then, are some of the counterforces that encourage people to continue using the dialect they learn in their home communities rather than changing to adopt the dialect valued by prestigious institutions. Although changing dialects is first and foremost an individual issue, it is also a societal issue.

Alan Davies describes the dilemma that a society’s leaders face as they craft the public stance to be taken toward dialect diversity:

In that court, what determines the final decision is an educational philosophy about the kind of society we wish ours to be, with the recognition that for the advantage of pluralism in dialect and language maintenance, there is the price of fragmentation, nonintegration through one standard and lack of proficiency for many in that standard. On the other hand, for the advantage of efficiency, of proficiency in and integration through one standard, there are disadvantages of alienation, overall cultural loss and possible cognitive dissonance.58

A final reason that low-prestige dialects persist is that for some speakers they actually carry covert prestige. Although prestige of the obvious, unmodified kind goes with the speaking of a standard dialect, nonstandard dialects may have covert prestige, a hidden or secondary kind of prestige. Although a nonstandard dialect may signal a lower level of education, it also signals a sense of toughness, strength, and, indirectly, masculinity. That is, by speaking with a nonstandard dialect, a man can portray himself as possessing qualities that are especially valued for men.

In a study of fraternity men that involved tape-recording the men’s talk in several sites, Scott Kiesling,59 in fact, found that the fraternity members increased their use of nonstandard pronunciation when they were in all-male house meetings. Kiesling attributed this change to each man’s desire to be regarded as a strong, not-easy-to-push-around kind of person. Covert
II. TALK’S BUILDING BLOCKS

prestige, then, is the tougher image that a nonstandard dialect delivers. Further evidence that nonstandard dialects can furnish men covert prestige is to be found in a study by Peter Trudgill. People were asked to report their usage of nonstandard forms, and then each person’s self-report was contrasted with his or her actual use. Men were found to overreport their use of nonstandard forms (e.g., “goin” vs. “going”), whereas women underreported their use of nonstandard forms. This pattern ties to broad cultural expectations. In general, working-class people are perceived as tougher and stronger, whereas middle-class speakers are seen as more polite, refined, and correct. Similarly, males are generally perceived as tougher and stronger than females, whereas females are assumed to be more polite and correct. A consequence of the presumed relationship between dialect and these master identities is that middle-class men (and to a certain degree working-class women) will face contradictory injunctions: Should male middle-class speakers talk as is most appropriate for their class or for their gender?

A Rhetorical Perspective on Accent

The dominant perspective researchers have taken toward dialect and identity is a cultural one. Accents and dialects are treated as relatively stable features of talk presumed to be shaped by preexisting identities (e.g., social class, gender, ethnicity, nationality). If, however, we approach accent from a rhetorical perspective, we think about the linkage differently. When and why, we would ask, do speakers choose one accent over another?

One phenomenon that has been well documented is that speakers change their accents, as well as their rates of speech and their pausing patterns, depending on their conversational partners. In seeking to sell a vacation to a client, a travel agent will shift his pronunciation toward that of the client. A politician may use a regional accent when speaking to her constituency at home and switch to a more standard accent when addressing public officials at the state capitol. Howard Giles has tried to explain when (and why) in a single encounter people will change their speech. Communication accommodation theory (CAT) posits that speakers will talk more like their partners (converge and accommodate) when “they want to be approved of and when they want their communication to be effective.” At the same time they are likely to resist accommodating and may even accentuate their differences (diverge) when “they want to symbolize and emphasize difference and distance.” By and large, similarity is attractive to people; a communicator likes others who talk like she or he does. Thus when a person wants another to like her, she will shift her accent toward...
her partner’s accent. The shifting is usually unconscious, although it need not be. In situations in which people are unequal, such as at a job interview (or the cases of the politician or the travel agent), the person with less power (or more to lose) is most likely to change his or her speech.

Convergence isn’t visible only in face-to-face speech. One study of online forums about breast and prostate cancer looked at the extent to which men’s and women’s speech on the forums did or did not converge. Women dominated both forums (despite the prostate cancer forum being devoted to a male category of cancer), and, over time, men who participated adjusted their speech toward the style and topics set by the women participants. This was particularly the case in terms of topical references (discussing typically “feminine” concerns such as emotions), and men often commented on this:

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**EXCERPT 5.6**

I suppose it is a fact that some men find it hard to get it across as well as they should! Me, after all we went through, it has left me with some sort of feeling of opening up more and just saying whatever I feel. This thing has some strange side effects on emotions that I don’t think you can read or learn about other than experience them personally.  

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Although one or both speakers converging is the most common occurrence, speakers also will talk so that their speech becomes more different from their partner’s. Divergence is especially likely in conflict situations between members of different social groups. In a study that had a Welsh person and a British person discuss (in English) whether the Welsh language should be cultivated or left to die out, the Welsh speaker used increasingly Welsh-accented English over the course of the dispute  

In a study of primary schools in Cameroon (Central Africa), Edith Esch analyzed the way teachers at two schools suppressed dialects, creoles, and pidgins in favor of the official standard languages (English or French). Their ways of talking about their teaching diverged linguistically in the classroom from the speech of their students, but there was also an ideological divergence between the two schools: One saw teaching as “parenting” whereas the other saw teaching as “preparing students for citizenship.” Both schools used these norms as explanations for their language practices and for their routine punishments of students who spoke the local dialect. In effect, then, the students at each school were becoming more and more different in speaking style from one another.
Besides diverging to indicate dislike or subtle rejection of another, speakers may also diverge to license norm violations. For instance, if a German speaker were speaking English and could do so with no noticeable trace of a foreign accent, nonetheless he might choose to use a more marked foreign accent. When a speaker sounds like a native, he is presumed to be a fully functional member of that society. A native speaker will be viewed more negatively for failing to behave in expected ways than a non-native. Thus, if our English-fluent German is uncertain about whether he knows all the right ways to behave in an American business meeting, he might shift his accent to be more different from the partner’s to mark his non-native status. Shifting toward non-native speakers is another way to accommodate by employing an accent one does not actually have. First-generation children of immigrants to English-speaking countries may sometimes speak an accented form of English at home (in addition to or instead of the parents’ native language) in order to be understood easier or not to be seen as differentiating themselves from their families.

Summary

Though taking account of the important nonverbal dimension of communication, this chapter has focused mainly on the sound of talk. Talk sounds different when it is spoken by a man, a woman, or a child; a European, a Hispanic, or a Hmong American; a New Yorker, a westerner, or a southerner; a New Zealander or a Scottish speaker. Not only does talk reflect a speaker’s geographic, social class, and gender origins, but it is also used strategically to display affiliation or hostility. In addition, it may be used as a strategy to claim a particular interactional identity. Consider but one interesting example. Lawyers and judges pronounce the word “defendant” as if they were defending an ant (defend-ant) rather than the more everyday way (defend-ent). Peter Tiersma explains this unusual practice:

This aberrant pronunciation may well have originated with pedantic law professors who grew weary of students misspelling defendant as defendant, which is a logical enough way to write it. Perhaps the professors began to articulate the word with added (but unnatural) emphasis on the a in the final syllable, stressing the final syllable and coloring it to rhyme with ant. Students ever eager to begin “talking like a lawyer,” quickly mimicked their instructors. Whatever its origin this unusual articulation is now considered a badge of membership in the legal fraternity. 68
For personal identities related to feelings and attitudes, it is prosodic changes that are most important. Voice gets used to do all kinds of subtle identity-work. It is a big part of what makes talking with people so involving and fun. For sensitive issues, hearing a person’s voice seems absolutely necessary. We get much more information about what a friend must mean when we hear her saying the words. And we can count on our own tone of voice to convey things that we may find difficult to put into words. The addition of facial expressions and gestures creates another layer of interactional meaning. At the same time, and all too often, the sound and sight of talk becomes a site for conflict. Sometimes it is because two people, coming from different communities, attach nonsimilar interactional meanings to a vocal or gestural move and do not realize that this has occurred. Other times—and this is commonplace among intimates—one person accurately interprets the other’s intended meaning, whatever he might be saying explicitly, but the meaning is hostile, angry, and blaming. Working through negative feeling that one person has toward another is invariably difficult. For all kinds of reasons, people may not be willing to admit that what the partner inferred (and states) is true. Or it may be only partly accurate. In addition, the vocabulary available to refer to aspects of voice and how vocal features and gestures connect to feeling-linked identities is limited, thereby making it a particularly challenging topic. Finally, talking explicitly about feelings (their expression and why they are being felt) may itself be an identity-threatening act. But that is another story.
Interaction Structures

EXCERPT 6.1: Presidential Debate between Obama and McCain

MOD: All right. We’re going to move to another question and the topic is leadership in this campaign. Both of you pledged to take the high road in this campaign yet it has turned very nasty. Senator Obama, your campaign has used words like “erratic,” “out of touch,” “lie,” “angry,” “losing his bearings” to describe Senator McCain. Senator McCain, your commercials have included words like “disrespectful,” “dangerous,” “dishonorable,” “he lied.” Your running mate said he “palled around with terrorists.” Are each of you tonight willing to sit at this table and say to each other’s face what your campaigns and the people in your campaigns have said about each other?

[Several exchanges, including one in which McCain stated that Representative John Lewis, an Obama supporter, had implied that McCain was associated with the “worst chapter in American history, segregation, deaths of children in church bombings”]

O: . . . . And I think (. ) Congressman Lewis’s point was that uh we have to be careful about how we (. ) deal with our suppor [ters. Now John John let=

M: [You’ve go:tta read what he said

O: =let-[ let=

M: [You’ve gott:a read what he said.

O: =Let me- let me complete

MOD: Go ahead.
O: uh my response. I do think that he inappropriately drew a comparison between what was happening there and what had happened during the civil rights movement. And we immediately put out a statement saying that we don’t think that comparison is appropriate. And in fact afterwards Congressman Lewis put out a similar statement, saying that he had probably gone over the line.

Excerpt 6.1 and Excerpt 6.2 that follows are from the third presidential debate in 2008 between then-Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain. The format for this debate had a moderator posing questions to one of the candidates and then the two men discussing the issue. In the last two decades presidential debates have included a variety of novel formats. In addition to the traditional one, in which both candidates stand behind lecterns and have a specific number of minutes to address an issue and offer rebuttal comments, there have been town hall meetings in which audience members ask questions, and there are “discussions,” such as this third debate was, at which candidates are seated at a table with a moderator who poses questions. Because of the consequentiality of these debates, deciding on their formats, as well as the number to hold, have become major issues of negotiation between staff within each campaign office.

Unlike ordinary discussion in which the rules remain unspoken and there are no referees, presidential debate “discussions” have moderators who explicitly spell out and enforce participation rules. In this debate, the moderator, Bob Schieffer, began by announcing:

EXEMPLARY 6.2

The rules tonight are simple. The subject is domestic policy. I will divide the next hour-and-a-half into nine-minute segments. I will ask a question at the beginning of each segment. Each candidate will then have two minutes to respond, and then we’ll have a discussion. I’ll encourage them to ask follow-up questions of each other. If they do not, I will.

Interactive formats have much to commend them, but at the same time they create identity dangers for candidates that are not present in the traditional structure. Such formats require candidates to obtain and then maintain “control of the floor during the open discussion while simultaneously appearing to be ‘assertive’ but not ‘rude’ or ‘indifferent.’” In these debate
contexts the stakes are high: Citizen judgments about each man’s interac-
tional and personal identities (“Is this man going to be a good president?”; “Is he assertive or is he rude?”) mattered, both for the candidates and for the voting public. Each man sought to display himself positively and alter-
cast the other as having negative qualities.

One way a speaker altercasts another negatively is to treat him as interrupting, hence implying the other is a rude person. In this moment of extended overlapping speech, Obama’s comment, “Let me complete” [what I’m saying], a comment he began five times by recycling his opening word (“let”) treats McCain as doing the interrupting, unfairly keeping Obama from making a point. The moderator’s intervention and direction to Obama to “go ahead” further upheld Obama’s definition of the situation. But in this discussion-formatted situation, to determine which man was actually “interrupting” is not that clear. McCain’s disagreement began at a place at which it would have been appropriate for him to take the floor. Both men were talking in overlap, either responding to an accusation of bad judgment in his campaign or elaborating why his accusation of the other’s campaign was justified. What we can say pretty firmly is that in this heated moment, Obama’s discourse moves in conjunction with the moderator’s framed McCain as the interrupter. In this competitive context a single interruption is a tiny transgression, unlikely to be consequential in itself. Combined with other acts, however, it could become something another treats as a pattern, evidence that that speaker possesses a problematic personal style.

Presidential debates are events few individuals face, but controlling the conversational floor—the place and space for talk—in an appropriate manner is a task everybody must manage. In ordinary conversations with friends, as well as in the routine exchanges at work and during public meet-
ings, the way a person handles the structures of interaction affects whether she is seen to be shy and insecure, overbearing, rude, self-absorbed, or poised and competent (i.e., appropriately assertive and appropriately other-
responsive).

As Erving Goffman commented, “Life may not be much of a gamble, but interaction is.” How people design and sequence their turns of talk and respond to others’ initiations implicate important personal identities. In addition, the mastery of professional roles or particular interactional identities—doctor, teacher, counselor, emergency call taker, lawyer, technical support service provider—is bound up with learning how to manage a key interaction-structuring activity: questioning and responding.

What are the structures of interaction? How do they operate? How do they connect with the identities communicators both desire and wish
to avoid? We begin this chapter by describing the turn-taking systems in ordinary conversation and in institutional encounters, making visible how people’s uses of an occasion’s turn system contribute to positive or negative identity assessments. Then we give attention to adjacency pairs and their common permutations. Adjacency pairs, we show, provide the infrastructure that explains why people draw the inferences they do about the morality, caring, and competence of others. Subsequent sections focus on little words that matter (e.g., oh, so, well) and take a close look at the practice of questioning. We conclude by identifying some ways that speech communities do interaction structuring differently.

**Turn Taking**

In everyday situations outside of school, work, or public settings, there are rarely formal rules about who can talk, when, and about what. Rather, who gets a turn in a conversation, and how frequently, is something that gets negotiated within the local moment. To state it more formally, turn taking is **locally managed**. This local management relies on what Harvey Sacks and his colleagues identified as two “grossly apparent facts” about conversation. These facts are that in small groups usually (1) only one person speaks at a time and (2) speaker changes recur. Moreover, how long any person will speak is not predictable; turns may be very short (e.g., single words—“Yes”—or short phrases—“You betcha” or “Around 7:00 tomorrow”) or could be quite lengthy (multiple utterances). Put together, these facts create a puzzle. How is it that conversationalists are generally able to accomplish smooth exchanges in which overlapping speech is infrequent and brief?

The basic unit of talk, as noted earlier, is an utterance. Utterances may be single words, short phrases, or **sentence-like** clauses. Conversation analysts label this smallest unit a **turn constructional unit** (TCUs) to highlight the unit’s role as the basic building block of talk. TCUs are cued by our knowledge of the world, as we have a good sense of when single words and phrases will be complete responses. TCUs are also cued by a speaker’s intonation (drawing out of a syllable on a final word (so:), rising or falling intonation), a language’s grammar (ends of questions and statements), hand gestures coming to rest at the body, or reengaging someone’s gaze. When we focus on the boundaries of TCUs—the exact places in a stream of talk at which it would be appropriate for speaker change to occur—we are attending to **transition relevance places** (TRPs). Turn constructional units and transition relevance places, then, are alternative ways of naming either a talk unit or a boundary. Example 6.3 illustrates the relationship.
As a person’s turn often includes more than a single TCU, there are recognizable ways to build longer turns. A speaker can frame what he is doing as a speech action that will involve multiple TCUs, as a speaker would do in giving directions, telling a story, or making an argument with several points. In addition, a speaker may attempt to hold on to the speaking turn by speeding up speech and rushing through a TRP, avoiding the other’s gaze, or doing hand gestures that metaphorically push another away. We could think of such moves as a speaker steamrolling through a yield sign. Cues that a fellow conversationalist wants to claim a turn include such actions as leaning forward, opening the mouth, starting a hand gesture, and looking toward the current speaker. Attending to these cues and recognizing people who want to speak (“Jenny, you look like you had something you wanted to say”) is one of the ways meeting leaders display themselves as “good at running meetings,” a workplace identity that many people seek.

According to Sacks, in conversation there are three kinds of actions that are possible at TRPs:

1. The current speaker may select the next speaker. Speakers may nominate who is to be the next speaker by name (“I’m not attending that meeting, how about you Rich?”) or cue who the selected other is through gaze or body orientation, or through the mention of a topic that might only be appropriate to one party.
2. If the current speaker does not select a next speaker, then any of the present persons may self-select and start talking.
3. If no one self-selects, then the current speaker may continue speaking.

Local management of conversation, then, involves the parties in an exchange drawing on these mechanisms to jointly manage who is going to talk for how long, how often, and in what order.
Most instances of overlapping speech in conversation involve no more than a couple of syllables and occur around TRPs. A reason most overlap is restricted to such spots is the undesirability of being seen to be an interrupter. There are, however, activities in which overlapping speech will not yield negative assessments. Overlaps that occur in the middle of turns when the listening party is interjecting small tokens of attention (“Uh huh,” “mm,” “I see”) that encourage a speaker continuing (continuers) are one exception. Another occurs when a recipient acts to help a speaker who is trying to remember the name of a person or place. A third kind of overlapping speech that rarely causes negative judgment is what Schegloff called choral talk, when several people murmur congratulations, say good-bye, or laugh at the same time. In contrast to overlapping talk that is seen as interruptions, these select cases are understood as having cooperative or supportive purposes.

When lengthy stretches of simultaneous talking do occur, they are likely to be seen as two people competing for the floor. Whether both parties—or just one—will be assessed negatively will depend on features of the context. In such moments, the talk of at least one party gets louder and higher in pitch, and the pace of speaking changes, becoming either faster or slower. In addition, as we saw in the Obama–McCain debate, one communicator’s talk may be cut off and followed by sounds being prolonged or particular words or phrases being recycled. Eventually these segments of overlapping talk conclude with one person dropping out. Sometimes explicit accusations are made that the other interrupted, always interrupts, or is rude, or that the other never listens or is selfish. Other times, nothing explicit is said in the moment, but one or another party walks away and talks to others about the conversation partner’s rude, overbearing, or self-preoccupied personality. We all know that people “will get angry at, or feel contrite or guilty about doing such a thing as intruding on X’s time, speaking while he is speaking, interrupting him.” In other words, built into conversational practice is an emotional motor that helps to keep most people in line most of the time. From how one manages turns, consequential personal judgments will be developed.

Interruption is not the only feature of the turn-taking system that is implicative for identity. The sheer number of turns one takes and the talk content of the turns also shape identities. By and large, people who take more turns and longer ones will be judged as being more expert, influential, or assertive and, in institutional situations, will be assumed to be higher in status than less frequently speaking parties (senior doctor vs. intern or boss vs. secretary). In addition, introducing a new topic for talk is usually regarded as a more assertive act than responding to an ongoing topic; this
is especially the case if the new topic is focused on the self’s interests rather than the other’s interests.

Although generalizations abound as to what kinds of moves generally go with what kinds of identities, the picture is quite complex and dependent on how the particular persons and practices come together in a specific situation. For instance, although talk is typically seen as the way a person establishes himself as powerful, under certain conditions silence may be the more powerful tool. Once we move outside of ordinary conversation, though, the rules change.

Turn taking in ordinary conversation is locally managed—there are no prespecified rules. In institutional settings, although local management does occur for some activities—for example, a few people chatting about a project—many occasions have formal turn-taking rules that restrict who may speak, when, and on what topic. At one extreme are situations in which the turn system is entirely preallocated (preallocated turn structure). A good example would be the courtroom, where the rights to talk are highly restricted. Not only are parties restricted to speaking in particular slots, but their turns are also format- and content-restricted. Attorneys, for instance, may not make statements to witnesses but must pose questions, and witnesses must limit what they say to responses that will be judged answers to the questions they are asked.

Many institutional encounters have turn-taking systems that are a hybrid between the two extremes of locally managed and preallocated. In business meetings, for instance, there is often an agenda that orders topics of talk, and the meeting chair gets to decide when to close down one topic and start the next topic, as well as whether a member’s comment is on or off topic. However, within the confines of a meeting, discussion may resemble that of ordinary conversation, in which people do a lot of self-nominating and subtopic introduction.

**Adjacency Pairs and Common Permutations**

Talk involves more than people performing randomly sequenced acts. We, as talkers, have strong expectations that certain kinds of speech acts will be followed by selected others. A greeting (e.g., “Hi,” “How ya doing?”), for instance, will usually be followed by a second greeting. That pairs of acts are usually found together is part of the meaning of adjacency pair, a concept developed by Schegloff and Sacks to explain the orderliness of conversation. There are many kinds of adjacency pairs. Some pairs involve similar acts, as is the case with greetings or good-byes, whereas others
involve different acts. Examples of pairs that involve different actions include invitations or offers followed by acceptances (or refusals) and questions followed by answers. Example 6.4 offers an instance of a common adjacency pair that might occur between coworkers.

**EXAMPLE 6.4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARYN: How bout some lunch?</th>
<th>Invitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JAY: Sounds good. ((stands up))</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Example 6.4, then, the invitation is the first part of a pair, or **first pair part**, and the acceptance is the **second pair part**. Equally possible as a second pair part to an invitation is a refusal, shown in Example 6.5.

**EXAMPLE 6.5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARYN: How bout some lunch?</th>
<th>Invitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JAY: (pause) Uhh, better not. I’ve got to get this done by 2:00. Thanks though. How’s tomorrow?</td>
<td>Refusal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adjacency pairs may be expanded in two ways. If a speaker were going to request to borrow a piece of equipment, for instance, a logical prerequisite would be that the person asked actually has the equipment. For a lunch invitation, it is most reasonable to make one if the person being invited has not already eaten. For this reason, communicators often do a **presequence**, an adjacency pair (usually in question–answer format) whose purpose is to determine whether the conditions are reasonable for the focal first pair part. Example 6.6 illustrates such a presequence.

**EXAMPLE 6.6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARYN: You eaten yet?</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JAY: No.</td>
<td>Answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TARYN: How bout some lunch?</td>
<td>Invitation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because presequences are recognizable structures that point to a next act pair, communicators can, if they wish, jump the gun and respond to
what they assume is coming next. In response to Taryn saying, “You eaten yet?” Jay may shake his head no, stand up, and say, “Where do you want to go?” Or he might respond, “Sorry, I have to finish this report by 2:00.”

A second way adjacency pairs may be expanded is through **insertion sequences**. Similar to presequences, insertion sequences involve an inserted adjacency pair to determine whether some condition applies that would make the conversationally preferred option possible. Consider Example 6.7 to see how this applied to our invitation example.

**EXAMPLE 6.7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARYN:</th>
<th>How bout some lunch?</th>
<th>Invitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JAY:</td>
<td>You got $10 to lend me?</td>
<td>Request</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TARYN:</td>
<td>Yeah.</td>
<td>Grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAY:</td>
<td>Sounds good.</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Insertion sequence**

The notion of adjacency pairs is not merely describing the most usual sequences. It is possible for questions not to be followed by answers, greetings by greetings, and so on. As Jack Sidnell highlights, adjacency pairs are not a matter of probabilistic generalities (e.g., 85% of the time an invitation will be followed by either an acceptance or a refusal). Rather, a second pair part is a normatively accountable action following a first pair part. If an expected possible second pair part is not forthcoming, it will be noticeably absent, and communicators will give social meaning to its absence. The absence of a second greeting or good-bye, for instance, is often taken to mean that the greeted party is feeling irritated or mad unless the greeter decides that the absence is a sign of the greeted party’s preoccupation. In other words, one conversational practice used to enact the identity I’m a person who’s mad at you right now is to refrain from doing a speech act where it would be expected.

A related concept that has the potential to generate powerful inferences is known as conversational preference. Conversational preference refers to the structurally preferred second act for adjacency pairs that may take one of two forms. For instance, statements prefer agreement, and following an offer, an invitation, or a request, acceptances are conversationally preferred to refusals. To describe an act as “conversationally preferred” is to say that it can be done straightforwardly and simply; in contrast, a dispreferred act is always longer, more conversationally marked, and elaborated. Consider, for example, the difference between Jay’s acceptance of Taryn’s
invitation to lunch (Example 6.4) and his refusal (Example 6.5). Of note is that Jay did not refuse by simply saying “No” or “No thanks,” but instead paused briefly, started his response with an extended “Uhhh” to suggest that he was thinking about the offer, and explained why he was saying no rather than yes.

Jay’s response illustrates the conversational clothing of dispreferred acts. They (1) are not immediately adjacent but begin after a pause; (2) they start with “well,” “uhm,” or other markers; (3) they include an expression of appreciation, apology, or token agreement (“thanks,” “yes but”); and (4) they include accounts (explanations for the dispreferred act). To say that acceptance acts are conversationally preferred to refusals is by no means to imply that a speaker desires or wants to accept. This may be completely untrue. But it is to say that speakers routinely do not, nor are they expected to, do a dispreferred act in the same simple way as a conversationally preferred one can be done. The best explanation of why these conversational preferences have evolved as they have is to be found in people’s usual face wants. Refusing an invitation or rejecting an offer are more likely to cause interpersonal hurt than accepting one. Thus more elaborate ways of performing dispreferred acts have become interactional structures. That everyday communicators are aware of the conversational cues that a dispreferred act is forthcoming is suggested by the frequency with which pauses before responding to an invitation are often followed immediately by different invitations or requests, as Example 6.8 demonstrates.  

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**EXAMPLE 6.8**

TARYN: How bout some lunch?  
JAY:  (2.0) Uh[hh  
TARYN: [That’s fine. Let’s make it later this week? 

---

One implication of this conversational structuring practice is that one cannot just say no. Kitzinger and Frith draw upon this fact of conversation to critique the burgeoning programs designed to teach women how to avoid date rape. Most of the programs, they note, “are deeply problematic in that they ignore and override culturally normative ways of indicating refusal.” A direct “No,” whether it be to a request for sexual intimacy, an offer of a ride, or an invitation to lunch, is quite rare. Just saying “no,” as most
people recognize, says more than “No”; it is frequently perceived as rude and hostile, personal identities most people seek to avoid. Pausing and saying some mildly positive remark before delivering an actual refusal is how refusing is routinely done.

The problem with date rape is not that men misunderstand women’s softened refusals; as Kitzinger and Frith argue, men are not cultural dopes. The problem is that men do not want to hear refusals. As evidence they note the following: Under a poster with the caption “No means no” in a men’s area of a Canadian university, men had scrawled such hostile comments as “No means kick her in the teeth,” “No means on your knees bitch,” and “No means more beer.” One would not need to fully endorse Kitzinger and Frith’s feminist analysis of date rape to agree that programs to combat rape between acquaintances, whatever the programs involve, need to consider how conversational acts such as refusal and assent are ordinarily done.

For just about every principle that is generally true, there are exceptions and complications. One such complication regarding conversational preference exists for acts of praising. In an important study of compliments, Anita Pomerantz showed that agreeing with another’s fulsome praise of self is problematic. Although agreement may usually be preferred, people are also expected not to engage in self-praise and boasting. As discussed in Chapter 4, compliments can be potentially face-threatening. When a person is complimented, this act presents the recipient with a small challenge, as he needs to navigate between disagreeing with the person’s assertion and therein altercasting the other as wrong or agreeing with the other and potentially presenting the self as boastful. Communicators manage this everyday challenge in a number of ways. They may joke about what is praised or downplay whatever is the focus by using less intense language, as can be seen in Example 6.9, when “fantastic” is downgraded to “OK,” or speakers can attribute responsibility for a praised act elsewhere, as is commonly seen when athletes attribute a successful game to their teammates, their coaches, or the amount of hard work put in.

EXAMPLE 6.9

A: That was a fantastic speech!
B: Thanks. It did turn out OK, didn’t it?

Moreover, the principle of not self-praising extends to others who are closely connected to the self. Communication scholar Danielle Pillet-Shore
studied how parents responded to praise of their children in parent–teacher conferences. She found that these moments were awkward, albeit joyful, ones for parents.

**EXCERPT 6.10**

**TEACHER:** Well let me begin and I know you: are expecting all of this. She’s wo:nderful. She’s like a mod[el child. I mean-

**MOM & DAD:** [((joint laughter))]

**TEACHER:** -she’s just so: sweet. And such a good helper, and friend. And everything. She’s just wo:nderful. I know you don’t

**DAD:** [That’s good to hear.

**TEACHER:** hear anything different [((laughter))]

**MOM:** [((laughter)) She better be: Nope.

**DAD:** [Nah

The parents’ joint laughter enacts them as being embarrassed at the praise and as showing appropriate parental modesty. At the same time the teacher’s laughter marks the delicacy of her act of praising. As Pillet-Shore concludes, “Teachers’ crediting utterances expose their inference that the parent is primarily and ultimately responsible for the student’s behavior/ performance, momentarily leaking some of the unofficial business of the conference: teachers’ monitoring and judgment of the parent for how the child is performing in school.”

**Little Words That Matter: Discourse Markers**

Another way communicators cue the particular activity in which they are engaged or their relationship to others is through the use of words and phrases such as “oh,” “well,” “y’know,” “I mean,” “like,” and “so.” The technical name for this family of words and phrases, initially given by sociolinguist Deborah Schiffrin, is **discourse markers**. There are many more discourse markers than the ones just noted. What makes a word or phrase a discourse marker is that its main meaning is to structure interaction—to frame a communicative situation as involving a particular relationship or kind of event.
For instance, the discourse maker “well” at the start of a turn frequently indicates that something is not going to be straightforward. Even more specifically, “well” cues that what was said in the immediately previous turn was inadequate or wrong (e.g., “Well I hafta tell you that doesn’t make sense to me”; “Well I think Mary is going to find that a little problematic”). This meaning of “well” occurs in many contexts of talk, but it is especially frequent in courtroom exchanges. In a study of 100 jury trials, Chris Heffer found that attorneys were eight times more likely to start questions during cross-examination with “well” than in direct examination, and in a study of seven state supreme courts hearing cases about the constitutionality of marriage laws, Karen Tracy and Russell Parks found that 30% of justices’ questioning turns to attorneys representing either the gay and lesbian plaintiffs or the state agencies began with the disagreement markers “well” or “but.” Courtrooms are adversarial sites that pit parties against each other. “Well” does not occur as frequently in other sites as it does in courtrooms, but when it does, it altercasts the other as saying something not quite right: wrong, confused, or exaggerated.

Other discourse markers serve different functions, with each marker having multiple purposes. Consider just a few of these markers and their most common meanings. “Oh,” for instance, often marks that what a conversational partner has said is news to the hearer. “So” indicates that a speaker is returning to her prior agenda after a tangent or that she is returning to an agenda that motivated an action, as would be cued when a telephone caller says to the person she has called (“So, how are you anyway?”) after initial topics have been discussed. As a final example consider the word like. This discourse marker is used to cue that what’s coming up is a quote from another person (“She was like you can’t do that. And I was like that’s what you think.”).

By carefully studying segments of talk, discourse analysts have explained how a whole raft of words and phrases function. Although most communicators would not be able to name and explain what most discourse tokens do, nevertheless as speakers we regularly use them in a systematic fashion and understand what others are doing when they use them. Interestingly, there seems to be a disjuncture between how the popular media portrays words such as these and what these words actually do. In popular culture phrases such as the ones we have identified here are assumed to be junk verbiage, unnecessary words that clutter up a person’s talk. They are not. To quote a title of one of Galina Bolden’s articles, they are “little words that matter.” We have more to say about certain discourse markers in later chapters. What is important to note here is that discourse markers serve to structure interaction in identifiable ways. These little words cue attitudinal
stances toward events and people; they express affiliation and disaffiliation and significantly contribute to the positive and negative constructions of self and others’ identities.

**Questioning and Responding**

As we mentioned earlier, skillful questioning is a hallmark of professional identities of many types. Students learning how to be professionals will be explicitly taught, as well as informally socialized, about what kinds of questioning moves will count as effective. These moves, of course, depend on whether the person is seeking to be a police interrogator, an elementary school teacher, a focus group interviewer, a medical history taker, a reporter, or some other role. Because of its centrality to important competences, questioning (and responding) has been studied extensively by discourse researchers. Here we unpack two important links between questioning sequences and identities.

**Link 1: Sequences Make Visible Whether Parties Are in an Institutional Encounter or Doing Ordinary Conversation**

Questioning is one way communicators do ordinary sociability; it is also the vehicle for enacting institutional identities. Although the enactment of institutional identities is strongly associated with specific places—for instance, doctors take histories in clinics—there is no absolutely fixed link between identities and places. People may engage in friendly, nonwork identities in institutional settings, and they may enact institutional identities in their homes. Paul Drew and John Heritage identify three characteristics that distinguish institutional interaction from ordinary exchanges: (1) At least one, if not both, of the parties have relatively specific and restricted goals. (2) Not just anything can be said. Questions and responses are expected to have certain formats or content, and certain actions will be avoided. And (3) there are inferential frameworks that surround and shape the interpretation of exchanges.

An example of how institutional goals and inferences work in a non-institutional setting is illustrated in Excerpt 6.11. A social service that is a routine provision in Britain is having nurses visit new parents in their homes to provide help and to see how they are doing. Consider one exchange that occurred at the start of a nurse’s visit with a pair of new parents. The child is sucking on a pacifier, and the health visitor asks:
EXCERPT 6.11

HV: He’s enjoying that [isn’t he
F: [yes he certainly is=
M: =He’s not hungry ’cuz he’s just had his bottle
(0.5)
HV: You’re feeding him on (.) Cow and Gate Premium.

The father’s response treats the health visitor’s question as ordinary sociability, commenting on the pleasant demeanor of his new baby; the mother’s does not. Her response, “He’s not hungry ’cuz he’s just had his bottle” can be seen as treating the nurse’s comment as a possible criticism about the quality of her mothering. She is not caring for her child appropriately by feeding him when she should. We do not know whether the health visitor was indirectly asking about this matter, but because the nurse’s job is to assess how parents and new babies are doing (and report families in which there is serious trouble), we can see the mother attending to this institutional goal and using it to understand what on the surface looks like an innocuous friendly question from the nurse.

Consider a second exchange (Excerpt 6.12) and the question design features that lead us to infer it must be a job interview rather than ordinary conversation.

EXCERPT 6.12

1 A: What was your major in college?
2 B: Business administration.
3 A: And did that prepare you for a managerial position?
4a B: Yes, I think my management courses were excellent.

If asked what was going on in Excerpt 6.12 most readers would make an immediate assignment of meaning: It is a job interview. Moreover, it is unlikely that people would have difficulty figuring out who’s who. Speaker A appears to be the interviewer and Speaker B the interviewee. The self-evidence of these identity attributions flows from the way three particular communicative practices combine in their occurrence. First, A and B perform different speech acts in recognizable adjacency pairs; A asks B for information, and B answers A’s questions. If in line 2 B had said, “Business
administration, and what’s yours?” our guess about A’s and B’s identities would be much less certain. The lack of symmetry in the adjacency pairs that each person initiates cue us that A and B are likely to be in institutional roles in which each has different rights and obligations with regard to question asking and question answering. That one person gets to ask most of the questions and the other does most of the answering is a feature of many pairs of institutional identities.

To be sure, our judgment that Excerpt 6.12 comes from a job interview rests on more than this adjacency pair structure. The topical focus and the evaluative stance displayed by B toward the topic of discussion provide further clues. That B is being asked whether her educational training links to preparation for a certain kind of work is just the kind of topical focus to be expected in a job interview, and it is also a subject of talk that is less likely in other situations and relationships. This does not mean that this topic is unimaginable elsewhere: Friends and acquaintances in informal conversation do talk about majors and job preparation. If, instead of how B actually responded to being asked how her major prepared her, she had responded with the answer in Example 6.13, consider what we would infer.

**Example 6.13**

4b In certain ways it did; in other ways it didn’t. I had other things that were more important to me than school at that time. I think if I were doing it now, I would be getting more out of my college classes.

If the content of B’s answer were 4b rather than 4a, we would guess that she was talking to a friend rather than to a job interviewer. In 4a it is the sense that the speaker appears to be putting her best foot forward and seeking to show her suitability for the position that further cues us that this is a job interview. In contrast, 4b implicates a more personally reflective and complex evaluation of an experience, a kind of evaluation that might occur between people who have some level of intimacy and trust in which one is not performing for the other. Stated a bit differently, the response in 4a suggests that B is responding to each interview question as if its purpose were narrower than the utterance content would suggest. Such a frame, in fact, is the one that job interviewers expect. At recruiting centers on college campuses, the adoption of a persuasive frame was a key practice that distinguished interviewees who received second interviews at the company from those who did not. Interviewees who did not learn about the company in advance and did not do conversational work to display their high level
of interest in working for that particular company were much less likely to receive a second interview.36

**Link 2: The Content and Design of Questioning Sequences**

**Display an Askers Stance toward the Issue or the Recipient**

We develop the idea of stance more fully in Chapter 9. For this discussion of questioning and institutional identities, we would highlight two features of questioning. First, built into institutional identities is an understanding of what an appropriate stance would be to a category of person. Help line call takers are expected to be supportive when they question callers, whereas shock-jock radio hosts are expected to be critical. Although institutional settings have ideals about questioning conduct, it is often quite challenging to enact the ideal. This is so because professional roles frequently have competing aims built into them that are not well recognized. We saw this in Chapter 2 for academic advisors, and such competing goals are common in just about every professional role, at least some of the time. News reporters are expected to be fair and objective, but they are also expected to be hard-hitting, not simply pushovers for powerful people. Doctors are expected to be understanding of the medical challenges people face, but they are also expected to get people to change unhealthy behaviors.

An unavoidable feature of all question posing is that how a question is formulated will portray assessments of the focal action and the person. Imagine that a doctor said to a patient either the (a) or (b) formulation in Example 6.14.

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**Example 6.14**

(a) You know your extra weight is dangerous. Why haven’t you tried harder to lose 30 pounds?

(b) Losing weight is hard. Do you have ideas about what changes you could make to reach your goal of losing 30 pounds?

---

Doctors and nurses are expected to get overweight patients to lose weight, and they are expected to be sympathetic and helpful about medical problems. Which question formulation would better get a patient to lose weight is unclear, but given the face-threat of portraying someone as responsible for a “dangerous” condition, it seems likely that most patients would prefer the (b) formulation to the (a) one.
Second, questioning sequences may cue a question asker’s personal stance. In institutional contexts in which questioners are responsible for treating a category of participants equally and in which how people are treated can be observed by others, small differences in questioning can cue whether a party is favored or disfavored. In appeals courts, judges are expected to apply the law to the facts of the case. To help do this well, courts engage in oral argument, in which attorneys on both sides of an issue are subjected to tough questioning by the court’s judges. In the study by Karen Tracy and Russell Parks of seven courts hearing same-sex marriage appeals, the authors found that judges did considerable work in their question posing to show their attention to the ideals of judicial questioning. Judges framed what they were doing as impersonal, a matter of sorting through legal issues, and did this by using argument language in their questions that used such words as claim, evidence, and reason. They also displayed their orientation to the law by referring to legal cases in their questions. Yet although judges did work to honor judicial ideals, small differences in how they treated attorneys representing the different sides conveyed a judge’s stance toward same-sex marriage. In this study of 50 judges who asked questions of attorneys on both sides of the issue, Tracy and Parks found that judges engaged in tougher questioning with the side they voted against. Tough questioning is a characteristic of question sequences rather than a feature of individual questions. In this situation it involved judges asking more questions of the side that they opposed, structuring questions to the disfavored side to be longer and more complicated and asking a greater number of follow-up questions after an initiating one. Through using tougher questioning with attorneys on one side of the same-sex marriage debate than with attorneys on the other, judges made visible whether they were for or against marriage between same-sex couples.

Speech Community Differences

As with other aspects of everyday talk, interaction-structuring processes are culturally inflected. Somewhat different meanings may be attached to a given segment of talk, and, for some occasions, what is taken to be normal will differ. We have already noted how this applies in job interviews. Let’s consider two other differences.

The notion of adjacency pair is cross-culturally relevant. In Chinese, Swahili, and English, speakers are expected to return a first greeting with a second one. However, what counts as an acceptable greeting varies. Helen Spencer-Oatey notes that in Hong Kong “Hello, have you had lunch?”
is used by many Chinese speakers as an initiating greeting, much like “Hello, a bit colder today?” British English speakers new to Hong Kong routinely hear this greeting as an invitation. In addition, when running into an acquaintance on the street, a usual Chinese way to greet someone is to say “Where are you going?” To British English speakers this greeting seems inappropriate and intrusive—“That’s my own personal business, why is this person asking me this?” Yet, from the Chinese point of view, not only is this a legitimate greeting but it also demands no more than a vague response, such as “I’m going over there” or “I’m going into town.” Thus, for Hong Kong English speakers, the question “Where are you going?” is meant not to solicit information but to build rapport, much as the American English greeting “How are you doing?” functions.

A second speech community difference in interaction structuring is to be found in the cues a group uses to request a turn and to signal attention. As illustrated in Chapter 2, the length of a pause that is seen as normal before a new speaker claims the floor varies across Anglo and Native American communities. By and large, Anglo speakers assume shorter pauses at a TRP to be what is normal and as the signal that a speaker is done. Native Americans regard the normal polite pause to be a bit longer. The upshot of this very small difference is consequential, leading to conversations in which an Anglo partner keeps self-selecting to continue talking, inferring that her Native American partner has nothing to say as she did not come in after a presumably normal pause.

Another difference between Native Americans and Anglos involves the use of visual cues to give attention. From their earliest years, children raised in many Native American communities are taught to make fine visual discriminations. Children will be taught how to identify a person at a distance. On family occasions, an infant will be kept in a noisy family gathering room but will have a sheet draped over his or her cradle to block him or her from seeing others. In contrast, Anglo families are likely to take a child out of a noisy room to a quiet one. That is, Anglo families train their children to attend to auditory cues, whereas Indians put more weight on the visual. In signaling attention, a Native American speaker is likely to use subtle movements around the mouth in the lower region of the face. These movements are much less typically used or attended to among Anglo speakers. Given that Indian children are also likely to avert their gazes as a way of showing respect, it is quite likely that an Anglo partner will not recognize that a Native American is being attentive. Philips, for example, documented that Native American children in mainstream American classes are reprimanded for not paying attention far more often than are their Anglo peers. Thus a small, largely out-of-awareness difference in
turn-taking systems, especially when power relations are unequal, may be part of the way well-intentioned members of the dominant speech community (middle-class Americans) produce unfair treatment of ethnic minorities.

**Summary**

In this chapter we described how turn taking works in ordinary conversation when it is locally managed, as well as how it operates in institutional encounters such as debates in which the situation has prespecified rules about who can talk when and about what. We identified what is meant by adjacency pairs and discourse markers and considered how they did identity-work. In addition, we focused in on questioning sequences in job interviews and health care visits. Interaction structures, more than other features of talk, have regularities across languages and cultures. Nonetheless, even these structures have a cultural dimension: What counts as a greeting, the length of a pause that is judged reasonable, and the function of gaze in giving attention all vary across speech communities.
A mother calls to her children. She repeats the same phrase three times in two languages: “Ven acá. Ven acá. Come here, you.” Why did the mother switch from Spanish to English? Would it have made a difference if she had begun with English and ended with Spanish? In this chapter we consider how the language(s) that communicators use links to their identities. If a speaker has more than one language at her command, what identity does she construct by choosing one over the other? By mixing them together? This chapter specifically focuses on three issues: (1) the identity implications of language choice and language switching, (2) the evolution of language use in communities, and (3) the controversy in the United States about English and whether it should be declared the country’s official language.

Identity Implications of Language Choice and Code Switching

Consider the case of Wilson, a teen who had emigrated from the Dominican Republic (a Spanish-speaking country) to the United States when he was small boy. Upon arrival in the United States, Wilson spoke only Spanish. By going to school and playing with English-speaking peers, he gradually became fluent in English. As with many immigrant children, Wilson frequently served as a translator for older Spanish-speaking family members when they needed to deal with stores and agencies. As is true for many Dominicans, Wilson is racially black—he has brown skin and the kind
of hair and facial features found among persons categorized as African American.

In the United States race tends to be treated as the first and central category in identifying a person. For many Dominican Americans, their first identification is with their ethnic-language community (Hispanic) rather than with others who share their skin color. This leads to an issue for Dominican Americans in the United States because African American (black) and Hispanic are taken to be either–or categories. Dominican Americans frequently get asked “What are you?” Look at Excerpt 7.1 to see what Wilson said about himself.

**EXCERPT 7.1**

A lot of people confuse me for an African American most of the time. They ask me, “Are you Black?” I’m like, “No I’m Hispanic.” And they’ll be like, “Oh I thought you were Black or something.” Most of the time I’ll be talking with them, chilling or whatever. They’ll be thinking that I’m just African American. Because sometimes the way I talk, my hair, my skin color. It’s just that my hair is nappy. I use lots of slang.²

Wilson explicitly claims “Hispanic” as his central category, setting it in contrast to “African American.” But his use of languages and the dialects within them reveals a more multifaceted sense of self. In speaking, Wilson routinely mixes Black English Vernacular (BEV), American English, and Dominican Spanish. Depending on the situation and his conversational partner, Wilson will use one or another language/dialect to highlight a different facet of who he is. Through speaking Spanish and several varieties of English, Wilson resists others’ attempts to put him in a single category. As Benjamin Bailey notes, “language gives Wilson the freedom to highlight diverse facets of his identity.”³ Switching from one language to another (code switching), then, is a way for a person to make visible master identities, such as nationality or ethnicity, that may not be inferable from a person’s appearance. In this sense, the term code does not refer to the same idea as speech codes from Chapter 2 but refers specifically to going back and forth between separate languages or distinct dialects in a systematic way that conforms to the grammar of both. This is different from inserting words from one’s home language or words that sound like (but don’t actually exist in) the other language because one lacks fluency in the second language (e.g., *el checko* for the check, actually *cheque* or *cuenta*, in Spanish). “Spanglish” refers to the blending of Spanish and English in regions where
both are spoken and may incorporate aspects of code switching or dialect shifts; however, it may not follow formal rules, as dialects do. There are many kinds of Spanglish that are particular to their localities, and so rather than being one uniform way of speaking, Spanglish refers to the variety of informal means by which speakers draw on both languages as a resource in their day-to-day business.\(^4\)

Part of what defines code switching is that the code switcher is fluent in both languages and uses them according to grammatical rules. An article by Shana Poplack and colleagues demonstrates the relationship between code switching and accommodation. They examined English–Quebec French code switchers along the Quebec–Ontario border in Canada. Their results suggest that the use of certain English grammatical features in primarily French speech spoken by bilingual speakers does not appear to arise from the code switching itself.\(^5\) In other words, just because a speaker code switches does not necessarily mean that the two languages spoken change or influence one another. In fact, code switchers tend to maintain the grammar of the two languages they use rather than blending them together, as in Spanglish.

Not only does code switching occur as people move from one situation to another, but it also occurs within the same situation and, as our opening example showed, even within the same utterance. With regard to the opening example, Spanish–English bilinguals interpreted the meaning of the mother’s call to her kids as a mild threat, a way to inform her children that her words were meant seriously. The reverse ordering (“Come here. Ven acá”), in contrast, was understood as a personal appeal, something along the line of “Won’t you please come.”\(^6\) In other words, by switching from Spanish to English, the mother signaled a stance of seriousness associated with a different sort of speech act, which, in this case, was indicated by the language used rather than the form of the utterance. For most Spanish-speaking Americans, English is the language associated with work, school, and public matters, whereas Spanish is the language of home, informality, and relaxation. Because of these associations, a bilingual speaker’s switching of codes can create a very particular relational meaning. This general kind of association applies to other languages as well.

Consider a conversation in a Hungarian American home. Kristóf (K), an 8½-year-old boy, is talking with his mother (M) about his day at school. As a way to maintain their ethnic heritage, the family typically speaks Hungarian at meal times, and Kristóf usually honors this practice. Of interest is one point in the conversation when he switches into English to assert that he will make his own salad.
EXCERPT 7.2. Making a Salad at the Dinner Table

1 M: Kristóf mi volt az iskolában? Iratok tesztet?
   (Kristóf, how was school? Did you write any tests?)

2 K: Tessék?
   (Pardon?)

3 M: Volt teszt? Milyen volt az AGP?
   (Were there any tests? How was AGP?)

4 K: Most nem voltam. Nem volt még.
   (I wasn’t [in AGP] today. It hasn’t started yet.)

5 M: Kedden van?
   (Is it on Tuesday?)

6 K: Thursday-n van.
   (It’s on Thursday.)

7 M: Kertek salátát, úgy-e?
   (Would you like some salad, wouldn’t you?)

8 K: I’ll make my own salad.

9 M: Mi?
   (What?)

10 K: I’ll make my own salad. (pause)

11 K: Ilyen kicsi tányérokban csinalják a restaurant-okban.
   (They make it in such small plates in the restaurants.)

12 K: I need some salad please.

What kind of identity-work is accomplished by Kristóf’s speaking mostly Hungarian but switching to English (turns 8, 10, & 12) to assert that he will make his own salad? Given the family preference for speaking Hungarian at meals, Kristóf’s switch to English can be seen as a small moment of resistance: He is challenging the personal identity of obedient child and the relational stance of being a subordinate party. Refusing to use the preferred language, as Myers-Scotton and Bolonyai state, is “one way Kristóf can fight a battle over power. As he switches to English, he can display that he is about to pull out of a situation that renders him a passive, subordinate recipient of his mother’s actions (i.e., being served the salad).” Switching to English allows him to shape interactional meanings toward his own end, showing himself to be “a maturing boy who interacts with peers outside the home.” Code switching, then, enables speakers to present
themselves in particular desired ways and to resist others altercasting them in negative or unwanted ways. What identities will be made salient depends on what domain and activity each language is associated with.

Related to code switching is another activity called crossing. Crossing refers to the speech associated with one group (or a particular ethnic identity, for example) being used by another group. Ben Rampton developed this idea by studying teens in London and the Midlands of England. The young people he studied used particular dialects related to their own ethnic group (e.g., Bangladesh, African Caribbean), but they would “cross” into another dialect, language, or style of speaking for some social purpose such as challenging authority, entertaining friends, destabilizing the usual hierarchical relationships with adults, doing relational work with particular others, and so on. The use of each language depended on the setting, the interactional situation, and who was around at the time. 

Crossing is similar to code switching in that it involves going back and forth between ways of speaking, but while crossing more generally involves switching between any ways of speaking (including a different style), code switching refers more specifically to the selection of language. Furthermore, and perhaps more important, crossing highlights the loose ties between speakers and their speech, seeing language and style as resources to be employed dynamically for situated purposes in the moment, rather than as indicating prior or natural relationships.

The interaction between people who speak more than one language often results in code switching over the course of a conversation. Especially in places where it’s common to speak more than one language fluently, code switching is an ordinary part of interaction and a resource for identity work. Hsi-Yao Su studied code switching between Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese in one speaker’s telephone conversations. Su, following work by John Gumperz, proposed that code switching always serves as a kind of contextualization cue that indicates a change of frame for the conversation.

In these particular conversations, a speaker, Mei, was making requests of friends and family (regarding participating in recording their conversations for research) that could be considered face-threatening. The use of Mandarin (associated with more formal situations) could be seen as authoritative and distancing, whereas the use of Taiwanese (the language of everyday discourse) could be seen as too familiar or not serious enough about what was needed. By switching back and forth between them, Mei could both accomplish the seriousness of the request and attend to the potential face-threatening nature of the request. Excerpt 7.3 gives an example of part of a conversation demonstrating how Mei did this shifting.
In this example, the relationship between what Mei is saying and what language she says it in frames the explanations she is making (for why the other person should agree to participate). Her use of Taiwanese and appeal to family begins the turn in a frame that is very intimate; rather than continuing her next utterance (line 2) in Taiwanese (which would have increased the intimacy and probably made the request incredibly difficult to refuse), Mei switches to Mandarin. She is still linking participation with trust and trust with family, but the stakes for refusing are not as high. When she goes on to refer to the study/research itself, to keep speaking in Mandarin could come across as abruptly and suddenly quite distancing; particularly after such familiar talk previously, it would be as if Mei had stepped out of the family-research mode completely into the researcher mode. Thus switching back to Taiwanese maintains the level of intimacy in the talk and keeps what she is saying linked to the earlier sentiments about trust and family.

Language choice can serve important institutional functions as well. In the bilingual Hong Kong common law system, the meaning of the language spoken in the different courts is tied to the way people argue and interpret legal concepts. Kwai Hang Ng studied examples of English and Chinese Cantonese interactions in the Hong Kong courts, where parties may use either language, and noticed that the common law court system—based on models of law in English-speaking countries—is uniquely enacted in the Hong Kong context. Speakers’ uses of Cantonese and English are evaluated differently: English is considered to be closely tied to the court system and is therefore “appropriate” and “solemn,” whereas Cantonese is “unruly.” The uses of Cantonese were strategically employed by witnesses as challenges during cross-examination and involved doing community-specific speech acts. One example, known as “catching fleas in words,” describes the sorts of definitional disputes that can occur during cross-examination. Ng gives an example of an extended discussion over whether the defendant was a “teacher” or “tutor” through which the examiner displays cleverness during cross-examination. In a later example, one witness
uses another speech act distinctive in Cantonese called “speaking bitterness” to defend herself during a particularly difficult cross-examination:

**EXCERPT 7.4 (Translated from Cantonese)**

TAM: I came down here to work my butt off to earn my living. I’ve worked my butt off in Hong Kong until this very day. (hand slapping table) Is this your way of treating me?

To English-speaking people, Tam’s expression will seem inappropriate for the courtroom. In Cantonese, however, her use of this distinctive speech act evokes her hardship in a way that is culturally recognizable. By doing so, she gains sympathy and also is able to defend herself against the cross-examination by undermining the claims of the examiner. Having two languages at one’s disposal provides more resources in a variety of situations, whether one chooses to speak a certain language in a certain context or switches back and forth between languages.

**Language Death, Revitalization, and Tourism**

An inevitable result of **language contact** is **language change**. As people interact, they converge and diverge in different settings and influence the way language change occurs, how fast it occurs, and in what ways it occurs. As with the communication accommodation theory discussed in Chapter 5, the minority or lower-status language speakers in a region are usually the ones to accommodate (or to be made to accommodate) to the dominant or prestige language. Accommodation occurs for multiple other reasons, too: for instance, for practical purposes when groups of people need to work together who don’t share a language. Such conditions are ripe for creating additional dialects of a language (and their precursors, pidgins and creoles) and for influencing native languages. Whenever there is a large influx of people to a new place, the local language is bound at the very least to absorb some new terms. In the United States, the Native American languages, the languages of countries that claimed land prior to nationhood (England, France, Spain), and the subsequent waves of immigration post-nationhood have resulted in American English including scores of words from other languages. The words American English has incorporated from other languages have undoubtedly enhanced the language—imagine not having words like *barbecue*, *muffin*, *sleazy*, or *chocolate*[^13]—but the effects of language contact are not always benign or useful.
One result of language contact, particularly in the imperialist past but no less so in the current English-dominated world, is **language death**. Language death happens when fewer and fewer people can fluently speak a language (**language endangerment**) and eventually the language dies out. Sometimes there is little to be done when this change is in process; other times, it is too late; and linguists argue over whether all languages need saving. However, one result of the threat that dominant languages have posed to other languages during language contact is that more and more communities are trying to bring back their languages from the brink of death.

**Language revitalization** refers to efforts, sometimes at the community level and sometimes aided by governments and education systems, to save a local language that is threatened or dying out. Language revitalization happens worldwide and encounters varying success. It is particularly difficult, for instance, to teach languages that may be spoken (often imperfectly) by only a few members and that may have no writing system. This has been the case for many Native American languages. Of the more than 800 Native American languages indigenous to North America, 500 are endangered or nearly dead, one is stable but considered threatened (Cherokee), and only one is increasing in usage (Navajo). Having financial support as well as enthusiasm across the community helps, but it doesn’t guarantee success. Navajo’s success may be due in part to the use of Navajo code talkers to send secret messages to allies during World War II. But a crucial element is the use of the language in everyday life. Though many revitalization efforts have involved money, community support, special schools, and varieties of incentives, not all languages that are encouraged to reincarnate actually come back.

As an interesting contrast, the revitalization attempts of Celtic languages spoken in parts of the United Kingdom and Ireland have encountered varying results. Manx and Cornish (spoken on the Isle of Man and in Cornwall, respectively) are currently in the process of being revived, and Irish Gaelic and Welsh show increasing numbers of fluent and home speakers. Both of the latter languages in particular have political status, which has involved official documents, signposting, and television programs in the languages. Scottish Gaelic, on the other hand, has been declining despite similar revitalization efforts. It is possible for languages that were once dead to be cultivated or maintained in certain areas of life without becoming spoken vernacular languages—Latin is the best known example of this—but the only language so far that has been brought back from the dead entirely to become a national language is Hebrew.

Languages are bound to change, and sometimes they become threatened when people mix. That this occurs is a well-known fact and is certainly involved in issues related to language, immigration, and education.
Tourism, too, plays a role. Places that see a high number of English-speaking tourists may find more pressure to learn English and to adopt Englishisms into their own language. As (mostly English-speaking) media become more widely consumed and as more and more people have the ability to travel, some have worried that the distinctiveness of local places and local languages could be threatened. It is certainly the case that for many places that are used to English tourists or that have English language learning as part of their education, tourists can get by without knowing any of the local language at all.

The choices one makes as a tourist or native indicates the rhetorical element involved in selecting a language during travel. Speaking the language of the visited country could be a way of saying “I’m making an effort to make this easier for you” or could be interpreted as insulting if the speaker is making a hash of things or the native has already demonstrated English proficiency. Speaking one’s own language while traveling could be a marker of ignorance or an assumption that everyone should know one’s language. If a native speaks his or her own language, it could be seen as a lack of knowledge or as a disinclination to be helpful or accommodating. If the native speaks the tourist’s language, it could be seen as helpful or as not helpful (in cases in which tourists have been hoping to “practice a foreign language”). The interactions people have during travel shape the interpretations people from different places make of each other and of people from those places whom they meet in the future. Paris is a city assumed by many English speakers to be resistant to speaking English, as well as resentful of people trying to speak French. That assumption may lead people interacting in Paris to interpret their travel experiences in certain ways that reinforce ideas of what (Parisian) French or (English speaking) tourists are like.

Because language is seen as linked to identity, people may become protective of their language. The fact that so many countries have official language laws in place and policies about languages indicates that language is seen as connected to national identity in important ways. One language that seems beyond threat is English. It is the third most commonly spoken language in the world (after Mandarin Chinese and Spanish) and is the most widely used language. However, issues related to immigration and language have resulted in an ongoing controversy in the United States over whether English needs to be made an “official” national language.

**Language and Immigrant Identity**

Part of the reason that people might use one language in a certain situation and another in a different situation is that ways of speaking link to ideas of
how one *should* speak. The ideas people have about why a certain language should be spoken or what it means to speak it are language ideologies. Language ideologies involve the assumed reasons for speaking a language based on the ideals the language supposedly embodies. This link is not necessarily natural but is constructed by native and non-native language speakers over time. An example of this is the common correlation between Japanese culture and interactional harmony. The ability of the Japanese language to omit pronouns (*I, you, she*, etc.) could be explained in terms of this cultural ideal: that deemphasizing individuals is actually built into the language. Because saying “I drink tea” or “you drink tea” can be said the same way (*ocha o nomimasu*), the situation requires context (who is saying what, intonation, gestures, etc.) to determine who is drinking tea. This is part of the reason that Japanese language and culture are sometimes called “high context”—because context is required to understand what people are saying in particular (in contrast with more explicit, or “low context,” cultures). These assumptions, however, oversimplify the relationship between cultural identities and language. This proves to be especially problematic when considering issues of language policy.

People immigrating to the United States and other English-speaking countries from non-English-speaking ones usually know only a small amount of English when they first arrive. Many immigrant adults become only partially competent in their new language. Immigrants who arrive as children and teens generally do better, eventually becoming fully competent. However, the process of mastering a second language takes time. Child and teen immigrants spend years in school, struggling with the consequences of not being fully competent in English when such competency is presumed as the mark of a “normal” school child.

Jennifer Miller studied identity issues for teens immigrating to Australia from non-English-speaking countries, some from European (e.g., Bosnia) and others from Asian (Taiwan, Mainland China, and Vietnam) ones. The issues confronting the teens as they sought to sound like Aussies differed depending on whether they looked like their Australian peers or were visibly different (blond vs. black-haired). European students generally made the transition from outsider, non-English-speaker to insider, fellow Aussie faster than Asian students. In contrast to a relatively quick mixing of the European immigrants with native Australians, teens from Asian backgrounds tended to group with each other at lunch and on other social occasions and to speak Chinese. In general, Asian students mastered English less quickly.

Sorting out the meaning of the Asian students’ segregation and their more limited English language ability, Miller argued, is quite difficult. On the one hand, the students could be viewed as deliberately choosing not
to mix with their Anglo-Australian peers and likewise deliberately choosing not to use English. “This view sits well with the stereotype of Asian students as withdrawn, quiet, and resistant to integration.” Such a view of these students sees the problems they face as of their own making, thereby “obviating the need for the institutions to do anything ‘extra’ for the students.” Others would see the situation differently, arguing that schools (and other institutions) value languages and features of communicative expression differently. European-linked languages, and the expressive patterns common to them, quite probably were favored over Asian ones. The Asian students in Miller’s study, in fact, experienced their Anglo-Australian peers as not liking them and as actively distancing themselves from them. This second perspective highlights how the Asian master identity, visibly made manifest through the students’ appearance, may have led Anglo-Australian students to treat the Asian students as less likely candidates for friends.

Although most Asians were slower learners of English than their European counterparts, not every Asian student was. For instance, one of the girls (Nora) in Miller’s study had started working in a family noodle shop soon after her arrival. She quickly became proficient in the English needed to deal with customer orders and problems that arose with disgruntled patrons. Her proficiency with English in this one context led to her feeling comfortable with going shopping. This, in turn, led to her entering additional situations that required her to be able to speak English. Each of these small changes in how she spent her time and who she spoke with facilitated her coming to think of herself differently, a self-redefinition in which English language competency became increasingly important to her sense of who she was.

Given increasing globalization, it would seem wise for societies to have citizens who speak a diversity of languages. Speaking Chinese, Vietnamese, Spanish, Hungarian, or any language should make a child feel special and worthwhile, in possession of a valued skill, rather than make that child feel like a failure or a problem. How schools would accomplish this attitudinal transformation is by no means straightforward: Such change would require rethinking the ordinary communicative practices that occur in classrooms and that contribute to how children come to see themselves as competent and likeable (or the reverse).

Attitudes toward speakers of other languages, however, are not merely a matter for schools. They are stances that are shaped by what is going on in the larger society. Consider what is happening with the social movement to declare English the official language of the United States.
Speaking English and American Identity

What does it mean to be an American? In what sense is it or should it be linked to speaking English? Should there be laws that declare English as the language of the land? This issue is one that Americans see differently. Consider what four prominent individuals have had to say.

EXCERPT 7.5. S. I. Hayakawa, A Past Republican Senator from California

What is it that has made a society out of the hodge-podge of nationalities and races represented in the immigrant hordes that people our nation? It is language, of course, that has made communication among all these elements possible. It is with common language that we have dissolved distrust and fear. It is with language that we have drawn up the understandings and agreements and social contracts that make a society possible.19


The goal of a unified citizenry committed to democratic ideals is an admirable one, and universal acquisition of the English language by all residents of the United States would no doubt further that goal. But the means by which we promote English should not in themselves run counter to our democratic tradition. Imposing English upon Spanish speakers though a constitutional amendment would likely exclude many from political participation, sacrifice equal justice in the courtroom, narrowly restrict educational alternatives on the basis of political criteria, and mark linguistic minorities as “un-American” in the eyes of the rest of society. Based on undocumented fears of separatism and cultural fragmentation, passage of the E.L.A. [English Language Amendment] would insult and alienate a significant portion of our society in the name of national unity.20

EXCERPT 7.7. Walter Huddleston, Ex-Senator (Democrat, Kentucky), Congressional Sponsor of the ELA

National unity does not require that every person think and act like everyone else. However, it does require that there be some common
threads that run through our society and hold us together. One of these threads is our common belief and support of a democratic form of government, and the right of every person to fully participate in it. Unfortunately, this right to full participation means very little if each individual does not possess the means of exercising it. This participation requires the ability to obtain information and communicate our beliefs and concerns to others. Undoubtedly this process is hindered without the existence of a commonly accepted and used language. In essence what a policy of bilingualism—biculturalism does is to segregate minorities from the mainstream of our politics, economy and society because we are not making it possible for them to freely enter into the mainstream.\textsuperscript{21}

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**EXCERPT 7.8. Baltasar Corrada, Ex-Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico, Nonvoting Delegate to House of Representatives**

No one is arguing against the need for all Americans to attain proficiency in English in order to participate in all levels of our society. No one is suggesting that any other language should replace English as the vehicle for interaction in our society. This is the way it is: this is the way it should be. But we do not need the Constitution to mandate this, just as we do not need the Constitution to mandate that we love our mother and our father, or that we have to be patriotic. This is part of the responsibility of citizenship that does not have to be imposed upon us. America is great not because we speak one language or the other but because we are united by the fundamental principles that bind our people together: freedom, justice, equal opportunity for all, fairness, democracy. To say that we make our country stronger because we make it “U.S. English” is like saying we would make it stronger by making it “U.S. white.” It is as insidious to base the strength or unity of the United States in one language as it is to base that strength or unity in one race.\textsuperscript{22}

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**The Official English Movement**

The Official English movement emerged in the United States in the early 1980s. Similar movements have been occurring in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, although they have been much less successful.\textsuperscript{23} James Crawford, a scholar who extensively studied the controversy, describes the emergence of the movement as bizarre given that the 1980 census had revealed that all but 2\% of speakers over 4 years of age spoke English and only 11\% were regular speakers of another language.\textsuperscript{24} The movement began in the United States when then-Senator Hayakawa introduced into Congress
a constitutional amendment to declare English the official language of the United States. The proposal failed, but several years later Hayakawa started a lobbying group called U.S. English. The purpose of the group was to lobby states to pass laws declaring English that state’s official language. The lobbying group was enormously successful. Five years after its start, the group had over 400,000 members and an organizational budget of 6 million dollars. By 1990, 17 states had passed Official English statues or approved constitutional amendments; by 2012, the number of states was up to 28. The content of different states’ laws varies considerably, from single-sentence declarations to complex documents that spell out the contexts in which English is required to be used and what circumstances would be allowable as exceptions. Though the movement was most visible in the 1980s and 1990s, it is by no means gone. In 2009, Nashville, Tennessee, voters rejected a proposal that would have made Nashville the largest English-only (except in situations of health and safety) city in the United States. In 2012, Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum reignited the controversy by suggesting that Puerto Rico, a Spanish-speaking U.S. territory, should make English its primary language as a condition of statehood.

Although the Official English movement framed itself as being pro-English, from its start it was very much antibilingual. Recruitment of members to the lobbying group (U.S. English) was particularly likely in those geographic areas (e.g., Florida and California) that were feeling the impact of heavy Asian and Hispanic immigration. Scholarly commentators attribute the success of the movement to two main causes. A first cause of the movement’s success was the quiet passage in the 1960s and 1970s of legislation that was sympathetic to linguistic minorities. Key pieces of legislation included the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, which made federal funding available for the first time to schools that developed educational programs geared to helping children learn English or to maintain languages other than English. Another especially important event was the class action suit brought in the name of a Chinese student (Lau) in San Francisco, in which it was argued that a fair and equal educational opportunity required more than putting a non-English-speaking child into a regular classroom. The Lau case, as it came it be called, made its way to the Supreme Court, which ruled in 1974 that students with limited English proficiency were legally entitled to special help in their schools. A final piece of legislation seen as important was the Voting Rights Act of 1975 that required any voting area in which 5% or more of the citizens spoke a language other than English to have access to ballots in their own language.

Besides these pieces of legislation that gave attention to immigrant speakers’ needs, there was a second factor. Contributing to the success of
the Official English movement was the sharp increase in immigration in the 1980s, a number exceeded only in the first decade of the 1900s. As a result, some Americans experienced fear that non-English-speakers were taking over the country and beginning to marginalize those Americans who spoke English.

**Critics’ Views: The English-Only Movement**

In response to the growing success of the Official English movement, several influential institutions began to speak out. Major newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, USA Today, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*, took editorial positions against Official English policies. These newspapers argued that passing laws to recognize English as the official American language was unnecessary. In addition, professional organizations, such as the International Communication Association, the Organization of Teachers of English as a Second Language, and the American Psychological Association, argued that English-only initiatives had had a primarily negative impact. For instance, the American Psychological Association argued that English-only initiatives lessened self-esteem and lowered the academic achievement of linguistic minorities, as well as contributing to creating poorer relationships among ethnic and racial groups in the United States.³⁰ In labeling the movement “English Only,” critics highlighted what they saw as its main effect: promoting an intolerant stance toward racial and ethnic minorities in the guise of patriotism about English. In addition to fostering intolerance, an irony of the English-Only movement was that it was occurring “in the face of growing demands for multilingual abilities in the workplace.”³¹

How should American identity be linked to speaking English? Does American society need to strengthen the connection? Does the United States need to create a society in which speaking languages other than English becomes sufficiently stigmatized that most Americans will avoid doing so? Or is a weaker link reasonable and desirable: one that regards English as the most usual language spoken by Americans, but not one that is a requirement? As our readers can probably infer from the way we have posed this question, our own position is to favor a weaker link: English speaking, and especially the speaking of certain dialects of English, is a strong cue that a person is a native-born American. However, to make language proficiency a requirement is neither needed nor desirable. English does not need legislation to prop it up, nor is it fair or wise to devalue Americans who speak other languages.
Interestingly, not only is language use linked to identity but so too is a person’s attitude about the issue. Whether a person is for or against Official English laws (as is the case with other politically contested issues) will be taken as an indicator of one’s likely political tilt. That is, the political identities of liberal and conservative, to identify the most commonly used ones, are attributed to speakers when they express pro- or anti-views toward a single issue. Based on expression of one attitude, a speaker will be assumed to hold a larger set of opinions. This, of course, is highly problematic, but it is a rather common way to make sense of who another person is. For instance, speakers who express negative assessments of Official English would be expected to espouse views that are anti-death penalty, pro-choice, pro-government social services, and so on. Those speakers favoring Official English will be assumed to also favor the death penalty, support minimum government support for services such as health care and welfare, and be pro-life.

In membership categorization terms (Chapter 3), people with certain category memberships are seen as holding certain beliefs and as overlapping with other categories. This knowledge of what attitudes will be taken as clustering together is made visible when people do the rather common action of prefacing an opinion with a disclaimer. In saying “I’m not a bleeding heart, but I don’t think we need these Official English laws” or “I don’t usually argue the conservative line, but I think we need Official English laws,” a communicator makes visible what she is assuming to be the usual attitude package. At the same time these disclaimers instruct the conversational partner not to assume that the speaker holds the other attitudes regarded as going with the focal one.

Summary

In this chapter we have considered an issue that is not a choice for everyone. For some Americans, there is no choice about what language to speak: English (or Spanish or French or Korean) is the only possibility. For other Americans, and for many other nationalities, there is a choice. Speakers can switch back and forth between two or more languages as the occasion, the activity, and the relationship requires. In this chapter we explored some of the reasons that speakers code-switch, as well as other related language issues. In addition, we considered what is at stake in proposals to declare English the official language of the United States.
PART III

COMPLEX DISCOURSE PRACTICES
Chapter 8

Style

Style is an aspect of just about every imaginable domain. In fiction writing, authors are encouraged to develop a unique literary style. Doing so means thinking systematically about how to use short versus long sentences, what kinds of figures of speech to employ, how to design dialogue, and so on. One website, in fact, describes the development of a literary style as requiring authors to think carefully about 15 sets of decisions related to their writing.¹ Most broadly, the ways people live their lives reflect particular styles. “Yuppie,” “Soccer Mom,” or “Conservative Christian” are lifestyle names that point to a package of decisions a person has made about where to live, what to eat, how to spend time recreationally, what news sites to access or avoid, and so on. In addition, buildings have styles (e.g., Victorian or Spanish Mission) as do people’s ways of dressing (e.g., goth, granola, nerd). When we describe someone as having a conversational style, we are attending to the identifiable and distinct way that a person talks.

Everybody has a style. As Deborah Tannen comments:

Style does not refer to a special way of speaking, as if one could choose between speaking plainly or speaking with style. Plain is as much a style as fancy. Anything that is said or done must be said and done in some way, and that constitutes style. . . . You can no more talk without style than you can walk or sit or dress without style. Anything you say must be said at a certain rate, at a certain pitch and amplitude, in a certain intonation, and at a certain point in interaction. All these and countless other choices determine the effects of an utterance in interaction and influence judgments that are made both about what is said and about the speaker who says it. All these and countless other necessary choices determine a speaker’s style.²
Conversational style refers to a set of speech features that are found in each other’s company. Talk features that comprise a style are like friends who hang out together. The friends do not need to be around each other, but they usually are. Speech styles are possessed by individuals and by groups of people. When we think about style as being chosen to accomplish particular goals, we are taking a rhetorical view. When we conceive of style as affected by a speaker’s communities and the values these communities privilege, we are adopting a cultural viewpoint. In this chapter we think about style from both vantage points, but the cultural perspective is dominant. We begin by focusing on three dimensions of communication style: (1) its directness, (2) whether it is polite and if so what kind it is, and (3) its expressiveness. We describe what each of these styles involve, its advantages and limitations, and the style’s most usual identity linkages. Then we look at a style that has become prominent in just the last decade or so—e-mail/texting style—considering its main features and what it cues. Finally, we conclude the chapter by reflecting about two master identities, ethnicity and sexual orientation, identifying what can cue them and how and why people play with styles associated with such identities.

**Directness Styles**

Of the many ways of describing style, “direct” versus “indirect” is a particularly common way to characterize how people talk differently. Yet as we will soon see, what it means to be direct or indirect is not a straightforward matter. To further complicate this issue, it is virtually impossible to discuss direct and indirect styles without implying that one is better than the other. Each has advantages. Yet, by and large, people react negatively to others whose degree of directness differs markedly from their own. Consider what one Israeli husband said about good communication:

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**EXCERPT 8.1**

I think that showing consideration for the other means to speak directly and sincerely with people, I think that going round and round shows lack of consideration, I feel hurt and cheated when I feel somebody close is trying to tell me something but does not say it. I think that to talk sincerely, directly is much more civilized, more true. For example I’m always slightly annoyed with Dina [his wife] when as she always does, she asks me if I would mind picking up Yaniv [the baby].
At this point in the interview, the wife, a French woman, intervened to say:

**EXCERPT 8.2**

But that’s a nice way to ask, I do not force him, I soften the request, I leave him the choice to agree or disagree.

For this husband and for many other people, being direct is being *sincere*, *civilized*, and *true*. For this wife and for many others, being direct about requests involves being *not nice*, *forcing another*, or *leaving someone no choice*. Style directness, then, becomes a hallmark of especially valued aspects of personal, relationship-linked identities—whether one is moral, honest, and fair, treats others as equal, is respectful, and so on. It also is the marker of various master identities, such as a person’s nationality and gender.

Style directness is best thought of as an umbrella concept; it includes choices about a set of related but distinct conversational practices. A primary one concerns how a communicator performs speech acts. After examining this primary facet of directness, we look at several others.

**Speech Acts**

With regard to style directness, three kinds of speech acts are especially interesting. A first is directives.

As explained in Chapter 4, directives are acts in which one person attempts to get another to do something (or to refrain from doing something). We saw one kind of directive in Excerpt 8.1, when the husband complained about the usual way his wife requested that he stop on his way home from work and pick up the baby. Everyday relationships are full of situations in which one person is trying to get another person to do something or is responding to that other person’s demand, request, or hint. For instance, a work supervisor could try to get her employee to work an unscheduled shift by demanding “You have to work Saturday night” or by requesting “Would you be able to work Saturday night?” or by just complaining: “Oh no, I don’t know what we’re going to do. Erin just called in to say she won’t be able to work Saturday night.” This last strategy, the most indirect, allows the employee to hear the supervisor’s comment as a hint asking her to volunteer to work the additional shift.

Directives vary in terms of how direct they are; a direct directive states exactly what is desired, whereas an indirect directive requires a listener
to do inferential work to figure out what the speaker wants. Table 8.1 gives examples of directives for a situation in which a person wants to get a friend to repay a loan, with strategies arranged from most to least direct.

Situational factors influence which form a speaker will select. In general, when a person is in a situation in which he has the right to direct the actions of another, he is more likely to use direct-statement directives. A father, for instance, is more likely to tell a misbehaving child “Go to your room” than he is to use a query such as “How about going to your room?” or a hint such as “I’m not liking the way you’re acting right now.” In contrast, when the relational situation is not one that gives a party the right to direct the actions of the other, indirect forms are more likely to be selected. For instance, a person who wants a friend to loan her money is more likely to use queries (“Would you be able to loan me $20?”) or hints (“Oh gee, I don’t have any money with me”) than a direct statement (“You have to loan me $20”). When a speech act is indirect, it requires listeners to do more inferential work to arrive at a speaker’s intended interactional meaning. The literal meaning of the utterance is different from what the speaker is trying to convey. A complexity, though, is that acts always carry both direct and indirect meanings. A speaker may intend to be direct, but this intention does not rule out the possibility that a listener will assign his statement an indirect meaning.

Besides selecting different forms for directives, indirectness may be accomplished through selecting content that is different from the meaning

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<td><strong>Hint directives</strong></td>
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that is intended. For instance, a criticism of someone’s grammar may be heard (or intended) as a criticism of her overall goodness or competence as a person. At the same time it may have been heard (and intended) as no more than its literal meaning—as a small jab about a minor speech choice. An invitation to come up to someone’s apartment to see her new flat-screen, high-definition TV may be intended as an invitation to move a relationship to a romantic, sexual level. If the request happens at a culturally significant time (at night, but especially on Friday or Saturday night) between persons regarded as eligibles (of the appropriate gender, age, and sexual orientation), the invited will be expected to know what the invitation means and not be outraged or surprised when a sexual overture occurs. But the invitation to see a new possession may be just that, with nothing more intended. Thus an ever-present challenge for communicators is to decide when conversational partners are expressing themselves directly and when their intended meaning is an indirect one.

Misunderstandings are an inescapable part of everyday communication. Because talking is a flexible practice, it enables people to convey subtle and sophisticated meanings. At the same time, talk’s chameleon-like potential can make figuring out others’ interactional meanings frustrating. In general, the better one knows another or the more routine a talk situation, the more likely it is that one will infer other people’s intentions accurately. But this is not always the case. Tannen describes a pattern typical of many middle-class American women and men in dating relationships. At the beginning of a relationship, couples have relatively few misunderstandings: Both see it as necessary to watch out for hints and to give the other party options. As the relationship progresses, however, the men and women begin to change their expectations about how to communicate. With increasing intimacy, women tend to expect more indirectness—“We know each other so well, you should know what I want without me telling you.” In contrast, men tend to expect less indirectness, using a logic that assumes, “We know each other so well, you can tell me what you want.”

No one expects directness all the time. In a study of seven cultures, Shoshana Blum-Kulka and her colleagues found that every cultural group (e.g., Argentinean Spanish, Australian English, Canadian French) believed that speakers should vary their degree of directness according to the situation. Interestingly, across these cultures there was some agreement about how situations should affect the degree of directness. In particular, the seven communities under study judged direct directives appropriate if a police officer were asking a citizen to move her car but inappropriate if a person were asking a neighbor for a ride. In general, favors were to be performed indirectly and with politeness forms, whereas actions involving
relational rights could be performed directly. However, although cultural groups saw some situations similarly, they saw others with considerable divergence. For instance, for the case of a college roommate failing to do his or her share of the chores, huge differences appeared among the nationalities. The vast majority of Argentineans (76%) used direct statement directives, whereas only a tiny percentage (12%) of Australians did.

To give another example, consider a study in which Americans and Greeks were asked to interpret the most likely meaning of a husband’s response to a question from his wife:

**Example 8.3**

**Wife:** John’s having a party. Wanna go?

**Husband:** OK.⁹

Participants in the study were given two possible meanings for the husband’s “OK”: (1) My wife is asking if I want to go to a party. I feel like going so I’ll say yes (direct meaning); (2) My wife wants to go to this party. Since she asked I’ll go to make her happy (indirect meaning). Two-thirds of the Americans in the study selected the direct meaning, whereas only one-half of the Greeks did. To generalize, Greeks prefer and use an indirect style somewhat more often than Americans.

Cultural differences in style directness are especially likely in another kind of speech act: talk that seeks to get information from another person (information-seeking acts).

**Example 8.4**

1. “Why don’t you have children?”
2. “Were you married before?”
3. “How much money do you earn in your job?”¹⁰

These three questions are examples of direct acts of information seeking. If asked by an acquaintance in America or Germany, there are likely to be assessed by the speaker’s conversational partner as rude and inappropriately direct. In a study of German and Chinese students conversing in Germany, Susanne Günthner found that both groups of students reacted negatively to each other. Germans found the Chinese to be boring and not
interesting conversationalists—they didn’t do enough asserting of their own opinions. Chinese regarded the German students as rude, aggressive, and often offensive. Interestingly, although it was the Germans who were generally perceived as more direct, it was the Chinese who saw it as reasonable to seek information directly about the three issues in Example 8.4.

This points to one of the interesting complexities of directness. Although cultural groups are routinely described in terms of their relative directness or indirectness—for example, Chinese and Japanese are more indirect than Germans and Americans—the actual picture is more complicated. Cultural groups disagree about what topics are to be regarded as sensitive or private information. So although it may be reasonable to describe Chinese communicators as generally more indirect, there will be particular situations in which they will be more direct than Americans or Germans would be. To give another example, Kochman\(^{11}\) notes that the practice of directly asking someone what he or she does within the first few minutes of meeting, a practice common among middle-class American whites, is sometimes seen as inappropriate for social occasions among African Americans. To ask a new acquaintance straightforwardly about his or her occupation is to treat a person’s job as saying something important about who he or she is. In a community in which underemployment and unemployment are not uncommon, job information becomes a delicate topic, and such a question becomes inappropriate intrusiveness.

How, then, do people seek information indirectly? Pomerantz\(^{12}\) identifies a practice she called fishing. Assume that Seth, a friend of Reesa, wants to know where she was last night. He could ask directly: “Where were you last night?” However, to do so might suggest that he sees himself as having the right to know this information, a right usually assumed only in close relationships. Or this comment might be interpreted as evidence that Seth is possessive or jealous, personal identities usually seen as undesirable. One way for Seth to seek the information he wants without asking for it directly would be to report his own actions on the previous night: “Hey, Reesa, I gave you a call last night and you didn’t answer” or “I drove by your house last night and your car was gone.” Each of these statements is a report of Seth’s activities. At the same time, it is quite likely to lead Reesa to spontaneously mention what she was doing the previous night (“Oh, my brother was in town for a meeting and we went out to dinner”). “Fishing for information,” then, works by virtue of commenting on something that the speaker has seen or heard that implicates the other. In essence, a “fishing comment” is a piece of talk designed to encourage the partner to disclose information, but it does not have the demand quality that is present in a direct inquiry.
A third kind of speech act that may be done with different degrees of directness is the giving of news (news giving) or the expression of opinions (opinion expression). Especially when delivering bad news, it is common for speakers to do so indirectly. Douglas Maynard\textsuperscript{13} studied a diagnostic clinic where parents brought children who were not developing normally. Clinicians often had bad news to tell parents at the end of the testing period. They had to tell parents that their children were unlikely to ever learn normally—would always be slow and developmentally delayed, and have a lower than normal IQ. Maynard found that rather than delivering the diagnosis straightforwardly, doctors often approached giving out bad news circuitously. A clinician would start the final parent conference by asking the parents to state what they themselves saw as the problem with their child. Then she would confirm and build on the parents’ opinion before finally labeling the trouble in official diagnostic language. Delivering the news in this indirect fashion rather than directly had the advantage of showing attention to and concern for the parents’ perspective on their child. It also conveyed caring in terms of how the bad news was likely to affect the parents. To deliver sad news in a clear, direct way may implicitly convey a message that the speaker does not care whether she hurts the recipient.

However, what exactly directness will convey is culturally variable. Tamar Katriel\textsuperscript{14} notes that Israelis understand direct expression differently than do people of other nationalities. Dugri, a term originating in Arabic and now colloquial in Hebrew, is an important symbol of Zionist socialism. It is the name for an honest person who speaks straight to the point, and it also is the name of an act (doing dugri) that involves speaking straight to the point. Dugri involves speaking plainly and without adornment or softening (“His is not a good plan to follow”; “You shouldn’t treat your grandmother that way”). A prototypical act of dugri occurs when a subordinate speaks out to someone of higher rank and expresses a negative opinion at some risk to self. To act in this manner is regarded as a courageous and valued kind of expression. To speak dugri is to show that a speaker cares about another or is committed to an issue. Other societies, Katriel documents, contrast in interesting ways with this Israeli ideal. Table 8.2 displays these differences.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>TABLE 8.2. Valuing and Use of Directness</th>
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<td>Israeli</td>
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<td>Men</td>
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In Israeli society, expressing opinions directly is valued for both sexes. In American society, speaking directly is used and valued less for women than for men. In Arab society, as in Israeli culture, there is a similar ideal for both sexes. However, Arab women and men are expected to do musayra, to work to make relations harmonious. The communicative ideal is to go along, to humor and accommodate others so that an interaction may proceed smoothly. The ideal of musayra also goes with a valuing of hierarchy. Among Arab interactants, it is the person of lower rank who is expected to do musayra. Finally, among the Malagasy people of Madagascar, similar to the people of the United States, the valuing of directness is linked to gender. However, the gender linkage is the opposite of that expected in the United States. Malagasy men are regarded as the subtle communicators, the ones who can handle sensitive situations. In contrast, women are seen as direct in their speech style, lacking subtlety. Women may be able to handle a direct confrontation in the marketplace, but they cannot be counted on to manage diplomatically sensitive scenes among people.

Katriel’s initial studies were carried out in the mid-1980s in Israeli. When she looked at Israeli expression in the 21st century she found that many young Israeli speakers were shifting their style toward a more indirect one. Younger Israelis were taking on a directness style more similar to the American one. This finding illustrates an important point about style. Over time not only may individuals change, but entire social groups may also come to speak in different ways. Indirectness is, with an exception we discuss soon, often used to be considerate and respectful. It is also used to be funny, to create rapport, or to protect a speaker. Tannen describes the advantages of indirectness this way:

*Rapport* is the lovely satisfaction of being understood without explaining oneself, of getting what one wants without asking for it. *Defensiveness* is the need to be able to save face by reneging in case one’s conversational contribution is not well received—the ability to say, perhaps sincerely, “I never said that,” or “That isn’t what I meant.”

Directness, in contrast, is often seen as being honest and nonmanipulative, sometimes seen as being clearer, and in some cultures (e.g., Israel, Poland) is regarded as the best way to be considerate of others.

**Linguistic Clothing of Speech Acts**

Besides the basic form of a speech act, communicators need to select an act’s linguistic clothing: Should the act be carried out in a bare-bones minimalist manner? Or should words be added to soften any negative or face-attacking
implications? Mitigation markers refer to a diverse set of conversational devices that are used to attend to these two purposes. Mitigation markers are forms of indirectness. When they are included in an expression of opinion, an information inquiry, or a directive, the speech act would count as being performed more indirectly than if these bits of talk were absent. In general, the more mitigation markers a speaker uses, the more he or she is using an indirect style. Many mitigation markers are negative politeness forms, which we explain and illustrate in the next section. In addition to mitigation markers, there are three other aspects of language that affect a speech act’s directness.

A first kind of directness-increasing device is the use of obscenities, which are part of a larger category of forms that function to intensify or upgrade acts such as directives (upgraders). To tell someone “Get the hell in here” is more direct than to merely tell someone to “Get in here.” This makes visible a second complexity in deciding whether a cultural group has a direct or an indirect style. In the culture study mentioned earlier in this chapter, Australian students preferred indirect directives (queries or hints to get a roommate to do a chore). At the same time, Australians were the most likely of all the nationalities to use upgraders (e.g., “I was bloody well wondering when you’re going to do what you promised?”). Other examples of intensifiers include words such as quite, really, and very, although not all words have the same upgrading effect.¹⁸

A second language form that affects a speaker’s directness style is euphemisms. Within all societies there are topics that are considered sensitive, at least in certain situations or with particular conversational partners. Sex and mention of sex organs, excrement, illnesses (particularly related to controversial lifestyle choices), judgments about a person’s character, certain kinds of religious references, and death are delicate matters in most cultures. Stated more generally, topics that directly or indirectly challenge the goodness and morality of a speaker, a recipient, or a spoken-about person are usually delicate talk activities, requiring speakers to give special thought to the words they select.¹⁹

Compare the following two comments:

**EXAMPLE 8.5**

1. **Indirect**: His uncle passed away last week. Old Tom probably liked to have fun in the pubs with his friends a bit too much.

2. **Direct**: His uncle died last week. Old Tom had been an alcoholic forever.
In excerpt (1) not only does the speaker use mitigation markers that soften his assertion (“probably,” “a bit”) but his vocabulary choices for talking about Tom’s death and drinking are less harsh. Some of these differences—“passed away” for “died”—are standard euphemisms, nicer words for something harsher. Others, such as the phrase “liked to have fun in the pubs,” are not euphemisms in the strict sense but share with euphemisms their core impulse of making a reference nicer or more palatable. When speakers refer to something in the world using words that are more positive, cleaned-up, scientific, or vaguer than the lived experience, they are speaking indirectly.

Using indirect language is a way to show oneself as not a coarse, crude, vulgar, obnoxious, insensitive, or nasty person. Put positively, referring to sensitive topics indirectly displays one to be tactful and considerate, a person of good taste. But as with many communicative choices, the identity dangers don’t come only from a single direction. To use indirect references a lot (whatever “a lot” means) can imply that one is overly sensitive and easily offended, prissy, perhaps too politically correct, pompous, or possessing other undesirable personal identities. To use direct references frequently may be taken as evidence that one is down-to-earth, unpretentious, or perhaps comfortable with one’s sexuality. Which set of identity dangers communicators fear more—or which desired identities are more strongly sought—will shape people’s usual language choices and contribute to their unique conversation styles. As with other aspects of directness, speech communities differ in their patterns of preferences. A study comparing euphemisms in British English and Arabic, for instance, found that although both communities used euphemistic expressions about death and lying, Arabic speakers used many more distinctive formulations to express themselves euphemistically.20

A final distinction is between literal and ironic forms. Irony means expressing the opposite of what one means. For example, following a game in which a team dramatically lost, one player says to the other, “Great game, wasn’t it?” Or at a breakfast when a waiter is serving muffins and one rolls off the plate into a woman’s lap. The woman looks at the muffin in her lap, then back at the server, and comments, “How elegant.” Stated simply, people make ironic comments in which they expect the listener, given the context, to understand what is meant. Irony serves multiple purposes. It is a way of being humorous, and it can foster a bond between the speaker and the listener. The use of irony can also work to elevate the status of the speaker. When the irony has a critical edge, depending on its exact target and how it is worded, it can intensify a criticism.21 Studies of American college students found that men make more ironic comments than women,
and an ironic statement that was edgy and sarcastic was judged to be more a masculine style.\textsuperscript{22}

Thus, although it is a generally reasonable to say that American women employ a more indirect style than American men, the generalization does not hold across all forms of indirection. Such complexities exist across cultures as well.

People of all cultures perform some acts directly and others indirectly. How frequently communicators select the different options for being indirect (or direct) and the situations in which each device is employed is what gives individuals and their communities their characteristic directness style. But directness involves other conversational practices besides those tied to speech act performance.

\textbf{Amount of Small Talk}

It is the beginning of the day in a New Zealand office. Diana, Sally’s boss, enters the office to collect her mail. The following conversation occurs:

\begin{verbatim}
EXCERPT 8.6
D: Good morning, Sally, lovely day.
S: Yes, don’t know what we’re doing here. We should be out in the sun.
D: Mm pity about the work really.
S: How are your kids?
D: Much better, thank goodness. Any mail?\textsuperscript{23}
\end{verbatim}

This exchange is a classic example of small talk, the friendly chatting that occurs between people about topics such as the weather, sports, food, fashion, and children. Small talk is the everyday term to refer to what the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski initially labeled “phatic communion.”\textsuperscript{24} Justine Coupland describes small talk as “subsuming ‘gossip,’ ‘chat,’ and ‘time out talk,’ ” a mode of talk that is “supposedly minor, informal, unimportant and unserious.”\textsuperscript{25} But as she and other authors show, small talk is anything but unimportant:\textsuperscript{26} It is crucial to the smooth functioning of everyday life. Small talk is centrally about building and solidifying relationships; it occurs around the coffeepot and in mailrooms, at the start of meetings, at the beginning of a work lunch, or at the start of a telephone conversation. It differs from business talk (\textit{big talk?}) in that it is about topics not directly relevant to the task at hand. The content of
small talk (e.g., weather, sports) could occur in almost any context; it is neither technical nor focused on the task purpose for which one person contacted another.

Small talk is about building bonds with others. A day without small talk would be strange indeed. Yet the amount of small talk that people regard as desirable or necessary is enormously variable. Speakers who do extended “small talking” before getting down to the business at hand are using an indirect style; those who get right down to business with only minimal small talk are being more direct. Similar to other facets of directness, the choice to minimize small talk will be viewed favorably by some people and negatively by others. A direct speaker may be seen as a person who *doesn’t waste time* or who *doesn’t beat around the bush*, but also as *boorish* or *not understanding how business really works*.

With regard to use of small talk, Americans are typically more direct than most Latin American or Asian speakers. Americans regard the building of goodwill and a positive relationship as a relatively minor part of business encounters. Most other nationalities give considerably more attention to relational work in business encounters. This aspect of style directness also plays itself out in informal, outside-of-work contacts. Theodossia-Soula Pavlidou²⁷ conducted a study that compared telephone conversations among Greeks and among Germans. She found that Greeks engaged in much more small talk than Germans did. In addition, Greek conversationalists would offer a social reason for calling (expressing their desire to know how the other was) before moving on to the explicit purpose of the call. In closing the conversation, Greek speakers spent almost twice as long as Germans in closing rituals (telling the other to keep in touch, saying good-bye). Pavlidou concluded her study this way: The Greek way is “to build the relationship through small talk,” whereas the German way is to “refrain from keeping the partner on the phone for too long and letting them know pretty soon the reason for calling.”²⁸ Thus both Germans and Greeks care about building positive relationships, but the way they do so is quite different. The relational concerns of Germans led them to use a relatively direct style, whereas Greeks favored a more indirect approach.

**Making an Argumentative Point**

Another aspect of style directness has to do with how a communicator makes an elaborated point in a discussion (*argument point-making*). The most indirect way to make an argument is to tell a story. As stories have multiple points that could be inferred, telling a story is less clear than making
a claim and giving reasons. Soon after the September 11, 2001, attacks occurred, an online discussion was held among citizens in New York City to generate ideas about what should be done to redevelop the World Trade Center. Communication researcher Laura Black studied this discussion and found that participants frequently told stories to make their points about why building a memorial was important, who should be allowed to be involved in the planning (just Americans or people from around the world), and where in New York City the memorial should be placed. Although what other online discussants were to take from a participant’s stories was not always clear, the stories brought “people’s experiences and perspectives to the conversation in a powerful way.”

In these 9/11 discussions people told stories to agree with another person’s point and to disagree and show why the other’s argument was problematic. Disagreement with another expressed through the telling of a story softens the conflict. It enables argument makers to express who they are and why they feel as they do. When people focus on what an issue means for them, rather than laying out an abstract claim and reasons, the differences usually become less threatening. On the other hand, besides the greater ambiguity, telling a story can be a long-winded way to make a point. People are criticized for launching into stories inappropriately (“What a gas bag! I asked a simple question and got a half-hour story!”). To summarize, although making a point by telling a story can be memorable and effective, the practice needs to be used judiciously. But, as with other conversational practices, what is considered judicious or going overboard is likely to vary across communities.

The more common way for people to make an argumentative point is to state an explicit claim and give supporting reasons. An organizational choice that a speaker must make is whether to put the claim first, followed by the reasons (including evidence), or to begin with the reasons and follow these with the claim. Using a claim–reasons package, whatever the order of the two, is a more direct way to make an argument than to tell a story. Each organizational order makes the point explicit rather than leaving it merely hinted at. However, the two argument patterns differ in their directness. An argument that begins with reasoning followed by the claim is more indirect than the reverse. Compare Examples 8.7 and 8.8, in which the two types of organization are illustrated. In Example 8.7 the speaker is a 14-year-old girl talking with her mom. In Example 8.8 the speaker is a school board member who is arguing to other school board members at a public meeting why it makes sense to add a class in world literature as a graduation requirement in the school district.
EXAMPLE 8.7. **Indirect (Inductive)**

(R1) **GIRL:** You know how you’ve been encouraging me to stick with something and work at it?

**MOM:** Yeah?

(R2) **GIRL:** And you’re always saying that I sit around and watch TV too much?

**MOM:** Yeah.

(R3) **GIRL:** And I’ve saved $200.

**MOM:** Okay?

(Claim) **GIRL:** Well, there’s this karate camp in Connecticut for 2 weeks in July. I really need to go if I’m to get any better. Can I go?\(^{31}\)

EXAMPLE 8.8. **Direct (Deductive)**

(Claim) We need to add world literature as a graduation requirement.

(R1) **We are an educated district and we need to be challenging our kids.**

(R2) **We need to challenge all of our kids too, not just those in honors classes. For kids not going to college it may be their only opportunity to read literature from other countries.**

(R3) **If we’re committed to diversity, as we say we are, then we should be exposing our students to authors from diverse cultures.**\(^{32}\)

In making the argument that her mom should both allow her to go to karate camp and pay for it, the girl in Example 8.7 has used an **inductive organization.** Such an organization is especially effective when the point a speaker wants to make is one that the listener may be expected to resist. By gaining her mom’s assent for the legitimacy of each reason before identifying what the reason is being used to support, the girl pulls her mom into what she wants. This organization is effective when one is seeking to move the other to action and when the speaker anticipates possible resistance. Organizing an argument inductively is more indirect than organizing it deductively.
In Example 8.8, the school board member uses a deductive organization. Unlike the girl with her bid for camp, the school board member has the right to advance his view: His official job is to talk about the issues on the agenda and argue for what he thinks is the best course of action. By beginning with what he favors, the school board member makes it easier for his listeners to make sense of his subsequent information. In essence, a claim as the first part of an argument instructs listeners how to interpret the comments that follow. In that sense, to begin with a general claim and follow it with the particular reasons is an effective strategy when the emphasis is on facilitating listeners' understanding.\(^{33}\)

Although all cultures use both kinds of argument organization, there are cultural differences. Asian speakers use the inductive organization more frequently than Americans do, and this preference is another factor contributing to the impressions that Asian style is (usually) more indirect than its American counterpart.\(^{34}\)

### Politeness Styles

In everyday life the notion of politeness refers to a limited set of communicative actions related to manners—saying “please” and “thank you,” apologizing for small lapses, not talking with a mouthful of food. Discourse scholars, however, use the term much more broadly. Politeness is concerned with how people treat others. Politeness—as well as its opposite, impoliteness—is a matter of situated judgments people make about each other. In ordinary talk we rarely use the word polite, more commonly using terms such as kind considerate, tactful, respectful, or friendly when we make a positive judgment and insulting, rude, arrogant, or selfish when we make a negative judgment. Although politeness is a judgment that will be affected by who says what to whom under what circumstances, it is useful to treat politeness as an identifiable set of language practices. Treating politeness as discrete language practices permits us to identify typical moves that generate positive and negative judgments, even if such moves do not always have their predicted effect.\(^{35}\)

The politeness styles that speakers develop are routine ways of addressing the paradoxical nature of face. As we noted in Chapter 1, people have both positive and negative face needs and recognize that others have these wants, too. Whether a speaker gives more attention to her conversational partner’s desire to be shown care and involvement or that person’s desire to not be infringed upon will create that speaker’s politeness style. Because
expressing care and concern for another also incurs imposition, and because showing respect and granting independence has the potential to be uncaring, speakers must choose how to weigh competing face wants. Communities, as well as individuals within them, resolve these tensions in different ways, therein developing distinctive politeness styles.

Politeness styles are of two main types. An involvement politeness style is one that puts a premium on recognizing others’ positive face wants. Speakers using an involvement style will emphasize friendliness and building connection to others. In contrast, an independence politeness style puts a premium on recognizing others’ negative face wants; this style “respects the rights of others to their own autonomy and freedom of choice.” To illustrate the difference, imagine you wanted someone to give you a ride to the airport. You could do so using either an involvement or independence style. If you used an involvement style, you might ask the person, as shown in Example 8.9. If you used an independence style, you’d be more likely to say something similar to Example 8.10.

**EXAMPLE 8.9 (Involvement Politeness Style)**

Hey Frankie, old bud you don’t need sleep do you? How’d you like a chance to help out a friend —m::i. I need a ride to the airport Saturday and have to be there at 8. You up for getting me there?

**EXAMPLE 8.10 (Independence Politeness Style)**

Frank, I hate to ask this of you and I wouldn’t normally do so, but I’m in a bind. By any chance could you give me a ride to the airport Saturday morning?

In an impressive study of three cultures, Brown and Levinson catalogued the strategies that promote involvement and independence. Table 8.3 illustrates some of the common ones. As can be seen, mitigation markers are part of an independence style, and they are also part of an indirect style. This overlap underscores an important feature about style. Styles are sets of features expected to go together. The same feature may be part of different kinds of styles, but the feature’s interactional meaning shifts because of the other features.

When we compare nationalities in terms of preferred politeness style, American speakers stand out from speakers in most other countries.
Americans prefer involvement politeness. By being talkative, using first names readily, and assuming that one has things in common with others, Americans work to be friendly but often come across to independence-favoring speakers as rude, disrespectful, or shallow. Conversely, nationalities that avoid chattiness, use last names and titles, and presume that parties have differences do so in order to be respectful and avoid infringements on others; but for many Americans, these speakers will seem cool and distancing. Most communicators have good intentions most of the time. Moreover, assuming at least initially that a communicative trouble is the result of misunderstanding rather than intentional malice is likely to yield happier outcomes. It would be naïve, however, to assume that people never have bad intentions. There are situations in which a communicator deliberately seeks to humiliate others. In the next chapter we explore the discourse moves that do attack and convey a disrespectful stance. Although rudeness is more often a stance (a momentary targeted expression) than a style (an enduring tendency), there are a small set of interactional identities that expect, if not require, a rude style. Television and radio talk show hosts in certain genres are expected to have rude styles. It is the rudeness of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 8.3. Politeness Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Talk practices</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-reference</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of talk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dialect used</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequent speech acts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Notable discourse moves</td>
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these hosts, in fact, that makes the shows so entertaining. Simon Cowell, a host of *American Idol* and several British shows, is a good example of what a rude style sounds like.

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**EXCERPT 8.11. Remarks Made by Simon Cowell**

(a) You are gorgeous, but your voice isn’t.

(b) I think you’re amazing: amazingly dreadful.

(c) That was extraordinary. Unfortunately, extraordinarily bad.

---

Other identities also demand rude styles. Drill sergeants in the military are expected to yell, call names, and engage in comment making that in other contexts would be highly disrespectful. A final example of an interactional identity requiring an attacking style, albeit for different reasons than the first two, is that of attorneys doing cross-examination of witnesses. Cross-examination is all about impeaching the credibility and character of witnesses. Attorneys do this through the content of the questions they ask, the words used to formulate them, and how question sequences are strung together. Although sanctioned in the courtroom context and evidencing subtleties that we do not see with drill sergeants or celebrity hosts, cross-examining attorneys will be seen by the witnesses they question as treating them in an insulting, impolite manner.

Attorneys use an attacking style as a part of their job; they altercast witnesses for the other side as lying or incompetent in order to make their own side’s story more persuasive.

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**Expressiveness Styles**

Another facet of style concerns how lively speakers are and how straightforwardly they display their feelings. Consider the following situation. An African American woman named Joan McCartney was watching the play *Lysistrata* at a university theater:

She was laughing heartily enjoying the play’s bawdiness and humor, when a white woman turned to her and said, “You are really outrageous!” McCartney, hurt by the remark, asked what was wrong. The white woman replied, “You are laughing so loud. I mean, come on! It’s funny but. . . .” McCartney said, “Daag, it’s a comedy. Ain’t you supposed to laugh?” But as she reflected in her report of the incident, “That was
Based on observation of college students, faculty, and community groups in Chicago, Thomas Kochman identified two styles guiding emotional expression that differentiated white and black Americans. In general, African Americans tend to favor forceful expression, whereas whites are likely to prefer a more subdued and restrained style. For many whites, forceful expression is seen as irresponsible or in bad taste, but for many African Americans the low-keyed styles often used by whites comes across as dead, cold, or not for real. The different evaluations of expressiveness styles can be traced to the ways each speech community thinks about the rights and responsibilities of communicators. According to Kochman, whites are likely to see emotion as a dangerous thing, capable of easily damaging others. Because of the damage potential of emotional expression, it is the responsibility of speakers to rein their feelings in to protect the sensibilities of listeners. People in their role as listeners have the right to expect others to be tactful and to edit out strong or hurtful feelings. Many feelings should be kept inside and not expressed.

In contrast, African Americans are likely to regard expressiveness as an attractive quality in people. We are all emotional beings. Part of making communication lively and interesting is ensuring that people have the space to express the emotions they feel. People are strong and quite able to handle intense expressions from others. It is valuable for each person to be able to express his or her feelings; in fact, as long as expression does not cross the line to physical fighting, it is a speaker’s right. It is listeners who have the responsibility of being tolerant of others’ expressiveness.

This difference in styles was vividly illustrated in a college-level communication class that Kochman taught. The class had 14 white and 8 African American students. As their final assignment in the course, students were asked to talk with the other members of the class about the communicative style each student had displayed during the class. The assignment carried a potential that students might be offended; indeed, several students expressed concern about doing it. As a result, Kochman had the class discuss the assignment. In their discussion white and black students revealed different attitudes about whether self’s feelings or others’ sensibilities should receive preemptive consideration—specifically, the rights of those students who had something to say and wanted to say it (whether others wanted to hear it or not) versus the rights of students not to hear what others might want to say about them, irrespective of how much others wanted to tell them. The way the class divided on this issue was culturally
revealing. Twelve of the 14 white students argued for the rights of students not to hear what others might want to say to them—thus giving priority to the protection of individual sensibilities, those of others as well as their own, even if this might result in forfeiting their own chance to say what they felt. The 8 black students and the remaining 2 white students, on the other hand, argued for the rights of those students to express what they had to say about others even if the protection of all individual sensibilities would be forfeited in the process. On this last point, one black woman said, “I don’t know about others, but if someone has something to say to me, I want to hear it.”

Similar to African Americans, many Jewish Americans also value a high-keyed, animated style, especially in discussion of issues and ideas. Disagreeing and arguing with people in a lively fashion is often regarded as a good way to connect with people—it is “a method of sociability,” in Deborah Schiffrin’s words. As with the other aspects of style, when people have different preferences, interaction between persons is likely to be uncomfortable and even contribute to interethnic tension.

In a study of communicative exchanges between African American customers and Korean immigrant store clerks in neighborhood grocery stores in Los Angeles, Benjamin Bailey showed how the Korean and African American parties assigned radically different interactional meanings to the presence or absence of emotional expression. The Korean shop owners saw the African Americans’ high volume and use of profanity as inappropriate and rude. For them, the African American customers’ failure to restrain self’s expression was a sign of disrespect. But the African American customers also felt that they were being treated disrespectfully by the Koreans. For them, the lack of personal engagement (small talk) and absence of emotional involvement (signaled by eye contact, smiling, etc.) from the Korean shop owners conveyed contempt and lack of regard.

Texting Styles

As mobile telephones have become ordinary if not required possessions and people text and tweet regularly with each other, texting styles of expression have evolved. Texting styles mix ordinary written expression with several distinctive practices that attend to the desirability of being brief. In a short, engaging book called *Txtng: The gr8 db8*, David Crystal argues that complaints that texting is ruining the minds and language skills of the young is nonsense. Texting style extends ways of writing that have been around for a long time. To be sure, there are snippets of text that come across as truly foreign, as does Excerpt 8.12:
EXCERPT 8.12

My smmrholswr CWOT.B4, we used 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF & thr3 :-@kids FTF. ILNY, it’s a gr8 plc

[The translation: My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girlfriend and their three screaming kids face to face. I love New York. It’s a great place.]

Excerpt 8.12 is dense and hard to understand, but unless someone was participating in a contest to use exclusively “textese” to communicate, anyone texting is unlikely to use this many symbols in such a short message. The message does illustrate, though, the features common in texting style. These are described and explained in Table 8.4.

Most people use a texting style that selectively sprinkles in some of these features regularly, with younger texters using more of them than older ones, and women and girls making greater use of emoticons, but especially

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature description</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of single letter, numbers, and symbols to represent words or noises</td>
<td>b4 = before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>xxx = kisses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>:-@ = screaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronyms and the use of initials</td>
<td>GF = girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NP = no problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OMG = Oh my god</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JK = just kidding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omitted letters in words, often vowels</td>
<td>plsd = pleased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bt = but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>yr = year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonstandard spelling</td>
<td>cuz = because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fone = phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>skul = school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortenings</td>
<td>gov = government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>incl = including</td>
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<td>prob = probably</td>
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smiley faces, than men do. More than anything else, texting styles enact and point to a texter’s membership in a particular community. People who regularly text and chat with each other online tend to develop unique forms of expression that enable quick identification of words and phrases related to the topics they reference most often.

Communication technologies and how they are used change quickly, and texting—a relatively “new” discursive practice—is already undergoing changes. With the advent of predictive texting (which anticipates what is being typed) and as-you-type spellchecking, it is no longer faster (sometimes it is even slower) to text in abbreviations and acronyms. Thus continuing to use abbreviations and acronyms marks someone as being younger (pre-to mid-teens), under the assumption that it is a style of slang or fashion, or older, if the person has an older phone or is not “adept” enough to use predictive text. There are exceptions to this with popular acronyms that have been around for years already (e.g., OMG, LOL). LOL in particular has evolved away from its original meaning of “laughing out loud”; though it sometimes means that, younger people frequently use it more generally (to mean something like a smile, an affirmation, or a joke) or to mark an ironic or sarcastic stance. Like other popular text acronyms, it has also bled into ordinary speech, but unlike others, such as “OMG” (“oh-em-gee”), it is pronounced as a word “lawl” (rather than saying “el-oh-el”). Crispin Thurlow and colleagues have studied different functions of texting and constructions of texting in the media. One interesting result of these studies is that in many ways, texting is no different from the slang of social groups. It is not an entirely new language or even its own dialect, but a particular style of speaking that is coded informally, like small talk:

Just as new linguistic practices are often adaptive and additive rather than necessarily subtractive, conventional young text-messaging manipulate conventional discursive practice with linguistic creativity and communicative competence in their pursuit of intimacy and social intercourse.

**Master-Identity Marked Styles**

To describe a style of talking in terms of master identities—but particularly those related to ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation groups that are marginalized in a society—is a sensitive matter, a move that can serve stereotyping and discrimination. Research provides us compelling evidence that no generalization is true for all its members. All identity categories exhibit variation. But as Deborah Cameron remarks, “we may do women [Latinos,
African Americans, gay men, lesbians] a disservice if in our eagerness not to (over) generalize or stereotype we deny that it is an issue.” The meaning of a style, as Nikolas Coupland shows, arises from the usual association of language features and social groups. It is this usual, albeit partial, association between features and groups that furnishes the communicative potential of styles.

Speakers may straightforwardly (and unself-consciously) talk as members of their category are prone to do. Speakers also can exaggerate talk features that symbolize an identity linkage as a way to highlight the relevance of that identity, or they may minimize those features to background that identity. In addition, communicators can adopt talk features of identities that are not their own to signal something about the self or other in that interactional moment.

Ethnicity Markers and Their Uses

In Chapter 4 we discussed a few of the dialect features of African American Vernacular English, or Black English Vernacular (BEV). In addition to these dialect features, there are other ethnic markers of African American ethnicity. Black women, for example, are known for their usage of “girl” as a form to address other black women, and they use this form both to build friendly connections to others and to mark self and partner as African American. Black American ministers also use a unique style that marks them not only as black but as members of a particularly respected category, the preacher. Black preaching style includes sustained intonation across a speech that continues until the climax, a gravelly voice, frequent use of call and response, and frequent repetition of phrases, themes, and sounds. But it is not just preachers who use this style. A study of speeches given by African American leaders (current and ex-members of Congress, a lawyer-professor) at the State of the Black Union showed speakers to shift into this style. At this political event that was focused on discussing the role of the black vote in Obama’s election, these speakers shifted into the black preaching style at key moments in their speeches. These shifts enabled the speakers to increase their connection with the audience by drawing on the community’s respect for preachers, thereby making their message more persuasive.

These African American leaders took on another group’s style to build connection with their audience, but style can also be used to mock another group. In a study of a Southern California restaurant, Mason Carris found that Latinas used la voz gringa, a stylized white Valley girl voice of high
pitch with extreme pitch variation, to mispronounce a pejorative Spanish slang term as a way to mock white women.56

One of the defining features of ethnic identity is the language one speaks. In cities with large immigrant populations, it is common for youths to attend school with others from many different backgrounds. A school in England that Ben Rampton studied included teens who were from African Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani, as well as Anglo British, backgrounds.57 Although friendships tended to be conducted mostly within ethnic groups, there was mixing, and as a result kids mastered particular language and dialect features of the other groups. Teens from the African Caribbean countries spoke a distinctive creole (English mixed with the indigenous African languages from the area). African Caribbean teens were seen as tough, cool, and assertive, and these features came to be associated with this creole version of English. Non-native speakers (Anglos and the South Asian groups) would cross over to use this dialect to speak to teachers and other authorities when they wanted to oppose them. Talking in the creole dialect, then, enabled an Anglo or Asian teen to enact a stronger, more authority-challenging identity than was possible when speaking in his or her own native version of English.

Finally, let us consider how sexuality may tie to an aspect of style.

**Voice and Gay Men’s Style**

One distinctive feature of gay men’s style is to use a higher average pitch and more vocal animation than is typically used by heterosexual men. Of note, higher average pitch and greater vocal dynamism are vocal features that also are associated more with women than with men. The meaning of gay style, then, can be seen as piggybacking on, and contrasting to, the cultural assumptions of what it means to be a (heterosexual) male or female. A gay vocal style is a hybrid that is related to, yet different from, the voices used by heterosexual men and women.

Although we can refer to a gay vocal style, gay men vary among themselves in how much they use it, and they vary across talking contexts in what version of the style they use (marked or muted). Erez Levon interviewed Israeli gay men involved in activist organizations of varying political philosophies.58 Some of the gay men were in mainstream integrationist groups that were working to highlight gay–straight similarities and ensure that gay men and lesbians had the same rights as heterosexuals. Other gay men were members of radical queer groups who regarded the oppressions they were experiencing as part of larger patterns of social inequity that
connected to discrimination experienced by Palestinians and women. In his interviews Levon asked his interviewees about a wide range of topics (e.g., Zionism, religion), including a subset of gay-focused topics (e.g., coming out, gay rights). Following the interviews Levon compared the average vocal pitch of men in the mainstream and radical groups when talking about gay-focused versus other topics. All men varied their average pitch by topic, using higher pitch for the gay-focused topics than other topics. In addition, men who were part of the radical queer groups used comparatively higher pitch on all topics than did the mainstream gay men. In sum, we see gay men using a more marked vocal style in discussing matters close to the center of who they are, whereas they used a more muted vocal style when talking about nonpersonal topics. Moreover, those gay men who identified as politically radical used a higher average pitch than gays who identified as mainstream.

Summary

In this chapter we have sought to paint a picture of both the complexity and the consequentiality of conversational style differences. Style directness, we saw, arises from each speaker’s selection and management of speech acts, argument making, amount of small talk, and particular language practices. In addition, speakers vary in terms of the kind of politeness they use, their degree of emotional expressivity, if and when they text, and which and how many “textese” features they use.

Styles are shared within speech communities, reflecting how a community has prioritized desirable but competing beliefs about right and good ways for people to assert themselves and treat each other in interpersonal life. There is no “right” style, as there is no correct way to prioritize among desirable values. Our hope is that an understanding of how style and identity judgments are related will help readers reflect about conversational options, choose more wisely, and be more tolerant of others whose styles seem irritating.
“Is Margarita a particularly friendly person or is she interested in me?”
“Is Roger skeptical of what I’ve said?”
“Why is she treating me as if I’m ignorant and know nothing about this?”
“Todd says he supports this initiative, but he sure seems reluctant.”

In ordinary life we give considerable attention to figuring how other people feel about us (Does he like me? Think I’m smart? Believe I’m honest? Think she’s better than me?). We also expend considerable energy trying to determine others’ attitudes about views we hold dear (about a presidential candidate, a pending neighborhood ordinance, whether classmate J is a jerk). Having a reasonably accurate sense of how others regard us and the issues we care about is personally desired and practically important.

There’s a difficulty, though. For much of what people desire to know, it is problematic to ask straight out. “Do you think I’m smart enough to handle this new assignment?” is not a question people typically ask their bosses. To ask such a question may imply either that one doubts one’s own competence, doubts the boss’s sincerity and goodwill, or both. Asking another for information is itself an informative action. The content and form of a question become fodder for others’ inference making about the questioner. In addition, even if we ask and receive an answer, the answer might well prove difficult to interpret. Imagine how a boss might answer the question about being “smart enough”: 

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Responses could mean what they appear to mean on the surface, they could be ironic and mean the opposite, or they could raise an entirely new issue. Thus, because direct inquiry often is problematic, people will infer a key other’s attitude based on a set of clues. Using clues to piece together what kind of persons others really are and how they feel about themselves, has the advantage of sidestepping potentially negative implications set in motion by explicitly asking questions.

A stance is the communicative display a person makes toward an interactional other and the event, issue, or person being discussed. A speaker’s expressed stance may be the same as her internal feelings, but it also may not be. There are all kinds of reasons that a person may work to come across differently from the way she feels inside. Stance highlights that what is available to us as interpreters is a person’s communicative expression. We do not have access to others’ minds and hearts. For anyone but the self, all we have is what others express to us. Stances are displayed toward social situations (e.g., Is the situation boring or interesting? Formal or casual?), topics (e.g., Is a person certain or uncertain of this opinion? Skeptical of a claim or a believer?), and the other (e.g., Does she like me or seem critical?). The linguist John DuBois highlights how stance-taking always involves positioning and alignment of the self to the conversational other, while at the same time making cuing an evaluation of the person, topic, or event being talked about.

Stance indicators are the clues used to infer what another person’s situation-specific stance is. Stance indicators may be particular words or phrases, the choice of one speech action over another, hand and facial gestures, tone of voice, the absence of talk, and so on. In figuring out a person’s stance toward a sensitive issue or toward us, we use much more than what she explicitly says. In essence, just about any aspect of communication can function as a stance indicator in a particular context. Stances are
inferred from multiple indicators. They are constructed by an interpreter, usually effortlessly and with little reflection, based on what the speaker conveyed intentionally and what she may have given off unintentionally.

Over time people frequently express similar stances toward some particular others and issues. A consistency in stance expression—what Rebecca Damari\(^3\) calls stance accretion—is what gives people’s personal identities solidity. Stance accretion accounts for our view of ourselves and others as having personalities and character, not as fleeting, ever-changing entities. In an important way, then, a person is the stances he or she regularly takes.\(^4\)

In this chapter, we consider several issues regarding how conversation indicators can cue stances. We begin by scrutinizing two families of stance indicators, conversational marking and modality devices. For each we consider the meanings of the indicators and how they do their work. Then we examine feelings-linked stances, focusing first on the positive ones of involvement and interest and then examining hostility and other negative stances. In the final section we reflect about political stance and cultural variation.

**Marked and Unmarked Forms**

A linguistic choice that gives information about a person’s beliefs is his or her use of marked or unmarked forms. The idea of conversational marking is a broad one that can be applied to many different talk contexts. The main idea is this: **Unmarked forms** reveal what a speaker believes to be typical, usual, or routine; **marked forms** reveal what a speaker regards as atypical, unusual, or uncertain. Unmarked forms are shorter and simpler than marked ones.\(^5\) How marking is done is dependent on the conversational context. Let’s consider three examples of how marking works.

**Identities Expected to Go Together**

Identities are typically understood to co-occur in certain patterns. When identities co-occur in the to-be-expected fashion, speakers referring to others usually leave the co-occurrence unsaid. For instance, if a white male judge came into a courtroom, a speaker recounting her experience is likely to say, “The judge came into the courtroom.” But if identities are not what were expected, speakers often note that in their description. For instance, if the judge were a black male, the speaker might say, “The black judge came into the courtroom,” or if the judge were female, “The lady judge came...
into the courtroom.” Other examples include: (1) calling a female nurse “the nurse” and a male nurse “the male nurse”; (2) noting a person’s sexual orientation only if the person is gay or lesbian (“my gay teacher” but not “my heterosexual teacher”); (3) describing a 20-year-old college student as “a college student,” but a 35-year-old college student as a “nontraditional college student.”

In talking about different kinds of Americans, the unmarked form (“American”) is typically used when people are of European background. Others are usually referred to as “hyphenated” Americans (“Asian-Americans,” “African-Americans”) even when, as is becoming the more common practice (illustrated by our usages throughout this book), no hyphen is used. Although it is possible to use comparable forms for Americans whose ancestors came from Europe (e.g., “Anglo-Americans,” “European-Americans”), these forms are much less likely to be used.

Of interest is the fact that when a speaker chooses to mark something that is usually unmarked, it is taken as evidence that the person is critical of existing social practices. For instance, in a study about women friends, McCullough described a woman she had interviewed as being at that point in the “conventional heterosexual life cycle” at which she might be considering having children. This sentence would probably strike most readers as unusual. A feature of the woman’s identity (heterosexuality) is marked (i.e., made explicit) that is usually left unmarked. A more expected sentence would have noted that the woman is at a point “in her life cycle” at which she is contemplating having children. In marking heterosexuality, the writer makes visible that differences in sexual orientation are a typical kind of difference among people. In essence, by linguistically marking a feature of personhood that is usually left unmarked, the author reveals her commitment to normalizing lesbian and gay lives.

By examining what is marked versus what remains unmarked, we can gain insight into what is believed to be generally true about certain identities. This is nicely illustrated with Lakoff’s analysis of “mother” forms. The unmarked form of the word is mother, but various marking options exist. A person can be a stepmother, an adoptive mother, a biological mother, a foster mother, an unwed mother, or a working mother. All of these markings point to what is taken to be the prototype mother—the ideal that is presumed. In essence, to use the unmarked form of mother suggests that the person is a woman who supplied her half of the child’s genes, is married to the child’s father, stays home to nurture the child, and is one generation older than the child. That the unmarked form makes assumptions about what is routine and to be expected is further illustrated when we generate utterances that mark one of the implicit features. Consider how unusual it sounds to describe someone as a wed mother or a nonworking mother but
how normal it sounds to hear another described as an *unwed mother* or a
*working mother*.

The phrase *working mother* makes visible an interesting complexity
of marking. Although marking is used for what is taken to be atypical, the
atypical in an absolute empirical sense may actually be what is usual and
commonplace. For instance, at this point in U.S. history, the majority of
women who are mothers actually work outside the home. Thus we have
a case in which an everyday talking practice has not caught up with the
societal change in employment patterns.

**Being Knowledgeable or Ignorant**

A second application of the idea of conversational marking is in question
formulations. One identity at stake when a person asks another a question
is whether the question asker sees the recipient as knowledgeable. Question
formulations cue whether the other is presumed knowledgeable or is seen
as not likely to know. For instance, the unmarked form of asking direc-
tions would be short and simple: “How do I get to the UMC?” Marked
forms would be ones that recognized that the recipient might not know
the answer: “*By any chance* could you tell me how to get to the UMC?”
or “*I was wondering, do you know how* to get to the UMC?” Of interest
here is the fact that either the marked or the unmarked question option
could be appropriate. Put another way, selecting a marked form or using
an unmarked option may either yield smooth communication or cause
problems. Whether problems occur will depend on the match between
what a recipient knows and whether a marked or unmarked form is used.
If a questioner’s utterance presumes that the other will or should know
something—that is, the unmarked form is used—and the question recipient
does not know, she may feel embarrassed. On the other hand, if a question
asker uses a marked form—thereby implying the other’s possible lack of
knowledge—and the question recipient does know, she may feel insulted.
To be treated as a novice when one is knowledgeable generally offends peo-
ple.

In a study one of us (K.T.) did of a discussion group in a university
department, she examined how the use of marked and unmarked question
forms were consequential to the graduate students and faculty members
participating. The departmental discussion, which the group referred to
as their “colloquium,” was a weekly meeting that brought about 15–20
students and faculty together to talk about research projects. Each week
one person would present what he or she was working on for the first half
of the meeting; then the group would question the presenter and discuss
the research. In this setting, participants wanted others to evaluate them
as smart and intellectually creative, and they were concerned that others might not see them this way. One graduate student described his identity concerns during participation in the colloquium in this way:

EXAMPLE 9.2

I was very worried that I might say something and it would show that I didn’t grasp everything . . . just worried about general issues, uh how I look and do I seem like a bright individual and have something to say, have original thoughts, any knowledge of well the field or just general classics? Or am I just a person who snuck in here and we’re going to have to weed him out because there’s really nothing upstairs.⁹

Being knowledgeable is crucial in most institutional roles; it is something people care deeply about. Salespeople seek to know their product; instructors, what they teach; managers, how their workplace functions; computer programmers, about software; and so on. Part of an individual’s sense of whether coworkers regard him as good at his job or incompetent will depend on how questions are posed.

**Being Skeptical of or Believing What Another Says**

A third application of the notion of conversational marking applies to the stance one takes toward what another has said. Do communicators respond to others as if they believe them or do they seem to be skeptical? In situations in which an institutional actor is involved, with a number of people offering different versions of events, such as happens in courtrooms, mediation, or news reporting, we might be concerned about whether that institutional actor is really neutral.

Perhaps the most frequent situation in which people convey skepticism is in reporting what another person who is not present said to them. Imagine a conversation between a wife and husband in which the wife is reporting that their babysitter called to say he could not make it. Consider the following formulations:

EXAMPLE 9.3

1. Teddy can’t make it tonight because he’s come down with the flu.

2. *According to* Teddy, he’s not going to be able to babysit because he has the flu.
3. *Teddy’s story* for why he can’t babysit is that he’s coming down with the flu.

4. Do you want to hear a good one? *Teddy says* he’s getting the flu and that’s why he can’t babysit.

In (1) the wife gives Teddy’s reason for not coming. By not including any markers she conveys the idea that she believes Teddy’s story: She has taken what Teddy told her to be true. In the other three cases (2–4), the wife suggests her skepticism by adding certain phrases. The most common markers of skepticism, according to Anita Pomerantz,\(^\text{10}\) include (1) referencing what another said as “his story” or “his version”; (2) using such modifiers as “supposedly” and “allegedly”; (3) highlighting that something is a report rather than a description of the world, for instance, by prefacing a description with the phrase “according to Teddy,” “Teddy says,” or using the phrase “quote, unquote” to report another person’s words; or (4) juxtaposing two pieces of information that are assumed to be incongruous, for instance, if the wife had said, “Teddy called to say he won’t be able to babysit because he has the flu. After his call I went to the mall to pick up some things and guess what? I saw him in the food court hanging out with a bunch of friends,” she would make visible to the husband her skepticism about Teddy’s reason for stating that he could not babysit.

These devices are available for direct use as well. A supervisor could say to a late employee, “What’s your story this time?” Such a query not only conveys skepticism regarding what the employee is saying right now but may also be taken as accusing the employee of a pattern of dishonesty. In other words, being directly skeptical may have relational consequences that a speaker does not wish to incur. There are other ways to indicate skepticism, some of which are very subtle. Undoubtedly how skepticism is marked will depend on the topic and one’s relationship with the other.

One especially interesting twist can be seen in regard to the topic of paranormal experience. Although people are generally expected to believe each other and hence to mark when they do not, there are certain topics to which this does not apply. In Western societies, where science is highly valued, people are expected to be skeptical of paranormal reports.\(^\text{11}\) Thus when people report paranormal experiences they usually do considerable work to frame their experience as reasonable. In essence, when we move to the context of the paranormal, we see a flip in what gets marked. Whereas for most everyday situations belief is usually unmarked, for reports of the paranormal it is belief that requires elaborate explanation and accounting.

Conveying belief or disbelief becomes more complicated when there are more people and multiple stories involved. People whose job it is to
intervene in conflicts and sort out competing stories—for example, marriage counselors, mediators, and judges—need to do significant work to show that they are impartial and neutral, not privileging one person’s account over the other’s. What the conversational work will be that accomplishes displaying a neutral stance will vary with the interactional identity and will involve more than use of marked forms. Of note, in institutional contexts, such as mediation, use of the markers mentioned previously usually conveys neutrality rather than skepticism. For instance, consider a mediator working with a divorcing couple on child custody arrangements who says:

Example 9.4

According to you [nodding to the husband], you were there and waited an hour to pick up Jessica, and Mary didn’t show up and hadn’t notified you. And according to you [nodding at wife], you called Bob the night before and let him know you would be an hour later.

In this context, use of the phrase “according to you” marks that the mediator recognizes that what each person is saying is a version of the truth and thereby indicates neutrality. When multiple stories are part of the situation, such as is the case in a divorce dispute, and the speaker is not one of the disputing parties, then a stance indicator shifts its meaning, cueing a different, albeit related stance: in this case, neutrality.

The use of marking, then, does different things depending on what is being marked. In responding to others’ comments, the use of marked forms conveys either skepticism or neutrality. In questioning, the selection of marked forms conveys that the other is seen as not likely to know what is being asked. For identity references, marked forms show that a communicator regards another as not the usual kind of person for the role she is in. In almost any conversational situation, the notion of marking can be applied. Unmarked forms are used for states of the world that people take to require no comment.

Modal Devices

Whenever people talk, they not only make assertions, direct others to do things, or commit to do things themselves, but they also express whether they are certain or doubtful of what they say and whether the other or the
self is strongly, weakly, or not at all obligated to take an action. In conversation, one common way speakers hedge their certainty is by including the phrase, “I don’t know.”

EXCERPT 9.5

MK: What time’s Mike coming over dear
FR: (.) I don’t know. (0.8) In the afternoon he said.  

When a speaker uses this phrase, particularly when it occurs as part of a response to a question, it cues that the person is not fully committed to what she is reporting.

**Modality** is the name that linguists give to those aspects of a language “having to do with the expression of possibility and necessity.” Modal devices refer to words and phrases that speakers use to modulate how possible, necessary, or generally true they regard something to be. For instance, compare (a) and (b) in the pairs in Example 9.6.

EXCERPT 9.6

1a: Mom to son: “You **must** come home for Thanksgiving. It’s the only time you can see Granma.”

1b: “**Could** you come home for Thanksgiving? It’s the only time you can see Granma.”

2a: Housemates: “There’s **13 inches** of snow out there.”

2b: “There’s **probably about 13 inches** of snow out there.”

3a: Coworkers: “The cafeteria is **always** packed at this time. Let’s go to the Sink.”

3b: “The cafeteria is **usually** packed at this time. Let’s go to the Sink.”

In each of the (a) instances, the speaker expresses a stronger stance of obligation or certainty than in the (b) instances. When the Mom tells her son he must come home rather than asking if he could, she is expressing that she regards her son to be strongly obligated to do what she says. By straightforwardly announcing the snowfall rather than hedging it with **probably**
and about the housemate expresses strong certainty. Example (2) also illustrates another example of conversational marking. A statement about the world without marking as in (2a) comes across as more factual than when it is modified. If a speaker says “climate change is happening” rather than “I argue that climate change is happening” or “climate change is probably happening,” he is treating what he is saying as more certain and factual. Thus the housemate’s assertion in (2a) displays a more certain stance regarding the height of the snow than his (b) statement.

A particularly interesting modal device that Anita Pomerantz initially described is that of extreme case formulations. Extreme case formulations are extreme descriptions or assessments such as every, all, none, best, least, as good as it gets, always, perfectly, brand new, absolutely. In everyday talk people use these words to defend what they are saying, to counter criticisms, or to propose that an activity is not wrong because of how commonly it is done. Consider a call made to a suicide prevention center.

**EXCERPT 9.7**

1. **DESK:** Do you have a gun at home?
2. **CALLER:** (0.6) A forty five,
3. **DESK:** You do have a forty five.
4. **CALLER:** Mm hm, it’s loaded.
5. **DESK:** What is it doing there, Whose is it.
6. **CALLER:** It’s sitting there.
7. **DESK:** Is it your’s?
8. **CALLER:** (1.0) It’s Dave’s.
9. **DESK:** It’s your husband’s, hu:h?
10. **CALLER:** I know how to shoot it,
11. **DESK** (0.4) He isn’t a police officer,
12. **CALLER:** No:
13. **DESK:** He just has one.
14. **CALLER:** Mm hm, It u- Everyone does, don’t they?
15. **DESK:** (1.7) Yah ah::You have a forty five and it’s loaded
16. **CALLER:** Mm: mm,
17. **DESK:** And uh (0.4) I suppose maybe everyone in- evrywuh- in Burnside Park
18. **CALLER:** has one I don’t know
In line 14, where the caller asserts that everyone has guns, she is using an extreme case formulation. In using this modal device here, she is defending the normality of gun owning. The suicide call taker does not accept this description but challenges it. In repeating the gist of her statement but upgrading it—everyone everywhere, or at least in her town, has a gun—he challenges what she is saying, even though he also simultaneously uses a string of modality devices to soften the challenge (I suppose, maybe, I don’t know). In response to the challenge the caller decreases the strength of her claim, backing down from her first extreme case formulation to a claim that it is at least “a lot of people” do and that it is “not unusual.” As Excerpt 9.7 illustrates, how strongly people assert a claim depends on how the conversational partner responds. Speakers frequently shift their stance if challenged.

### Interest and Involvement Stances

A pervasive concern of most people is whether conversational partners are interested in them and what they are saying or the converse: uninterested or even hostile. Indicators of involvement are reasonably trustworthy; however, there are some complexities in interpreting them that are often not well recognized.

Stance indicators of involvement cut across communicative channels; high levels of involvement differ from lower levels in terms of vocal cues, facial and bodily gestures, and selection of particular discourse forms. Involvement typically goes with increased levels of physiological arousal. Thus the signs of physiological arousal tend to be taken as stance indicators of involvement.

Deborah Tannen refers to a package of voice and speech pacing features as conversational signals. When people (1) talk faster, (2) pause less frequently and for shorter times, (3) use a louder voice, and (4) are more vocally animated (i.e., use more variation in their pitch) than other speakers, they are using a high involvement style; when they increase these features from their own baseline, they are displaying an involved stance. As noted in Chapter 5, judgments about an in-the-moment stance are relative to a communicator’s baseline talking style (e.g., how fast and loud does she
normally speak?). In addition, an involved stance is also cued by gestures and facial expressions. Albert Mehrabian named the set of gestures that convey liking and interest nonverbal immediacy.\textsuperscript{19} Indicators include orienting one’s body more directly toward another and leaning forward, gazing more frequently at the other, giving more smiles and nods, and increasing ordinary (nonhostile) touches. For both vocal and gestural indicators of involvement, a relatively low frequency (or low intensity on an indicator) compared with a person’s baseline use is a sign of low interest or boredom.

Other facial expressions also contribute to the stances we attribute to listeners. Eye rolls do not have a single meaning, but the act frequently conveys something like “there she goes again.” Interestingly, facial expressions that in ordinary life we think of as negative may convey positive stances. For instance, if a speaker were telling a story about an unpleasant event (e.g., bugs getting into her bedding), a listener’s frown or grimace during the telling would likely convey alignment with the speaker and her experience.\textsuperscript{20} Although a raised eyebrow generally conveys skepticism, if it occurs during the report of an acquaintance’s careless, hurtful actions, it can cue the listener’s alignment with the speaker, a shared incredulity that someone would act in such a fashion.

In addition to nonverbal indicators of involvement, there are also linguistic markers. In group situations, the telling of personal stories, especially lots of them, marks a higher level of involvement than offering abstracted and general statements.\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, how turn taking is managed (e.g., how many instances of simultaneous speech or interruption occur) conveys group members’ involvement (or lack thereof).

In certain work roles employees are expected to display a positive stance regularly, and failure to do so may lead to dismissal from a position. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild coined the name emotion labor for these positive stance displays that are part of job requirements in positions such as wait staff, clerks, or flight attendants.\textsuperscript{22} By labeling positive stance displays of this type “emotion labor,” Hochschild reminds us of how effortful such communication can sometimes be.

Complexities in assessing involvement stances arise from different speech communities and individuals within these communities having distinctive usual styles and degrees of expressiveness. In general, Europeans from warmer regions such as Greece and Italy (and American ethnic groups originating from these regions) have more involved conversational styles than communicators from cooler areas (e.g., Germany, Sweden). Thus, to accurately assess a conversational partner’s involvement stance, one has to know that other well. The importance of having an accurate baseline for individuals is suggested by comments such as the following:
To summarize, involvement (or its lack) is cued by a complex set of indicators. When all the indicators line up and one knows the other well, the stance indicators are especially reliable. If the indicators point toward different stances or one does not know the other person well enough to have a sense of her baseline, it is best to treat one’s inferences as tentative, as no more than a best guess under problematic circumstances.

**Hostility and Other Negative Stances**

In the previous chapter we suggested that rudeness is more often a stance that one person takes toward another for a reason in a particular context, rather than a style that characterizes the person generally. Of note, the same indicators that lead communicators to see another as displaying a hostile stance also lead them to judge the other as having a hostile style. When we refer to another as having a style, we are treating the stance that the indicators cue as a regular, reoccurring one for that person. Styles and stances are tightly tied to each other. Particularly for culturally problematic qualities such as disrespect or hostility, parties will get into debates as to whether an expressive moment was an in-the-moment stance or evidence of an enduring style.

A hostile stance can be enacted straightforwardly or with ambiguity. The most common indicators of strong negative feelings include fast-paced, loud voices, what we hear as screaming or yelling, the use of insulting names, and cursing. Timothy Jay offers an interesting analysis of the links between negative stances such as anger and cursing and other obscenities. Table 9.1 overviews some of the most common kinds of profanity and the reasons why these terms are usually offensive.

The terms noted in Table 9.1 are strong cues of hostility. When they are used, they usually cue that the speaker is angry or feeling hostile toward the person who is the focus of talk. There are exceptions to this general- ity, however. The clearest example of a different meaning involves racial–ethnic terms. Terms such as nigger and wop will be insults when used by someone who is not a member of the group, but the terms can become...
When used across categories of people, there may be layers of both positive and negative meanings in what such a term cues. “Hey bitch,” said by a man to a woman in a friendly intonation within certain communities of speakers, may cue affection, but because the address form is gender marked, not applying equally to both speakers, its use is likely to simultaneously also convey disrespect.

When people express hostility in institutional contexts, they tend to use more subtle practices than cursing and name calling. In a study of contentious school board meetings, citizens expressed outrage toward their elected officials by using three strategies that can be found in many meeting and workplace contexts. These are described next.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>How they work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cursing and profanity</td>
<td>God damn you, To hell with you</td>
<td>Curses embody attempts to harm a person; profanity conveys disrespect for religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to subnormal thought</td>
<td>Dumbhead, numbskull, jerk, moron, shithead, retard</td>
<td>These vary in offensiveness but all convey that the person has not thought carefully about his or her action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to sex organ</td>
<td>(To men): prick, cock, dick (To women): cunt</td>
<td>Accuses the other of promiscuous behavior or is used when the offended party hasn’t received expected sexual favors. Has done undesirable act.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to deviant sexual act</td>
<td>Motherfucker, cocksucker, go screw yourself, take a flying fuck</td>
<td>Using generally taboo words to express strong disgust and anger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to being sexually violated</td>
<td>I was fucked over, what a ballbreaker, he was jerking us off</td>
<td>Social abuse is conveyed through reference to sexual abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial–ethnic references</td>
<td>Spic, nigger, wop, taco, kike</td>
<td>When used by one group about another group conveys derogation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to animals</td>
<td>(To men): pig, jackass, turkey (To women): pussy, cow, bitch, dog</td>
<td>Seeks to reduce human; implies that the other is no more than an animal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Descriptions

Sometimes speakers describe events in ways that portray the actions and the parties responsible in highly negative terms. Although we tend to think of “description” as neutral, much of the time it is positioned and stance-cueing. Particularly in situations of dispute, people’s descriptions are strategic tools to frame opposing others as incompetent, wrong, or stupid.25 Descriptions do this stance-cueing work because language inevitably conveys moral assessments. In a meeting of a local school district that followed the publishing of its reading test scores, citizens turned out at the board meeting to criticize the district’s elected officials for how they had interpreted the meaning of the scores. After introducing himself, a community member said:

**EXCERPT 9.9**

I’m here tonight to express my concern over the *dangerous misuse of reading statistics*. I’ve had the good fortune to spend the last sixteen years as an international management consultant helping some of the world’s largest organizations improve business performance by improving employees. As you might expect, this involves gathering and interpreting a lot of data and subjecting it to rigorous statistical analysis. By any responsible informed statistical interpretation the current uproar over fourth grade reading scores is *unjustified, even silly*. And judging by the comments in the Camera [name of the newspaper] it reveals a *frightening ignorance* about statistics on this Board. 26

Describing board members as dangerously misusing statistics and having “frightening ignorance” conveys a highly critical stance, as does characterizing their interpretation of the statistics as “unjustified, even silly.” In addition, by the way the speaker described himself—as a business consultant for international corporations and as regularly interpreting statistical data—he frames the board members as possessing limited competence and portrays himself as the real expert.

Avowals of Feelings

A second way that speakers in a public meeting expressed negative stances was to name the feeling they were having at the moment. Because feelings are assumed to have causes, to **avow a feeling** in a situation in which particular others are responsible is to implicate them. A particularly subtle way
to cue negativity is for a speaker to say, as we saw in the opening of Excerpt 9.9, that he is “concerned.” To describe what one is feeling as “concerned” is to imply that the other has done something inappropriate and concerning. Speakers in this study of public meetings also announced that they were “angry,” “appalled,” and “hurt.” Although the exact stance that will be conveyed depends on the feeling named and the action it is linked to, most often the stance cued will differ from what is named. When a speaker says she “is angry” in a public meeting, it cues a critical, disapproving stance toward the target’s actions, but an actual stance of anger will be expressed in other ways than a speaker self-labeling her feelings as angry.27

We would not usually think of someone announcing she was “surprised” as an attack, but it can be. Consider what another speaker at the same school board meeting on reading test scores said:

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**EXCERPT 9.10**

**PARENT:** I am surprised that School Board members including one with a PhD in education would misunderstand ((audience applause)) the [purpose of this test

**PRES:** [Just a moment, just a moment, no personal attacks please [that’s not appropriate=

**PARENT:** [That’s not personal

**PRES:** =Go ahead, Susan.

**PARENT:** =That’s not personal28

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What makes the parent’s announcement of her “surprise” an attack is that she attributes her feeling as arising because of a “misunderstanding.” To describe a person as “misunderstanding” can be a nice way to imply that another is wrong. In this particular exchange, though, the misunderstanding is framed as surprising because of the board member’s credential (a Ph.D. in education); thus it strongly implicates that the board member should have known better. Such an implication is insulting, and we see the president labeling the parent as violating the rule for meeting conduct that forbids personal attacks. Interestingly, the parent disputes the president’s label, rejecting the idea that her remark was an instance of personal attack. But by disputing only that it was personal, the parent conveys that her remark, indeed, was attacking, albeit a reasonable kind of attack given the situation.
Rhetorical Questions

A third way that citizens speaking in local governance meetings conveyed a critical stance was to pose rhetorical questions (i.e., a question to which no answer is expected). Rhetorical questions serve many different functions. In public speaking contexts, including communication classes, rhetorical questions occur frequently at speech beginnings as a device to build interest in a topic. Teachers also regularly use rhetorical questions in giving lectures when they are working to have a lively, involved style. In contentious public meetings, however, rhetorical questions served other purposes.

In the study of school board meetings we have been discussing, rhetorical questions most often occurred in pairs toward the end of a citizen’s speech and conveyed a critical stance toward the district’s actions. In a controversy over the removal of a coach at a local high school that many parents opposed, a supporter of the action ended his speech saying, “Why would the decision of a highly qualified, very competent superintendent be changed? Is it politics or is it protecting one’s own friend?” This pair of rhetorical questions expresses a negative stance toward those advocating the keeping of the coach. By implying that the only reason a person could be against dismissing the coach is because of “politics” or “protecting friends,” the speaker asserts the illegitimacy of wanting to retain the coach. His stance is further solidified by the first rhetorical question that describes the recommendation to fire the coach as coming from “a highly qualified, very competent superintendent.”

As Tracy concludes, rhetorical questions in contentious public meetings allow speakers to make highly critical claims without incurring the negative personal assessment that might be made if accusations, especially unsubstantiated, were straightforwardly offered. Rhetorical questions enable speakers to protect their own face, while (somewhat) lessening the degree of face attack on the other.

Stances Related to Politics and Culture

So far in this chapter we have emphasized stances toward people, but stance also includes issues and events. In no arena of life does the term stance occur more frequently than in politics. In the political arena, stance references a relatively straightforward position—the gist of what a party says. News media regularly report as to a nation’s or a political figure’s stance
toward different issues. A Google search on the phrase “stance toward”
turned up 610,000 results, with the top handful being:

EXCERPT 9.11

(1) FNL Exclusive: Rangel Criticizes GOP Hardline Stance toward
   Immigration
(2) A Toughened U.S. Stance toward Iran
(3) Rick Perry Displays Varied Stance toward Crime
(4) Hezbollah Chief Shifts Public Stance toward Assad
(5) Russia’s Stance toward Syria32

Yet whereas politicians are expected to publicly express their stance on
any issue about which a reporter can raise a question, many ordinary citi-
zens regard public expression on political issues to be a “very private mat-
ner.”33 In a survey that political scientist Pamela Conover and her colleagues
did, only 18% of Americans reported talking about their political views
with anyone besides good friends and family. Why would so many people
see expression of stances on public issues as a sensitive matter? Conover
suggests that this type of expression says “something about who we are—
about our basic values, our character and our identities.”34 Expression of a
political view is especially informative to others because a view on a politi-
cal matter is expected to, and usually does, come in a package with other
views. As was noted in Chapter 7, opinions usually occur in clusters. A per-
son who espouses the right to own and carry guns is expected to also favor
capital punishment, be against abortion, and favor Republican candidates.
A person who favors gun control is expected to oppose capital punishment,
be pro-choice, and favor Democratic candidates. Thus expressing a stance
on a political issue publicly means that others will draw a set of inferences
about other aspects of one’s personal identity.

Not only is expressing a political stance a disclosive act, but a person’s
expression of a political stance in a site such as a public meeting can also
lead others who disagree to pursue that speaker, seeking to persuade her
of why she is wrong. For many people, the possibility of this happening is
uncomfortable and to be avoided. Thus we have the strange situation in
American society in which people generally do not express their political
views in public situations but instead limit their expression to intimate con-
texts in which others are likely to have similar views.
Views about political expression vary across national communities. A study that compared a French Usenet newsgroup with an Anglo-American one, both of which were focused on the environment, found that the Anglo-American group did a lot more explanation giving, and when questions were asked, they functioned to get the discussion back on topic. In contrast, the French Usenet group treated the context as a place for friendly exchange of ideas among peers. Their group did far less explaining. When questions were asked by French participants, the questions often were facilitating digressions that enabled members to explore personal links. To summarize, through the frequency of explanations and questions, as well as what was questioned, Americans treated this Usenet environmental discussion as a nonpersonal and nonpolitical exchange that required scientific expertise. In contrast French Usenet participants framed the occasion as a political arena for friendly exchange and debate. It was understood that their talk could reasonably veer off topic because attending to personal relationships was part of what the group was seeking to do.

Summary

In this chapter we examined two categories of stance indicators and several stances, but there are many more stances and packages of indicators than what we discussed. Our dominant perspective for thinking about stance has been the rhetorical one. Stances were treated as individually chosen expressions about the character of events and other people, as well as views parties held about social issues. In reflecting about “stance indicators,” we considered what conversational practices communicators could select (or avoid) to convey desired character traits and attitudes. That is, stance indicators were seen as enacting a person’s in-the-moment position toward another person, an event, or an issue. Yet whereas many stances are fleeting and quickly changing, others are enduring, relatively stable signatures used by individuals in communities. Of note, when we begin to focus on the stability of stances, we are likely to change our analytic language, referring instead to speakers’ preferred styles and how they are associated with identifiable speech communities.
Around Christmas in 1996 a young girl named JonBenet Ramsey was found murdered in her locked home. The event had begun as a kidnapping; the parents had called to report their missing child and to let the police know they had received a ransom note. After many hours of police presence in the home, JonBenet’s body was discovered in the basement. The particulars of the case were bizarre and fascinating: JonBenet was a frequent beauty pageant participant, her mother was a former beauty pageant winner, the father was a wealthy businessman. A first version of the ransom note was found in the trash. Upon discovering the child’s body, the family hired a public relations representative and an attorney and refused to speak further with the police.

The murder drew international coverage. Reporters from newspapers, magazines, and television flocked to Boulder, Colorado, the site of the murder, to have immediate access to information as events unfolded. News trucks and reporters were everywhere as police investigated. The media criticized the police for not adequately keeping the public informed. The police defended their actions. Then, a couple of weeks into the investigation, Chief of Police Koby agreed to an interview with four local reporters. The interview, broadcast over a local cable channel, was intended for the Boulder community. During the interview one of the reporters asked about the police’s poor handling of the media and keeping information from them. Consider Chief Koby’s answer, and particularly the story he recounts within it:
EXCERPT 10.1. Boulder Police Chief’s Interview

Well part of the comment about uh the public not having a right to know uh was taken out of context. What has happened in this investigation is this. That it is a, it is something that means a great deal to the Boulder community and that is why we are here tonight. So that we can have this conversation. Uh and that it can be heard in total and uncut by the Boulder community but... this situation is a curiosity to the rest of the country and quite frankly it uh, it is a sick curiosity in some ways. Ah to give you an example of that. A call got through to me a couple of days ago from someone who lives out of state. And it was giggling and laughter and it was Chief, I was late in my office one night, it says, Chief, we’re sitting around the table playing Clue and substituting ah th-, the situation for what you have in Boulder. Who was it du dut du dut du dut with the dut in this or that room? That’s sick. And uh so my reference is that there are certain things that everyone is, certain bits of information that every person is entitled to. And we have provided those uh pieces of information. And there are other pieces of information that the public is not entitled to know and doesn’t need to know. And so it is simply a desire to have their curiosity satisfied. But it serves no purpose. And that is the information that I’m not going to provide to the public.¹

Why did Chief Koby tell a story in this public interview? And why did he tell this story? What was the story doing for him and the police department? For Boulder citizens? For the reporters? In this chapter we begin by considering what makes a segment of talk a story. We then highlight several distinctive conversational practices employed within stories. Using the police chief’s story as an ongoing example, we describe some of the key identity-linked functions of stories. We conclude by considering how the content of stories and storytelling practices differ across speech communities.

Everyday Narratives and Their Key Features

The more formal name for stories, one used by scholars from a variety of fields, is narrative. Narratives include both written and oral forms. Some oral narratives are quite similar to written ones, as, for example, we see in the book-like tales told around a campfire. However, unlike their written counterparts, most oral stories are told to serve personal and relational
purposes other than giving information and entertaining. In addition, oral narratives are produced in talk; as such, they must be “occasioned” (have a reason for telling and a go-ahead from listeners), and, at least to some degree, they are jointly produced.²

*Differences with Written Stories*

In contrast to written stories that exist as whole units apart from any specific occasion, everyday stories need to be introduced into conversations; people cannot just launch into telling a story any time they wish.³ This means either that stories are invited by a conversational partner, as exemplified in Example 10.2, or that a speaker who wants to tell one makes a bid to do so (Example 10.3).

**EXAMPLE 10.2. Sample of Story Invitation**

A: ((Upon meeting a friend whose face is scraped)) What happened to you?

B: Well, you know the roof I’ve been trying to patch? I was . . .

**EXAMPLE 10.3. Sample Conversational Bid to Launch a Story**

A: You won’t believe what happened to me today.

B: What?

A: Well I was walking to the train . . .

In certain kinds of institutional settings, such as the reporters’ interview with Chief Koby, the invitation to tell a story is built into the situation format. Interviews by their very nature legitimize people giving extended answers. Typically, interviewees are asked to explain themselves or their actions. In such situations, then, an interviewee may launch a story as a piece of evidence to support a point he is making.

Not only must everyday stories be occasioned, but they must also be jointly produced. In institutional settings such as interviews or presentations, these joint markers will be less visible, although even here at least a few will be present.⁴ A story’s *jointness* can be of two types. The first is the teller–recipient kind of jointness that involves one party telling and the other acknowledging and supporting that telling. At the most minimal level, recipients will produce simple tokens of listening (“hmm,” “yeah”). Even nonverbal practices such as eye contact and nodding are a way of
participating in the story and encouraging it to continue; nodding does not always mean showing an agreeing or affiliating stance but can just be a way of saying “carry on, I’m paying attention.” Recipients may also contribute responses that are more enthusiastic, such as prolonged “Ohs,” “Really?”, small commentaries (“How awful!”; “She’s incredible!”), or questions that probe for amplification of particulars in the story. Neal Norrick studied these narrative discourse markers or response tokens and noted that minimal kinds (like “uh-huh” and “mhmm”) attract little or no attention themselves—they serve mainly to encourage the storyteller to carry on. Others, such as “wow,” “no way,” “oh,” and “really” can display a more specific stance toward the story and therefore may elicit a response.

Excerpt 10.4 gives examples of minimal contributions and some of these more noticeable responses.

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**EXCERPT 10.4**

1. **JULIE:** Senior year I went to the prom with Hank
2. **ANNA:** ((snorts)) Didn’t you guys like ditch each other afterwards
3. **JULIE:** Yeah then we ended up running into each other at like King Soopers
4. **ANNA:** Oh:::
5. **JULIE:** And he was so pissed cuz I told him I couldn’t like go out afterwards an .hhh
6. **ANNA:** [Whoopsie
7. **JULIE:** [Hoo::: yeah I don’t think he was [very happy
8. **ANNA:** [Small world
9. **JULIE:** He didn’t talk to me for like a year after that [((laughs))
10. **ANNA:** [Wo
11. **JULIE:** I finally started talking to him after like high school ended

Anna gives some responses to Julie’s story about a school dance that are more minimal and that are not responded to (or at least not directly): “oh” in turn 4 for example, after which Julie continues her story with “and” in turn 5. The “wo” in turn 10 is also not directly addressed, though Julie’s update to Hank not talking to her for a year might have been prompted by the “wo’s” expression of a surprised stance. Other responses by Anna are more elaborate and request more explanation or information—turn 2, for example, in which Anna prompts Julie to say more by referring to her own memory of the events. The “whoopsie” in turn 6 seems to be agreed with
One feature of this story is the use of the word *like* in places where it isn’t fulfilling its usual grammatical meanings (comparison—“this is like that”—or preference—“I like that”). Anna uses it in turn 2, but Julie uses it in almost every utterance of her story (turns 3, 5, 9, 11). The discourse marker *like* seems to have an important function in storytelling. In addition to being one way of quoting someone (see the discussion of reported speech later in the chapter), it occurs frequently in other places doing other things—highlighting a point here, introducing some uncertainty there, drawing attention to one thing or another—which can make it a frequently heard feature. Because of that frequency, *like* has often been seen as a sort of “speech tic” with no meaning. Jean Fox Tree, however, analyzed the ways it is placed in stories and found that though it occurred more frequently than other discourse markers and as frequently as *ums* and *ahs*, it was nonetheless tied to the story in ways that the *ums* and *ahs* were not. Fox Tree found that *likes* occurred in similar ways when a story was retold, suggesting that it had relations to conveying the content of the story in certain ways. One function that *like* seems to serve is as a marker of imprecision—a cue that what is coming should be heard as an approximation or taken loosely, generally. That seems to be the case in some of the examples of *like* in 10.4; for instance, when Julie says “I told him I couldn’t like go out afterwards” (turn 5) it seems to indicate that she might not have exactly said to Hank “I can’t go out afterward” but may have said something which implied that, or she might have given reasons why she couldn’t go out. Here she doesn’t go into all of that, but indicates that “I can’t go out” was the upshot of what she had told Hank.

Though somewhat less frequent in everyday talk, a particularly powerful way to display that one is closely connected to another is for two people to tell a story together, chiming in with different details, as Jenny Mandelbaum argues. An example of a conarrated story that Mandelbaum analyzes is seen in Excerpt 10.5 in which two dating, college-age couples (Shawn and Vickie, Matt and Nina) are having dinner together. The group had just been discussing “going to church,” at which point Shawn and Vickie launch a story:

**EXCEPRT 10.5**

S: I have to start goin’ cuz I’m gettin’ really tense.

M: Yeah
S: An that really calms you
N: Yeah it does. An it’s like medication
S: I was goin’ crazy today. On the- on the road
V: Well you know what he did?
S: Went out of my fuckin’ mind
V: He made a right. It was in Santa Monica. You know have- the have
S: Oh shit
V: All those bright
S: I made a left- left,
V: They have one-way streets and everything? And then two-way streets? He made a left turn from a one-way street into a two-way street but he THOUGHT it was
S: But in the wrong lane ((laughs))
V: He thought it was a one-way street ((a few lines omitted))
V: He’s traveling down
M: Wrong way?
V: The wrong way
S: All of a sudden this guy goes-[AAAAHHH AAAHHH
V: [And how much (   ) cross the block
S: Very rushed cross the block, an I an I an I
V: AN I’M YELLIN SHAWN at SHAWN ((story continues))

Following Vickie and Shawn’s story, Matt and Nina tell another story about a near-accident they experienced together. Everyday stories, then, are not produced alone, whether it be the full collaboration that we see in Shawn and Vickie’s storytelling or the more limited jointness that occurs when one person acts as the story listener.11 Oral stories are joint accomplishments. In addition, it is particularly common for the telling of one story to serve as the occasion for the telling of another. Stories frequently occur in rounds, in which one story occasions another. Telling a second story is a good way for a listener to show she got the point of the partner’s story or that she sympathizes and has had a similar experience.12 It is also a way for a conversational partner to engage in some friendly competition on whatever has become the focus of conversation (“If you think that was bad, you should hear . . . ”). Though most of this chapter focuses on story as a verbal accomplishment, paralinguistic and other nonverbal elements are
an important component of storytelling. Stories are often accompanied by particular patterns of gaze and eye contact, as well as a range of gestures, some of which incorporate important visual components of the event being described.\textsuperscript{13}

**What Makes an Everyday Story a “Narrative”?**

In a classic article that first appeared in the late 1960s, William Labov and Joshua Waletsky argued that stories about personal experiences were the simplest and “most fundamental”\textsuperscript{14} kind of narrative. Typically, everyday stories reconstruct self’s and related others’ experiences and can be characterized by three features:

1. The talk concerns a particular time when an actor experienced an event; often this event is a problem, but it need not be.\textsuperscript{15}
2. The event being told about is newsworthy—out of the ordinary and/or interesting in some way.
3. An evaluation of the event is conveyed.\textsuperscript{16}

Let us consider what these features look like in Koby’s story:

**EXCERPT 10.6 Chief Koby’s Story**

A call got through to me a couple of days ago from someone who lives out of state. And it was giggling and laughter and it was Chief, I was late in my office one night, it says, Chief, we’re sitting around the table playing Clue and substituting ah th-, the situation for what you have in Boulder. Who was it du dut du dut du dut with the dut in this or that room? That’s sick.

Koby begins by setting the scene, describing a specific time in the past (a couple of days ago), provides a bit more information to orient his listeners (he’s working late in his office and gets a telephone call), and then reports a problem (he received an obnoxious phone call from an “out-of-state” person). Similar to many everyday stories, but quite uncommon in written ones, we hear nothing about how Koby actually dealt with this event. Did he hang up? Holler at the people? Answer the question? To not include information about how a problem was handled keeps a story’s point focused on the nature of the problem rather than, say, on the resourcefulness or reasonableness of the person to whom the problem occurred. Thus
Koby’s talk manifests the first features of everyday narratives: It tells about a particular time when a person had an experience.

The second criterion, **newsworthiness**, also referred to as “reportability,” is the hardest to assess in stories, because what counts as “newsworthy” is very much a matter of judgment, and it is not uncommon for people to disagree. At its simplest, though, to tell a story is to implicitly claim that one has something to say that deserves an uninterrupted lengthy turn at talking. Very few people, for instance, would judge Example 10.7 as deserving to be treated as an adequate story, even though it includes both of the other features (an agent confronting a problem and an evaluation).

**Example 10.7**

I went into the kitchen, got a bowl out of the cupboard. When I went to get a spoon, they were all dirty so I opened the dishwasher, took one out, and washed it. Then I opened the refrigerator and took out milk. I looked at what cereals we had, picked Cheerios, poured myself a bowl, and ate them. They were good.

Assembling breakfast is so ordinary a “problem” that few of us would think of this event as meriting the label. But if the narrator were a 3-year-old child and it was the first time he was doing this activity for himself, this story’s content becomes imaginable as reasonably newsworthy. In general, newsworthiness means that an event is at least a little out of the ordinary. The content of Koby’s phone call certainly would qualify. Someone comparing a city’s murder investigation to the board game Clue and actually expecting the police officer involved to comment would count as unusual by just about anyone’s standards. In ongoing relationships newsworthiness often becomes tied to events that have led one or another party to have some kind of feelings, whether they be positive (amusement, happiness) or negative (frustration, boredom, anger), strong or mild.

The third criterion, **evaluation** of the event, is seen in Koby’s explicit assessment of the out-of-state caller’s actions (“that’s sick”). But evaluations do not need to be uttered explicitly. Quite often a speaker will leave it up to the listener to infer what the evaluation should be by providing guidance through the way the story is told. Consider Excerpt 10.8 and how a husband conveys his evaluation of his wife Connie’s actions at a pub one evening and later that same night in their home. The story was told in a marital counseling session that included the husband, the wife, and the therapist.
Connie had a short skirt on I don’t know. And I knew this uh, may be I had met him, Yeh I musta met Dave before. But I’d heard that he was a bit of a lad. He didn’t care who he chatted up. ((a few lines omitted)) So Connie stood up pulled her skirt right up her side and she was looking straight at Dave like that. And then turned and looked at me. And then she said w-, turned and then back to Dave and said by the way that wasn’t for you. ((a few lines omitted)) Then we went back to the house. Connie and, we all went back to the house at this point. Uh went back there’n I was si- um John and Caroline were together and Dave and Connie were sitting talking. I was sitting on the floor playing records. I sat there for two ’n a half hours. Uh no one come over. Not once did they. ANYthing. Just sat there talking. I was just completely ignored the whole time. ((a few lines omitted)) Uh I was boiling at this stage and I was real angry with Connie. And uh went up to bed ’n I lay on the bed, got in bed. I could hear giggling and all that downstairs and then the music changed, slow records. And then they changed to slow records. I could hear that Connie was dancing with this bloke downstairs. And Caroline turned around and said something about it. It was wha-, it was oh Connie look out, I’m going to tell Jimmy on you. And next thing I hear is, what he doesn’t know doesn’t hurt him.

In this story, the husband, Jimmy, is telling a story about an event that led to his throwing his friends out of his house, yanking his wife up the stairs, and throwing her on the bed. When people narrate events that made them feel angry, an evaluative dimension that becomes relevant is the reasonableness of the person’s anger. That is, a judgment people make about their own and each other’s anger—certainly in a therapy session but also in everyday exchanges—is whether or not it was reasonable. Because of this, the point of anger stories is often something like “The person [the other] who triggered my anger was bad” or potentially, albeit less frequently, “I was silly, wrong, and acting unreasonably to get angry.” In this story Jimmy does not make his evaluation of his own and Connie’s actions explicit. Rather, his assessment is conveyed through the ways he describes particulars in the scene. Through the particular details he chooses to provide and to omit, he is framed as acting reasonably and Connie as acting inappropriately.

Consider how this is accomplished. Jimmy describes how he dealt with the anger he was initially feeling by going up to bed. The details of his story point to Connie as intentionally flirting with a man who was a “lad,” or
ladies’ man who did a lot of “chatting up” of women, and shows Connie deliberately emphasizing and commenting about her legs and short skirt to Dave. When the group returned to Jimmy and Connie’s home, Connie is described as coupled off with Dave and ignoring Jimmy for a long time (2½ hours). By describing himself as going up to bed while guests were still in his home, Jimmy implies that Connie should have known that he was bothered by her actions. Nonetheless, Connie is described as choosing to give no attention to her husband and staying with Dave, “giggling and all that.” In describing what the two were doing in this way, and especially with the inclusion of the final details—Connie dancing to slow music, her friend Caroline’s warning that this action would make Jimmy mad, and the report of Connie’s comment (“what he doesn’t know doesn’t hurt him”)—one is left with an image of Connie behaving in overly flirtatious ways with a man who is not her husband. Simply put, through the way Jimmy describes the actions, the story conveys an evaluation that Connie was a bad wife and Jimmy was reasonable to be jealous and get mad.

That Jimmy’s story is his own evaluation of these past events and that others—in this case, Connie—might see things differently is evidenced when we look at what Connie initially said. Consider Excerpt 10.9, in which Connie describes their marital problem to the therapist and her initial version of the same event that precipitated Jimmy’s story.

EXCERPT 10.9

Jimmy is extremely jealous. Extremely jealous person. Has always been from the day we met. You know? And at that point in time there was an episode, with a bloke in a pub, you know? And me having a few drinks and messin. That was it. Right? And this got out of hand. To Jimmy, according to Jimmy I was always doing it and you know always aggravating him. He was a jealous person. I aggravated the situation. And he walked out that time. To me it was totally ridiculous the way he goes on through this problem that he has.

Of note is that Connie describes the episode as involving a “bloke,” which is a much more distant impersonal way to describe someone than using his first name. It implies an unmemorable man with whom she spent an evening in a group. Her actions were “messin. That was it,” the usual kind of play and joking that people in bars do. Perhaps she aggravated the situation a bit, she acknowledges, but through her description she strongly implies that her actions were no more than ordinary sociability. These simple sociable
acts Jimmy reacted to as Connie’s “always doing it” and “always aggravating him.” In describing Jimmy as saying that Connie “always” aggravates him and “always” does it, Connie presents us with a person who reacts the same way regardless of the situation. Such a description implicates Jimmy as abnormally and unreasonably jealous, a man with a problem.

Narratives, then, are accounts of past events that convey a teller’s point of view. The evaluation of the events may be stated explicitly, or it may be built into the story and conveyed through particulars that are included or omitted, as well as by the language used to describe them.

Besides these features, a primary conversational device used to convey evaluation is reported speech. Reported speech is stating what the self or another person said. It must be kept in mind, however, that it is unlikely to be an accurate replay. People are notoriously bad at remembering exactly what someone else said. Reported speech is a rhetorical device to present what one is uttering as if it were one’s exact words or those of another. In that sense, reported speech might better have been named “constructed dialogue” or reconstructed speech.19

Reported speech is of two types: indirect and direct. When it is done indirectly, the gist of what was said is quoted generally. For example, if Jimmy had said at the end of his story, “then Connie told her friend, it didn’t matter as long as I didn’t find out,” he would have been using indirect reported speech. In contrast, direct reported speech enacts what the other actually said. We see an instance of it at the conclusion of Jimmy’s story, where he voices Connie’s supposed words: “And next thing I hear is, what he doesn’t know doesn’t hurt him.” One indicator of direct reported speech is the pronoun form. References to self in the third person (e.g., “what he doesn’t know” said about self) mark a piece of talk as direct reported speech. Usually, too, a storyteller’s intonation changes during the quoted other’s comment. Another example of direct reported speech is seen in Koby’s story (Excerpt 10.6). Immediately before making his evaluation explicit (“That’s sick”), Koby reports what the out-of-state caller said (“Chief, we’re sitting around the table playing Clue and substituting . . .”). Particular verbs that introduce reported speech can also add subtle differences to meaning. Saying that Suzy said or Suzy says “I’m so sick of it!” tends to be taken as closer to an actual quotation than saying Suzy went or Suzy goes “I’m so sick of it!” or the widely used Suzy was/is like “I’m so sick of it!” The latter in particular tends to be ambiguous as to whether the person really said/thought that exact utterance at the time or not.20

Direct reported speech is an especially useful way to manage a dilemma frequently faced by storytellers. The dilemma is this: When people recount stories of troubles they have had with others, it is easy for their listeners to
discount what they are saying as biased and self-serving, especially when a teller claims to be in the right and portrays the other as in the wrong. A way to manage this presentational dilemma is to recount what was said without offering explicit assessment. Using reported speech allows tellers to position their story as the truth of what happened: They are just “giving the facts” rather than a mere version, an opinionated view. At the same time, through intonation and the emphasis given to certain words, and perhaps also in the choice of words selected, the speaker makes visible his stance toward what is being reported.

A recent context for storytelling bridges some of the differences between oral and written narratives: online stories. Social networking sites such as Facebook status updates provide their own sort of story, telling events of one’s day or life in an episodic fashion. Facebook status updates provide story-like snippets that focus more on how recently something has occurred (rather than reflecting on something in the past). Status updates are a different sort of way of presenting one’s life experiences through storytelling—it happens in text but is more dynamic and ongoing than traditional written stories because others can contribute and comment shortly after the telling.

A final difference between oral narratives and written ones is that telling a story in everyday life always has a situated social purpose. The answer to the question, Why tell this story to this particular person in this specific situation? becomes a key part of the meaning of everyday stories. Consider, now, some of the major purposes accomplished by narratives.

**Functions of Narratives**

A story may often serve more than one purpose: Above its very referential and informative functioning it may entertain, be a piece of moral advice, extend an offer to become more intimate, seek audience alignment for the purpose of joint revenge, and serve as a claim as to “who I really am”—and all that at the same time.

**Argument Making**

The common purpose of stories is to persuade others to think a certain way or to take a particular action. This, in fact, is the most visible function of Chief Koby’s story. A reporter has asked a question that has accused the police of not doing something they have a responsibility to do—keeping the public informed—and also of having denied that they had that
responsibility. In this context, Koby’s story is a part of an argument that attempts to refute this accusation. His story, along with its surrounding talk, seeks to persuade his listeners (and viewers on cable TV) that the police management of information was reasonable. Stripped to its essence, his argument involves three moves: (1) a statement asserting that he believes the public does have a right to know certain kinds of information, followed by a claim that the Boulder police had released all those kinds of information and will actively work to keep the public informed; (2) a claim that there are certain kinds of information that the public is not entitled to know, a claim that Koby supports by telling the Clue story, which provides a vivid example of people wanting details that they have no right to get; and (3) finally, and clearly the most subtle move, an implication that much of the information that the media is after is of the Clue-story variety rather than the legitimate kind. Koby concludes his comment by implying that the police will not be bullied into providing the media with this kind of information. In a nutshell, he ends his comment with a counteraccusation—it is the media, not the police, who are behaving inappropriately.

One reason to use stories rather than other kinds of evidence, such as research reports, statistics, or the testimony of experts, is that stories are highly persuasive. Psychologists have described this as the “vividness effect.” Stories are memorable and affect emotions more than other kinds of evidence do. This feature of stories, in fact, is both the advantage of and the problem with using stories as evidence. Stories say nothing about how typical an event is. If a conversational partner can make salient that a person’s story is extraordinary, she can direct others’ thinking away from the conclusion that a story is seeking to argue for.

In Koby’s comment, the story functioned as evidence for a claim he had explicitly articulated. However, stories may also comprise a claim and its evidence all wrapped up together. This practice, in fact, is quite common in families. Imagine a mother talking to her young son. At dinner she tells a story about an older neighbor who was just arrested for smoking pot (“You know what happened to Barb?”). The story recounts how Barb got into trouble with the police, what Barb has to do as punishment, and all the grief Barb is causing her parents. At one level the mom’s story is providing newsworthy information about a person both parties know. It is informing. But if we think of the story as an argument, as a claim and its evidence bundled together, we could hear the story as the mom advancing a claim that it’s bad to smoke pot and using as her evidence the story of what happened to Barb when she did. If her son is a relatively young child, we are especially likely to hear it as this general type of argument. Should her child be a sometimes-wild teen, the story is likely to be meant (and interpreted) as a more directed speech act.
Performing Speech Acts

If the son is a teen who does things of which the mother disapproves, the story quite possibly was meant (and interpreted) as a warning: something to the effect of “if you continue to do wild things and smoke pot, as I suspect you may be doing, you’ll get arrested, hurt lots of people, and face all this grief, too.” The mother’s story, then, is an indirect way to perform the act of warning. Of course, the son could always challenge his mother on the story: “Why are you telling me this story? What has this got to do with me?” And the mother might explicitly acknowledge that her purpose was to warn her son: “Well, I get worried and I don’t want that to happen to you.” Or, for any number of reasons, she may deny her intent to warn: “I just figured you might want to know what’s happening with Barb.” In the previous chapter we considered advantages and disadvantages of using an indirect style. In general, telling a story is a relatively common way to perform sensitive speech acts such as advising, criticizing, or reprimanding another. The story enables a speaker to do the sensitive action, but to do so in a manner that is not a straightforward way of taking responsibility for performing it.

Stories may also be used to perform interpersonally positive speech acts—for example, when a friend recounts to a third party a story of another person’s accomplishment in front of that person. Or, more complexly, one person can invite another to tell a story about his or her accomplishment in the presence of an influential third party in hopes of eliciting the third party’s praise. In middle-class American families, this is an especially common activity for mothers to do with regard to a child in front of Dad. In Example 10.7 shows what this kind of exchange looks like.

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**EXAMPLE 10.10**

MOM: BJ, tell Dad what happened in school today.

BJ: Well, you know me and Jade are doing our science project together? Well we were working on making tables on the computer to put some of our results in. And Mrs. Edgar came by. She looked at what we were doing and said you guys are gonna make our school proud. Biscayne is going to get all the awards.

DAD: Honey, that’s wonderful. . . .

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In Example 10.10 BJ’s story narrated her involvement in an activity that led to her teacher, Mrs. Edgar, praising her. This, in turn, following the story’s telling, led to her father complimenting her. Another function
of BJ’s story, then, by virtue of its particular content (it is about BJ herself) is that it presents her as a good student in science. In addition, although this single occasion would be insufficient to establish such an identity, the mother’s command to tell the story rather than just waiting for BJ to do so altercasts the daughter as modest, a girl who needs to be nudged to talk about her successes.

Self-Presentational Devices

Like all talk, stories may be inspected for what they convey about a speaker. But when the story that a speaker tells includes oneself as a character, a story is twice as informative. Consider what identities the following two narratives build. Excerpt 10.11 is told by one college student to another discussing a mutual former friend of theirs who complimented another friend’s girlfriend; Excerpt 10.12 was told by a 13-year-old girl to her best friend (another girl) with two boys standing nearby who could overhear.

EXCERPT 10.11

I asked him. I was like “do you say that all the time that she’s hot? Do you say that in front of Brad?” And he’s like “yeah we don’t care.” So I was like- they don’t care. They’re like so- That’s how they are where I live. They have no respect for girls.

EXCERPT 10.12

When I was in Connecticut this weekend, my friends, we were staying for competition, right, and they met this boy, right, so they called him out from the hotel, and he was having phone sex with one of my friends, you know how they have phone sex, like, aw, you’re wearing this, oh baby, you look so fine, you know, and all, they’re having phone sex, I was sitting there, I was cracking up, I was like “no sir.”

In Excerpt 10.11 the young woman displays a sense of indignation toward young men who live in her hometown and particularly toward one man who has done something she finds reproachable (complimenting a friend’s girlfriend behind his back). This presents her as having some moral sense of right and wrong—of being a “good person”—as opposed to the personal identity of the man she is talking about (whom she earlier calls a “bad guy”). Her story also presents her as having something in common
with the woman she is talking to—they are “girls” versus the “boys” whose behavior she is criticizing; they are aligned together and in agreement that what the man said about his friend’s girlfriend is a violation of some sort. In Excerpt 10.12 the girl positions herself as an individual (“I,” “my friends” vs. “we”) and one who is not fully in agreement with her friends and all their actions (“I was like ‘no sir’”). In addition, the content of her talks reveals her to be knowledgeable about sexuality and boys, a valued expertise among 13-year-olds, yet nonetheless a person who does not engage in these activities herself. In other words, the story presents her as not the type of girl who does this kind of sexual activity: It presents a view of her stance toward sexual behavior and does so in front of important others (boys and her best friend).

Context is an important component of presenting the self through stories. Casual stories such as these tend to be associated with private, interpersonal conversations, but stories (as examples have already shown) occur everywhere—in institutional settings, in workplaces—and may be a crucial component of the context even if they’re not part of the “official” business of what goes on there. Stories that are told at work present personal and interactional identities, identities related to one’s social life and one’s professional trajectory. Narratives occur in meetings, in casual conversations, in interviews; they occur with coworkers, managers, clients, and customers. Stories told at work will almost always be relevant to one’s professional identity—even when those stories are not themselves about work. Moral stances are one facet of stories that are incorporated in the way people position themselves in stories to others, about others, in work settings.

When a speaker tells a story in which she is an actor, she is presenting a picture of what she does (or refrains from doing) under some particular circumstances. Through the details of a person’s action, a picture can be built up as to whether she is trustworthy, fair-minded, a braggart, sexually loose, and so on. Although tellers do not usually think about themselves as agents making moral claims, nonetheless stories do present speakers in a moral light. This light need not be terribly bright, but it is inevitably there. Most communities have a tradition of telling certain sorts of stories as a way of confessing and learning from one’s mistakes or as a lesson to others, precisely to present or negotiate cultural norms.

If we examine Chief Koby’s story, we can see some of this moral work going on. Consider the significance of one detail that Koby provides in his story (“I was late in my office one night”). As story recipients, we did not need to know when the phone call came to make sense of the story. Yet this detail is important. It makes available to us the information that Koby is a police chief who works late into the night. Working long hours when there
is a problem is a routine way to display that one is a serious and committed public official. Koby makes this identity available to listeners by including just this particular detail in the story.

A kind of story that has a special function of presenting a person is the “life story.” This refers to the narrative arc of someone’s life, similar to a biography in a written form, but more often it involves much shorter and more selective snippets when told in conversation. It’s a kind of story that is recognizable in everyday discourse: Someone can flirt with it (“so, tell me your life story”) or complain about it (“all I asked was a simple question and I got his whole life story!”). Because people’s personal lives are not always consistent and do not always make sense as they are happening, a life story is a way of building a coherent sense of self, both for oneself and for others. Metaphor has been shown to be an important component of this process, as it is one way of making associations (e.g., of one part of one’s life with another or with the whole) and thus establishing an apparently stable, authentic identity.

**Doing Relational Work**

In addition to presenting who a speaker is, the stories people tell, as well as the way they are told, build three kinds of relational stances. First, there is a certain kind of self-presentation that is specifically about the kind of person one is in a relationship: as a particular sort and quality of friend, lover, mother, brother, and so forth. Second, whenever a person tells another person a story, an implication is set in motion of the type “I see you as the kind of person who [would like/needs to hear/etc.] this particular story” or “We have the kind of relationship in which a story of this type is reasonable to tell.” That is, stories altercast their recipients as being particular types of others. For instance, the mother’s story about her neighbor’s pot smoking and arrest potentially altercasts her teen son as someone who needs to hear a warning and hence, perhaps, as a less-than-ideal child. Koby’s Clue story may be taken as altercasting the media as unreasonable, requesting information that is sick and that they have no right to expect. It is also the case that Koby’s story seeks to altercast the listening Boulder community as generally reasonable. By mentioning that the obnoxious phone call came from out of state, Koby implies that inappropriate, prurient interest is common to people outside the community and, by implication, is not a criticism he is directing at his most important audience (i.e., Boulder citizens).

Second, as we noted earlier, joint storytelling, like holding hands in public, is a tie-sign, a way to mark that two people are close. Joint storytelling is not possible unless two people have been around each other for
extended amounts of time. This sign of closeness may be displayed in a romantic couple, as we saw in Excerpt 10.1, in which Shawn and Vickie co-narrate their near-accident, or it may be manifested between close friends, as Jenny Cheshire observed among adolescent boys retelling their escapades to an interviewer. Stories can also build relationships across groups. Stories told in families build family identities—for instance, how close or independent people are, their triumphs and tribulations, and their alliances with others. Cynthia Gordon analyzed how narrative was one way in which, through talk, family members positioned themselves as being part of one political party versus another and as supporting one presidential candidate over another. She also has studied how people use narrative to construct their interactional family identities. Family talk is always tied to the identity of others in the family: A mother’s identity, for instance, is partly built through the stories she tells about her children. Gordon gives an example of a mother, Janet, accounting for her preschool daughter’s tantrums; Janet attributes her daughter’s misbehavior to the child’s sensing Janet’s stress about her own mother’s failing health. Gordon interprets the mother’s story this way:

In providing this account as part of the evaluation of the story, Janet makes her daughter’s behavior potentially more reasonable (it’s a sort of empathy) and connects it in an intimate way to Janet’s identity and the closeness of their relationship. By doing facework for the daughter, Janet does facework for herself, as culturally a child’s behavior is often linked to judgments of the parents.

Additionally, there are stories that become an iconic part of a family’s history. Such stories, which are told and often retold, can develop their own sort of “fame” and are an important part of constructing a family identity. Saskia Witteborn’s study of narratives told by Palestinians showed that the stories they told in everyday life and in interviews presented and reaffirmed their identities as Palestinians with one another and for others. Stories do not just build relationships with others but present relationships to others. Stories also provide important ways of building community and cultural identities.

**Positioning the Narrator in an Ongoing Conflict**

Although many stories that people tell involve themselves as key characters, people also recount stories about events they have witnessed. One feature that generally makes an event newsworthy, and hence worthy of telling as
a story, is that it relates to a conflict. Thus, if on your way to work you saw a protest occurring outside of a Planned Parenthood clinic, you might tell a classmate about it. You would do this because in American society actions that link to abortion can be assumed to be of widespread interest. In all likelihood your storytelling would allow the classmate to infer whether your sympathies were more with the pro-life protesters or with the pro-choice staff. In social scenes in which there are different views of what is going on or what is reasonable, stories invariably position their tellers as sympathetic or antagonistic toward one or another player in a conflict. Consider how the story told by a friend of Connie’s (Excerpt 10.13) about the events recounted in Examples 10.8 and 10.9 might differ if told by a friend of Jimmy’s (Excerpt 10.14).

EXCERPT 10.13. Connie’s Friend

You won’t believe what Connie has been putting up with from Jimmy. The other night when they had some friends in their home, in the middle of the evening Jimmy stormed off and went up to his bedroom without so much as a goodbye. A little later he came down, threw everyone out and yanked Connie upstairs by her hair. He pulled so hard some of her hair came out. As usual the scene occurred out of the blue. Jimmy accused Connie of throwing herself at one of their guests when all she’d done was try to be friendly to a new acquaintance.


Connie has been at it again. I don’t know why Jimmy stays with her. As usual she was dressed to seduce, a skirt that barely covered her ass. Some guy shows interest—surprise, surprise—and Connie, according to her, was quote–unquote, just being friendly. Connie invites this guy back to their home, ignores Jimmy and does one of her exhibitionist cling dances. Jimmy got mad but didn’t really do anything. He should have tossed her out the door with her so-called friend and told her it was over.

These two stories position their narrators quite differently in relation to Jimmy and Connie and their marital troubles. The teller in Excerpt 10.13 is sympathetic toward Connie and antagonistic toward Jimmy, whereas the teller in Excerpt 10.14 is just the reverse. Many features of a story may contribute to a narrator’s positioning, but two are especially important. A first feature concerns who is presented as the active agent and who is framed as
the acted-upon other; the second involves describing scenes and labeling the actions that were taken. Are the actions conveyed by the verbs presented as morally reasonable or morally reprehensible? Contrast how Jimmy is portrayed in the first story compared with the second. Jimmy does things that require Connie to “put up with him,” a colloquial expression that implies Jimmy is a troublemaker and unreasonable. Jimmy “storms out,” “throws friends out,” “yanks hair.” In addition, by framing Jimmy’s actions as the initiating ones and making Connie’s role as an actor invisible, as well as explicitly mentioning how she had “done nothing,” Connie is portrayed as the acted-upon victim and Jimmy as the nasty agent.

In contrast, the second story positions the narrator of Connie and Jimmy’s conflict as being in Jimmy’s camp. Connie is “at it again,” dressing to seduce, inviting other men home, ignoring Jimmy, and “doing her exhibitionist cling dances.” In addition, the storyteller described Connie’s action with skepticism markers indicating doubt toward Connie’s claimed innocence (e.g., with the comment “surprise, surprise” and the preface “according to her”). In this second version, then, Connie is portrayed as the active agent doing nasty things, whereas Jimmy is the acted-upon innocent other.

Todd Sandel’s analysis of the stories that mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law told about their conflicts with one another indicated that such stories serve an important purpose in assigning blame, asserting agency, and connecting one’s actions to moral ideals. The stories of the mothers-in-law asserted the importance of respecting one’s elders. Stories told by daughters-in-law, in contrast, challenged or showed displeasure toward their elders. These stories gave a particular version of self, narrated a relationship, made an argument about responsibility and blame, and positioned the speakers in a relational conflict.

In a rather different arena, Richard Buttny examines how positioning with regard to race relations worked in the stories college students of one ethnic group (black, white, or Latino) told to other members of their same ethnic group following viewing of a video about racism. By and large, white students tended to see minorities as exaggerating the frequency and damage of problematic race incidents on campuses, whereas students of color saw whites as ignoring everyday racism and not taking responsibility to combat it. When telling stories, whites and students of color told them in a manner that displayed which position (and group) they took to be more reasonable. Story positioning drew upon a number of different conversational practices, with the use of reported speech as a particularly prevalent one. Consider, for instance, a conversation among three Latinas. The video, *Racism 101*, had shown an incident in which an African American student had received a nasty racist letter. In a discussion...
that followed the viewing, C recounted the following story to her two acquaintances.

**EXCERPT 10.15 C’s Story**

The same exact letter . . . was thrown in my building, my dorm. And my friend was the RA and it was the worst experience that I ever had in my life. It was ridiculous the way the white students reacted. Was like, *Well I didn’t put it out*. And it became an individual thing. And it wasn’t a matter of someone of my race offended you and something should be done.\(^42\)

C’s story positions herself as in alignment with how other persons of color are likely to assess race relations in the United States. By labeling white students’ reactions as “ridiculous,” and enacting a white student response (“Well I didn’t put it out”) that shows insensitivity and unwillingness to take responsibility, C makes clear which party in this larger society conflict she sees as the more reasonable.

Stories, then, reveal alliances and antagonisms. The telling of a story about a multiperson conflict becomes a way people support one person in the situation and criticize some others. It is also true that the way a recipient responds to a story about two other people she knows conveys whether the recipient agrees with the teller’s assessment of events. For this reason, listening to a story in which one feels equally connected to the person being portrayed as a bad agent and to the helpless victim may be an uncomfortable situation. Such occasions may turn into at least a miniconflict between a teller and his or her listener as to what is a reasonable view of the narrated event.

**Expressing Morally Questionable or Devalued Viewpoints**

In most Western societies the expression of straightforward bigotry and prejudice against persons of nonwhite ethnic groups is frowned upon. In work or public sites it is unacceptable to use hostile names to reference other people’s ethnic groups or to make comments about the stupidity, violence, inferiority, and so on of nonwhite ethnic/racial groups. Nonetheless, many white Americans and Europeans do have at least subtle prejudices toward one or another ethnic/racial group. Based on a two-country study (United States, the Netherlands) of how racism gets communicated in ordinary talk, Teun van Dijk\(^43\) argues that stories are an especially common...
vehicle for expressing subtle prejudice. Consider the story that a white Dutch woman told when asked in a research interview to talk about experiences in her neighborhood:

**EXCERPT 10.16. (W = Woman, I = Interviewer)**

W: But a (pause) long time ago, a Surinamese lady came uhh to the supermarket, which at that time was still on B-square.

I: Oh yes, that was (pause) yes

W: That was in the beginning

I: Yes

W: And what was it, I believe that it was still the Spar [supermarket chain] and that lady bought bread. She leaves the store and comes back and says, “I don’t want that bread.”

I: Hmm

W: Then the manager very POLITELY (pause) “Madam, we do not exCHANGE bread.” No in Holland one doesn’t exchange bread, do we? And no meat products either. Well after that the lady took on TERRIBLY, and the manager you know he tried to explain it to her, that bread cannot be exchanged here and in a very polite manner, after which the woman started to SHOUT, like, Don’t touch me.

I: (pause) hmmmm

W: She throws the man that bread into his face, walks to the cash register and grabs two packets of Pall Mall.

I: Yes.

W: I still remember that very well.44

In this story a (white) Dutch woman tells a story about how a (black) Surinamese woman acted with a (white) Dutch manager in a store. The details of the story—throwing bread, shouting, grabbing—build an image of the woman in the store as low-class, aggressive, and unreasonable. At one level, one could describe the storyteller as merely recounting the kind of unpleasant episode that a person will see or experience with others in the course of living in a city. Anyone who lives in a big city is going to have negative experiences with others, and some of the others are likely to be persons of different races. But, as van Dijk goes on to show in his analysis, this particular kind of story—stories that remember and portray foreigners and nonwhites in negative ways—seems to be especially memorable for whites.
Events that reflect negatively on persons of color are particularly likely to be remembered and retold as stories by whites in America and the Netherlands. This, then, is how stories can be, although not necessarily are in any particular case, a subtle way to express racism.

Research also suggests that narratives of personal experience are an effective way to advance the view that a strange and unusual event should be taken as believable and normal. In a study of tales of the unexpected, Robin Wooffitt shows how stories about unearthly lights, objects moving, or visions of the future are told in ways that present the experiences “as the kind of thing that happens to people, and thereby as existing independently of the speaker’s agency, actions and intentions.” This “normalizing of the strange” is accomplished by presenting a focal paranormal event surrounded by many highly ordinary particulars (e.g., “I was sitting in my living room watching TV”; “I was e-mailing a friend and having a cup of coffee”) that nobody would doubt.

Stories fulfill multiple functions at once, including subtle ones. The story in Excerpt 10.17, told by narrator Kathy to three friends (Mike, Carrie, and Riley), is an example:

EXCERPT 10.17

1 K: I was walkin down the street goin for a run. Like- I was still like puttin in my i-pod and stuff. They were like right there where all those pumpkins- There’s like a vine it’s like overgrowing like everything? And so they’re like two kids and the mom and dad are like I don’t know if they were like actually cutting all the pumpkins or what.

2 C: M hm

3 K: But- And then asked me to take a picture. So I’m like talkin to them for a while. And they were like “hey we’re uh the Blah-blah-blahs.” And they’re like the Barsters or something.

4 M: ((laughs)) Like they’re on Family Feud.

5 K: I don’t know ((laughing))

6 M: “We’re the Last Names” ((mock announcer voice))

7 K: Yeah that’s what he said. Like “oh well I’m Kathy” hh and uh [The little boy’s like-

8 M: [“From the Midds family” ((mock announcer voice))

9 K: ((laughs)) The little boy’s like “Where’d you just move in?” And was like totally judging. I’m like “I moved in that duplex right [there.”
This story could be seen as doing a speech act: It informs everyone present of a recent event (representative), and it displays a feeling Kathy had of being looked down on by her neighbors (expressive). It also presents Kathy in a certain light: It depicts her as doing ordinary things (getting ready for a run) and as being in some sense “normal” at least with respect to her group of friends. This is set in contrast to the family she discusses, who are presented as having a lot more money and acting in slightly peculiar or at least noteworthy ways (asking her to take their picture, introducing themselves in a funny tone, etc.). This sets up the “punch line” of the story in which she is later judged (by a little boy) for living in a particular place (turns 9 and 11). This outcome implies that the judgment is unfair—that the family members are the ones who are odd (living in an expensive home, etc.), whereas renting is not odd or shouldn’t be negatively evaluated. This might also serve to position Kathy in a small-scale, relational conflict (if for instance she had ongoing issues with these neighbors). The story does relational work by aligning Kathy with her friends, which her friends reinforce by jumping in and contributing to the story (turns 4–8, 15–19). The story also serves an entertaining function—it is meant to be humorous. To sum up, stories simultaneously accomplish many different activities. They are useful for making arguments, and, in particular, for advancing questionable claims. They can perform a variety of speech acts and are particularly potent ways to present the self or enact a relational identity, to altercast the conversational partner, as well as nonpresent others, and to position the self in an ongoing conflict. Consider now how stories and storytelling practices are likely to differ across speech communities.
Cultural Differences

As with all facets of talk, storytelling is learned in the national, ethnic, and social class groups in which each person has spent significant amounts of time. As a result, stories reflect their tellers’ communities. Cultural membership shapes both the content of stories and communicators’ narrating style. As with other communicative differences, differing cultural styles may cause interactional trouble.

Story Content

An American professor was offered a job at a Dutch university. It was a wonderful opportunity to take on new challenges, so she accepted the job. As her stay lengthened, the Dutch students she worked with would ask her how she had come to find herself living away from the United States. The professor would tell her story. Students would respond with “Oh” and immediately change the topic. The American professor wondered why her story received such a cool reception: Had she said something inappropriate?

The preceding event happened to Livia Polanyi, who went on to write a book about how the stories Americans tell are distinctive to their community. From a middle-class American point of view, there is nothing more natural than to narrate how one came to be in the line of work one is in, as well as in one’s particular job. It is also seen as typical and reasonable that people’s professions will require them to leave their home communities and go to distant cities. Most middle-class Americans do not go as far as Polanyi did, but leaving family and friends to take a job is a rather routine life event. This is not the case in the Netherlands or, for that matter, in most American working-class communities. To leave family and friends just for work is seen as a negative thing to do. Even if that were a person’s main reason, it would be considered inappropriate to admit it. Admitting it would display a person to be callous and ambitious. In fact, the Dutch language has a word for people who act in this inappropriate manner. Polanyi’s story was showing her to be a vakidoot, a one-sided academic grind who was interested only in her field.

From the Dutch students’ point of view, asking a question about how Polanyi became a teacher in Holland was a way to show the American teacher that they had accepted the intimacy and informality that distinguished her classroom from those of many Dutch professors. But when she responded with her career story, her Dutch students felt Polanyi was rejecting them. In their eyes, the story seemed to be a refusal to give an honest answer, for the story she told could not be the real one.
What events can or should be narrated is a deeply cultural matter. Among Americans narrating how one came to meet and commit to the person who ends up being one’s significant other is a kind of story people are expected to be able to tell on all kinds of occasions. In cultures in which two people marrying is less a matter of love and more a matter of family and material circumstances, this kind of story is less common. Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz studied how personal narratives told during wedding anniversaries reveal personal aspects of a (married) relationship. These sorts of stories are of a special type because they have often been told many times (they are retellings), and therefore they are already known to some of the people present during a celebration. This means that some participants are able to laugh or react in anticipation of what is coming, or even chime in, reinforcing their relationship to the couple and reemphasizing the meaning of the relationship for others. The story itself is thus “newsworthy” only to some people—for others, sharing in the story is in some way reliving a private event in a public situation.

Moreover, it is not just the general content that is culturally shaped but the stance a storyteller is expected to display the self as having. In narratives concerning one’s employment and professional choices, Charlotte Linde showed that middle-class American stories routinely portray the self as spontaneous, open to opportunity and the unanticipated events that happen in one’s life—that is, narrators position themselves not as people who had their careers planned from an early age. Portraying the self as a person who is following a life trajectory that is a tightly structured recipe is negatively assessed. At the same time, middle-class American storytellers work to show that they have arrived at where they are through hard work, determination, and focus. This balancing act, which shows that one not only is ambitious and works hard but also seizes the moments that come along by chance in life, is not found as commonly in stories among other groups of Americans or other national cultures.

In Colombia a common content for everyday stories, visible but much less frequent in the United States, is the telling of palanca narratives. Palanca is a Spanish word for a lever. A palanca narrative is about how one person used his or her influence to pry open a bureaucratic or institutional exchange to help another. Rather than primarily thinking of themselves as individuals, the more common way Americans think about the self, Colombians think of themselves as a set of bonds to others. In Colombia the connections each person has with others are routinely acknowledged and celebrated. People tell stories about what others did for them and what they were able to do for others. Thus the sheer frequency of palanca narratives in Colombian life points to a different view of persons than the view held in
the United States. This also means that telling stories about certain things will be more successful at accomplishing certain functions—persuading and arguing, for instance—in some contexts than in others. Stories are part of the world of cultural persuadables: The same story won’t make the same sense and may not do what it is meant to do in all places at all times.

**Narrating Style**

In studies of middle-class Americans, an interesting difference has been found between women and men.\(^{52}\) In women’s stories, often people have names and do a lot of talking. In men’s stories, there tend to be more details about place, time, and objects; people more frequently are nameless and silent. Put another way, direct reported speech is a more common feature of women’s than men’s stories. This storytelling style difference is evidenced in boys and girls as young as 3–5 years of age.\(^{53}\) One might conclude that this reflects that men value relationships less than women, but this would be an inaccurate conclusion. Jenny Cheshire\(^{54}\) studied a group of 11- to 15-year-old adolescents and asked kids in same-sex groups to recount a real-world event. Cheshire found that the boys were much more likely to tell their stories jointly—chiming in, adding details, revising particulars—than the girls. Girls, in contrast, did more solo storytelling, thereby respecting the autonomy of each storyteller. Thus although there do seem to be differences between boys and girls and between men and women, they do not support a simple generalization such as that boys value autonomy and girls value connection.

Another kind of narrating style difference that has been found among different communities of Americans concerns how parts of a story are to be sequenced and connected. The difference, simply put, is whether a temporal linear organization is preferred over one in which a story is organized around a set of associated topics. The **temporal organization** is the one taught in schools and used more frequently by middle-class Americans. This style orders people and actions within an event along a chronological time line that is signaled explicitly (with words such as *next* or *then*). In contrast, the **topical style** of narrating offers a set of people and events that are linked in the teller’s experience (often via emotional connections) and need not be ordered in a strict chronology, though the story will be organized in other ways. It also commonly uses vocal cues (stressing a word to signal a new unit) to create story links rather than using explicit words. The topical style has been found to be more common among working-class speakers of all races and ethnic groups, although particularly African Americans and Latinos.\(^{55}\) An instance of the topical style is seen in Excerpt 10.18, a story
told by a 6-year-old black girl to her teacher during classroom sharing time. The teacher had instructed Deena to share one important thing.

EXCERPT 10.18

D: In the summer, I mean w- when um I go back to school. I come back to school in September. I'ma have a new coat and I already got it. And it’s um got a lot of brown in it. And when um, I got it yesterday. And when I saw it my um my mother was, was going somewhere. When my, when I saw it on the couch and I showed my sister, and I was reading somethin’ out on the bag and my big sister said, my big sister said, Deena you have to keep that away from Keesha, cause that’s my baby sister. And I said no. And I said the plastic bag because um, when she was with me,

T: Wait a minute

D: My cousin and her-

T: Wait a minute, you stick with your coat now. I s-said you could tell one thing. That’s fair.

D: This was about my coat

T: OK, alright, go on

D: This was-, and today, and yesterday when I got my coat my cousin ran outside and he, ran to tried to get him, and he, he he start, and when he get in, when he got in my house he layed on the floor. And I told him to get up because he was cryin’

T: Mm- what’s that have to do with your coat?

D: H- he because he wanted to go outside but we couldn’t ((exasperated))

T: Why?

D: Bec- it um, because, I don’t know

T: OK ((chuckles)) thank you very much Deena

In this storytelling episode Deena was obviously frustrated. When the researchers interviewed her in her home to find out how she felt about her experience in the class, she described her teacher as not interested in what she had to say. Deena said, “She was always stoppin’ me sayin ‘that’s not important enough’ and I hadn’t hardly started talkin.” Deena’s sister also mentioned that she had had the same frustration during sharing time 5 years earlier. For a speaker who assumes a story will have a temporal linear
organization, Deena’s story may sound incoherent. Deena’s teacher apparently thought so. But talking with Deena in her home made it apparent that she had an organized story to convey. She wanted to tell about her new coat and the issue of protection. On the one hand, she needed to protect her baby sister from the plastic bag the coat had come in. On the other hand, she had to protect her new coat from the messy hands of her cousin. However, Deena’s organization—associating these two topics—was not a recognizable style to her middle-class white teacher. As a result, the teacher interrupted her multiple times to question where she was going and to ask for details that took her in a different direction than she was thinking.

In schools, storytelling style differences can be highly consequential. For Deena and other children of working-class American parents, it is often the beginning of how they come to see themselves as not very good at what schools are all about. But this narrative style difference is not restricted to children. It plays itself out in differences among adults and what happens to them in important institutions.

In a study of small claims court, where citizens stand before a judge to tell their story—their side of a dispute—John Conley and William O’Barr58 observed similar differences. In general, working-class Americans, minorities, and women are more likely to tell stories in a topical-linked style, what the authors call a “relationally-based account style,” than are middle-class, white, and male speakers. A linear story style in this setting attends to the rules of the courtroom and what is considered relevant in the setting. This storytelling style is more often used by middle-class whites or by male speakers. A topical storytelling style, Conley and O’Barr suggest, is one component that increases the chance of a judge’s decision going against a speaker. Thus how communicators narrate their lives and experiences shapes what opportunities they are likely to have.

Summary

Telling stories is a major part of everyday talk. Everyday stories have their own form and shape—they are often about social activities, featuring the actions and speech of others, but they are also themselves a social activity that is produced in interaction with others. People tell stories to accomplish things: to be seen in a certain ways; to give information; to disagree about an idea; to build, maintain, or sever relationships. Through a story’s content and a large set of stylistic design features, stories do complicated kinds of identity-work. Storytelling, then, is a major part of how everyday talk both builds and reflects identities.
The Jerky Boys, a comedy duo from New York City, are famous for their prank telephone calls to unsuspecting participants. In one call an attorney is asked for advice about a motorcycle accident that the caller ostensibly had when he was driving and drinking and “speeding all over the neighborhood.” The Jerky Boy caller tells the attorney that he lost control of his motorbike, hit a pole, and slammed into people whose bones he broke as a result of his out-of-control driving. The caller then states that he is speaking with the lawyer in case he is sued.

Telephone exchanges in which a person calls to check in with a lawyer about possible legal trouble is a bread-and-butter communication form for attorneys. Attorneys have stock questions they ask for particular legal troubles to assess whether a case is one they might take. Consider how the exchange between the attorney and the caller proceeds following the first 35 seconds of narration.

**EXCERPT 11.1**

A: Did you have insurance?
C: Yeah but it was through a friend
A: But will you- will you be covered?
C: I don’t know.
A: Well that- The insurance company will appoint a lawyer for you if you get sued. But when you get sued you may be higher than what your policy is. When you get sued above your policy, if you have a policy you’re going to have to contact a lawyer.
C: Right.
A: I don’t handle cases like that.
C: Right but di- Is it possible in any way then to sue you people?
A: Sue who?
C: You. I’m asking you for help.
A: Sue who? M::e?
C: Yes
A: Why do you want sue me?
C: Well I’m trying to explain I had a terrible accident.
A: Why- What does that have to do with me?
C: Wul- I’m asking you for help and maybe I could sue for punitive damages that you’re giving me.
A: I’m giving you?
C: Yes
A: M::e?
C: Ye::s
A: What’d I do to you?
C: We’ll punitive damages here.
A: I’m a- yu- I’m a lawyer what did I do to you?
C: The sidecar smashed into a pole and everything I’m trying to explain this to you.
A: Hey you want to sue m::e?
C: Wh- Why not?
A: M::e?
C: Sue everybody.
A: Sir I can’t help you.

This prank call will strike many people as funny because the attorney shows no awareness that his leg is being pulled. In this exchange that the Jerky Boys labeled “Punitive Damages,” a call that can be heard on YouTube,¹ the attorney responds as if the caller were a legitimate potential customer inquiring about services. Such leg-pulling is possible because work in all kinds of roles and institutional sites regularly makes use of distinct communication genres. A genre, as Vijay Bhatia defines it, “is a recognizable communication event characterized by a set of communicative
Genres are structured communicative events that permit certain kinds of communicative contributions and (generally) rule out others. However, although genres have a typical form, they may be exploited to advance one party’s private purpose, as we see happening in this Jerky Boy call. In essence the caller creates humor by both using and playing with the genre. He exploits this “seeking legal help” genre in several subtle ways. In the call’s beginning (not shown in the transcript), rather than presenting his trouble in a way that foregrounds its accidental, unintentional character, he includes descriptive details that upgrade his responsibility and carelessness. Then, as shown in Excerpt 11.1, the caller turns what would be the usual focus of such a call—how likely is he to be sued and how he should prepare for this outcome—on its head by threatening to sue the attorney for punitive damages. Distinctive jargon is another important part of many genres, and certainly, “punitive damages” is jargon common to the “seeking legal help” genre. But the use to which the caller puts this term is not; therein lies the call’s humor.

Following an explication of the concept of genre, this chapter describes six genres. We focus on each genre’s typical form, on how it links to identities, and on distinctive challenges within it or ways it may be exploited. We begin by analyzing genres in institutional contexts, the site in which the idea of genre is most useful and most used. Then we demonstrate how genre also applies in informal communication scenes involving friends and family members.

Background

Genre, a term in English adopted initially from French, means kind, class, or type. It is widely used in ordinary discourse to refer to types of literature, movies, and paintings. Its applicability to forms of talk in everyday life was initially called for by a Russian scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin, who was writing in the middle years of the 20th century. Arguing with a common understanding of language at that time, a view promoted by Ferdinand Saussure, Bakhtin asserted that language involved more than strings of unrelated sentences. Speech, he argued, comes in genres that involve stable packages of expression. These packages range from simple ones, such as greetings and good-byes, to complex ones, such as presidential debates, emergency calls, or professional conferences. The idea of genre partly overlaps with the notion of frame that we introduced in Chapter 1. Genres, like frames, refer to the situated communicative activities or practices that are being enacted. The biggest differences between the two concepts is that, whereas genre
highlights the expectations that preexist an interactional moment, *frame*, with its easy verb form, *framing*, highlights the in-the-moment interactional moves. In addition, frame foregrounds the name and meaning of the activity, whereas genre foregrounds the parts that make it up.

Genres involve several features, with the most important being that a genre is a sequence of acts. In most genres certain acts are required, whereas others are optional. For parts of the sequence, certain acts must occur at a specific moment (opening or closing), whereas others can be switched around a bit. Second, genres are characterized by particular speech styles that vary in all the ways we discussed in Chapter 10. A genre’s style may be serious or humorous, involved or distant, formal or informal, to name just a few of the most obvious dimensions. It is also the case that individual communicators may style a genre in ways that are distinctive to themselves. In actual situations, genre and style are intricately tied to each other. Genreforegrounds the structural aspects of talk, whereas style focuses on the expressive features or on how speakers vary. Third, although not a defining feature of all genres, a common feature of institutional ones is that they possess specialized vocabularies. It is the use (and abuse) of a term such as *punitive damages* that cued that the prank call was a legal exchange. Finally, genres are tied to identities and communities. In the call, it is the call taker asking about insurance and providing the caller information about how legal suits work that enacts him as an attorney talking with a potential client rather than as some other pair.

Learning new speech genres, in fact, is a key part of professional training. Coming to be a professional category of person is based on a person mastering that category’s speech genres. In nursing school, for instance, a student will practice taking information from a patient, learning how to sequence and formulate questions about health and lifestyle to achieve the desired informational and relational outcomes. Becoming a business professional, to give a second example, involves mastering genres such as interviewing job candidates, making a sales pitch, participating in and running meetings, updating a superior on team activities, and giving and receiving performance reviews.⁵ Ably achieving a businessperson identity also involves mastering written genres such as sales reports, recommendation letters, and strategic plans. Each profession has speech (and writing) genres that are distinct to that group, and performing its genres in a skilled manner is the central way people enact themselves as an identity of a particular type.

Some genres are highly specialized, carried out among professionals and including job-related jargon unintelligible to the uninitiated, as is the case for talk between air traffic controllers and pilots during takeoffs and...
landings. Others are more accessible, bringing lay participants into contact with a professional who uses but often explains selected jargon as would be common in meetings between a layperson and an accountant, architect, or attorney. All genres have unique features, but genres may also share commonalities, as is the case across kinds of gatekeeping situations. Whether a gatekeeping interview involves an academic advisor determining whether a student has met the requirements to graduate or a social worker assessing whether particular persons meet the criteria to become adoptive parents, both put the gatekeeper in the role of asking a series of questions and explicating a final judgment, and these communicative moves, although content-flavored, have much in common.  

**Genre 1: The Emergency Telephone Call**

An emergency telephone call to 9-1-1 may concern many different kinds of trouble, but the structure of such calls is focused and quite narrow. Don Zimmerman has identified five key phases or activities in emergency calls: (1) the opening, (2) the caller request for help, (3) the interrogative series, (4) the call taker response, and (5) the closing. An example of a typical emergency call is seen in Excerpt 11.2.

---

**EXCERPT 11.2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opening</th>
<th>1 911: Midcity Emergency::,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 CLR: U:m yeah (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request</td>
<td>4 somebody just vandalized my car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrogative Series</td>
<td>6 911: What’s your address.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 CLR: Three oh one six maple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 911: Is this a house or an apartment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9 CLR: It’s a house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 911: ( Uh-) your last name.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 CLR: Minsky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 911: How do you spell it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Emergency calls contrast with calls between friends and coworkers in that they rarely begin with friendly greetings and inquiries as to how the other is doing. The absence of such actions, common elsewhere, contributes to this genre’s distinctiveness. On the rare occasions when callers do begin with greetings, it serves to mark an emergency call as not business as usual. In a study of 9-1-1 calls, Karen Tracy and Donald Anderson showed that a caller who began by greeting the call taker (“Hi, how are you?”) went on to tell a complicated story about troubles with his wife that was not a problem in which police could reasonably intervene. A caller’s violation of the expected genre in the opening moment, one could say, works to cue the call taker that what is to be presented is not a typical emergency. Thus deviations from the expected genre cue that something nonordinary is forthcoming.

Although call takers do not typically greet citizens when they report emergencies, call takers regularly use greetings in other telephone calls they make, and in so doing they create different call genres. In fact, one of the ways emergency call takers construct themselves as fellow professionals is to greet others in their broad category (other police personnel, paramedics, firefighter staff) before getting down to the business that motivates the contact. For instance, in Excerpt 11.3 an emergency call taker contacts a different police unit to see whether a sergeant who handles complaints is there. The call taker is calling for a citizen who has complained that her car was towed unfairly and has asked to talk to “someone in charge.” After being put on hold, the following exchange occurs between the two police-linked personnel.

**EXCERPT 11.3 (PU = police unit, EC = emergency communications)**

PU: Thanks for holding. How can I help you?

EC: This is Agent Ted in communications, how are you?
“Behind the scenes” personnel coordinating calls are less structured than 9-1-1 calls. Yet they are also a communicatively purposeful genre with distinctive features. Similar to calls between other kinds of coworkers, the call begins with a friendly greeting. That this call is a more distinct genre than an ordinary phone conversation is cued by the emergency caller’s use of police jargon that people unaffiliated with policing and this unit in particular are unlikely to recognize. In asking to speak to “three-twenty”—the police car dispatch identification for a particular sergeant—the two parties enact themselves as police personnel who are coordinating regarding work activities.

Genre 2: Organizational Meetings

One of the most common genres in 21st-century work life is the meeting. Meetings come in many sizes and occur for many purposes. They vary from informal gatherings of a few people in a coffee shop to plan an event to a large decision-making group with one set of people around a table with a second layer of others aiding and observing around the room’s perimeter. Although multiple identity categories contribute to making the meeting genre what it is, the chairperson’s communicative activities are especially important. The meeting chairperson, as Anita Pomerantz and Paul Denvir show, is expected to open (“Let’s get started, shall we?”) and close (“thanks everybody. See you all next week”) the communication occasion. A chairperson is also responsible for introducing the items on the agenda, allocating turns among people, determining when discussion of an item is sufficient, and shifting to the next agenda item. It is the chairperson, moreover, who would be expected to sanction conduct of other members judged to be inappropriate, whether that involved a mild rebuke (“Okay, folks, save that for the break. We need to get this done”) or a more serious criticism (“Linda, that’s not appropriate. You need to take that up one-on-one with Matt”). In formal meetings these activities are likely to be carried out by a single person who is officially the meeting chairperson. In more informal groups, many of the same activities occur, but they could be carried out by several people.

How meetings are designed and enacted and what a meeting’s most important purpose is understood to be varies across communities. Put
another way, genres are culturally inflected. Haru Yamada’s comparison of informal planning meetings held weekly among a small set of American bankers with similar meetings of Japanese bankers identified culturally distinctive ways of moving through the agenda. In the American meeting, items on the agenda were clearly owned and the responsibility of a particular person, and the person who owned the item did most of the talking. In the Japanese meeting, in contrast, talk on agenda items was not so individually marked; all meeting members talked on each topic. In addition, rather than concluding an agenda item formulaically with a comment such as “that’s it,” as Americans did, Japanese meeting members did so gradually through an increase in the number and length of pauses.12

The speech differences that have been observed in the meeting genre cross-culturally can be tied to the differences in the understood communicative purpose of a meeting. Are workplace meetings seen primarily as places for action to be taken or as sites for formal ratification of plans that had been decided elsewhere? In a study that compared business meetings in China and Europe, Yuling Pan and her colleagues found that Chinese meetings were understood to have the purpose of ratifying decisions that had been made previously through private conversations with participants, whereas in the European meeting, the meeting itself was seen as the time to make the decision.13 This difference in a meeting’s understood purpose led to disagreement being either welcome (in European meetings) or discouraged (in Chinese meetings). In essence, then, we see speech communities giving different weights to the task and relational concerns that must be managed in all meetings.

In a review of culturally Western workplace meetings, Janet Holmes and Maria Stubbe compared how men and women ran and participated in meetings.14 In formal meetings there were few gender differences, but as meetings became informal and as a greater number of a meeting’s participants were women, women’s communicative conduct changed. The authors found that the small talk at the start of a meeting lasted longer and personal humor sequences occurred more often in informal, mostly female meetings. We can say, then, that when a meeting has proportionally more women, participants are likely to spend more time performing communicative acts that promote friendly connecting than would occur in mixed-sex or all-male meeting groups. Through the content and style of one’s participation in the meeting genre, a person enacts himself as a person possessing particular personal identities—organized, dominating, quiet, emotional, task-focused, tactful—as well as displaying his interactional identities (meeting chairperson, timekeeper, note taker).

When meetings are public, another genre of talk becomes visible.
Genre 3: Citizen Testimony in Public Meetings

A third genre of talk, a monologic one that involves a speaker taking an extended turn at talk, is that of the citizen giving a speech in a public hearing. Unlike many institutional genres in which rules are tacit, the giving of a speech in a public context usually has explicit rules—for instance, specifying how long a person may talk and what topical content is expected or disallowed. The citizen testimony genre occurs in meetings about zoning and environmental issues, in state legislative hearings for bills expected to be controversial, and in the routine meetings that city councils and school boards hold.

This genre includes three phases with one or more distinct speech acts in each phase. Citizen testimony includes an opening, a body in which the meeting-specific argumentative work is accomplished, and a closing. Excerpt 11.4 illustrates a typical opening in a citizen speech. This one occurred in a school board meeting in which the district was experiencing conflict.15

EXCEPRT 11.4

Greeting (optional) Good evening.

Self-identification I am Randy Szarmack.

Credentialing I’ve been a resident of the Boulder Valley School District for over twenty-five years. I have two children- I’ve had two children at Boulder High School and two more yet to attend. My oldest son will be a junior this Fall.

What exactly is done in the credentialing move of an opening depends on the kind of meeting and its content focus. In general, speakers will note whatever they judge as supporting a right to have what they say be taken seriously. In Excerpt 11.4 the speaker highlights the extended length of her involvement in the school district as a parent with four kids. In a speech analyzed in Chapter 9, in which a man was criticizing this same school board for their interpretation of statistical tests, he mentioned a relevant work role (management consultant) and his experience working with statistics. When the topic of a meeting concerns an issue related to an identity-linked policy—but not in other cases—speakers nearly always
mention their ethnic or gender identities (e.g., “Speaking as a Latina”). In a legislative hearing to take testimony about a bill extending marriage rights to same-sex couples, some testifiers introduced themselves by noting that they were religious or identifying the church or religion of which they were a member; others introduced themselves by highlighting that they were gay or lesbian themselves or closely related to a gay person. These self-descriptive credentialing moves are tailored to the occasion with the aim of enhancing a speaker’s standing in order to amplify his or her influence in the proceeding.

The body section of citizen testimony will be especially context dependent. It may be packaged as a story, an argument, or both, and its content will vary with a meeting’s focus. In single-issue hearings, the speech body often advances claims indirectly because the topical frame is clearly understood. In multipurpose regularly reoccurring meetings, however, citizens’ speeches often need to both nominate and explain the issue or problem they are addressing. Finally, the concluding phase of testifying typically includes an expression of thanks from the speaker that is reciprocated with another “thank you” from the meeting chairperson.

Should a testifier not adhere to the genre, she will be instructed to add in the expected act, as happens, for example, when testifiers forget to announce who they are at the beginning of their testimony. This kind of reminder, mild and perfunctory as it is, is a way of altercasting the citizen testifier as a novice, someone who is not knowledgeable or comfortable in what she is doing. At its most basic, then, command of, or difficulty with, a genre enact a communicator as a more or less experienced identity category, whether that be citizen testifier, report meeting participant, or emergency call taker or maker.

**Genre 4: Talk Show Interview**

A different sort of genre is the talk show interview. Whether it happens on television or radio and features politicians or celebrities or ordinary folks, the talk show interview is a kind of mediated interaction that has been around in one form or another for many decades. Talk show openings can be different—ordinary people call in to radio talk shows most of the time, whereas celebrities and experts are invited. On television, ordinary people might also be invited if they are involved in some sort of extraordinary circumstances. But the host’s interactional role is relatively stable, and talk show interaction tends to revolve around question-and-answer sequences. Consider the following excerpts of two talk show sequences,
one in Hungarian and one in Hebrew (both excerpts show the English translations only):

**EXCERPT 11.5 Hungarian Radio Show “The Freedom of Speech”**

1. **HOST:** Should one respond to hate speech with an essay suitable for inciting hatred?
2. **GUEST:** What essay do you have in mind?
3. **HOST:** Well, your essay.
4. **GUEST:** This is preposterous.17

**Israeli Radio Show “There Is Someone to Talk To”**

1. **HOST:** I’ll tell you, [Dan
2. **CALLER:** [She worked
3. **HOST:** Dan, I swear to you,
4. **CALLER:** Yea.
5. **HOST:** Your conversation is extremely pleasant for me.
   [But the break
6. **CALLER:** [Yeah, okay18

Though both excerpts are from similar contexts (radio talk shows), they are also different in a number of ways. The Hungarian show is political, and more contentious interactions such as the one given are expected; guests also tend to be more recognizable to the public. The Israeli show, on the other hand, is not strictly guided by a topic and features phone-ins from members of the public. Nonetheless, both excerpts are recognizably part of the talk show genre. In the Hungarian-language interview, the host guides the interaction by asking questions and follow-up questions designed to get the guest talking. These questions also seem to be designed to get the guest talking about something rather controversial with which the guest may not agree. Being challenging and inciting confrontation is common for many kinds of talk shows, on the radio and on television, as a form of entertainment. The host’s question in turn 1 prefers a “no” answer: In asking whether hate speech should be responded to with hatred, a reasonable expectation would be disagreement. The fact that the guest does not disagree right away might indicate a belief that sometimes hate is an understandable response to hate, but perhaps more likely, it shows that the
guest senses what is coming: that the guest is being set up by the host. This possibility is confirmed when the host accuses the guest of doing this in an essay. Both host and guest are “doing confrontation” and doing so through the way they pose and anticipate challenging questions and respond to or deflect those questions.

In the Hebrew-language interview, the conversation has not been so contentious. Nonetheless, the host makes visible another aspect of this genre, which is that it is structured by particular time limitations. Here, the host has to interrupt the caller to tell the caller they have to go to a break (turn 5) and are therefore out of time. Because interrupting someone in the middle of talk is seen as rude, the host tries to avoid coming across in this way by doing stance markers of sincerity (“I swear to you” turn 3) and complimenting speech acts (turn 5). Talk shows are generally either live or filmed in front of an audience, and participants have to accommodate their talk to the schedule of the show, the commercial breaks, and other elements of format.

Hosts and callers or guests on radio and televised talk shows display their interactional identities in a number of ways: the sorts of speech acts they do, how long a turn they take, how their talk frames the situation, and the way in which they respond to one another. But interactional identities are not strictly separate from other kinds of identities. In particular, personal identities are tied to interactional identities. Hosts will present themselves as polite or challenging, accommodating or critical, depending on the nature of the program and the identity of their interlocutors. The identities talk show participants take on in relation to one another is particularly salient in news show parodies such as The Daily Show and The Colbert Report, which exaggerate political and other identities for satirical (and humorous) effect. But even popular talk shows such as Oprah or The Dr. Phil Show are guided by the personal identities of the hosts, the identities of guests, and the focus of the show. Who is on the show sets up an expectation for how the interaction will go, and what the show is about (hoarders on The Dr. Phil Show or paternity tests on The Maury Povich Show) sets up an expectation for the sorts of people who will be on the show and the sorts of things that will happen.

Genre 5: Gift Exchanges

Exchanging gifts is a looser genre than some of the others we’ve discussed because giving and receiving gifts can happen in a lot of situations, especially cross-culturally. In most Western societies, however, gift-exchange
ceremonies share many common features. Particularly during birthdays or holidays, the person opening the gifts (the gift recipient) is the focus of attention, surrounded by the gift giver and various onlookers and expected to perform in certain ways. Gift recipients nearly always make very positive, even exaggerated exclamations of joy upon seeing a gift. This is followed by displaying the gift so that others can assess it positively as well. Gift exchanges may differ from culture to culture or even family to family, but for the most part people expect gifts to be accepted with gratitude. Part of the evidence for this “rule” is that when people do not respond to gifts in positive ways, people treat them as having not provided the “correct” action. Such an exchange is illustrated in the following excerpt. Samantha has just graduated from middle school and her family is celebrating. Her grandparents have given her a make-up mirror.

**EXCERPT 11.6**

1  **GRAM:**  You know this is from Gramma and Grampa right,
2  (0.5)
3  **GRAM:**  Sam?
4  (0.5)
5  **DAD:**  Oh:: (.) it’s a makeup mirror=
6  **MOM:**  =How cute
7  **SAM:**  (  )
8  **DAD:**  That’s good cuz I just *broke* yer mirror (1.0) in yer little black case?=
9  **MOM:**  =The Mary Quant=
10 **SAM:**  ((looking puzzled))
11 **DAD:**  =Yeah it fell outa the back of the truck (.) you know remember how I was talking about the- how everything was (.) kyna ((crash sound)) opened the door and it went right out the truck (0.5) hit the ground and went to pieces (.) so
12 **SAM:**  (  )
13 **DAD:**  Yeah I know
14  ((camera cuts to next scene))
15 **GRAM:**  It magnifies (.) it lights up\(^9\)
In this excerpt, the forms of talk expected in this genre are not happening, leading others in the interaction to pursue them. From the beginning of the exchange Samantha is apparently not performing with as much enthusiasm as would be expected. In the home video recording from which the data are drawn, Samantha is fairly quiet and unexpressive. She does not look bored or uninterested, but several of the others in the situation (her grandparents, parents, and siblings) treat her responses as “not enough.” After Samantha opens the gift, all of the audible praises of it come from her parents (and later her grandmother, one of the gift givers) while she remains subdued. She speaks and probably says appropriate things, but her voice is so low it is not picked up by the camera (turns 7, 12) and she is often looking down at the gift and not making eye contact with the others in the room. The other participants work to try to make up for this subdued response by trying to elicit a more marked response from her. From the beginning Gramma (turns 1, 3) is trying to get Samantha’s attention, and later Samantha’s parents offer their own praise and explanations for the gift, as if to give reasons why Samantha should like it (turns 5, 6, 8, 9). It is hard to tell how long after the break the camera picks up again, but it is long enough for the position of the camera to have changed completely and yet people are still praising the gift while Samantha is still quiet: Gramma on turn 15, and more compliments from others continue after that.

One key dilemma in gift giving is that everyone has to act as though they are happy to receive a gift, but everyone knows this. This means that gift recipients are under pressure to act happy but also to act genuinely happy, not as though they are just faking it for the people around them. People use a number of strategies for giving positive assessments and appearing to do so genuinely, one of which is to respond quickly and with high (even exaggerated) excitement toward a gift. Doing response cries, exclamations that appear to be reactive and given off naturally, can be rhetorically motivated to authenticate a reaction to a gift. Samantha, however, does not do this. There could be any number of reasons why. Perhaps she does not like the gift and cannot summon more than minimal appreciation. Perhaps she does like the gift but does not feel a need to display her gratitude more extremely. Perhaps she is the sort of person who is not so demonstrative. In any case she is not fulfilling her duties to the genre and does this by not fully participating in the interactional identity (as an excited, grateful gift recipient) that the situation affords her. In doing so, she may be (perhaps inadvertently) displaying a personal identity of someone who is not grateful or appreciative enough. On the other hand, she may see herself as displaying an identity that is more “real” by not pretending any more enthusiasm than she actually feels.
Displaying certain identities has consequences for the situation. Identities are bound up in gift exchanges because gift exchanges and their ceremonies are linked to the relationships between the gift givers and recipients. Identities are never solely individual but are displayed in relation to, by reacting to, or with others. It is the identities of all the participants and their relation to one another, not the identities of single persons, that contribute to an event fitting into an identifiable genre.

**Genre 6: Personal Conversation**

People tend to think of more institutional genres as organized and **ordinary conversation** as random, but as conversation analysts have demonstrated, conversation is quite well organized. It certainly is a recognizable genre, though a much less strict one than some others we have mentioned. Its visibility as a genre is noticeable in the ways in which it is referenced in organizational and institutional contexts. Employees may be urged (or even trained) to be “personable,” to interact in a “conversational” style, which is assumed to be more friendly and less formal. That people mark off kinds of conversation as distinct from other genres indicates that there are act sequences, styles, terms, and identities associated with doing a particular type of “ordinary conversation.” A recognizable prototype for conversation is the personal conversation—the sort of conversations people have with a close friend, relative, or loved one. In Excerpts 11.7 and 11.8 two close friends (who are also classmates in college and sorority sisters) have a personal conversation about “boy troubles.” Part of what emphasizes the intimate nature of the conversation is that it starts off being styled as a more institutional genre. One contextual feature: The conversation was initiated because one of us (J.S.R.) asked students to tape conversations with good friends for analysis. Consider how Cara (C) and Molly (M) began:

**EXCERPT 11.7**

1 C: What do you want to do when you’re older?
2 M: I (.) want (.) to (.) own (.) a (.) hotel.
3 C: Why do you want to own a hotel?
4 M: So my friends can stay there for free?
5 C: Really that’s why?
6 M: No [(laughs)]
Cara and Molly begin their recorded conversation in a way that invokes an interview, asking questions back and forth as if they did not know each other well. One important aspect this choice demonstrates is that ordinary conversation often involves mixes of genres, and often conversations do not fall neatly into one or another. In this particular case, the more explicitly performed genre seems to be a way of commenting on the situation and the fact of being recorded. We would suggest that these two close friends use the interview genre—a genre that is commonly taped and regularly made public—as a way to ease into the doing of a personal conversation. Personal conversation is a genre not usually taped and public. Molly and Cara’s starting in this way, therefore, marks their conversation as atypical in some way. Molly’s reference (turn 8) to the conversation feeling like an interview further highlights that she sees the two of them as not talking to each other as they normally would. If we did not know otherwise, given the way these two talked we would infer that the two women had a much more distant relationship, acquaintances perhaps or quite new friends. We expect close friends, especially female ones, to have a sense of each other’s hopes for the future and to know that a friend and her boyfriend had broken up. To ask for information about another’s hopes or for a person to give information
about where one’s boyfriend is from and how long the two have been dating would normally cue a not-very-close relationship. In this context, though, these features have a different interactional meaning, cueing that Cara and Molly are beginning the recording of their “personal conversation” using a genre (an interview) that feels more comfortable for public overhearing. Tape recording often makes people self-conscious. Typically, though, after a few minutes people move into talking with each other as they normally would. Soon after Excerpt 11.7 Cara asks Molly, “What are you doing on your computer?” At this point the two launch into a recognizable personal conversation.

EXCERPT 11.8

59 M: Like um about this essay, Graham was like “so do we have anything due: (.) tomorrow in class?” And he- I was like yeah our first essay’s due. And he was like alright so I’ll call you later to do it.
60 C: Euw
61 M: Yeah
62 C: And how do you feel about that?
63 M: Not good [([laughs]])
64 C: [ >What are you gonna do <
65 M: Um (. ) probably if he asks to come over I’m just gonna say I’ll help him online.
66 C: Why would you want to help him after him being such an obnoxious asshole to you?

After Cara asks Molly what she’s doing on her computer, Molly briefly discusses an assignment she’s working on, then launches into a complaint about a mutual friend and classmate of theirs (Graham) who recently rejected her romantic overtures (turn 59). Discussing private matters having to do with relationships is not a topic solely covered in personal conversations—it also occurs in therapy—but it unfolds here in a particular way. Cara does not ask who Graham is or what situation Molly is referencing, indicating that she already knows and also pointing to a much closer relationship than was cued by their opening “interview.” Instead, Cara’s next turn (turn 60) is “euw,” a stance marker of dismay or disgust, which is immediately thereafter aligned with by Molly’s “yeah” in turn 61. While showing familiarity with the Graham situation, Cara seems to receive this
recent update about Graham as news; nevertheless, she knows how she should respond to the new piece of information. She produces her response without hesitation, and the response is quite strong. This is one way Cara shows that she knows Molly well and knows what Molly’s response to the situation is. The subsequent turns strengthen the sense that this is a conversation between people who are quite close and know a lot about each other’s recent relational histories. Cara’s questions to Molly about how she feels and what she’s going to do aren’t unique to a personal conversation (they would also fit with the interview style of earlier), but what they are about is a personal subject—Molly’s emotional stance toward a sensitive subject, for instance. Even more definitive perhaps is Cara’s response to what Molly says she’s going to do. Cara immediately displays a challenging stance toward Molly’s assertion in which she indicates that Molly is being too “soft” on Graham. Graham wants help with homework over the phone, and Molly states that she’ll only assist him online. Cara questions why Molly would want to help Graham at all and cues a strikingly negative stance toward Graham by calling him “an obnoxious asshole.”

One way people show they are strongly aligned with someone is to disalign from someone with whom that person is in conflict. This is part of doing support, of providing some form of comfort or cooperation with someone who is going through a difficult or frustrating situation. It not only indicates a close stance with the other person in the conversation but is also a way of doing a particular identity of someone who is a “good friend.” There are sensitivities attendant on such situations. Bashing someone who is a love interest can be dangerous, even if the love interest is seen as wronging the friend. Cara is doing being a good friend in a “tough” style: She doesn’t display being careful toward Graham for the sake of whatever feelings Molly still may have about him. Later in the conversation Cara is adamant that Molly must not continue to have a sexual relationship with Graham now that he has rejected a romantic relationship with her. Molly’s stance toward these injunctions is unclear: She mostly smiles and laughs, possibly aware of the recording camera, possibly to avoid outright disagreement.

The genre of a personal conversation is likely to include private topics—here, relationships and sex—often through a trading of stories and to involve various shows of alignment or support from the listener toward the situation. Advice may be given as well, as it is later in this conversation, and emotional stances toward people and events are evoked. It is a more flexible genre than the previous ones discussed, but the way participants talk to one another demonstrates that it is a recognizably different form of talk from others.
Summary

Genres are identifiable packages of communicative actions that may be loosely or strictly structured and either enacted straightforwardly or played with. When genres are played with, as we saw in the Jerky Boys prank call and Cara and Molly’s conversation, one genre gets embedded in another to accomplish a complex interactional meaning. Genres are an important component of identity work. By performing a certain speech genre straightforwardly, a communicator comes to legitimately be a particular interactional identity. By playing with a genre within a genre, a communicator establishes a different kind of identity.

Speech genres exist at different levels of abstraction. Interview talk, for instance, is a recognizable genre involving questioning by one party and responding by the other, but the content, interactional style, and unfolding of the interview will depend on which interview version, or subgenre, the interview is. That is, medical intake interviews will differ from political news interviews, which in turn will differ from celebrity radio interviews. Interview subgenres also vary from each other depending on whether they are primarily conceived as events to be viewed by others or as events to serve institutional, gatekeeping purposes. Finally, although many genres occur in all cultures, it is also true that most genres include culturally distinct features and may be performed in a style that marks the doer as being a person of a specific nationality, gender, or some other master identity.
PART IV

THE CONCLUSION
Endings are communicatively challenging, difficult to get just right. Although they are an ordinary part of every activity, people invest them with extraordinary significance. This is so whether the ending involves an individual encounter, moving away from home, or finishing a book. What the challenges are, of course, varies with what is being ended. For books, authors are expected to end on a thoughtful, interesting note that underscores as well as draws out the implications of the main points they have been making. In this book’s ending, we seek to accomplish these purposes in several ways. First we present two cases of everyday talk that you can view (case 1) or listen to (case 2), along with reading transcripts. These cases, accompanied by the questions we raise about them, are designed to help you put together the multiple ways of analyzing talk and identities that we have discussed in this book. Following the cases we offer a handful of “take-away thoughts”—insights we hope you remember and use as you close this book.

Case 1: Four Teens Talking

The following is a transcript of four cousins talking with each other around a dining room table as they drink tea. Three of them—Alicia (12), Jerri (14), and Kylie (14)—are visiting the home of their aunt, uncle, and older cousin, Josie (19), during the winter holidays. I (K.T.), Josie’s mom, asked the girls if they’d be willing to talk and be taped so that I could use their tape in a college class. The girls were instructed to say who they were and then talk about something on which they were likely to have differences of opinion. The transcript starts about 5 minutes into their conversation. Three of the girls have introduced themselves, and it is Kylie’s turn.
Before answering the questions, view the 4-minute video, available on YouTube.¹ Watch the video both with and without the transcript as you reflect about the questions.

EXCERPT 12.1

1 K: Okay um I’m Kylie and I like ((laughing from others)) reading and drawing and climbing trees and running

2 Je: [She goes to the same school as Alicia

3 K: =playing soccer and

4 A: “I like reading too” ()

5 K: and um (2.2)

6 Je: And what are you gonna be reah reah reah eh ((laughter))

7 ?: What’d you want be when you grow up ((laughter from all))

8 K: Um I don’t really know what I wanna be when I grow up but maybe maybe a teacher or an author or a chemist or something else ((laughter from others))

9 Jo: So are you gonna go to acting school?

10 Je: Um hmm

11 Jo: Like for college?

12 Je: Yeah

13 Jo: Er are you just gonna go to a regular university and major in acting? or [yeah or=

14 Je: [well um actu-

15 Jo: =Or major in the[ater

16 Je: [I’m thinking well there’s like a couple acting schools that I’m definitely considering but like I don’t know because like if I don’t make it which I will make it but if by some freak chance all of the acting world shuts down and I hafta do something else then I wanna have something to fall back on like writing or something er I don’t know so I’m gonna back myself up in some good minors an:

17 JO: Cool.

18 K: “I don’t think of writing as a good fallback thing cuz ((group laughter))
19 Je: THANK YOU FOR YOUR LOVING SUPPORT Kylie ((more laughter)) It means a lot to me

20 K: But (.) I mean in general. I’m sure you would be a very good writer ((sing song))(. . .) but (.) it’s just

21 Je: (would be)

((several laughing))

22 K: Yeah ((others laughing))

23 Ke: Da.mn

24 Ke: But just its- it seems like such a (.) a chancy thing like some writers do really good and some writers [( .)

25 Je: [I’ll be really good

26 Jo: [( .) with actors or dancers [or a lot=

27 Ke: [Yeah I know

28 Jo: =of [things

29 Je: [What I’m thinking is that I can like write songs to get in the ↑door and then like since I’d have such mad connections for like these famous artists that I’m writing songs ↑for then I can be like( .)Oh wait ( 0.6) I wanta sing it (( said laughing)) And then I can be like( .) Yeah I also sing too I think I mentioned that. I did mention that. (1.2) Yes ((laughing))

30 A: Well sst “on the topic of” (. . .) authors when J K ↑Rowling started ↑out like (1.6) in an apar- she was living in an apartment with one daugh↑ter and to write she (0.8) would go to stores or not stores um cafes and stuff and [she would just=

31 Jo: [my bad

32 A: =sit there ( . ) and write (1.0) and if she [I mean

33 Je: [She writes the Harry Potter books

34 A: like yeah “in case you didn’t ↑know”

35 Jo: ((laughing)) I:. didn’t

36 A: But now she’s [like ((others laughing))

37 Je: [Josie’s so out of touch ((lots of laughter))

38 A: but now she’s ( .) ri- richer than the queen of England. Er the second richest wom↑an ( .) or something like that

39 Je: [whoo

40 Jo: [WO:W that’s out of control
Jo: Well I bet a lotta people are (. ) richer than the queen of England that includes like [think=]

K: [but she’s like]

Jo: =about like football=

K: She lives in England

Jo: =players and people that make ][(laughing)) a lot of money

?: [yeah]

Je: ( ) I’m being a famous football player

Jo: ( ) Actors famous actors make phshhh I’m sure more than the queen of England. I don’t know how much she makes but (. ) it seems like (. ) they would

A: I don’t think she makes a lot she jus ( )

Je: well you know what Bush makes [like no money whatsoever=

Jo: [yeah]

Je: =He makes like seventy thousand or something

Jo: No like two hundred thousand a year or something was it

Je: Really?

Jo: I dunno

Je: Oh

Jo: Somethin.’ I don’t know (. ) but

Je: He doesn’t make like that much at all

Jo: Yeah but they get to (. ) like live for free and like get everything and [( )

Je: [they get to live for free

((laughing))

Jo: Wuhhhh

Je: Live in a place

Jo: They don’t pay rent (. ) at the white house

((all laughing))

Jo: So:(.) I guess (. ) but

Aunt:[if you wanta talk about ( )

Jo: [But they get two hundred thousand dollars a year or something like that for the rest of their life, it’s not just when they’re in tern

A: [O:h

Je: [Oh damn ( )
69 Jo: Ye:ah so like once like your president
70 K: so he can get another job that he doesn’t like
71 Jo: they don’t hafta go (.) get a (.) job or anything after your
pres[ident (.] yeah (1.6)
72 K: [whoo
73 Je: somehow that reminds me of outer space ((laughing)) go figure
((lots of laughing))

Questions

1. **Overview:** Let’s start at the broadest level. What master, interactional, and personal identities does this 4-minute segment of talk make visible? Describe the features of talk that lead you to the inferences you make about the speakers’ identities. Think about their voices, their turn taking, the speech acts they do and respond to, their conversational style, the stances adopted and their indicators, the purposes and implications of the mini-stories they tell.

2. **Context:** What is the context for this conversation? How is the context both cued and created in the girls’ exchange?
   - What is the historical time? If you were to propose what year this conversation occurred, what would you guess? What features of the conversation lead you to this judgment?
   - One contextual feature that distinguishes this conversation from many others is that the girls are having the discussion as a favor for their aunt. They know they are being videotaped and they know older others will be watching them talking. This context, we could say, leads the girls to enact the identity, “we’re people being taped for others to watch.” What features of the talk cue this? Consider both obvious and subtle features.

3. **Master identities:** If you had only a transcript, would you be able to guess the age range and gender of the speakers? What are the cues of these master identities?
   - What are the ways that Josie enacts herself as the oldest?
   - In her opening introduction, what about Kylie’s self-description cues that her age identity is young teen?
   - Are there ways of talking that seem more typically female? What are they?
4. **Personal identities:** What does the selection of speech acts and how they were responded to tell you about the personal relationships among the girls? Are they close or distant? What makes you think so?

- Apply the idea of altercasting to Kylie’s response to Jerri at turn 18 and then Jerri’s response to Kyle in the next turn (turn 19). How is Kylie altercasting Jerri and then how does Jerri altercast Kylie?
- If you made personality inferences about the girls, what would they be? What are the ways of communicating that cue these profiles?
- With regard to the identities of “I’m a reader” and “I love books,” how do the girls claim or disavow those identities?

5. **Cultural perspective:** This is a conversation among middle-class American girls who are white.

- How is class enacted through their talk? Would the conversation differ if they came from less affluent and educated families? How might the talk have differed?
- How does the talk reflect that they are likely to be American rather than British or Australian?
- Would their talk be different if they were middle-class Latina, Asian American, or African American girls?

**Dr. Laura and a Controversial Radio Broadcast**

Dr. Laura Schlessinger has been a talk show host for many years; she is the author of popular, conservative self-help books, such as *In Praise of Stay-at-Home Moms, The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands,* and *Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives.* Her radio show typically involves callers, most often women, phoning in to ask for advice. Dr. Laura, as her website bills her, chats with a caller on live radio, finding out about the person’s concern, and then she gives advice, which is often accompanied by conservative political commentary. In August of 2010 Dr. Laura, who is a white woman, took a call from Jade, an African American woman, which became the focus of extensive media attention. Schlessinger’s radio show was canceled because of her handling of this call. Six months later she began another show on satellite radio. The 6-minute call can be heard in its entirety on YouTube. A simple transcript of the exchange follows.
1 LS: Jade, welcome to the program.
2 C: Hi Dr. Laura.
3 LS: Hi::.
4 C: I’m having an issue with my husband where I’m starting to grow ver- very resentful of him. I’m black and he’s white. U:h we’ve been around some of his friends and family members who start– make rac- start make- racist comments as if I’m not there or if I’m not black. And my husband ignores those comments and it hurts my feel:lings. (pause) And |
5 LS: [Well can you give me an example of a racist comment? Cause sometimes people are hypersensitive. So: tell me what’s- Give me two good examples of racist comments.
6 C: Okayay wuh- Last night good example. We had a neighbor come over and this neighbor- When every time he comes over it’s always a black comment. It’s “O:::h well how do you black people like doing this?” And “Do black people really like doing that?” And for a long time I would ignore it. But last night I got to the point [where it
7 LS: [I don’t think that’s racist.
8 C: Uh well the stereo[type-
9 LS: [I:: I don’t think [that’s=
10 C: [[[
11 LS: =racist. No: I think that-No: no no. I- I think that’s- Well listen. Without giving much thought a lot of blacks voted for Obama simply ’cause he was half-black. Didn’t matter what he was gonna do in office. It was a black thing. You gotta know that. That’s not a surprise. Not everything that somebody says- We had friends over the other day. Got about thirty-five people here. The guys were gonna start playing basketball. I was gonna go out and play basketball. My bodyguard and my dear friend is a black man. And I said “White men can’t jump I want you on my team.” That was racist? That was funny.
12 C: How about the N-word? The N-word’s been thrown aro[und-
13 LS: [Black guys use it all the time. Turn on HBO. Listen to a black comic and all you hear is nigger nigger nigger.
That isn’t-
I don’t get it. If anybody— if anybody without enough melanin says it, it’s a horrible thing. But when black people say it, it’s affectionate. It’s very confusing. Don’t hang up. I want to talk to you some more. Don’t go away. I’m Dr. Laura Schlessinger I’ll be right back.

[After taking a commercial break, Dr. Laura resumed her discussion with the caller]

I’m Dr. Laura Schlessinger talkin to Ja::de. What did you think about during the break by the way?
Uh I was a little caught back by the N-word that you spewed out I have to be honest with you. But but my point is race re[lations-
[O:h then I guess you don’t watch HBO or listen to any black comedians.
But that doesn’t make it right. I mean race is a[(
my dear
Since Obama’s been in off[ice=
[The point I’m trying to make
=Racism has come to another level that’s unacceptable.
Yeah we’ve got a black man(.) as president and we have more complaining about racism than ever. I mean I think that’s hilarious.
But I think honestly cause there’s more white people afraid of a black man taking over the nation.
They’re afraid.
If you want to be honest about [it (]
[Dear they voted him in.
Only twelve percent of the population’s black. Whites voted him in.
It was the younger generation that did it. It wasn’t the older white people who did it.
Okay okay
It was the younger gen[eration=
[All right. A:ll right.
=that did it.
=Chip on your shoulder. I can’t do much about that.
35 C: It’s not like that.
36 LS: Yeah. I think you have too much sensitivity and not enough sense of humor.
37 C: So it’s okay to say nigger?
38 LS: Well it depends how it’s said.
39 C: It’s okay to say that word? Is it okay to say that word? Is it ever okay to say that word?
40 LS: It’s- It depends how it’s said. Black guys talking to each other seem to think it’s okay.
41 C: But you’re not black. They’re not black. My husband is white.
42 LS: Oh I see so a word is restricted to race. Got it. Can’t do much about that.
43 C: I- I can’t believe someone like you is on the radio spewing out the nigger word and I hope everybody heard it.
44 LS: I didn’t spew out the nigger word.
45 C: You said nigger nigger nigger.
46 LS: Right, I said that’s what you hear.
47 C: Everybody heard it.
48 LS: Yes they did.
49 C: I hope everybody heard it.
50 LS: They did. And I’ll say it again.
51 C: So what makes it okay [for you to say the word?
52 LS: [Nigger nigger nigger is what you hear on HB-]
53 C: [So what makes it-
54 LS: Why don’t you let me finish a sentence?
55 C: Okay.
56 LS: Don’t take things out of context. Don’t double N- NAACP me. Take the
57 C: I know what the NAACP-
58 LS: Leave them in context.
59 C: I know what the N-word means and I know it came from a white person. And I know the white person made [it bad.
60 LS: [All right. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. Can’t have this argument. You know what If you’re that hypersensitive about
color and don’t have a sense of humor. If you’re gonna marry out of your race people are gonna say, “Okay what do blacks think? What do whites think? What do Jews think? What do Catholics think?” Of course there isn’t a one-think per se. But in general there’s “think.” And what I just heard from Jade is a lot of what I hear from black think. And it’s really distressing and disturbing. And to put it in its context. She said the N-word and I said “on HBO listening to black comacs you hear nigger, nigger, nigger.” I didn’t call anybody a nigger. Nice try Jade. (pause) Actually sucky try. Need a sense of humor. (pause) Sense of humor and answer the question. When somebody says what do blacks think? Say “This is what I think. This is what I read that if you take a poll the majority of blacks think this.” Answer the question and discuss the issue. Like we can’t discuss anything without saying there’s -isms? We have to be able to discuss these things. (pause) We’re people. (pause) Goodness gracious me. (pause) Uhh ah hypersensitivity. Okay which is being bred by black activists. (pause) I really thought that once we had a black president the attempt to demonize whites hating blacks would stop. But it seems to have grown. And I don’t get it. (pause) Yes I do. It’s all about power. (pause) I do get it. It’s all about power and that’s sad. Because what should be in power is not power but righteousness to do good. (pause) That should be the greatest power.

Questions

1. Genre: Radio talk shows, such as Dr. Laura’s, are one distinctive genre of talk. Describe the sequence of communicative actions in this genre. Also identify who is expected to do which actions, in the beginning, middle, and end of each telephone call.

- Genres are bound up with stance and style. How does Dr. Laura’s talk exhibit the identity of an opinionated, conservative talk show host?

2. Membership categorization: The content of this call focuses on whether the term nigger changes meaning based on who uses it for what purpose. Describe Laura and Jade’s stances toward this issue.
Laura argues (turn 60) that if you marry out of your category, it’s reasonable for others to ask, “What do Blacks (Jews, Catholics) think?” Would you agree or disagree with her? Why?

What are the circumstances in which it is reasonable to either speak as a category (“Speaking as a man, I’d say”) or ask for another to speak because they are a member of a category?

3. **Face challenges:** Both Jade and Dr. Laura threaten each other’s face. Jade implies that Laura is a racist and Laura implies that Jade is oversensitive about race. Describe the conversational moves each one uses to altercast the other in this way. Make sure to draw out the logic of why saying “X” would imply “Y.”

Describe how Jade and Laura responded to the other person’s face challenges. What did each person do to resist the attribution of the negative identity?

4. **Cultural vs. rhetorical:** What questions would you pose about this exchange if you were approaching it using a cultural perspective? What about if you were approaching it rhetorically?

5. **The consequentiality of talk:** Laura’s radio show was canceled because of how she spoke. Would you see this action as a reasonable consequence, or would you agree with Laura that the response was a “politically correct” overreaction, an instance of censorship of speech?

**Take-Away Thoughts**

**Little Stuff and Big Effects**

The aspects of discourse that we have been examining in this book could be glossed as “little stuff.” We have looked at small “thises” and “thats” in everyday talk. The words we use to address people, whether phrases such as “sort of,” “maybe,” or “I don’t normally think X, but . . .,” are included in our assertions; the content of oral stories and whether stories include interpretations of other individuals’ words; a speaker’s tone of voice and pronunciation; overlapping speech; whether there are a lot of “uhhs” and “uhms”—all of these can reasonably be referred to as “little stuff.” In the sense that little stuff refers to small units within talk, this book has primarily been about little stuff.

There is another meaning of little stuff, though. Little stuff is a polite way to name something that a person regards as trivial and unimportant.
Little stuff is what can be ignored without harm, as long as attention is given to “big stuff.” We hope that the reason this second meaning of little stuff should not be applied is clear. The consequences of a single conversation can be significant, as they were for Dr. Laura and her show in the previous example. The little stuff we have concerned ourselves with in this book is the bricks and mortar for building selves of one type rather than another. It is the basic ingredients for building and maintaining relationships with those we love and with the people with whom we work and play. This little stuff is the lubricant that keeps public, social, and service encounters moving smoothly. At the same time, it is this little stuff that gums up the works. Little stuff causes hostility, high emotionality, and, at times, conflicts that result in violence.

Our aim in this book has been to make the little stuff that so often slips by unnoticed become harder to miss. By providing you with a vocabulary to help notice and analyze ordinary interaction, we have sought to make a more thoughtful kind of reflection possible. Little stuff often has big effects. This book has been about why that is so and how the inferential connecting process works.

**Multiple Communicative Goals and Dilemmas**

Talk is both interesting and difficult because communicators have multiple goals that may be challenging to achieve together. When the goals are strongly or completely in tension, a communicator will face a dilemma. Communicative dilemmas arise when different facets of a person’s, or group’s, belief about how to be a good (fill in the blank) point toward opposite communicative actions. Whatever conversational moves a person chooses, he risks being criticized for not enacting some other valued part of that particular interactional identity. In the conversation among the teenagers, for example, Kylie’s suggestion that writing isn’t a good “fallback” could be seen as concerned or as critical. With regard to academic advisors, we saw how their concerns with being both fair gatekeepers and personally helpful pulled their way of talking in opposite directions. In close relationships people constantly juggle being warm and caring but not intruding, building connections but respecting autonomy. We looked at how a dilemma surfaces whenever a person thinks about giving advice to another. Dilemmas are endemic to communicative life.

One dilemma that has been given a lot of attention, and one that we have touched on only indirectly, is the expertise–equality dilemma. The expertise–equality dilemma confronts people in many professional positions. Being a professional is all about having some very particular
expertise. Having expertise licenses a person to offer extended information and opinions; it also makes the directing and correcting of others necessary and reasonable. At the same time, many professional work settings define themselves as committed to democracy and equality: Doctors and nurses seek to give patients a voice in the system, teachers strive to empower students and encourage them to speak out. Being committed to democratic participation suggests that everyone, not just the experts, is to be treated in a respectful, appreciative way (i.e., not discounting anyone’s opinions). The dilemma is that the conversational moves that establish expertise are the same ones that may undermine equality. And similarly, moves that affirm equality may undercut one’s expertise and right to direct. For teachers, Billig and his colleagues describe the dilemma this way:

Within the classroom the teacher is the constituted authority with direct power over the pupils. Yet this authority is not maintained in an authoritarian manner. Instead . . . the teachers use democratic semantics: “we” discover things together, rather than “I” the authority, tell “you” the already discovered facts. It is as if the teacher and the pupil have set sail together on a voyage of discovery. Having left the port, the teacher has come down from the ship’s bridge and has discarded the old-fashioned uniform with its golden epaulettes of command. Now teacher and crew are gathered on the ship’s deck, discussing freely where to head for. Yet authority has not been totally abandoned. For all the discussion, the passage has already been charted. The teacher still possesses the navigational maps, the compass and the power to ring the ship’s bell. Even on the deck the teacher must direct the crew, and thereby the ship, but must do so without appearing too directive.6

Professionals, then, face a dilemma. Those who are too tentative in directing others may be seen as wishy-washy or judged incompetent; those who are too direct in their style will be judged authoritarian and lacking in “people skills.” Steering a communicative course clear of both of these negative identities is invariably difficult. Dilemmas, then, are part and parcel of everyday life. Recognizing that this is so is likely to foster an interpretive generosity, making it possible to forgive others, as well as ourselves, for less-than-ideal choices about the handling of a situation.

**Talk and Institutional Identity**

Throughout this book we have focused on how talk builds and reflects identities for individuals. But people are not the only entities that have identities; groups and institutions do, too! Identity and identity-work could be
usefully extended to groups. If we did so, we would ask how a group’s way of talking contributes to its unique institutional identity. Consider but one example.

Hospice, now a well-established institution, began as a social movement to make the process of dying more humane than it usually is in hospitals. Hospice is committed to addressing patients’ and families’ psychological and spiritual needs, as well as their physical ones. As an institution hospice defines itself in contrast to mainstream medical institutions. What does this mean? How do hospice staff members use talk to build their group’s identity as alternative and caring?

In a study of team meetings in a hospice located in the western United States, Julie Naughton found that the hospice team used a variety of small practices to enact itself as an alternative health care organization. Team meetings, a once-a-week event, brought the staff together for a several-hour meeting. The purpose of weekly meetings was to discuss patients’ physical conditions, their medications, and their difficulties with caregivers. During the meetings, a common conversational practice that occurred was the making of off-the-agenda, third-party comments (personal remarks about a nonpresent party), most often about a patient but sometimes about a patient’s family members. Third-party comments were largely positive (e.g., “a lovely couple,” “she’s a dear soul,” “I just love her”). According to the authors,

These positive comments . . . are one important way hospice professionals display their commitment to an institutional philosophy that commits them to care for the mind and soul of patients in addition to their bodies. . . . It was through making comments such as “he’s a charmer,” “such a dear” and “so sweet,” that hospice staff members enacted themselves as caring professionals, people who saw a patient as a “whole person,” as more than a malfunctioning physical organism.7

The notions of identity and identity-work that have been central in this book could be applied to institutional groups and families. Part of the reason that Dr. Laura’s show was canceled is that individuals in institutional settings are seen as representing the institution, so that her comments could be interpreted not only as her opinion but also as associated with the organization for which she worked. Posing questions about identity and identity-work at a group level could be expected to make visible discursive practices that differ from those of individual speakers, which have been our focus here.
Seeing Double: A Gift, Not a Distortion

In seeking to understand how talk and identities link, we have drawn on two perspectives. The first perspective has been the rhetorical one. In taking the rhetorical perspective, we recognized that talk is strategic, chosen, and designed to accomplish certain ends and avoid others. Mediators use certain phrases to present themselves as neutral and impartial; speakers in conflict change their accents to emphasize difference from their partners. Storytellers use reported speech to show that they are not being unfair in their description of a conflict with another. Bilingual speakers shift languages to indicate that they mean to be playful rather than serious. The rhetorical perspective is also one that adopts an evaluative stance; it leads us to think about the moral reasonableness and practical effectiveness of different sets of everyday talk choices. One can question, for instance, whether Dr. Laura’s responses to her caller were appropriate or ill advised or consider how she or her caller might have handled the situation differently.

The second perspective we have taken in this book has been a cultural one. In adopting the cultural view, we focused on how everyday talk reflects communicators’ identities. Persons of different master and interactional identities will talk and interpret in systematically different ways: Israelis differing from Americans, men from women, Native Americans from Anglos, teachers from students, older speakers from younger ones, and so on. In adopting a cultural perspective, we treated identities as relatively stable things, existing prior to particular conversational moments and brought to interaction. We considered how people with different identities were likely to talk and interpret differently. The conversation among the teenagers, by virtue of their particular topics, kinds of knowledge, and ways of speaking, cued their age and even gave hints as to gender and regional identities.

In adopting a rhetorical perspective, we gave weight to one truth: that each person’s choices about how to talk build her unique identity. Each of us can become what we want to be through reflecting about talk and choosing wisely. In adopting a cultural perspective, we gave weight to an alternative truth: that how people talk is stable and not easily changed. People are shaped, one could even say imprinted, by the communities in which they are born, spend time, and acquire beliefs about how to be a reasonable person. Recognizing these contradictory truths, we suggest, is an essential part of understanding everyday talk.
Communicative Effectiveness and Phronesis

Our focal purpose in writing this book has been to foster a better understanding of how everyday talk works. Good understanding, as we have conceived of it, is having a nuanced view of the communicative complexities that inhere in ordinary situations and relationships. With a rich picture of what is likely to be at stake in an everyday talk occasion, it is possible to choose more wisely. There is no algorithm for communicative success; quick fixes that always work do not exist. Yet it is possible for people to become wise situational judges and skilled communicators. Exhibiting *phronesis*—Aristotle’s name for communicating wisely—can be cultivated.\(^8\) Through opening up how situations and relationships might be thought about differently and making the little stuff that achieves the big effects visible, this text has sought to increase your ability to choose wisely, to interpret others’ actions generously, and to communicate skillfully.
Glossary

Accent: Particular ways of pronouncing words or patterns of intonation in language use.

Accounting: Giving explanations.

Accounts: Giving explanations for potentially problematic situations.

Act sequence: The part of the SPEAKING acronym that refers to the series of actions during a communicative event.

Adjacency pair: Sets of speech acts that usually go together.

Advising: Offering suggestions to others.

Ai auan: Malaysian complaint speech act that laments something that seems beyond one’s control.

Alignment: The process of matching or coordinating talk in such a way as to show support, agreement, convergence, or similarity.

Altercasting: The work a person’s talk does to maintain, support, or challenge others’ identities.

Apology: Expression of remorse.

Argument point-making: Speech act that makes a claim or argumentative point.

Avow a feeling: Express or claim a feeling in a moment.

Baseline: A person’s typical way of speaking.

Black English Vernacular (BEV): Also called African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Ebonics; refers to a family of dialects spoken among parts of African American communities.
Breathiness: A quality of speech that is low and aspirated.

Category approach: An approach that equates identity with group-level category labels (ethnicity, nationality, etc.).

Choral talk: When several people speak at once, as when calling greetings or saying good-bye, or laughing (generally not seen as interruption).

Citizen testimony: A genre of speech that involves identifiable opening and closing moves packaged with some kind of argument point making.

Code switching: Fluently and grammatically going back and forth between two languages or two markedly distinct dialects.

Commissives: A category of speech acts that commit the speaker to a future action.

Communication accommodation theory (CAT): Theory that people will converge speaking style to match those they align with and to diverge from those from whom they differentiate themselves or disalign with.

Communicating (“really communicating”): A U.S. American speech act associated with deep or meaningful conversation.

Complimenting: Praising others.

Content: The bare semantic meaning of an utterance.

Context: Aspect of the prior talk and situation that shapes interactional meaning.

Contextualization cues: Communication practices such as gestures, vocal qualities, and other elements that link to context and provide clues to how to interpret a situation.

Continuers: Small tokens (words or sounds) that encourage a speaker to keep talking and show that one is paying attention.

Contrastive sets: The meaning of a certain category is partly defined by being contrasted with another category (e.g., male, female).

Controlled enunciation: A style of speaking with pauses between words.

Conversation analysis: The practice of recording, transcribing, and analyzing naturally occurring talk in order to study sequential actions and their social accomplishments.

Conversational floor: Place and space for talk.

Conversational implicatures: Interpretations generated by flouting maxims that may be different in meaning from the content of the utterance.
Conversational preference: Refers to the fact that certain second pair parts are structurally preferred or expected based on the first pair part.

Conversational signals: Voice and speech pacing features.

Cooperative principle: The idea that communication involves coordination between speakers and listeners and the efficient exchange of information.

Covert prestige: A positive association obtained by a devalued nonstandard dialect such as an image of toughness.

Credentialed: A move commonly found in the opening of testimony evidencing why a speaker deserves to have her words given weight.

Crossing: Using a short segment of a language, dialect, or style associated with another speech community with which one is not ordinarily associated.

Culture: A largely invisible system of symbolic practices that shape people’s everyday interaction.

Cultural generalizations: Assuming people will be or act a certain way based on their cultural membership.

Cultural persuadables: Ideas that are open to persuasion because they are contestable in a cultural group; this is opposed to ideas that are deeply assumed and are not seen as open to discussion.

Daehwa: Korean term for dialogue that refers to an open-minded discussion about problems or differing perspectives.

Declaratives: A category of speech acts that transforms people’s identities, relationships, or situations.

Deductive organization: Giving the claim first and then listing the reasons that back up the claim.

Descriptions: Versions of events often displayed as neutral but that carry moral assessments.

Dialect: A characteristic way of speaking a language that involves grammar and accent.

Directives: A category of speech acts that seeks to influence others’ actions.

Disclaiming: Also disclaimers; face-threatening speech act that seeks to deflect potential criticism.

Discourse: Multiutterance unit of talk.

Discourse markers: Little words and phrases whose main purpose is to structure interaction or frame the talk in some way.

Discursive practices: Talk activities that people do.
**Dugri**: A term used in Israel to refer to someone speaking honestly and directly to the point, often at cost to self.

**Emotion labor**: The work to display a particular emotion that is required as part of an occupation.

**Ends**: The part of the SPEAKING acronym that refers to the goals or purposes of a communicative event.

**Euphemisms**: Indirect terms for words or topics that are taboo.

**Evaluation**: A speech act that espouses a particular stance toward people or situations; commonly found in narratives.

**Everyday talk**: Ordinary kinds of communicating people do on a daily basis in various contexts.

**Excuses**: A form of accounts that acknowledges a wrong but disclaims responsibility.

**Explicit knowledge**: Knowledge that can be articulated.

**Expressives**: A category of speech acts that displays emotions or opinions.

**Extreme case formulations**: Intensified assessments of something.

**Face**: The valued version of the self or reputation people seek to uphold in themselves or attend to in others in interaction.

**Facework**: How everyday talk practices support, challenge, or maintain one’s or another’s face.

**Face-threat**: Something that challenges one’s or another’s face.

**First pair part**: The first part of an adjacency pair.

**Fishing**: An indirect information-seeking act.

**Frame**: What is going on in a particular situation; the label people would give a communicative event.

**Gatekeepers**: A person in an institutional role who checks whether someone has the qualifications, requirements, or other criteria to do something or move to a level.

**Generic he**: Using *he* or other masculine terms to mean people in general.

**Genre**: A recognizable communication event guided by particular purposes. Also the part of the SPEAKING acronym that refers to the particular type of communicative event.

**Gift-exchange ceremony**: A situation in which people, usually who know each other, give or trade presents to celebrate a special occasion.
Given: The performances people give that align with their face.

Given off: Unintended performances people give that may not align with their face.

Gossiping: A face-threatening speech act that involves speaking, usually negatively, about nonpresent others.

Hwedam: Korean term for dialogue that refers to political talks or negotiations.

Honne: Japanese term for what people actually think.

Identity: Who people are.

Identity-work: The process through which talk makes visible who the people talking are or what they are like.

Independence politeness style: Politeness that focuses on others’ negative face wants.

Inductive organization: Listing reasons and then giving the claim that is supported by those reasons.

Information-seeking acts: A kind of directive speech act that tries to get information from someone.

Insertion sequence: Expanding an adjacency pair by adding more adjacency pairs between the two focal pair parts.

Instrumentalities: The part of the SPEAKING acronym that refers to the particular forms and channels of speech in a communicative event.

Interactional identities: Specific roles people take on in a situation in relation to others in the situation.

Interactional meaning: The meaning of a situation for the participants in it.

Interpersonal ideology: Communities’ beliefs about interpersonal issues and how/why people should communicate in particular ways.

Involvement politeness style: Politeness that focuses on others’ positive face wants.

Irony: Saying the opposite of what one means; expressing some meaning that contradicts the explicit meaning of what was said.

Jargon: Specialized vocabulary associated with particular occupations or groups.

Jointness: The quality of a narrative’s joint construction. Can be minimal (one person’s display of listening allows the story to be told) or may involve people telling a story together.
Judgment and acceptance: A dialectic between supporting friends and accepting them for who they are and being able to judge friends without violating that acceptance.

Justifications: Accounts that acknowledge a wrong but minimize its badness.

Keego: Also keigo; refers to politeness markers in Japanese.

Key: The part of the SPEAKING acronym that refers to the tone or affect of a communicative event.

Language change: Changes that languages undergo over time or within communities.

Language contact: Occurs when two or more languages are spoken in close proximity.

Language death: Occurs when a language is no longer spoken fluently by any speakers.

Language endangerment: Occurs when a language is spoken fluently by very few people and is in danger of death.

Language ideology: Belief about language.

Language revitalization: Efforts to revive endangered or dead languages.

Locally managed: Refers to how taking turns at talk is negotiated moment to moment.

Manner maxim: The cooperative principle maxim that speech should be clear and unambiguous.

Master identities: Relatively stable, unchanging aspects of personhood, including gender, ethnicity, age, nationality.

Marked forms: Forms of talk that are elaborated in some way and indicate what the speaker sees as atypical or not the norm.

Meeting: Communication situation involving a group of people who get together with a common purpose.

Membership categorization device (MCD): Collections of categories for referring to people and how to apply them.

Metaphor: Rhetorical device describing something in the terms of something else to imply similarity.

Mitigation markers: Used to soften or add uncertainty to talk; make an utterance more indirect.

Modal devices: Words and phrases that express a stance toward something as uncertain or possible.
Musayra: Muslim term referring to the work done through talk to maintain harmonious relations.

Narrative: Stories; generally multiturn utterances regarding a past event that is newsworthy and involves an evaluation.

Negative face: Aspect of face that focuses on avoiding imposition.

News giving: Delivering news, information, or some announcement.

Newsworthiness: The quality of stories that makes them worth telling; reportability.

Nonstandard dialect: A way of speaking a language that is not considered the norm or ideal.

Nonverbal immediacy: Indicators of liking and interest cued by leaning toward someone, giving more smiles and nods, eye contact, and nonhostile touches.

Normative: A rhetorical stance that considers how a situation or communication should be and evaluates it.

Norms: The part of the SPEAKING acronym that refers to rules and expectations governing a communicative event.

Noticeably absent: The absence of the second pair part of an adjacency pair; more broadly, a speech action that is expected given the context but that is not there.

Official English Movement: In English-speaking countries, but especially the United States, people who work to get laws passed that declare English the official language and limit government or workplace uses of other languages.

Opinion expression: An expressive speech act that presents a speaker’s opinion.

Ordinary conversation: A communication genre of regular, everyday talk.

Palanca narrative: A kind of Colombian story that emphasizes connections with others that have helped with occupational situations.

Paralinguistic markers: Nonverbal qualities of talk, such as intonation, pronunciation, and so forth.

Participants: The part of the SPEAKING acronym that refers to the people or actors in a communicative event.

Personal address: Terms people use to name others to whom they are speaking.

Personal identities: Features of self; personality characteristics, moral character.
**Phronesis:** Wise communication.

**Positive face:** Aspect of face that focuses on competence and likeability.

**Preallocated turn structure:** At the other end of the continuum from locally managed turn taking, this form sets rules about who can talk and when.

**Presequence:** An adjacency pair designed to check whether the conditions are reasonable for a primary first pair part.

**Quantity maxim:** The cooperative principle maxim that speech should be neither too brief nor too wordy.

**Quality maxim:** The cooperative principle maxim that speech should be true.

**Relevance maxim:** The cooperative principle maxim that speech should be related to a previous comment.

**Reported speech:** Also constructed dialogue; quoting another’s words, either by paraphrasing (indirect) or by approximating or presenting something as though said exactly (direct).

**Reproaching:** A face-threatening speech act that questions the reasonableness of another’s actions.

**Representatives:** A category of speech acts that informs or presents an alleged fact.

**Response cries:** Expressions or emissions of some emotion, feeling, or reaction that can be vocal, verbal, or nonverbal and that are usually taken to be natural or spontaneous.

**Retellings:** Stories that are told repeatedly.

**Rhetoric:** The art of discovering the available means of persuasion in a given situation.

**Rhetorical questions:** A question to which no answer is expected.

**Sapir–Whorf hypothesis:** The hypothesis that the language one speaks affects how one thinks.

**Second pair part:** The second part of an adjacency pair.

**Sentence-like:** Utterances that are full clauses, like grammatical sentences.

**Setting:** The part of the SPEAKING acronym that refers to the environment, place, history, or scene of a communicative event.

**Slang:** Particular terms or ways of speaking associated with social groups but not shared by all members of a speech community.

**Small talk:** Friendly chatting that occurs between people about ordinary everyday topics.
Social constructionist: Seeing identity as created through communicative actions. Identities are fluid and multiple rather than fixed and stable.

Social constructions: Terms or categories that have been invented and that change over time.

SPEAKING: An acronym composed of the parts of a cultural scene, meant to aid in analysis: Setting, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, Genre.

Speech acts: The purpose of utterances; names for utterances in terms of the actions they accomplish.

Speech codes: Particular ways of talking in a speech community.

Speech communities: Communities of people who share a common speech code or way of talking and interacting.

Stance: A communicative display toward the other in the interaction, as well as toward events, issues, or people being discussed.

Stance accretion: A consistency in a person’s stances over time that is incorporated into one’s personal identity.

Stance indicators: Cues of a person’s situation-specific stance.

Standard dialect: A way of speaking a language that is considered the norm.

Strategic: The quality of seeking to persuade others or being goal-oriented in communication.

Subgenre: Distinctive categories within a genre such that celebrity interviews and nurse-patient interviews are categories of the interview genre.

Tacit knowledge: Knowledge that is assumed or taken for granted and may be difficult to articulate.

Talk show interview: A communication genre in which a television or radio show host briefly interviews a guest for a live or live studio audience.

Tatemae: Japanese term for the official, public self, which may be inconsistent with what someone feels but is necessary to maintain certain social situations.

Temporal organization: Organizing story events chronologically, by the order of time in which they occurred.

Thou soo: Malaysian complaint speech act that focuses on resolving a problem.

Tie-sign: Cues as to the closeness of a person’s relationship with another.

Topical style: Organizing story events by related ideas.
**Tough questioning**: Questioning whose purpose is to challenge the claims and reasonableness of another.

**Transition relevance place**: The boundary of a turn constructional unit; the place at which it is appropriate for another speaker to take a turn.

**Turn constructional unit**: Conversation analytic term for utterance that emphasizes that it is the basic building block of talk.

**Unmarked forms**: Forms of talk that are bare and indicate what the speaker sees as typical or the norm.

**Upgraders**: Used to intensify or add urgency to talk; make an utterance more direct.

**Uptalk**: Quality of speech in which intonation rises at the end of utterances.

**Utterance**: A short segment of talk.
Notes

Chapter 1

1. We make a distinction in the text between examples and excerpts. Examples are instances of talk and writing that have been constructed by us to illustrate a concept or process. Excerpts are instances of talk and writing that communicators in some situation actually used. For excerpts we identify where they came from and who has written analyses of them.

2. There is no politically neutral language in which to write about talk and identities. Choices about how to refer to persons always carry a potential to offend. Many everyday terms imply that something is common (or unusual) about a particular category of people. At the same time less common forms of reference draw attention to themselves, potentially irritating readers and leading to judgments that an author is going overboard and being “politically correct.” Throughout this book we have struggled with this tension. For instance, this opening vignette describing speakers as “sounding American” may be taken as implying that non-native English speakers are not as fully American as those for whom English is their birth language. We do not believe this (see Chapter 7 and our discussion of the link between English language use and American identity). In this case, however, we have selected the everyday way of describing people as it is just this linkage that we want to highlight.

3. Grice (1975). This article is also available (Grice, 2006) in an edited reader that brings together classic pieces, such as this reprinted chapter, with more recent studies that illustrate the variety of research that analyzes discourse (Jaworski & Coupland, 2006).


6. Goffman (1959) gives the example of a lodging host asking a guest how she liked the fish chowder. The guest’s “Yes, it’s great” was the given response;
how quickly the guest raised her spoon to eat the chowder was the given-off
sign, what the host took to be a better indicator of the guest’s real assessment.

7. The notion of context and how it shapes the meaning of talk is an issue that
has engendered considerable debate among discourse scholars (see Duranti &
The most restricted view of how context should be used in building discourse
interpretations is seen in the conversation analytic position that limits con-
text to prior talk. Context should not come into interpretation unless parties
visibly display it as relevant through their comments. Many other discourse
analysts see the importance of taking account of wider sources of information,
including the kind of relationship parties have to each other and particulars
of their history, the taken-for-granted goals and activities of an institutional
interaction, and larger social beliefs and practices. Schegloff (1999a, 1999b)
and Billig (1999a, 1999b) provide a particularly interesting debate on this
issue. The most expansive view of context is developed by van Dijk (2008),
who treats context as a mental construct that is created by each person. Two
recent examples of how context shapes meaning making are found in Paoletti
(2012) and Tracy (2012). Paoletti shows how misunderstandings regularly
occurred between callers and call-takers in emergency calls for ambulances
when the geographic boundaries of the service providers shifted unbeknownst
to the callers. In a study of public hearings about same-sex marriage, Tracy
(2012) analyzes how the context—that is, how a legislative bill is formulated
and how the hearing’s participation is designed—affect what citizens could
and did say about same-sex marriage.


11. See Gumperz (1982a, 1982b). In Gumperz (1992) this idea of contextualiza-
tion cues is developed in more depth. Levinson (2003) describes the influ-
ence of this idea of Gumperz and contrasts it with how conversation analysis
approaches the study of interaction. Reviews of interactional sociolinguistics,
the name of the discourse approach Gumperz developed, are to be found in

12. How best to distinguish communicative levels is an issue that scholars do not
completely agree about. Different writers have used different terms to capture
what they regard as most essential. Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967)
distinguish between the content and relational levels of a message; Searle
(1969) separates the locutionary (propositional content) from the illocutionary
force or speech act level; Tannen (1986) differentiates the message from the
metamessage and the frame; and Bate (1988) distinguishes what’s said from
what’s meant. The broader process wherein talk (or written language) com-
ments on itself tends to be labeled differently in linguistics than in communica-
tion. In linguistics it is often referred to as metalinguistics or metapragmatics.
(Agha, 2007), whereas in communication the more likely term is *metadiscourse* (Buttny, 2010; Craig, 2008; Leighter & Black, 2010). Although not identical, the terms share a good amount of overlap.

13. Whether to assume that meanings are usually shared and that it is the exception when they are not, or the reverse, is an issue about which scholars differ. Cicourel (1973) has argued that people generally assume that they have a reciprocity of perspectives. Although we think Cicourel’s claim is reasonable—people generally do assume this—we think it is a problematic assumption. Being constantly aware, as Bakhtin (cited in Morson & Emerson, 1990) would advocate, of both the centrifugal and the centripetal forces (forces that are heteroglossic, or differentiating, and forces that pull together into a unitary language) of language and talk is crucial.

14. See Pomerantz and Fehr (1997, p. 75). The transcript has been simplified.

15. Tannen (1993a, 1993c) reviews different approaches to the concept of frame, drawing on Bateson (1972) and Goffman (1974). See Gordon (2009) for an extended application of the idea to family exchanges. Of note, there are other meanings for *frame*. One particularly prevalent meaning in media studies is to equate framing with treatment of an issue. So, for instance, we would talk about how the issue of same-sex marriage is framed in different newspapers (McFarland, 2011).

16. Excerpts 1.7 and 1.8 are taken from Erickson (1999, pp. 116–117). The description in Excerpt 1.7 simplifies and deletes small parts of the original. The transcript in Excerpt 1.8 has also been simplified. Pauses and information about breath groupings were eliminated, and punctuation was added. The preceptor (P) in the original transcript has been changed to S.


20. Tajfel and Turner (1986) developed social identity theory, which distinguished between social and personal identities and explained certain conflicts people had with others because of social identities. Subsequent development of their theory can be found in Hogg and Reid (2006). Labov (1966, 1972) likewise treats identities as fixed factors. Identities such as sex or social class affect the dialect a person speaks. Coupland (2007) provides a nice overview and critique of Labov’s work.

21. Two particularly nice explanations of a social constructionist view of identity can be found in Ochs (1993) and Bucholtz and Hall (2005). Their description of how the process works is very similar to our own.

22. See Brubaker and Cooper (2000).

23. Examples of communication-focused book titles that foreground identity include *Constructing Identities at Work* (Angouri & Marra, 2011); *Identity
Trouble: Critical Discourse and Contested Identities (Caldas-Coulthard & Iedema, 2008); Analysing Identities in Discourse (Dolón & Todoloi, 2008); Style: Language Variety and Identity (Coupland, 2007); Discourse and Identity (De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006); Language and Professional Identity: Aspects of Collaborative Interaction (Richards, 2006); Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious (Joseph, 2004); and Identity Matters: Communication-Based Explorations and Explanations (Mokros, 2003), to provide just a handful of examples. An inspection of this book’s references will reveal many more.

24. Democracy as a term is used all over the place in American public life. See Tracy (2010) for an exploration of the contrary threads in the meaning of this term and for an argument as to why the contradictions are useful.


27. The label master is adapted from Harvey Sacks’s use in his lectures (1992).


30. For discussion of face and how it does/should relate to identity, see Arundale (2006) and Spencer-Oatey (2005).


32. Discourse is another term that is rich in meaning, potentially referring to units of writing and even to pictures and graphic layouts. When it is used in the plural (discourses), it usually refers to a large and complex set of practices rather than to a specific unit of talk (e.g., the discourses of education). Gee (2006) makes the distinction between little-d discourses (texts and instances of talk) versus big-D Discourses. Cameron (2001) presents a definition of discourse as “language above the sentence” or patterns of meaning in extended units (not sentence-by-sentence), and does an especially nice job of unpacking the complexities of this term in an accessible manner.

33. In the past decade or so, there has been an explosion in the number of books and articles that introduce students to the practice of discourse analysis broadly, as well as how to do a particular kind. For general introductions, see Cameron (2001); Wood and Kroger (2000); Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates (2001); Woods (2006); and Gee (2011). For guidance about how to do critical discourse analysis, see Wodak and Meyer (2009) or van Leeuwen (2008); for discursive psychology, see Potter (2012) or Wiggins and Potter (2008). For information about doing conversation analysis, see Sidnell (2010) and ten Have (2007); for interactional sociolinguistics, see Gumperz (1982a, 1982b; and for an overview of action-implicative discourse analysis, the approach developed by Tracy (Tracy, 2005; Tracy & Craig, 2010).
34. We adopt this term from McCall and Simmons (1966). It was initially used by Weinstein and Deutschberger (1963).

Chapter 2

1. Rhetoric is by no means a homogeneous perspective, as is evidenced in the Encyclopedia of Rhetoric (Sloane, 2001). Our characterization is most consistent with Aristotle’s view as developed by Kenneth Burke (1969).

2. See Hauser (1986, p. 28).


4. See Sanders (1995) and Duck (1994). Tracy’s studies of institutions, such as academic colloquia (e.g., Tracy & Baratz, 1993), calls to the police and 911 (e.g., Tracy & Agne, 2002), and school board deliberations (e.g., Tracy & Ashcraft, 2001) are one kind of rhetorically informed discourse analysis. For fuller developments, see Tracy and Craig (2010).

5. See Tracy (2011, p. 84).

6. Kellermann (1992) makes the argument that communication is inherently strategic and primarily automatic.

7. In addition to Aristotle’s definition of phronesis as “a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man,” Noel (1999) notes that the term also incorporates various other shades of meaning based on its translation, including practical reasoning, practical wisdom, moral discernment, moral insight, and prudence. Jasinski (2001, pp. 462–470), a sourcebook on key rhetorical terms, provides an overview of the history and meaning of phronesis.


9. Chiang (2011). Also see He (1993) for a look at how modality is used in advising-student meetings. Vehviläinen (2003) found a dilemma between being seen as an expert giving advice versus encouraging students to be self-directed among advisors for occupational courses in Finland.

10. Professors’ office hours are a setting very similar to other kinds of advising situations. For example, in her study of Finnish career counselors, Vehviläinen (2003) found a dilemma she proposed was common to all counseling situations: being an expert provider of service to students versus encouraging students to be self-directed in their activities and decision making. One way advisors encouraged more self-directedness was by withholding advice, at least initially, and instead asking questions. In ordinary social interaction, following a question with a question would not necessarily be seen as avoiding giving requested advice, but with counselors it is sometimes treated that way.

11. Limberg (2007). One-on-one interactions with instructors do not occur only
in office hours; they also (probably more commonly!) happen through e-mail. E-mail is often a more convenient way for students to ask questions or make requests of their university instructors. As discussed in the example at the end of Chapter 1 in examples 1.11 and 1.12, e-mailing is not without its own challenges. In a comparison of student e-mails to professors in Great Britain and Australia, Merrison, Wilson, Davies, and Haugh (2012) analyzed differences in how students made requests. In particular they noticed that students in Great Britain displayed more attention to status and politeness by using professors’ official titles and proffering apologies in their e-mails, whereas the Australian students presented themselves in a friendlier, more egalitarian manner. Research on native Greek students at an English-speaking university in Greece found that non-native English speakers’ e-mails were interpreted as more impolite by their native English-speaking professors (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

12. Nakane (2006) found that in Australian university classrooms, Japanese students spoke up in class far less often than did Australian students because they valued maintaining their face over making an inaccurate comment or asking a question that could be seen as challenging the professor. However, this choice was often interpreted by Australian professors as evidence that the Japanese students were not confident or did not understand the material as well. Students speak in class for reasons other than joining in discussions, too, and these can also be potentially problematic moments. Tyler and Davies (1990) analyzed a particular interaction in a U.S. classroom when a student challenged a grade during class time; the Chinese teaching assistant, in choosing to discuss the grade on the spot, later claimed to have made the choice in response to a dilemma experienced between avoiding having the discussion at that time (to protect the teaching assistant’s competence and the student’s potential embarrassment) and appearing to be open to negotiation and willing to take criticism.

13. Benwell and Stokoe (2002); also see Attenborough (2011).

14. Benwell and Stokoe (2002); Excerpt 2.1 is from Benwell and Stokoe (2002, p. 442) and Excerpt 2.2 is from Benwell and Stokoe (2002, p. 443). Both excerpts have been simplified from the original, removing line numbers, overlaps, and prosodic details.


16. Conley and O’Barr (2005) review discourse research on mediation. They argue that mediation has some unintended negative consequences. In particular, the cooperative structure of mediation ends up disadvantaging women such that wives, in general, do less well financially than they do when they go to court.


18. The first tape from the Academy of Family Mediators was called Initial Mediation (1989a) and focused on the opening session. The second tape, called
Yours, Mine and Ours: Property Division Mediation (1989b), focused on issues surrounding property division. See Tracy and Spradlin (1994).


21. Samper and Garciaandia (2003), mediator-researchers in Bogotá, proposed that creative uses of metaphor in therapy could radically shift people’s ways of seeing things, creating what they called “momentosbomba.” Momentos is “moments”; bomba can mean “explosive,” “balloon,” or “joy.”

22. In developing these two perspectives we have assigned the structuring and constraining forces to the cultural view and the agentive force to the rhetorical view. This is a simplification. Ways of conceiving of culture are enormously diverse. Our version of culture is most similar to that developed by ethnographers of communication (e.g., Hymes, 1974; Philipsen, 1975) and interactional sociolinguists (Gumperz, 1982b; Tannen, 1984).


27. This term is used in the works of Fitch (1994) and of Carbaugh (1996) and is the foundation of speech codes theory (Philipsen, 1997).


29. For example, Carbaugh (2002); Carbaugh, Berry, and Nurmikari-Berry (2006); Carbaugh, Boromisza-Habashi, and Ge (2006).

30. For example, Carbaugh (1999).


36. Tileaga (2005, p. 611). This transcript was simplified from the original, deleting most of the prosodic information.

37. www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFwU5ILBIH0.

38. www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAfUeNOa-uE.


41. For example, see Herring (2010) and Walther (2012).

43. Though we have separated these master identities to focus on what makes them distinctive, they are difficult to discuss in isolation from one another. One’s gender is in part socially defined by one’s religious, ethnic, and national context; people’s ethnicities will be seen as different depending on their social class; and so forth. One classic study that highlights the connection between gender and social class is Philipsen’s 1975 research on Teamsterville, a particular blue-collar Chicago neighborhood in which whites of a variety of ethnic groups lived. The central question that Philipsen explored in his study of Teamsterville was what it meant to talk like a man. For the men in this community, talk among male equals was perceived to be the vehicle for building solidarity and affirming each man’s connections with other men. In situations in which the participants were not equal, strategies other than talk were expected, for instance, willingness to fight someone who posed a threat to loved ones or the use of physical discipline with misbehaving youths.

44. Hudson (2011).


46. See www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary.

47. Middle-class U.S. American culture is our starting point. However, we assume that there will be many similarities with other societies, particularly European or European-based ones, and especially those in which English is the dominant language (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom).

Chapter 3

1. See Sequiera (1993) for a review of issues of personal address and how they are applied in an American church community.

2. This description uses Fitch’s (1998) general typology. She developed it to describe Colombian culture; we use it to describe English speakers.

3. Thanks to Alena Sanusi for this example.


5. Thanks to Russell Parks and his spring 2012 COMM 2400 class at the University of Colorado at Boulder and the spring 2012 CMN 457 class at the University of New Hampshire.


7. Kleenex and band-aid are used in the United States, hoover in Great Britain.

8. Babycenter.com

9. Indianhindunames.com

15. According to a Huffington Post article (Bindley, 2011), the percentage of women keeping their last names peaked in the 1990s at 23% and dropped to 18% by the 2000s; based on a 2012 survey of couples marrying through wedding website TheKnot.com, only 8% of women keep their names. In a 2009 survey at the University of Indiana (Hamilton, Geist, & Powell, 2011), 71% of respondents said a woman should take her husband’s name, and half of that percentage said the practice should be legally required.

19. Stafford and Kline (1996) labeled women who kept their birth names as middle names or who hyphenated their last names as “combiners.” Carbaugh (1996) identifies these women as adopting the integrative option. Of note is the more positive flavor of Carbaugh’s name for this position.
21. See Fitch (1998) for a more elaborated discussion of Colombian address practices.
27. Carbaugh (1996) argues that FN–FN usage no longer is a strong sign of intimacy in the American scene. Under certain circumstances reciprocal title + LN may be more intimate (e.g., husband to wife: H: “Mrs. Smith, are you going to join me?”; W: “Mr. Smith (big smile), I believe I will.”).
30. This example is the way requests were formulated in a Western city where the
main groups in the city were Hispanic, white, and black (see Tracy, 1997b). What choice citizens are provided will vary with the ethnic groups in an area.

33. 2010.census.gov
40. Martin et al. (1999).
41. Martin et al. (1999, p. 28).
42. See Martin et al. (1999, p. 46).
43. Malay does not require gender identification for third-person singular.
44. See Prentice (1994) for an overview of language reform movements and effects.
45. Weatherall (1998) reviews this research.
46. See Whorf (1956).
47. See Erlich and King (1992, 1994).
49. See Prentice (1994).

Chapter 4

1. Shuy (1993) analyzes a series of trials in which the crime a person is accused of focuses on language—that is, one person saying something to another.
4. The notion of speech act developed here merges the speaker-focused intentional stance developed by Austin (1962/2006) and Searle (1979) with the anthropological and community-rooted notion seen in the work of Hymes (1974) and other ethnographers of communication (e.g., Katriel, 1986).
5. Many authors (e.g., Hymes, 1974) distinguish smaller units that get labeled as *speech acts* from bigger units that get labeled as *speech events*. However, as Wierzbicka (1991) argues, other than size of unit, the key features are highly similar. For this reason, we do not make a distinction.
16. For more on how emoticons can do speech acts, see Dresner and Herring (2010).
20. Gass and Neu (1995) have edited a volume that examines speech act differences across cultures with a focus on acts performed in a second language.
22. See Kotani (2002).
23. The summary of functions, as well as the explication of the gratitude function of “I’m sorry,” is taken from Kotani (2002). Interesting analyses of Japanese apology are to be found in an edited volume (Sugimoto, 1999c), with comparisons to Americans highlighted in chapters by Sugimoto (1999a, 1999b) and Kotani (1999). Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) explore cultural differences in apologies and requests, focusing primarily on Europeans.
27. See Kotani (2002, p. 67)
31. Other face-sensitive speech acts include, for example, complaining (Alberts, 1988a, 1988b; Boxer, 1996; Murphy & Neu, 1996), which is discussed briefly here; and asking for or responding to favors (Craig, Tracy, & Spisak, 1986; Goldschmidt, 1996; Tracy, Craig, Smith, & Spisak, 1984).
35. Excerpt 4.6 is from dissertation data in Robles (2011), and Excerpt 4.7 is a simplified example from Dersley and Wootton (2000, p. 382).
39. See Edwards (2005) on complaining, whining, and moaning; other similar speech acts include venting and bitching.
41. Dersley and Wootton (2000).
42. The literature on accounts is extensive. Reviews that tackle the issues in distinctive ways are available in Antaki (1994), Benoit (1995), and Buttny (1993). We draw most heavily on Buttny and Morris’s (2001) review in which they highlight this distinction between accounts as reason giving and accounts as seeking to mend social trouble.
43. Scott and Lyman (1968).
44. Some authors (Schönbach, 1990) have extended Scott and Lyman’s (1968) notion of accounts to include apologies and denials that one committed the problematic action. Because this broader definition is contrary to our everyday usage of accounts, we stick with the narrower meaning.
45. An example of a justification used commonly among children is “I told you so!” (Cobb-Moore, Danby, & Farrell, 2008).
46. Dillon (2011); Gill (1998); Heritage (2010).
52. van Over (2012).
55. Augoustinos and Every (2010); Buffington and Fraley (2011); Chiang (2010); Mallinson and Brewster (2005); van Dijk (1987).
56. Naughton (1996) finds postutterance disclaimers common in hospice staff meetings in which staff discuss the problems they are having with the families with whom they work.
57. From Robles’s unpublished data.
59. Compliments can be about a number of different things (appearance, actions, etc.); who compliments whom about what and how people respond is often thought to vary by gender. This appears to be the case in Jordanian Arabic communities (Farghal & Al-Khatib, 2001).
60. From Robles’s unpublished data.
63. Tal-Or (2010).

Chapter 5

1. This exchange is one taken from a telephone call set of more than 650 calls that were made to 9-1-1 and police dispatch. Karen Tracy and colleagues have written papers that analyze different interactional problems in these calls. See Tracy (1997b), K. Tracy and S. J. Tracy (1998), S. J. Tracy and K. Tracy (1998), Tracy and Anderson (1999), and Tracy and Agne (2002).
2. See Baldry and Thibault (2006), Hutchby and Wooffitt (2008), and ten Have (2007).
3. Detailed descriptions of the CA transcription conventions can be found in a number of places, including Atkinson and Heritage (1984, 1999), Ochs, Schegloff, and Thompson (1996), Psathas (1995), and Schegloff (2007).
4. Sobbing and laughing can sound surprisingly similar vocally (both involve aspiration and in-breaths).
7. LeBaron and Streeck (1997).
9. Planalp (1999) provides a review of research investigating emotion and how it is communicated. The majority of the work she reviews, as is true of the research itself, has been carried out in laboratories. Exceptions to this generalization are to be found in the area of emotions in organizational life (see Fineman, 1993, for a review).
10. In this chapter we focus on particular actions and utterances and how they look and sound. However, nonverbal elements can include slightly larger scale components, such as the arrangement of space, as well as attitudes toward and treatments of time. Though these are accomplished in different ways and at different levels than the concept of paralinguistics focused on in this chapter, these ideas are incorporated into other chapters and can be seen as relevant in particular to event-level communication, such as genres. For an example of a study on the concept of time and its role in structuring interaction, see Wingard (2007).
33. See Pittam (1994).
35. See Hall (1995, p. 192). To make the transcript easier to read, lower case i’s were changed to uppercase.
37. See Pittam (1994).
39. From Robles’s unpublished data.
41. See Basso (1979).
42. See Roth-Gordon (2007) for a discussion of slang as an innovative style associated with youth.
44. Coupland (2007).
45. Linguist Walt Wofram offers this generalization in the video American Tongues, produced and directed by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker (1988) by the Center for New American Media. See http://video.pbs.org/video/1553932059/
47. The quotations from the BBC, The Story of English TV series, programme 1, were quoted in Bayard et al. (2001, p. 44).
52. Gluszek and Dovidio (2010).
53. See de la Zerda and Hopper (1979) and Bradac (1990).
55. Labov (2010). Estimates about the number of BEV speakers in the United States range from 60 to 80% of African Americans. Dillard (1972) estimated 80%, whereas Spears (1992) estimated 60%.
56. Johnson (2000) overviews the phonological and syntactic features of BEV.
61. Bradac (1990) reviews this research.
63. In earlier versions of the theory, the name of the theory was “speech accommodation”; for instance, contrast Giles (1973) with Giles, Mulac, Bradac, and Johnson (1987). The reason for changing names was to extend the process to a broader array of communicative features than the more focused ones of dialect and speech rate that were the initial focus of the theory. We use the current name but emphasize accent, the focus of the earlier work.
64. Coupland and Yläne-McEwen (2000, p. 191) identify the core of accommodation theory this way. Their chapter provides a nice review and critique; see also Shepard, Giles, and Le Poire (2001) for an elaboration of the theory’s development across time. Communication accommodation theory has also been applied to conversations with the elderly, although here the focus has been on features such as vocabulary and sentence and topic structure rather than primarily accent (e.g., Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986; Ryan, Hummert, & Boich, 1995). Fox (1999) reviews much of this research, with an emphasis given to communicating in families with aging parents, and Barker et al. (2008) apply accommodation theory to police–civilian exchanges.
66. See Giles and Coupland (1991) for a review of communication accommodation research. A more recent review essay, although it has a broader focus, is Cargile and Bradac (2001).
68. See Tiersma (1999, p. 52).

Chapter 6

7. Schegloff (2011) explores how repetition of words at the end of turn conversational units is another way to claim or to identify that another person will claim a longer unit of talk.
12. See Nilsen and Mäkitalo (2010) for a study of how participants coordinate their turns in asynchronous online environments.
13. Tracy (1997a) claims that in graduate student–faculty colloquia in university departments, faculty members routinely talk more than graduate students. Ng, Brooke, and Dunne (1995) show that the number of turns a student took in a group discussion influenced how influential he or she was perceived to be. Tannen (1993b) reviews some of the complexities that go with use of language strategies and judgments of dominance.
14. See Sattel (1983) for a discussion of how silence is used by men to exercise power over women.
15. Although the most attention has been given to two-unit sequences, scholars have also identified places in which three-unit sequences are structurally expected. The most widely studied one is the classroom, between a teacher and student. This sequence is most commonly labeled the I-R-E sequence. The I-R-E includes teacher initiation followed by student response followed by a teacher evaluation (Mehan, 1979). This sequence has also been referred to as I-R-F (feedback) sequence (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Other three-act sequences identified include an interpretive sequence during psychotherapy that involves the therapist offering an initial interpretation followed by the patient’s response, which in turn is followed by the psychiatrist’s dealing with the patient’s elaboration (Peräkylä, 2011) and an activity in many service calls focused on repairs—(1) soliciting information about a repair, (2) status update, and (3) acceptance or rejection (Kevoe-Feldman & Robinson, 2012).
18. Whether there is a general conversational preference for agreement has been vigorously debated. The interactional picture appears to be quite complex. Pomerantz (1978) has shown that compliments often are not straightforwardly agreed with. Bilmes (1991) suggests that once an argument gets going, the

19. Roberts, Francis, and Morgan (2006) did an experimental study in which they varied the length of silence (0, 600, and 1200 milliseconds) after a speaker’s comment to determine how readily people treated silence as a sign of unwillingness to grant a request or accept an invitation. For long silences, people always heard the upcoming response as reluctant.


22. Benoit (1997) analyzes how athletes, Nobel prize winners, and Mary Kay cosmetic sellers who reach 1 million dollars in sales accept their awards.

23. See Pillet-Shore (2012, p. 185). This excerpt was simplified.


27. See Tracy and Parks (2012).


30. See Fox and Robles (2010) for a discussion of the many functions of like.

31. Discourse markers have been studied in a variety of contexts. For instance, Othman (2010) studied the uses of okay, right, and yeah in English university lectures, and Bolden (2010) has examined the use of “and prefacing” across multiple contexts. Discourse markers in languages other than English have also been studied, including, for instance, -to in Russian (Bolden, 2008a); bao and duo in Taiwan Mandarin (Wang, Tsai, Goodman, & Lin, 2010), -tamye in Korean (Shin Kim, 2011), naja in Danish (Emmertsen & Heine mann, 2010); nii in Estonian (Keevallik, 2010), and acb and achso in German (Golato, 2010).

32. Questioning has been the focus of multiple journal issues (Enfield, Stivers, & Levinson, 2010; Steensig & Drew, 2008; Tracy & Robles, 2009) and books (Ehrlich & Freed, 2010).

33. See Drew and Heritage (1992) for the initial explication of this distinction. Heritage and Clayman (2010) apply and work out the implications of the institutional–ordinary talk distinction in their studies of emergency calls, news interviews, healthcare situations, jury trials, and mediation.

34. This transcript is simplified. It originally appeared in Heritage and Sefi (1992, p. 367) and can also be found in Heritage and Clayman (2010, p. 46).

36. See Goodall and Goodall (1982).
37. See Tracy and Parks (2012).

Chapter 7

1. This example is taken from Gumperz (1982a, p. 92).
4. Otheguy and Stern (2011), Stavans (2004). It is important to note that the definition of Spanglish is not always consistent. Otheguy and Stern (2011), for example, define it as a dialect of Spanish and disagree with the use of the term Spanglish as it implies an imperfect knowledge of either language. Because Spanglish captures a broad range of ways of speaking that appear to be in different stages of development, our definition is an attempt to capture the fact that some versions of Spanglish may be achieving full-fledged dialect status, whereas others are still in flux or are more a style than a dialect.
5. Poplack, Zentz, and Dion (2012).
7. This is a slightly modified version of a transcript appearing in Myers-Scotton and Bolonyai (2001, p. 7).
13. From Carib (a language of parts of South America and the Caribbean), German, Latvian, and Nahuatal (an indigenous language of Mexico), respectively.
15. See McCabe and Foster (2006), Lawson and Jaworski (2007), and Thurlow and Jaworski (2006) for more about tourist–native interactions, the impact of the tourism industry on globalization, and issues related to tourist–native contact and language.
16. See http://www.ethnologue.com/
28. See Crawford (1992a) and Barker et al. (2001).
30. See Barker et al. (2001).

Chapter 8

5. This analysis uses Kim and Bresnahan’s (1994) three-category typology because it is relatively clear and straightforward. The earliest, and a particularly influential, typology is Ervin-Tripp’s (1976) study of children’s requests.
6. This is a much simplified version of a table in Kim and Bresnanhan (1994, pp. 326–328).
7. Gumperz (1982a) overviews this work by Tannen; it is also referred to in her bestseller (Tannen, 1990).
17. See Wierzbicka (1991) for a discussion of Polish and English speaker differences in directness.
18. Although this category of language forms has been most often called “intensifiers,” these words do not necessarily intensify what a person is saying. O’Barr (1982) found that use of common intensifiers such as really and very by courtroom witnesses decreased their perceived powerfulness. Including obscene language, in contrast, regularly has the effect of upgrading and intensifying the sentiment a person is expressing (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008).
19. McGlone and Batchelor (2003) did an experiment in which people described a series of photographs showing a distasteful scene (a dog urinating) and asked people to describe what they saw in electronic messages. Participants were more likely to use euphemisms (“made a puddle,” “did number one”) than the literal description when they thought they would meet the person to whom they were sending the description. The authors interpreted this as showing that euphemisms were used more as a self-presentation device than to protect another’s feeling.
22. See Gibbs (2000) for a study that shows American men use irony more than women, and Colston and Lee (2004) for a study that assesses the personal qualities assigned to speakers using irony.
23. This transcript excerpt comes from Holmes (2000). Punctuation was added to aid reading.
24. See Malinowski (1923).
30. See Black (2009) for a description of the different kinds of stories people used in the online discussion about the World Trade Center.
31. This is a constructed example, but it is based on conversations that I (K.T.) had with my daughter.
32. This is a gist version of several points made in a discussion that occurred at a meeting of the Boulder Valley School Board in Boulder, Colorado, in 1996. Argument making in this community is analyzed in Tracy (2010).

33. Deductive and inductive organization style is developed by Scollon and Scollon (1995). The advantages identified for each also are taken from their analysis.

34. See Yamada (1992) and Scollon and Scollon (1995).

35. Politeness studies are a distinct and large research area in which there are many lively debates. Eelen (2001) provides an insightful description and critique of nine distinct politeness theories, articulating the many differences among them. Of the nine, the three most influential have been Brown and Levinson’s (1987), Leech’s (1983), and Lakoff’s (1973). How closely politeness should be connected to face and other aspects of identity is one issue that has engendered significant debate (e.g., Arundale, 2006; Spencer-Oatey, 2005). In 2005, the Journal of Politeness Research was published, making much of the current work on politeness available in a central outlet. Since then the journal has published a special issue devoted to impoliteness (Bousfield & Culpeper, 2008) and special issues considering how politeness applies in health care (Mullany, 2009), computer-mediated (Locher, 2010), and legal contexts (Archer, 2011).

36. In relational dialectics theory, Baxter and her colleagues (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) show how the competing needs for connection and autonomy are crucial in close relationships.


38. See Brown and Levinson (1987) for an elaborated list. Table 8.3 reformulates some of the strategies described in Scollon and Scollon (2011, pp. 69–70), who drew upon Tannen’s (1984) initial names for these strategies.


40. These remarks are reported in Culpeper’s (2011, p. 174) book on impoliteness in which he is quoting from a book written by Cowell’s brother, titled I Hate to be Rude but . . . The Simon Cowell’s Book of Nasty Comments. Remark (a) comes from p. 67, (b) from p. 73, and (c) from p. 73.

41. See Bousfield (2008) for an analysis of drill sergeants’ talk.


43. See Kochman (1981, pp. 107–108); this discussion is also available in Kochman (1990).


49. In addition to Crystal (2008) also see del-Teso-Craviotto (2008) for a discussion of how gender and sexual identity are expressed in online chat rooms.
53. Coupland (2007) provides an in-depth view of how style has been conceptualized in sociolinguistics, tracing the diversity of recent developments from Labov’s variationist approaches that treated master identities as fixed categories and examining how phonological features of dialects varied based on the identity categories and the formality of situations.

Chapter 9

1. Our notion of stance and stance indicators draws on Ochs (1993), as well as the development of these ideas seen in edited volumes by Englebretson (2007) and Jaffe (2009).
4. Jaffe (2009) uses the concept “metastance” to refer to the practice of adopting consistent views across situations. This is similar to stance accretion (Damari, 2010).
5. The notion of marking has some similarity to the conversation analytic notion of preference (see Chapter 6 and Nofsinger, 1991). However, marking focuses on the language choices within an utterance rather than the interactional devices (longer pause, giving of an account) that occur when a structurally dispreferred second act follows a first speech act (e.g., an offer being followed by a rejection rather than an acceptance).
8. Tracy (1997a).
12. This excerpt is taken from Weatherall (2011, p. 325). The transcript has been simplified.
14. Our meaning for modal forms connects the linguistic approach of specifying lists of different kinds of modality and how they connect to syntactic and semantic categories with the conversation analytic impulse to look at the forms people actually use in their talk.
15. See Potter (1996) for a description of the hierarchy of discourse devices used to increase the facticity of an assertion, a process he calls “fact construction.”
17. This transcript is a slightly simplified version of the one included in Edwards (2000, pp. 353–354).
20. See Ruusuvuori and Peräkylä (2009) for a discussion of how facial expressions function to convey alignment and affiliation during storytelling.
22. Hochschild (1983) coined the term in her study of Delta flight attendants. Since then it has become an important research focus in organizational communication, being applied to 9-1-1 call taking (S. J. Tracy & Tracy, 1998), cruise ship staff (S. J. Tracy, 2000), and jail and prison guards (S. J. Tracy, 2005).
25. Drew (1992) and Potter (1996) show how description is often designed to undermine alternatives in situations of dispute.
26. See Tracy and Durfy (2007). A version of this study can also be found in Tracy (2010, Chapter 4, p. 84).
27. See Buttny (1993) for a discussion of how avowal of feelings differs from feeling expression.
30. See Tracy (2010, p. 87).
31. Tracy (2010, p. 87).
32. This Google search was run on July 20, 2012.
35. See von Münchow and Rakotonoeilina (2010).

Chapter 10

1. An analysis of and more excerpts from this interview may be found in Agne and Tracy (1998).
2. See De Fina and Georgakopoulou’s (2008) introduction and special issue on narrative as social practice in Text & Talk.
4. The exception is talk that is designed for overhearing audiences, as is the case in news interviews on radio or television. On such occasions it is rare to hear these conversational tokens that acknowledge listening (Hutchby, 1996).
6. “Ohs” are common ways people show that what the other has said is news-worthy (e.g., Heritage, 1984; Schiffrin, 1987).
10. This story is a simplified version of what appeared in Mandelbaum (1987).
11. Mulholland (1996) distinguishes between conarration that is centrally cooperative, what she labels duetting, and that in which participants are competing over a version of events.
12. Hamilton (1998) examines how stories and reported speech accomplish this in a family support group for people with bone marrow transplants.
15. These features are our attempt to cull a workable definition for everyday stories from the different literatures, but especially the linguistic structural approaches (Labov & Waletsky, 1997) and discourse processing (e.g., Shapiro, van den Broek, & Fletcher, 1995). We draw on these two but recast them with a more conversation analytic orientation. Two features that have often been identified as defining stories—(1) temporal structure and orientation and (2) a resolution or outcome to a confronted problem—we do not include. Temporal structure is excluded because this is a key feature that has been argued to be culturally variable, an issue we discuss later in the chapter. Resolution/
outcome is excluded because van Dijk (1987) finds this feature to frequently be absent when people are telling stories that are criticizing or complaining about people.

16. Different theorists have offered proposed different versions of what the main parts of a narrative are. Within linguistic traditions the most common is Labov and Waletsky’s (1997) six-part structure that includes (1) abstract, (2) orientation, (3) complication, (4) evaluation, (5) resolution, and (6) coda. In studies of story comprehension, the structure is described a bit differently. For instance, Trabasso, van den Broek, and Suh (1989) identify five features: the setting (S), the goals of the protagonist (G), attempts to achieve the goals (A), outcomes of the attempt (O), and reactions (R). For another version, see Reiser, Black, and Lehnert (1985).


18. The excerpts are simplified from the way they originally appeared in Edwards (1995). The analysis of the exchange draws heavily from the Edwards article but extends it in ways that focus on story features.

19. See Holt (2000) and Buttny (1997) for overviews of the kinds and functions of reported speech. Constructed dialogue is the term used for reported speech by Tannen (1989) to emphasize its designed, partly made-up quality.


21. Potter (1996) offers a descriptively rich account of how people work to construct their views as just the facts.

22. Reported speech can serve many functions related to positioning, defining, and defending perspectives and claims; see Schely-Newman (2009).


27. Shaw (1997) examines some of the ways stories reveal the self and reflect the other.

28. This excerpt is taken from Jessica Robles’s (2011) dissertation data. Transcription has been simplified, with punctuation added for readability.

29. This excerpt is taken from a master’s thesis (Crawford, 1996, pp. 59–60), excerpts from which are also analyzed in Bamberg (1997).

32. Bergmann (1998) notes this; he examines how ordinary talk, including stories, does moral work.
33. See, for example, Sandel (2010).
34. van de Mieroop (2009).
41. See Buttny (1997) for a discussion of the role of reported speech in talking about race on campus. Other articles that look at this same focus group’s conversations about the racism video tackle different issues (Buttny, 1999; Buttny & Williams, 2000).
42. This story has been simplified from its original transcript format. Punctuation has been added to make it more readable. See Buttny (1997, p. 485).
43. van Dijk (1987).
44. van Dijk (1987, p. 66).
46. Stories are a kind of example—a small slice of experience meant to serve as a sort of “case” for an argument, for what someone is like, for making a point, and so forth. Wästerfors and Holsanova (2005) analyze how examples about others serve rhetorical functions to make associations, display attitudes, posit possibilities, or question someone else’s claims.
47. Taken from Robles’s (2011) data. This transcript has been simplified.
52. See Johnstone (1993).
56. This is a simplified version of the story that appears in Michaels and Collins (1984, p. 227).

Chapter 11

1. The 2.06-minute YouTube audio can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhjBlPucpd0. This transcript is of the middle 30 seconds.
4. For nice overviews of the concept of genre, see Bhatia (1993, 2010), Swales (1990), and Askehave and Swales (2001).
5. Business genres that have been studied, to give a few examples, include the strategic plan (Cornut, Giroux, & Langley, 2012); job interview video (Tseng, 2010); company earning calls (Crawford Camiciottili, 2010); and commercial arbitration (Corona, 2011).
8. This excerpt comes from Zimmerman (1984, p. 214), and it is used in Heritage and Clayman’s (2010, p. 57) chapter on emergency calls.
10. See Tracy and Dimock (2004) for a review of workplace and public meetings, and Angouri and Marra (2010) for a nice application of the idea of the meetings as a genre.
15. Tracy (2010, p. 78). An earlier version of this chapter analyzing citizens’ speeches appeared as a journal article and includes much of this discussion (Tracy & Durfy, 2007).
16. See West and Fenstermaker (2003) and Tracy (2010, Chapter 4).
19. See Robles (2012, p. 18). Also see Good and Beach (2005) for more about gift-
ing occasions.


21. Some have seen this trend toward what they call “conversationalization” in
different genres—politics, media, and so forth—as potentially problematic.
See Fairclough (1994), Alvarez-Cáccamo and Prego-Vázquez (2010), and

22. This transcript was simplified with punctuation added to make it more read-
able; it was taken from dissertation data in Robles (2011).

Chapter 12

1. To view the video of the four teens chatting go to: www.youtube.com/watch?
v=FyIVICAHKm0&feature=youtu.be.

2. Laura Schlessinger. (2012, August 17). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclope-

3. See either www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8jqFLpTvQ or http://lockerz.com /u/20559230/decalz/6344937/full_audio_dr_laura_schlessinger_s_n_w.


8. Jasinski’s (2001, pp. 462–470) sourcebook on key rhetorical terms provides an
overview of the history and meaning of phronesis.
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