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Performing Identities and Constructing Meaning in Interpersonal Encounters: A Semiopragmatics Approach to Communication

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Abstract:

This article proposes a “semiopragmatics” model of interpersonal communication, to describe how different identities are simultaneously activated and “performed” during an encounter. By combining macro-level and micro-level approaches to communication, the model (Boutaud, 2005, Frame, 2008) links together prefigured and emergent aspects of meaning and identity construction in interpersonal encounters.

It builds upon an Identity Theory approach to social interactions (Burke *et al.*, 2003), applied to multiple identities. This theory posits identities as idiosyncratic, ad-hoc social constructs, based on role performance.

Centred on a three-tier “figurative context” composed of *prefigured* meanings (cultural level), *configured* meanings (social / situational level) and *performed* meanings (“figurative” / interactional level, the semiopragmatics model seeks to avoid cultural, social and psychological determinism or reductionism.

Suggested running head:

A Semiopragmatics Approach to Communication

Proposed text:

Identity construction is an ongoing process in all interpersonal encounters. We are constantly attributing (generally subconsciously) behaviours and representations to other people’s identities, and seeking to present ourselves (again, subconsciously) in a certain way, to justify our own acts. This article presents a Communication Science (communicational

semiopragmatics) approach to identity construction in interpersonal communication. It focuses on how, in a given situation of communication, different intrinsic and extrinsic factors come together to influence the way that people make sense of their encounter and of each other. By associating identity construction with a process of “crystallisation”, whereby things seem to ‘add up’, or ‘make sense’ for the actors, the semiopragmatics approach encompasses the interpersonal communication processes *in situ*, specific to the situation, but also a wider temporal frame and representational context. In this way, the different factors (codes, representations, semiospheres...) which “prefigure” an encounter, and the idealised relationship / course of events anticipated by the actors and into which they project themselves, contribute to the overall sense-making process.

By focusing on identity construction in given situations, the article thus examines the relationship between the macrosocial level of identity, linked to group identity or social roles, and its “performance” in (micro-social) encounters. Starting from a symbolic interactionist vision of social interactions, it builds on Identity Theory (Stryker, Burke) in order to better understand how, during their encounters, people handle (simultaneously or not) their multiple identity facets, distinguishing themselves more or less from the archetypal roles associated with each identity. This inter-subjective process calls upon existing cultural representations, but depends also on the way these representations are redefined pragmatically by the actors, and interpreted against the background of the constantly evolving relationship between them.

Following on from William James, and George Herbert Mead’s conception of the self, the question of identity in interactions has continued to be a key issue in Symbolic Interactionist research. Sheldon Stryker (1980, 2000), Peter Burke (2000, 2003) and colleagues have developed a theoretical framework called “Identity Theory”, to explain the way in which individuals choose to present different facets of their “self”, or, to adopt their terminology, different “identities”, in various interactions. According to this theory, an individual has as many identities as “*distinct networks of relationships in which they occupy positions and play roles*” (Stryker & Burke, 2000: 286), an identity being an idiosyncratic social construct (Mead’s “I” and “Me”) based on “*internalized role expectations*” (*ibid.*). The theory distinguishes “*social*” (group) identities, “*role*” identities and “*person*” identities, though all of these imply socially prefigured behaviours or character traits, and all may be used by an individual to present him/herself during an encounter. Each individual’s identities can be

structured, according to the theory, in a “salience hierarchy”, depending on the his/her “commitment” to each identity, based on their relative importance in the individual’s web of social relations, and as a source of self-esteem. This salience hierarchy can, in turn, be used to predict which identity will be activated in a given situation. For Identity Theory, “*commitment shapes identity salience shapes role choice behavior*” (Stryker & Burke, 2000: 286). During an encounter, individuals seek to “verify” their salient identities, by « *bringing situationally perceived self-relevant meanings into agreement with the identity standard* » (Stryker & Burke, 2000: 287). Individuals do this by evaluating the extent to which the traits they feel are being attributed to them correspond to the identity in question. Successfully “verified”, positively-connoted identities are a source of self-esteem (positive face), whereas any discrepancy between the perceived self-image and the desired identity traits is likely to provoke discomfort and efforts to bring the two into line with one another.

Although the theory states that the traits associated with a given salient identity are defined depending on the situation, this assertion does not allay a certain number of apparent weaknesses in the framework thus presented, from the point of view of pragmatics¹. Notably, the relevance of an analytically constructed, situationally-independent salience hierarchy can be questioned. The individual may indeed be more “committed” to some identities than to others, but the choice of an identity, and of the traits which embody it, is also very closely linked to representations of the situation at hand, and the anticipated potential gains (strategic, relational, self-esteem, etc.) in adopting them². Moreover, the idea that an individual is presented through a single salient identity, in a given situation, seems overly reductive, and contrasts with empirical studies of identity use in interactions, based on participant observation (Frame, 2008). Indeed, Frame’s study of identity use in a European student association suggests that not just one, but multiple identities can be simultaneously activated for each individual in a given interaction (national, student, association member, sexual, ...), and the traits chosen are partly selected and performed on the basis of their compatibility with a majority of the identities currently activated.

The semiopragmatics approach to communication presented here thus builds on Identity Theory, while intentionally understating certain aspects of it. The multiple identities of each individual, whether they be social, role, or person identities, are considered to be idiosyncratic

¹ Cf. Frame, 2008 pp. 93-150 for an in-depth description and discussion of Identity Theory.

² For a somewhat more pragmatically-orientated conception of a salience hierarchy, cf. McCall & Simmons, 1978: 81-2.

social constructs, defined with reference to culturally prefigured roles, and linked to self-esteem. However, the focus of our approach is not so much on individual choice of identities, as on how the subject manages multiple identities, activated simultaneously during an interaction³. In this respect, identities are seen less as the key to strategic self-presentation, than as pragmatically activated and negotiated interpretative references, upon the strength of which the individual establishes a certain degree of predictability during an encounter.

Indeed, although the treatment of different identities activated during an interaction may affect an individual's self esteem (Goffman, 1973; Cast & Burke, 2002) these identities also serve as a basis for the individual's accountability. Insofar as an identity (social, role or person) is associated with socially or culturally prefigured traits, behaviours or attitudes, etc., the individual who activates that identity is expected to conform, to a greater or lesser extent, to the model in question. Conformity constitutes a reassuring way of confirming social predictability, thus reducing uncertainty in the interaction (Gudykunst, 1995) and limiting the perceived intersubjective threat to face⁴.

Not only are identities idiosyncratically defined⁵, according to the semiopragmatics model, they are also performed in each encounter. This model distinguishes three different levels of interpretative 'references' used by individuals in an interaction. The first level is that of *prefigured references*. It includes all of the (cultural) knowledge that the socialised individual has at their disposal in a multitude of different areas, including language and other codes, interaction rituals, cognitive schemas, experiential frames, and so on. This knowledge provides a basis for decoding symbolic acts (discourse, actions, etc), both specific to and across to a whole range of different identities and situations, from an abstract, non-grounded point of view. Applied to identity, culturally prefigured knowledge would include the social expectations regarding role behaviour linked to different social roles and social groups.

The second level, that of *configured references*, takes into account the situation in which the individual finds him/herself. In a given situation, the individual is confronted with specific

³ Our approach thus responds in part to Stryker's call for research into the activation of multiple identities during an interaction (Stryker, 2003: 222)

⁴ Conformity to one's identities does not necessarily imply conformity to socially prescribed role expectations, as identities are idiosyncratic embodiments of these. However, once the nature of an individual's identities have been established, he/she is expected, normally, to conform to them. Non-conformity can, however, also constitute an intersubjective strategy intended to destabilize or to call into question relational *status quo*.

⁵ *ie.* John is not just "a doctor", but "such and such a type of doctor", etc....

circumstances which she/he anticipates and uses as an interpretative frame of reference, supplementing the prefigured knowledge. For instance, during a visit to his GP, a patient mobilises prefigured knowledge, such as language, knowledge of culturally-prescribed doctor-patient relations, some medical knowledge, etc. These references are completed by configured knowledge: knowledge of how the local medical centre is run (appointments, timekeeping, waiting-room etiquette), or linked to the identity of his family GP (bedside manner, specialisation, etc.).

The third level of reference is the *figurative* or *performed* level. This is limited to the interaction itself, and concerns the knowledge which is pragmatically defined during the encounter. In the example mentioned previously, performed interpretative references could be the information exchanged between doctor and patient during the consultation (symptoms / diagnosis), or, concerning the doctor's identity, the patient's observations about his apparent mood, state of fatigue and so on. The performed references, which Gumperz refers to as "grounded", complete and, in some cases, temporarily replace the prefigured and configured ones, though all three levels are taken into account simultaneously by participants, in both production and interpretation of their own and one another's symbolic acts. Figure I shows the three levels of interpretative references:

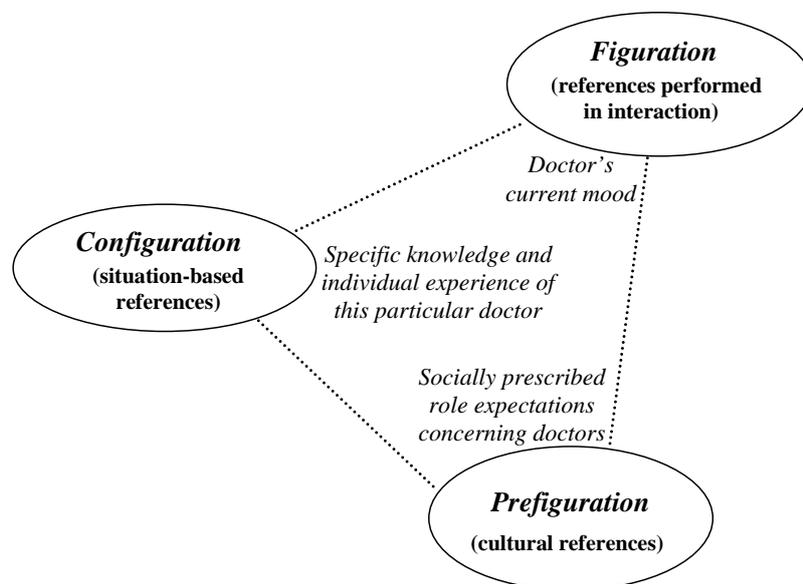


Figure 1 : 3 levels of interpretative references applied by a patient to a doctor during an interaction

By linking these different levels of identity construction in interactions, the semiopragmatic approach brings together three important aspects of identity: the social component

(prefiguration), individual particularities (configuration), and the emergent pragmatic level (figuration). In order to fully understand the interplay of the three levels, it is important to take into account the temporal dimension of the encounter. The beginning of an interaction is generally seen as a critical moment for establishing participants' identities, in order to reduce uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1995), all the more so in first encounters. McCall & Simmons (1978: 138-9) outline the process through which individuals seek to set up an initial "*working agreement*", a nominal agreement regarding one another's identity claims, allowing them to set the conversational frame and proceed with their encounter. This process generally involves participants implicitly or explicitly coming to an agreement on the situation at hand, assuming roles associated with it, and showing themselves socially competent to enact those roles.

When established, such an initial consensus allows participants to start 'going about their conversational business', while possibly introducing (activating) other identities, depending on their intersubjective needs or motives (accountability, facework, negotiation of power, etc.). The initial 'working agreement' constitutes a first instance of relative homeostasis in the encounter, which each new identity activated may reinforce or upset. Indeed, individuals may attribute actions or declared attitudes, representations, etc. to new identities, whether their own (if they seek to give account for their actions) or those of other participants (as they explain the acts of others by projecting new identities onto them). At the same time, a new identity may trigger a re-evaluation of that individual's previous actions, thus threatening the relational *status quo*.

An encounter can thus be conceived of as a cyclic phenomenon, insofar as it is likely to oscillate between moments of relative homeostasis, based on the established predictability and accountability of the participants through their different identities, and moments where an internal or external factor triggers an imbalance in the relationship, necessitating a more or less extended period of reassessment and renegotiation of participants' identities. Different identities become more or less important at different times in the encounter, but in each case they are apprehended on the three levels described above: socially prefigured, individually configured, and pragmatically performed. Indeed, as the encounter progresses, the number of performed references grows, theoretically increasing intersubjective predictability, but also

restricting the scope of new identities, supposing that individuals wish to maintain a degree of coherency within the encounter⁶.

The semiopragmatic model presented above can also help shed new light on the relationship between micro-level and macro-level identities. The influence of socially prefigured (macro-level) identities on the traits enacted by individuals during interactions (micro-level) was the object of George Herbert Mead's pioneering work (1934). In the model described above, culturally prefigured identities foreground the way that specific individuals enact them, which in turn conditions the traits they put forward in a particular interaction, under the influence of other activated identities, and of many other contextual factors. However, by linking the three levels of interpretative references in this way, the semiopragmatic model also makes clearer the impact performed identities can have, in turn, on the other levels. Performed identity traits during a particular encounter are associated with a particular participant, and go to enrich the representation that the individual has of him/her. Thus, the next time the two meet, the individual is likely to have integrated (at least some of) the performed traits in the identities attributed to the other person (configuration level). The influence of the particular on the collective appears to have less scope for immediate impact, since it supposes that one individual's idiosyncratic behaviour can be assumed as a new identity standard for a whole cultural group. Such an evolution does remain conceivable, depending on the size of the group concerned, and is all the more likely if that individual plays a dominant role in the group or in society at large⁷, and if their behaviour is relayed by the mass media, for example⁸. However, on a more mundane level, it is possible to envisage how culturally less-influential members of society or of social groups may in turn contribute to slowly-evolving identity standards, based on a logic of incremental change. In a context of evolving institutions and cultural references, new ways of assuming identities are tried out and socially approved in interactions, then reproduced by more and more people across social networks, before becoming gradually accepted (or not) as a cultural norm. In a process reminiscent of

⁶ As far as intersubjectivity is concerned, it is in the individual's interest to maintain (an illusion of) coherency between his/her different identity manifestations, in order to avoid negative reassessments of earlier behaviours. In this respect, the figurative level of the encounter can be seen to parallel the configurative level of a (long-term) social relationship: the 'better' one gets to know another individual, the more predictable they become, and the more risk they take in revealing totally contrasting character traits or identity facets.

⁷ Studies of leadership in organisations, such as Schein, 1985, underline the importance that a leader can have as a role model in shaping an organisation's culture.

⁸ Public figures such as pop stars can thus punctually contribute to redefining social figures - the rebel, for example - among fans and teenagers in general.

Darwinian evolutionary change, all figurative innovations, whether or not they appear successful from an intersubjective point of view, can potentially be taken as references by the individuals present, and may or may not eventually become dominant or mainstream on the collective level. Figure II illustrates the links between the three levels of interpretative references, as outlined above:

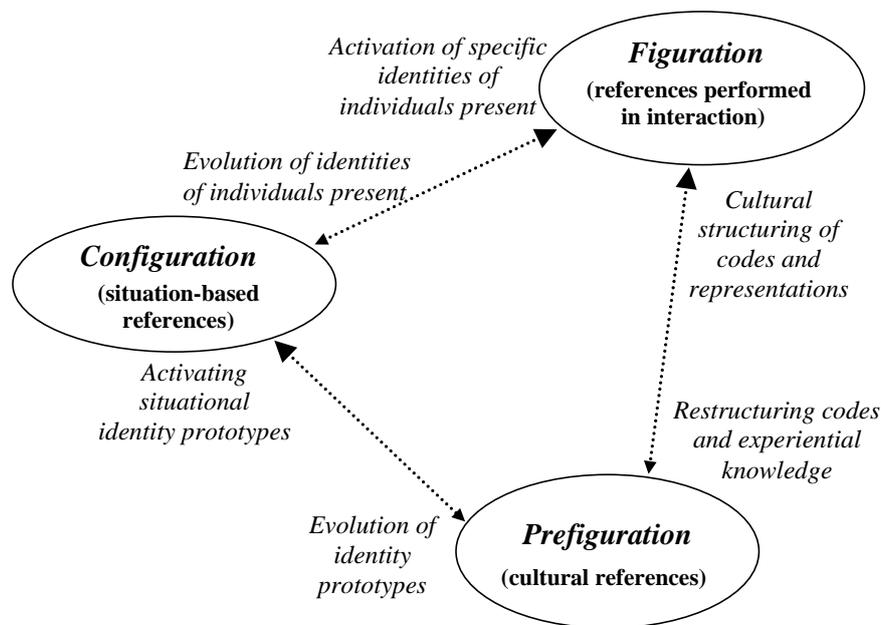


Figure 2: Relations between the three levels of interpretative references in an interaction

Although applied here to identity construction, the semiopragmatic model has a broader scope, and can be used to conceptualise many different domains of human activity, focusing on the interplay of culturally-prefigured, situation-specific, and emergent significations in the way individuals make sense of their experience⁹. As this article has argued, it currently provides a useful *theoretical* framework for understanding how social identity standards, and the various identities associated with particular individuals, participate as underlying references which are activated and performed in the specific context of an encounter. However, more empirical research is needed, applying the model specifically to identity construction, in order to be able to go further in understanding the influence of other contextual factors on the way identities emerge in different social contexts, and on the mutual influence of multiple activated identities. Such research could be based on observed and / or video-recorded interactions in their authentic settings, subjected to discourse analysis,

⁹ The approach was initially developed in relation to taste and gastronomic experience (Boutaud, 2004), and has been applied to the study of intercultural interactions (Frame, 2008), in order to better understand how individuals from different cultures negotiate meaning in a given context. The link between micro and macro levels also provides interesting insights into the way that cultures evolve through contact with one another.

completed with debriefing interviews. Focusing on the ways identities are portrayed, the objective of this research would be to try to make explicit the pre-existing representations of the different actors involved, their discursive strategies, and the conditions under which these evolve during the encounter. This programme of research could typically give us better insight into the intersubjective management of shared and mutually exclusive identities, and then be usefully applied to a wide variety of situations, not least to situations of conflict where the symbolic dimension often plays a central role.

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