

APPENDIX II

ANALYTIC TOOLS FOR THE STUDY OF INTERACTION

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⁽¹⁾ This Appendix draws upon material first presented as part of an article by Watson and Potter, 1962. "An analytic unit for the study of interaction." *Human Relations* XV:245-263.

In order to record systematic information about interaction, it is necessary to break up a continuous chain of behavior into standardized units. In studying sociable behavior, we could have chosen as an appropriate unit anything ranging in size from an individual act to an entire event. Our decision was to work with the episode as an analytic unit; to consider for each episode that the behaving unit was a set of persons joined together to form an interpersonal axis; and to view activity in the episode as the development of a resource. Our definitions of episode, interpersonal axis, and resource are given below.

1. Interpersonal axis.

The essence of a sociable conversation is that it is jointly maintained. An individual does not act in a vacuum, but in awareness of specific other persons

present. A set of mutually recognized expectations about one another and about how persons will talk together is mobilized, and the conversation follows the rules implicitly agreed upon. In this sense, the behaving unit in sociability is not an individual but a set of persons: an axis, as we have called it, consisting of two or more persons who join together to create a single system. We may refer to this system as a role system, an interpersonal system, or an interaction system, depending upon whether we wish to pay attention to the reciprocal expectations which pattern behavior, or the unit which is composed of persons, or the interaction itself.

An axis may consist of two or three persons who are talking together; or of a speaker addressing a group; or of an active group in which no single person or dyad provides a central focus. The active persons in the axis are referred to as axis partners. Other persons who are present, listening to the conversation but not taking a central part in it, are classified as members of the audience. The axis partners are jointly responsible for the interaction: for the maintenance or dissolution of communication between individuals; for the form and content of the conversation which ensues. The state of being actively involved does not change as one shifts back and forth between speaking and listening. An axis partner may be quiet; he may be listening; but he is actively engaged in the interaction because he is the person toward whom communication is directed, and he is the person expected to respond. In the case of a speaker talking to a group, the entire group is being addressed, and therefore is classified as axis partner rather than audience. In cases where one or more persons act as spokesperson(s) for the group, the

spokesperson(s) is/are included with the main speaker as axis partners, and the quiet members of the group are viewed as audience.

2. The episode unit.

The decision to focus on an interpersonal axis as the behaving unit in sociability led directly to the decision to utilize the episode as our major unit of analysis.⁽²⁾ The episode unit enabled us to focus upon homogeneities at the level of

⁽²⁾ We are indebted to Barker and Wright for their work in defining an episode as a unit for the observation of behavior. (Barker, Roger G. and Herbert F. Wright, 1954, *Midwest and its Children, The Psychological Ecology of an American Town*. Evanston: Row, Peterson.) They state (p.5) that "The behavior in this and every other episode has three basic attributes: it has constant direction, it is within the normal behavior perspective, and it has approximately equal potency throughout its course. " Our defining criteria are somewhat different from theirs, but give similar results when applied to behavior which is interactional. Modifications in the defining criteria were required partly because of our focus on conversational content, and partly because of our decision to take a partnership rather than an individual as the elementary behaving unit. Because our concept is quite similar to theirs, and because we could not find a suitable alternative term, we have continued to use their term, designating our unit an "episode."

the interpersonal system; to break up the continuous flow of interaction into units of jointly-maintained behavior, each of which could be analyzed in terms of implicit assumptions and assertions by and about the axis partners.

Our definition of an episode was given in terms of the central axis. Thus, an episode was defined as a unit of interaction involving (1) a single set of axis

partners, and homogeneous with respect to the following characteristics: (2) the role system uniting the axis partners; (3) the tie utilized by axis partners as a basis for communication; (4) the focus of attention manifest in the conversation; and (5) the relationship expressed by axis partners toward that which was the focus of attention. These characteristics served to set the frame for the episode, and in this sense, could be regarded as structural properties. They defined the relationship of axis partners to each other and to their topic, and in so doing, they provided the cues which defined episode boundaries. A change in any one of these characteristics --the composition of the axis, role system of the axis partners, axis tie, focus of attention, relationship to the topic --would mark a change in the interaction, and the beginning of a new episode.

The unit given by this definition was essentially an analytic unit rather than a phenomenal unit. In most cases we would choose to use the term "sequence" to refer to the units which occur in memory --the discussion about drugs on college campuses; the long tete-a-tete between Him and Her; the celebration of the arrival of champagne. Occasionally the phenomenal unit and the analytic unit might coincide, as for instance with a dramatic story told by a single person. It was even possible for the phenomenal unit to be smaller than an episode, if one of the persons participating in a conversation remembered only part of what occurred; only what he had said, perhaps, or only what his partner had said.

In comparison with the acts coded by many observers of interaction, of whom Bales³ may serve as a representative example, our episode could be either

³ Bales, R.F. 1950. Interaction Process Analysis, A Method for the study of Small Groups. Cambridge, Mass.: Addison Wesley Press.

smaller or larger. The episode might be larger, because the behaving unit is an axis rather than an individual, and the episode might include contributions from several different participants. On the other hand, the episode might be smaller than the act in cases where the focus of attention or relationship expressed toward the topic shifts within a single statement by one person. In fact, the heavy reliance upon substantive cues at the expense of person cues and grammatical cues probably makes it impossible to use the episode as a unit for direct observation of conversation: the necessary decisions can be made only from a written report.

Our image of the episode --an axis relating to an environment (or focus of attention) --is much like Newcomb's⁽⁴⁾ image of the A-B-X system. He says

⁽⁴⁾ Newcomb, T.M. 1953. "An approach to the study of communicative acts." Psychological Review 60:393-404.

that an act is symbolized as A to B re X. In these terms, the episode is defined as A-B (axis partnership) re X.

Within the unifying frame of a single episode, communication occurs between axis partners at many levels and refers simultaneously to many things. Individual expressions of opinion, sentiment, and personal style --expressions that might be given separate recognition at the level of individual act --give accent and color to the episode. In our coding of sociable interaction, we focussed sometimes upon the multiple, overlapping, and individualized aspects of the interaction; and sometimes upon the structural properties of the episode, and associated qualities which were assumed to be homogeneous for each episode. There were also some parts of our analysis which ignored episodes altogether, and utilized instead the entire party as a single unit of observation.

The choice of a unit of analysis was to a large extent arbitrary. Homogeneities exist at many levels -- at the level of individual acts, at the level of interpersonal episodes, at the level of parties -- and it is up to the particular investigator to decide which kinds of homogeneity are important for his purposes. The specification of a unit of analysis is simply a statement about what kinds of homogeneity, uniformity, or regularity are important; or, alternatively, a statement about what kinds of change in the ongoing process are significant. In our case, we decided to focus attention upon the interpersonal axis as the behaving unit; and to take as the unit of behavior an episode which would be homogeneous with respect to certain axis characteristics. These decisions reflected our view of sociability as a realm of behavior in which the central concern is the creation, development, and dissolution of temporary systems of interpersonal association.

3. Conversational Resource

Choice of a topic of conversation in a sociable situation sets the stage for communication among axis partners. Often a conversation proceeds at many levels at once, both overt and covert. In fact, it seems sometimes that a topic of conversation is chosen not so much for intrinsic interest as for its adaptability in the service of covert processes of communication. For instance, conversation about the weather — that personal resource in sociability -- allows individuals to exchange information about mood, about whether they like one another, and about whether they live in the same or different worlds. Thus, the nominal topic of conversation serves as a resource for the conversationalists, and they may draw upon it in many different ways.

The concept of resource occupies a position in the analysis of sociable interaction comparable to that of goal in a Lewinian analysis of task-centered interaction. If task-centered interaction consists of locomotion toward a goal, than sociable interaction consists of the elaboration of a sociable resource, moving away from the initial statement of the resource. Resource contrasts with goal in that it comes at the beginning of interaction, whereas a goal is usually conceived as being a terminal point for interaction. Resource and goal are similar, however, in that each serves as an anchor-point for interaction; each serves to create a field within which interaction occurs.

Locomotion in task-centered interaction is generally conceived as movement along a path which connects the person or group (the actor) with the goal. Often

there are several alternative paths available; choice among them depends upon the position of the actor, his relation to the goal, and his perception of the field.

Similarly, in sociable interaction, there are many different ways of developing a resource, depending upon what the resource is, on the relation of participants to it, and on their experience and expectations concerning interaction. The fact that only the beginning of a sequence of sociable interaction is fixed, with the termination unspecified, does not mean that the field is undifferentiated.

One way of considering the pathways suggested by a resource is by analogy with word association, or dream symbolism. When a resource is introduced, various ideas and reactions occur to the participants. The associational processes involved may be conscious or unconscious, logical or emotional, literal or symbolic, based upon individual experience or collective stereotype. The object in sociable interaction is to select those associations that will be most meaningful to the particular set of participants; that will evoke response from them, and/or enable them to join in with further comment.

Movement can be viewed as departure from a point of origin to move in some direction(s) which the participants find meaningful; or, alternatively, as a kind of spiraling activity, in which participants move away from the resource and back again, with each 'circle' shedding new light upon the resource, utilizing new facets of it, and perhaps adding to the collective product something of the personal quality of the speaker(s).

It is not our intention to present a topological analysis of sociable interaction, but merely to indicate the possibility of doing so, and to suggest the central place which the concept of resource must have in such an analysis.

A second way of using the concept of resource is in an analysis of what may be seen as a constant drift in human relationships toward boredom. Within any field of interaction, there appears to be a tendency toward normative stabilization: within the range of interactions of any given individual; within any given partnership, or relationship; and within the interaction processes which characterize any social institution. The existence of stable organizing tendencies that model behavior at the individual level and at the level of institutions and organizations is well known. It is perhaps less obvious that each interpersonal partnership also moves toward normative stabilization, developing fixed expectations about such things as what subject matter shall be discussed and what sentiments may be expressed, and about the kind and amount of personal exposure to be expected. The rigidity of these expectations often operates to restrict interaction in well-established partnerships to an almost-ritualized reiteration of the familiar; it prevents both the introduction of new material and the discovery of new aspects of self /other. Creating ways to circumvent such rigidity and keep a relationship growing, that is, to keep alive the experience of discovery, can be one of the greatest challenges facing individuals closely linked to one another by ties of marriage, friendship, or collegueship. The solution is made easier --but not automatic -- if the partnership has available to it a continuous supply of new resources; or if the resources that are relevant to the partnership are themselves subject to change - -as are children, or some kinds of work, or some leisure

pursuits. However, it should be noted that the problems created by normative stabilization are centered as much in the way a resource is treated as in the substance of the resource itself . It is likely to be more refreshing to find a new way of dealing with an old topic than to grind a new topic through the mill of an old treatment.