

METACOMMUNICATING ON ONE'S OWN SOCIALLY DEVALUATED BEHAVIOR

Abstract: Individuals are always behaving: they move, sit, talk, dress in a certain way. On the basis of their behavior, individuals are attributed characteristics by others present: they are considered polite or impolite, ridiculous, out of place, trendy, strange, and so on. Many of these characteristics are negatively valued. This paper examines how metacommunication, understood as communication about communication, is used in everyday-life encounters (Goffman, 1963a) to prevent others to attribute negative characteristics to oneself when one behaves in a negatively-valued way. It will be shown that in certain situations, metacommunication is unsuccessful in this respect: however an individual metacommunicates, the individual cannot save face. This aspect of human communication is another instance of the fact that 'one cannot *not* communicate' (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967).

Key words: metacommunication, everyday-life encounters, social norms, Goffmanian face, communication

1. Introduction

The concept of metacommunication features in research areas such as animal communication (Bateson, 1972/2000), pathological communication among family members (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967), play theory and child development (Sawyer, 2003; Branco, 2005), and is widely used as a therapeutic means in systemic psychotherapy (see for instance Salem, 2005). This paper sets out to examine some aspects of metacommunication in the domain of everyday-life encounters. In particular, I will consider how metacommunication is used by individuals to alter the way others judge them. The analysis is based on a number of concepts, which are introduced in §1. It will be shown that metacommunication can be used to restore one's face in the eyes of others (§2), but not in all kinds of situation (§3). The analysis provides further evidence that 'one cannot *not* communicate', as claimed by Watzlawick *et al.* (1967) and discussed in §4. The paper concludes with a brief summary in §5.

1.1. Metacommunication

As a first approximation, metacommunication can be defined as „communication about communication“ (Bateson, 1968: 209). As it stands, this rough definition can be applied to quite different phenomena. 'Metacommunication' sometimes refers to *internal* properties of a message, which indicate how the message should be understood

(Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967: 53; Giffin and Patton, 1971: 7, cited by Meyer-Hermann, 1983: 6). Such properties include tone of voice, bodily actions and facial expression accompanying an utterance, as well as the register, level of language, chosen by the speaker. The way one says „Good morning“, for instance, may indicate supplication, condescension or awareness of power position (Giffin and Patton, 1971: 7).

The term 'metacommunication' is also used to refer to a complete message, including its suprasegmental and non-verbal aspects, which refers to another message (Bateson, 1972/2000: 178; Meyer-Hermann, 1983: 15; Mishler and Waxler, 1968: 396; Ruesch, 1961; Ruesch and Kees, 1956: 192; Salem, 2005: 143–144; Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967: 53; Haley, 1958). This is the sense in which 'metacommunication' is taken here. An example is provided by Betty's question in (1).

(1) Alan says to Betty: „Could you please turn down the music?“

Later on, Betty asks Alan: „**When you asked me to turn down the music, where you angry at me?**“

As pointed out by Bochner & Lenk Krueger (1979) and Wilmot (1980), these two uses of the term have not always been clearly distinguished.

Metacommunication thus involves two levels of communication; the level-2 message (Betty's answer in our example), which constitutes metacommunication, is about the level-1 message (Alan's utterance).

It is not sufficient to report someone else's utterance for metacommunication to take place. In (2), Kelly is not metacommunicating.

(2) Kelly: „William said that he would like to buy the books“.

Following Meyer-Hermann (1983: 15), the author considers that metacommunication occurs when the level-1 message can be conceptualized as a theme of which something is predicated. In (2), Kelly does not predicate anything of William's utterance, but merely reports it.

Metacommunicative messages, or 'metamessages', can be classified along several parameters, including (i) identity or distinctness of the authors of the level-1 and level-2 messages, (ii) temporal relationship between the level-1 and level-2 messages; (iii) explicitness; (iv) medium of communication.

(i) Identity of the authors of the level-1 and level-2 messages

In example (1) above, the author of the level-1 message (Alan) is not the same as the author of the level-2 message (Betty). This paper will focus on situations where the two authors are one and the same person, i.e. on metamessages through which the speaker communicates on his *own* level-1 messages, as in (3) and (4).

(3) Mark works as a bellhop in a luxury hotel. One morning, he meets his boss, who immediately notices the stain on Mark's shirt. He says: „**I know I have a stain on my shirt, but I didn't have time to change it!**“

(4) „**What I will now say might surprise you:** Betty never turned the music down.“

(ii) Temporal relationship between the level-1 and level-2 messages

The level-2 message can take place *after* the level-1 message, as in (1) above, during it, as in (3), or *before* it, as in (4). The claims made in this paper hold for all three kinds of temporal relationship.

(iii) *Explicitness*

The level-2 message may refer to the level-1 message explicitly or implicitly. In examples (1), (3) and (4), metacommunication is explicit, in the sense that the speaker mentions the level-1 message; however, in the following example, (5), metacommunication is implicit: Seth does not mention the activity about which he metacommunicates, i.e. his walking on all fours in the park.

(5) Seth, who lost his keys in the park grass, is walking on all fours to find them again. He says ironically to a passer-by: „**I’m having fun, aren’t I?**“¹

Both explicit and implicit metamessages will be taken into account here.

(iv) *Medium of communication*

Both level-1 and level-2 messages can belong to different kinds of code. This paper restricts itself to *verbal* metacommunication. Level-1 messages, however, are not necessarily verbal; they can be conveyed through body movements, as in (5); appearance of clothes, as in (3); and other aspects of conduct which I subsume under the term ‘behavior’. More precisely, the paper will be concerned with *socially devaluated* behavior. These concepts are examined in the next three sections.

Before proceeding further, a remark on methodology is in order. The examples cited in this paper were either witnessed or invented by the author. In linguistics publications, it is common practice for the author to provide examples constructed by the author; although in some research areas this method has drawbacks as compared to natural data (see Heritage, 1984), it is suitable for many purposes, provided the author has a reliable knowledge of the language. I believe that everyday-life situations are similar to linguistic examples in that they can be made up by the author provided the author knows well enough the social groups about which the authors writes. Speaking about one’s own social group is like speaking about one’s mother tongue.

1.2. Actor, observer, behavior

The kind of situation to be discussed in this paper corresponds to what Erving Goffman (1963, 1967c) called *gathering*, i.e. „any set of two or more individuals whose members include all and only those who are at the moment in one another’s immediate presence“. In Goffman’s terms, a gathering may be *focused*, as when two persons talk to each other, or *unfocused*, as in the case of strangers waiting for a bus or standing in front of a painting in a museum.

In a gathering, individuals are *actor*, by which is meant that they *behave* in a certain way. The term ‘behavior’ is taken here in a broad sense. The following list, which is by far not systematic, gives some examples:

¹ This is a scene I witnessed one day while jogging in a park. Goffman (1963a: 78–79, 130–131) mentions a surprisingly similar situation.

- *movements* and *posture* of the actor when s/he eats, walks, jogs, speaks, gardens, queues, sits in a library, listens to a talk, etc.;
- *position* of the actor with respect to the environment: the distance between the actor and the other persons or objects surrounding him; the place where s/he stands;²
- *clothes, make-up, tattoos, hairdo, jewelry, smells* including perfume and body odor, *stains* on the body or on the clothes, *scars*;
- *language*: the actor's accent, sociolect, intonations, coherence in speech, the register s/he uses, the matters which s/he talks about, the time s/he begins or stops talking, the language s/he chooses in a code-switching situation, etc.;
- *extensions*, i.e. humans, animals or objects which accompany the actor (e.g. the dog which s/he walks, the car s/he drives, the book s/he holds in his hand, the beverage s/he drinks);
- *products* of the actor's activity, through which the actor conveys 'disembodied information' (Goffman, 1963a: 14): the decoration, furniture and cleanliness of the house or office, the way s/he set the table for his guests, the characteristics of handwriting in a letter, etc.

For some of the above categories, quantity, speed, and presence vs. absence are also relevant parameters. For example, the actor may wear too much perfume; eat slowly or fast; speak or refrain from speaking. Some aspects of behavior may combine several of the categories, like the actor's degree of *involvement* in a conversation (Goffman, 1963a, 1967b), which includes movements, posture, position and use of language.

In a gathering, an individual not only behaves in a certain way, but also *perceives* others and himself behaving. The two roles of actor and observer constitute two aspects of human conduct which cannot be separated from one another: as he observes others, an individual moves in a certain way, adopts a certain posture or a certain gaze. As Goffman (1963a: 16) puts it, „each giver [of a message conveyed in face-to-face interaction] is himself a receiver, and each receiver is a giver“. Perception is a behavior.

1.3. Characteristics

In a gathering, the actor's behavior is interpreted by the observer, in the sense that the observer attributes certain characteristics to the actor on the ground of his/her behavior. For instance, an individual may consider rude another individual who shoves him to get into the bus first. Other examples of such characteristics are: polite, courteous, well-mannered, distinguished, deferential, helpful, kind, impolite, discourteous, bad-mannered, coarse, vulgar, offhand, clumsy, ridiculous, laughable, childish, out of place, snobbish, modish, trendy, old-fashioned, elegant, chic, graceful, effeminate, feminine, masculine, overfamiliar, formal, professional (i.e. serious and effective), aggressive, mad, insane, strange, eccentric, odd, normal, generous, stingy, discreet, unobtrusive, inquisitive, sweet, clean, dirty and conventional. Henceforth, the term 'characteristic' will be taken in the restrictive sense of 'feature attributed during a gathering by an observer to an actor on the grounds of the latter's behavior'.

² Cf. Goffman (1963a: 10): „the individual's mere presence, regardless of his conduct while present, communicates either that he possesses the entrance qualifications or that he is behaving improperly“.

Many characteristics are not lexicalized. For instance, there is no adjective in English defining a person who only uses the variety of English which purists consider as correct. This characteristic is expressed through a whole proposition, as in 'He uses careful English' or 'He speaks an excellent English'.

The assignment of characteristics to an actor depends on several parameters, including the place and time where the gathering takes place, the roles of the participants, their relationship and what they know about each other. Furthermore, the assignment of characteristics is a social phenomenon, i.e. it is determined by the rules of the social group which the participants belong to. This is not to say that they will necessarily agree with these rules; an observer may, for different reasons, not follow the behavior-characteristics linking rules. Generally, however, s/he will at least be aware of the rules. The rules themselves may be subject to some variation, as pointed out by Goffman (1963a: 5): „An act can, of course, be proper or improper only according to the judgment of a specific social group, and even within the confines of the smallest and warmest of groups there is likely to be some dissensus and doubt“. See also Barthes (1985: 45).

Behaviors will be positively marked, as polite or impolite, formal or familiar, etc., in certain situations only. I may walk in a street without being considered either polite or impolite. As noted by Goffman (1963a: 6), „Some approved acts receive applause upon performance [...]. Some pass quite unnoticed and do not constitute a felt event [...]“. On the other hand, (ab)normality can be predicated of any behavior, contrary to most characteristics. It thus seems to be of a different nature.

It seems that some adjectives, like 'clean', may refer both to a behavior and a characteristic. If I say to someone „Now, it's ok, you're clean“ after trying to wash off from his skin an ink stain, I refer to his behavior. Presence vs. absence of a stain is a 'brute fact' (Searle, 1995) and is not dependent on any cultural frame of reference, though the *way* I refer to it is culturally determined. If, after observing the conduct of several patients in a psychiatric hospital during an extended period of time, I say of one of them „A is cleaner than B“, I am attributing a characteristic to A on the basis of his behavior. Although this characteristic is ultimately based on brute facts, i.e. behavior, it is not a brute fact itself, but an 'observer-relative' feature of the world (Searle, 1995: 9□13): it depends on the observer for its existence and, we may add, is culturally determined. Although Searle does not mention characteristics, as defined here, among the many examples he cites in *The Construction of Social Reality*, these can be considered institutional facts as well. Searle claims that institutional facts are constituted by rules of the form 'X counts as Y in C', for example, „such and such bits of paper count as money“ (p. 44). Characteristics are constituted in the same manner: such and such behavior counts as politeness, femininity, professionalism, etc.

Behaviors and characteristics are in a similar relationship to each other as are the *signifiant* and *signifié* of a linguistic sign (see Klinkenberg, 1996: 279). Goffman often refers to this semiotic relationship. In *Behavior in Public Places* (1963a), he uses terms such as 'body *symbolism*', 'body *idiom*', '*idiom* of individual appearances and gestures', 'embodied *expressive signs*', '*signs* [...] well designed to convey information about the actor's social attributes', '*expressive* implications of well or badly ordered

personal appearance', and he writes „an individual *divulges things* about himself by his mere presence in a situation“ and „*gives off information* about himself by virtue of the encounters in which others do or do not see him“; in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959: 1), he states that „[f]or those present, many *sources of information* become accessible and many *carriers* (or „*sign-vehicles*“) become available for *conveying this information*. If unacquainted with the individual, observers can *glean clues* from his conduct and appearance [...]“, and in *Stigma* (1963b: 43): „[The information is] *conveyed through bodily expression* in the immediate presence of those who receive the expression“ (italics mine). Searle's rule 'X counts as Y in C' is also of a semiotic nature. Roland Barthes, in *L'Aventure sémiologique*, mentions some behavior-characteristics linking rules: „this piece of clothing tells me exactly how conformist or eccentric its bearer is“ (1985: 227; see also p. 252 about the meaning conveyed by everyday-life objects, i.e. 'extensions' in the terminology used here).

1.4. Values

Behaviors and the associated characteristics are socially valued: in a given social group, under normal circumstances, some behaviors are esteemed, or positively valued, like being polite, professional or clean; others are disapproved of, or negatively valued, like being rude, out of place or strange. Such values form a continuum: an utterly disrespectful act is a more serious breach than a minor mark of impoliteness.

Here again, I am not claiming that an observer will *necessarily* devalue an actor on the basis of the latter's behavior: the observer may hold himself aloof from his group's values, for whatever reason. However, most observers at least *know* the rules shared by their group.

One and the same behavior may be more or less valued depending on the situation. A young man may gain prestige in the eyes of his peers by carrying out acts in a public place which are normally considered as impolite. Nonetheless, on a linguistic level, adjectives referring to characteristics do appear to reflect value differences, as shown by the oddness of utterances where adjectives referring to inversely valued characteristics are coordinated, as in (6) and (7).

(6) ?I admire John so much: he is so generous, always ready to help, humble, impolite...

(7) ?I hate John: he is so egoist, untruthful, polite...

We can now turn to the central question of this paper: *To what extent can metacommunication cancel the devaluation associated with a particular behavior?*

2. Value-restoring metacommunication

An actor may behave in a devaluated way for several reasons, and s/he may do so more or less voluntarily. At one extreme, involuntary devaluated behavior may characterize individuals who possess a 'stigma' (Goffman 1963b), like persons who give

off a bad smell because of some medical condition.³ Other examples are the situation of an individual who yawns while talking to a friend or listening to a lecture, and the situation of a person who has dirtied his clothes and does not have the opportunity to change them before a gathering, as in example (3) above. At the other extreme, an actor may voluntarily adopt a behavior which he knows is devaluated in normal circumstances. This happens in 'illustration situations', i.e. situations where the actor adopts a devaluated behavior to provide his audience with an example of such a behavior, as in (8).

(8) During a university lecture, a teacher points out to his students that in a gathering, the individual's behavior may lead the observer to attribute negative characteristics to him. To give an example, he utters a crude sentence describing some bizarre sexual activity between two persons and asks his students: „What would you think of me if, during a syntax lesson, I were to cite this example instead of an example of the habitual kind like 'Peter likes Mary'?“

Other situations, like (5) above, are intermediary on the intentionality continuum. (9) is a further example.

(9) Brad is having his stag party. His friends splashed a great quantity of perfume over him and had him take a crowded bus.

The actor can use metacommunication in order to cancel or pre-empt this attribution of negative value.⁴ Metacommunication may take the form of the actor's explaining to the observer why s/he is behaving that way: he suffers from a medical condition; he went to bed very late the night before; a car splashed him as it went past or a waiter spilt wine on his shirt; he lost his keys in the grass; he is having his stag party. In 'illustration' situations, the actor indicates that his behavior is not 'for real' but only meant to illustrate what he is saying. When the actor metacommunicates, the observer cannot attribute to him/her anymore the negative characteristics s/he would have attributed would metacommunication not have taken place. How can this 'value-restoring' or 'value-preserving' function of metacommunication be explained?

A first answer which might come to mind is that the observer cannot devalue the actor because s/he knows that the actor behaves that way for reasons that are independent of him: „Mark is not responsible for the fact that his shirt is dirty“. There are situations, however, where the actor *is* devaluated although s/he gives information which accounts for his/her behavior. The person who comes to a meeting in a classy restaurant with dirty clothes may tell that a car splashed him while he was on his way as he would tell any other insignificant event that happened to him during his day, without showing at all that he is conscious of the negative value tied to his behavior.⁵

³ The metabolic disorder known as trimethylaminuria is a case in point. This disorder confers a strong rotten fish odor upon the sufferer and „can be destructive to the personal, social, and work life of the affected individual“ (Mitchell and Smith, 2001).

⁴ Canceling metacommunication occurs when the level-2 message takes place *during* or *after* the conveying of the level-1 message; pre-emptive metacommunication occurs when the level-2 message takes place *before* the conveying of the level-1 message.

⁵ Such kinds of situation are a source of humor.

Justifying one's behavior is thus not sufficient to clear oneself of observers' negative judgment. Another feature of metacommunication is decisive here: when metacommunicating, the actor says implicitly „*I know* that in the current situation, the behavior I am exhibiting would normally be devaluated“. That is, *the actor shows awareness of social rules*. Devaluation thus appears to occur when the observer believes the actor is not aware of the devaluating potential of his behavior: I do not consider you sloppy because your clothes are stained, but because you do not show that you are aware of the fact that having stained clothes, in the current situation, is a devaluation-triggering behavior.

The two attitudes outlined above are independent of one another: not only may an actor provide an explanation of his behavior without showing that he is aware of its negative value, but he may show that he is aware of the negative implications of his behavior without providing an explanation for it, as in (5).

A remark can be made about those situations in which an individual metacommunicates not on his *own*, but on *others'* devaluated behavior. A subcategory of this is represented by 'attention-drawing' metacommunication, as illustrated by utterances pronounced discretely and with a lone tone of voice such as 'You have something between your teeth', 'Your fly is down' or, pointing to the other's shirt, 'The size sticker is still on'. Here, metacommunication does not free the actor from devaluation, but only draws his attention to a potentially devaluating behavior.

3. Metacommunication cannot always totally cancel devaluation

We have seen that metacommunicating on his/her own behavior may prevent the actor from being devaluated. Metacommunication may be totally successful in this respect, as in the situation of the tired individual who explains why s/he is yawning: once metacommunication has taken place, the level-1 message, conveyed by the actor's yawning, cannot be considered as a sign of boredom or rudeness, and no devaluated characteristic remains attached to the actor. In other cases, metacommunication will not totally prevent devaluation. Thus, in the university teacher situation, even if the students understand that the teacher's crude sentence was just meant to *illustrate* a devaluated behavior, they may still consider him strange or ridiculous. Another, less involved example may be cited here:

(10) On April 1st, Noah comes to a formal meeting with a paper fish stuck on his back. He tells the other presents: "I keep it on to please my daughter".⁶

Here, metacommunicating allows Noah to avoid being considered ridiculous for not noticing the paper fish, but it does not free him totally from ridiculousness.

There are thus two kinds of behavior leading to devaluation: those that metacommunication can 'save', and those that it cannot. Let us call them 'savable' and 'unsavable' behavior. More precisely, since the message conveyed by a given

⁶ This example refers to a tradition in countries like France, Switzerland and Britain of sticking a paper fish on the back of an unsuspecting person on April 1st.

behavior is determined in part by the context, we should say that there are two kinds of behavior *given a specific context*; one and the same behavior may be savable in one context but not in another. Another way of stating the difference between these is the following. The behaviors that we observe here take place in gatherings and as such are subject to social rules. The latter can be considered as rules which pair behaviors and characteristics/value. Metacommunication can, to a certain extent, dissociate these pairs: „my behavior X does not mean negatively-valued Y, but positively-valued (or neutral) Z“. However, as we have seen, it is not omnipotent. Unsaveable behavior occurs when metacommunication cannot be used to undo the pairing of a behavior with a negative meaning.

There are thus behaviors that metacommunication cannot strip of their negative value. This is to be distinguished from situations where metacommunicating *itself* is devaluated. Linguistic exchanges are subject to rules, as shown by conversation analysis studies. When two strangers are presented to each other at a dinner, the first thing they may be expected to do is to greet each other, not to metacommunicate. In such situations, it is therefore not possible to resort to second-order metacommunication, i.e. metacommunication on metacommunication, to try to cancel the devaluation tied to one's own metacommunication, since second-order metacommunication *is* metacommunication, and is thus devaluated.

4. „One cannot *not* communicate“

In *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (1967: 49), Watzlawick and his colleagues claimed that „one cannot *not* communicate“. The very fact of restraining from communicating *is* communication. Any kind of behavior, including silence or inactivity, conveys a message: „[...] the schizophrenic tries *not to communicate*. But since even nonsense, silence, withdrawal, immobility (postural silence), or any other form of denial is itself a communication, the schizophrenic is faced with the impossible task of denying that he is communicating and at the same time denying that his denial is a communication“. Other authors expressed the same idea: „the actors' actions, to adapt Merleau-Ponty's phrase, are condemned to be meaningful“ (Heritage, 1984: 110); „Although an individual can stop talking, he cannot stop communicating through body idiom; he must say either the right thing or the wrong thing. He cannot say nothing“ (Goffman, 1963a: 35).⁷ In order to deny that he is communicating, the schizophrenic would have to resort to metacommunication. But metacommunication itself *is* communication. There is no 'ultimate' metacommunication which could both cancel a lower-level message without being itself a message.

The two kinds of situation examined in the previous section are further illustrations of the fact that one cannot not communicate: there are situations where the actor's behavior devaluates him or her even if s/he metacommunicates, unsavable

⁷ In narratives as well, even details which might seem totally insignificant will, at the end of the day, acquire a meaning, if only through their absurdity or pointlessness (Barthes, 1985: 176).



behavior, and situations where metacommunication itself is devaluating. In both cases, whatever is done, the actor cannot *not* convey a devaluating message.

5. Summary

In this paper, I examined situations where an actor metacommunicates on his/her own socially devaluated behavior. A distinction was made between situations in which metacommunication is successful in detaching the devaluation normally attached to the actor's behavior, and situations in which metacommunication does not fully have this capacity. Both kinds of situation are further illustrations of the fact that one cannot not communicate.

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METAKOMUNIKACIJA O SOPSTVENOM DRUŠTVENO OBEZVREĐENOM PONAŠANJU

Rezime

Pojedinci uvek pokazuju neki vid ponašanja: kreću se, sede, govore, oblače se na određeni način. Na osnovu njihovog ponašanja ljudi u njihovom okruženju dodeljuju im različite osobine: smatraju ih učtivim ili neučtivim, smešnim, neprilagođenim, modernim, čudnim, i sl. Mnoge od ovih osobina ocenjuju se kao negativne. Ovaj rad istražuje kako se metakomunikacija, definisana kao komunikacija o komunikaciji, upotrebljava u svakodnevnom životu (Goffman, 1963a), kako ljudi iz neposredne okoline ne bi pojedincu pripisivali negativne osobine kada se taj pojedinac ponaša na način ocenjen kao negativan. Rad će pokazati da metakomunikacija u određenim situacijama ne postiže ovaj cilj. Naime, bez obzira na to kako pojedinac koristi metakomunikaciju, ne može da uvaži lice. Ovaj aspekt ljudske komunikacije predstavlja još jednu ilustraciju činjenice da „osoba ne može a da ne komunicira“ (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967).

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