

On the power of the impossible

Overt and covert meaning-breaking in interaction

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Forcing the other into an impossible situation is an exercise of power. This view on ordinary interaction is not usually accounted for by ethnographers. Yet it constitutes an interesting problem for the order* (Garfinkel 1967, 2008) of everyday action-in-interaction. An impossible situation, in fact, entails meaning-breaking, and of a peculiar kind. In Andersen's famous tale, the emperor is beautifully clothed, yet naked. The imposition to support the former claim is impossible to follow and, at the same time, not to follow. One has to admire what s/he cannot see. In Andersen's story the game is overt, in a sense, and anyway difficult to explain. Even more complicated are the covert mechanisms characterizing deception. But, from a theoretical perspective, to fully appreciate the deep structure that underlies both mechanisms —the overt and the covert ones— is perhaps the most challenging task.

To do this, we propose to start with reconsidering interaction as deeply related to (the avoidance of) impossible situations, since interaction is an end *per se*, that is, sustaining itself (Goffman 1959, 1983) —a fundamental commitment. Yet there is more than this. To frame the problem, we have to assume that interaction is endowed with a sort of *attractive force*. That is, the tendency to continue interacting and to avoid *impasses*, impossible situations where coordination is lost and there is no apparent way to recover it.

Furthermore, *impasses* are connected with the mutual definition of the situation. Interactional moves (Goffman 1981) that are considered relevant by participants with respect to the ongoing interaction and are regarded as having been mutually recognized make *scores* (Brandom 1994: 181), or reference points (RP). When people create a RP by mutually recognizing it through moves and reply moves, they mark that point in what we call *Recognized Epistemic Field* (REF). That is, they have reached an interpersonally valid definition of the situation (Garfinkel 2008). Fact is that sometimes this definition is invalid, and this could happen in manifold ways.

A REF, basically, is a regarded-as-shared map of the ongoing interaction that, at the same time, allows coordination and forces towards coordinating on the basis of its RPs. A RP, once marked (that is, once a situated meaning has been made), has to be taken into account, one way or the other. And this, ultimately, depends on the attractive power of interaction.

The strategy of those who gain power over the other interactant(s) is then to put in the REF —to make the other(s) accept— RPs that are contradictory or misleading (by themselves, by their intertwinings, or by their link with the shared phenomenal world), so that the one who is subjected to power falls into an impossible situation, in a situation of impasse. Not knowing what to do next could open up the possibility of devolving power to someone who proposes a “solution” for repairing or recovering from the impasse.

What is then common to overt and covert meaning-breaking? It is exactly this placing someone into an impossible situation, by leveraging on the attraction of interaction via a contradictory REF. Therefore, from an interactionist point of view, a possible way to frame impasses is by considering them as situations in which the following dilemma is at stake: to sustain the interaction itself or to save one’s face and sense of self? This is particularly clear when considering asymmetrical interaction (emperor-subject(s), manager-worker(s), etc.).

There are differences, obviously, between overt meaning-breaking strategies and covert ones. The main difference, we believe, is the threat of violence. Overt mechanisms, perhaps, more easily need to rely on violence. If we follow Collins’s (2007) approach, according to which violence is difficult to carry out and asks for peculiar interactional moves, this also entails, for the meaning-breaker, to be able to “resist” (more than the others) the attraction of interaction.

Finally, power is somehow reinforced by meaning-breaking. This both means that a) power equals —so to speak— the possibility to break *shared* meaning without apparently doing so, and that, at the same time, b) the lack of (public) recognition of meanings having been broken by someone enhances and increases her/his power. Therefore, actual meaning-breaking is an exercise, and thus a re-affirmation, of power. Furthermore, even in overt cases, such a way of exercising power includes also avoiding to have it explicit in the REF that the impossibility has been *strategically* put in place. This, as we will try to show in the full paper, makes, probably, both overt and covert strategies *ways of cheating*.

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