

Conversation

Possibilities of its Repair and Descent into Discourse and Computation

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Excerpt, pages 141-147, Heading Numbers added for reference.

A. Authentic conversation

In existential philosophy, authenticity has to do with being true to one's self despite pressures from society to be otherwise. There, authenticity is celebrated as an individualist ideal that denies the conversational reality of being human. I am using authenticity here to refer to the pleasure of participating in togetherness in which one is free to speak for oneself, not in the name of absent others, not under pressure to say things one does not believe in, and not having to hide something for fear of being reprimanded or excluded from further conversations. But I will be more specific than that.

Authentic conversation is not easily, if at all, identifiable from the outside. How would an observer access someone's construction in progress, why something is said, and what is not being said? Questions of this kind should not be dismissed as being subjective. Inasmuch as participants in conversations can be asked and may be willing to account for their feelings, the act of making them public, where they can be dealt with in the very conversations that elicit them, renders feelings – supposedly subjective – inter-subjectively acceptable. One is reminded of Wittgenstein's argument against private language. Participant accounts are not only richer in meaning and closer to what is going on inside a conversation than their observable manifestations, but also more predictable of how a conversation unfolds – at least to the satisfaction of the participants.

Participants in authentic conversations – whether as speakers or listeners, and in case of the latter, whether addressed and expected to respond or waiting for their turn – may experience conversations as:

1. Occurring in the presence of addressable and responsive individuals.

In authentic conversations, participants distinguish themselves and each other by the contributions they make to them. The act of distinguishing oneself is public. It does not impose identities on others, which is what observers are destined to do. When participants cannot be seen as addressable or the source of their voices

cannot be distinguished – for example, when in a large and anonymous crowd – conversation is no longer authentic.

2. Maintaining mutual understanding.

In conversations, mutuality, agreement, and coordination of understanding and acting are of central concern for all participants. However, since cognition cannot be observed and nobody can compare their own understanding with that of others, in conversations, understanding or the lack of it, is performative and evident in certain speech acts, such as “I understand,” “I agree,” or “tell me more.” Here, acknowledging understanding does not mean similarity or sharing of conceptions, its affirmation constitutes an invitation to go on, including to other subjects.

Observers, by contrast, are effectively excluded from the possibilities of checking their understanding of what they overhear against the performative understanding among participants in conversation. In this respect, analysts of transcripts of conversations or written exchanges are literally “out of the loop,” isolated, and responsive, at most, to their scientific community of equally detached observers.

3. Self-organizing and constituted in the contributions their participants make to each other.

Conversations are communicationally closed. They are not abstracted from anything. They are embodied in real participants’ talking and listening to each other, responding to what they heard, and acting accordingly. The identity of a conversation – dinner conversation, political deliberation therapeutic session, focus group discussion, business meeting, or design project – emerges from talk and text generated within that conversation. With the emergence of conversational identities comes the feeling of being part of it, referring to its participants by the inclusive “we.” How the responsibility to maintain the flow of conversational moves is distributed among participants and the direction in which a conversation is going is always uncertain – save for one’s own contribution. Among participants, this uncertainty is not a deficiency, however. Participants trust each other to make sense of what is said.

Observers who seek to understand a conversation from a recording of what happened, looking at it from a God’s eye view, cannot possibly appreciate the feeling of being part of it, the feeling of being able to shape an always evolving conversation, and the feeling of trusting each other to maintain the flow. As Michael Billig (2006) noted, we have a rich vocabulary of inner processes – feelings, thoughts, attitudes, experiences, memories and reasons – in terms of which psychologists construct the cognitive processes of their interest without being observable. However, it is because the conversational use of these words is public and coordinated with other speakers of a language that they become meaningful in conversations, not as description of individual states but as performing certain speech acts.

4. Intuitive, not rule-governed.

Authentic conversations are embodied practices. Turn taking, topic switching, coordination of reality constructions is natural, requiring no reflection, no preparation, no special training – as Nofsinger said, notwithstanding the fact that children, born into a community, need to learn joining its conversations. Children do not learn rules, however, and then apply them. They learn to interact with others by speaking much like how they see and hear others interacting with them. Authentic conversations do not follow rules; they give birth to further conversations. Only after sufficient conversational competencies are acquired is it possible to talk of improper practices – “do not interrupt,” “don’t be rude,” or “listen!” from which conversational conventions may emerge. But authentic conversations may go on without them.

Conversation theorists may well draw useful distinctions from the transcripts of conversations, for example, by analyzing conversational triples and adjacency pairs, formulating and testing hypotheses about how natural conversations are organized (Goodwin, 1981), postulating conversational maxims (Grice, 1975, 1978), or theorizing a universal pragmatics for ideal speech situations (Habermas, 1970, 2001). But all of these grand theoretical precepts are constructions by and for outsiders to conversations.

Conversation analysts have the tendency to claim that participants implicitly follow the rules they have invented. This claim is epistemologically preposterous, however. Drawing on Sigmund Freud, Billig (2006) makes a useful distinction between the unconscious and the preconscious. The former is an observer’s construction of cognition that is inaccessible to an observed individual (and often related to oppression). The latter is an observer’s construction of what that individual does not attend to at the moment, takes for granted while conversing with others. But from the perspective of social construction, there is the possibility that conversation analytic vocabularies enter a conversation and start coordinating participants’ talk whether of cognitive conditions or conversational rules. In other words, while the results of conversation analysis may not have anything to do with how conversation is practiced, teaching conversation theoretical explanations diverts practitioners’ attention from what they had been doing naturally.

5. Dialogically equal.

By dialogical equality I mean that every participant in a conversation has the possibility of contributing to it. Nobody feels excluded. Every contribution, even silence, is respected and appropriately responded to.

Indeed, participation is rarely observed equal. Some participants inevitably speak more than others do, leading to claims of observed power inequalities within conversations. Moreover, participants usually have unequal resources (experiences) to contribute. Turn taking is inherently asymmetrical. However, such interpretations of observed differences in frequencies as indicators of inequalities may not matter to insiders to whom unequal experiences may not be detrimental to

authentic conversations, more likely, they are what keeps a conversation alive. Even without making an observable contribution, the perception of being able to contribute when the opportunity arises and be accepted for what one says is all that matters. Needless to say, dialogical equality is not observable from outside a conversation. Participants may not notice it either but might articulate its lack.

6. Creating possibilities of participation.

Conversations may well take place while doing a job. But besides correlations with a purpose, conversations are inherently creative, offering participants possibilities to contribute and realize themselves in the contributions they and others make to the process. One obvious example of opening possibilities of participation is to raise questions not previously answered, inviting addressees to construct answers. Conversational possibilities expand when participants assure each other that their contributions are understood, important, and appreciated (Brown & Levinson 1987), and that their creativity is appreciated. Creating and maintaining possibilities for others relates to von Foerster's (1981: 308) ethical imperative: "Act always so as to increase the number of choices." Here, I am embedding his imperative in the context of social interactions. Socially relevant choices, not their number, are the gifts that partners in communication can offer each other (Krippendorff 2009: 34).

Obviously, possibilities can be created, pondered, exhausted, and constrained, but not observed. It should also be noted that not all questions may invite participation, as I shall discuss below.

7. Irreversible, progressive, and unique.

For participants, conversations never repeat themselves. Each turn is experienced as unique; each utterance reveals its speakers' shifting perspectives. As Heraclitus suggested, "you cannot step in the same river twice." Participants have numerous conversational moves available to alert each other to redundant threads: "here we go again!" "didn't you already tell that story," "old news," etc. Indeed, it makes no sense to repeat stories unless they have been forgotten or decisions unless they have not been followed up or been previously undone.

For conversation analysts, each transcript may well be unique as well. However, scientific analysis calls for the identification of recurrent pattern and generalizations at the cost of excluding the very uniqueness to which the participants in conversations respond. Observers tend to be blind to the unique contributions made in conversations. Participants tend to be blind to the repetitions they take for granted. Evidently, observers and participants construct realities that are orthogonal to each other but not necessarily incompatible.

8. Coordinating constructions of reality.

Conversations always leave artifacts behind, minimally the memories of their own history. Other artifacts include the always evolving relationships among participants. But most important are the changes that participants introduce into

the world while being in and after participating in conversations: decisions with practical consequences, institutionalizations of procedures, projects, designs or texts, and realizations of diverse technologies. Rarely do these artifacts correspond to any one individual's cognition. Participants supplement each other's contributions (Gergen 1994). Indeed, furniture, cars, computers, the internet and cities are designed in the course of many conversations, having long histories with changing participants but a common thread. Conceptions of these artifacts need not be shared and mostly cannot be articulated in full by any one individual but may complement each other in the interactions that set these artifacts in motion.

Conversation theorists cannot achieve such coordinations for their theories – unless they join the conversation they are theorizing and become active participants, no longer observers. Similarly, theorists of technology are comfortable in describing the histories of technological developments, but rarely appreciate the multiple conversational grounds of such developments, much less dare to forecast technological developments. The belief in technological determinism is an extreme case of denying the role of language and social interaction that drives such developments.

9. Continuable in principle.

From the perspective of external observers, conversations may be short, such as between occupants of neighboring seats on a city bus, terminating when they no longer sit next to each other, or long, such as between teenage friends who talk for hours on the telephone. For observers, both examples are finite in time. But what they have in common is the possibility of their continuation at a later time, at a different place, and perhaps including new participants, no matter what has happened in between separate encounters. When children move out of their family – for instance, when they go to college – and stay in touch with their family members and friends by telephone, email, or text messaging, they continue to weave the conversational realities they had started long ago, albeit by different means, across geographical distances, and under continuously changing circumstances. Conversations can terminate when they degenerate into other forms of interactions, incompatible with the above, and, in the extreme, when violence enters, which is a categorically different way of being together.

Evidently, there are vast differences between how participants see themselves in authentic conversations and what outside observers, conversation analysts, can record, analyze, articulate, and theorize. The two positions are con-sensually different, distinguished by unlike epistemologies, unlike relationships to their objects of attention, and unlike experiences with the subject matter of talk or writing. I am not devaluing the position of the conversation analyst, but wish to highlight that their reality constructions necessarily differ from the ones of those who are conversationally involved with each other.

B. Accountability and possibilities of repairs

The above depicts conversations as self-organizing and unproblematic verbal and non-verbal interactions among participants, including the constructions of reality they produce. Authentic conversation is typical among trusting friends but also among strangers who, having nothing to lose, feel alive in each other's presence. I do not expect participants able to describe what authentic conversation entails – as I tried above – but to become aware when disruptions of it are experienced.

In everyday life, people do not always respond in perfect alignment to each other. We say things that may not be understood as intended, interrupt someone's turn, offend someone without wanting to, or talk too much and thereby preempt others from speaking their mind. Besides such unintended disruption of unproblematic interactions, we know of systematic and institutionalized disruptions that we may notice when they occur but fail to address for a variety of reasons. I maintain that conversational competencies include ample possibilities to repair problematic conversational sequences within them. Whether or not we utilize these linguistic resources and how aware we are of these possibilities is a big question that I cannot answer here. Often it is only after encountering the efforts of others to repair problematic conversations that we are made aware of how we deviate from authentic conversation – without implying the ability to articulate just how a conversation got astray. Possibly the most important linguistic resource for repairing disruptions of authentic conversations is accountability.

I contend that everything said is said not only in the expectation of being understood by addressees but also in the expectation of being held accountable for what was said or done. As John Shotter (1984, 1993) suggests, speakers tend to articulate their contributions to a conversation not merely in response to other speakers but also with possible accounts in mind in case their contributions are challenged. The process of holding participants accountable may be initiated by noting an infelicitous, untoward, or problematic conversational move, action, or sequence of exchanges. Expressing disapproval with someone's contribution – sometimes called meta-communication – amounts to a momentary disruption of that flow and implies a request for an account by the presumed source of that disapproval. Requests for an account may also be made directly: "Why did you say that?" "What do you want to accomplish with that proposal?" "Why do you come so late?" The account subsequently given is then evaluated and either accepted or rejected, and in case of the latter, a new account may be requested, until the issue is resolved (Buttny 1993).

The most typical accounts are explanations, justifications, excuses (Mills 1940; Scott & Lyman 1968), and apologies. The interactions they set in motion are part of the conversation. They differ from the unproblematic flow of a conversation by focusing on the interaction in question, not on what they construct.

1. Explanations

Explanations are least disruptive of conversations. They respond to assertions such as “I don’t understand” “I am not following you,” and questions such as “can you clarify?” or “what do you mean by that?” Explanations, once accepted as making sense, have the effect of coordinating participants’ understanding performatively and bringing a conversation back to an unproblematic flow. Good explanations rearticulate or expand what had been said in terms compatible with listeners’ background of understanding.

2. Justifications

Justifications acknowledge a speaker’s agency in an actual or anticipated happening, and respond to expressed doubts of the merit of that happening. Justifications may be defensive when responding to challenges or preparatory when actions are proposed with the intent to seek approval. Often justifications are used to enroll listeners into the speaker’s project (Krippendorff 2008b). Once justifications are accepted, conversation can proceed to other topics.

3. Excuses

Excuses, by contrast, deny a speaker’s or actor’s agency, intention, or involvement in what happened and offer grounds for not being responsible for it. Typical excuses are appeals to external causes, lack of knowledge, accidents, being under the influence of drugs, or having acted on the orders of a superior. The latter may shift blame to someone else, which is a common diversion. If accepted, excuses render speakers blameless and enable them to continue their participation in the conversation. Excuses rely on narratives that are intended to be compelling, but not necessarily true by extra-conversational standards. Excuses do not change the condition for which they are offered.

4. Apologies

Apologies admit responsibility for an offensive conversational move or action, express regret, and imply the promise not to repeat it in the future. Unlike excuses, apologies admit the actor’s agency. Accepting an apology forgives the perpetrators of offensive conversational moves or actions and is a way to continue the conversation in the hope that the offense will not recur.

Shotter’s (1984, 1993) observation that all speakers talk in the expectation of being held accountable by listeners for what they say and do applies to the act of giving accounts as well. Accounts too are always articulated in the hope of being accepted and only those that have that chance are offered. Although accounts may well appeal to general conventions – rationality, common benefits, individual values, or established practices – such conventions are effective only in the very conversations in which participants are willing to let them stand. Inasmuch as the mutual acceptance of practices of living together is a matter of ethics by definition, successful accounts provide narratives that participants in conversation consider

ethical. Thus, in repairing problematic conversations, conversation-specific ethical narratives are proposed, tested, and accepted, i.e., narratives that participants can live with and find no reason to object to. The ethics that emerges in repaired conversations has two remarkable features. It is rarely generalizable to all conversations – effectively denying their universality; for example, the universal pragmatics of communication proposed by Habermas (1970) – and it cannot be represented by any one observer’s or participant’s cognitive construction. Conversational ethical realities are performed in conversations or interactively constructed.

Accounts may be personal, “I was angry,” informational, “I didn’t know that,” related to efficiency, “this is all I could afford,” ethical, “I didn’t want to hurt her,” moral, “everyone does it,” pragmatic, “it worked in the past,” or institutional, “this is the approved procedure.”

Problematic conversations can be considered repaired when they resume their natural flow. However, conversations are not machines that can be fixed by replacing defective parts. Successful repairs have the potential of leaving memorable residues behind, an awareness of what happened and how it was resolved. Such residues may become part of the history of a conversation and direct that conversation’s future along paths not taken without prior repairs. Therefore, a history of successful repairs holds the seeds of conventional accounting practices in terms of which future problematic conversational moves may become explained, justified, excused, or apologized for.

Thus, unless the history of repairs is forgotten, repaired conversation may no longer be quite authentic and I would argue this condition to be most common in naturally occurring conversations.

C. Degeneration of conversation

While language always provides ample resources for repairing untoward conversational moves or actions, this is not to say that all disruptions of the flow of interactions are indeed repaired. Not repairing problematic conversations is not limited to children who are in the process of developing accounting competencies. It applies to competent speakers as well. Failing to repair conversations that have turned problematic has two important social consequences. On the one hand, participants who do not hold each other accountable for what they say or do, whether for reasons of expediency or fear of reprisals, grant implicit permission to continue the untoward practices, which can lead to their tacit legitimization. On the other hand, participants who refuse to give adequate accounts when requested of them claim exceptional privileges, in effect, which can lead to the institution of inequalities and violate the dialogical equality that authentic conversation requires.

There may be reasonable and unfortunate conditions for not practicing accountability. Temporarily suspending conversation to get something more important accomplished might be considered reasonable – as long as this suspension is temporary and mutually consented to. Entrapment of one by another

– threads of exclusion from a conversation, induction of fear of retribution, and exercising authority – is always unfortunate because acquiescence inevitably creates burdensome interpersonal relationships that are incompatible with authentic conversation. The unwillingness to repair problematic conversations is the root cause of conversations descending into other forms of interaction, as I shall exemplify below. The results of such degenerations are where conventional sociological abstractions start – without adequate reflection on their roots in conversations.

There are innumerable many ways a conversation can degenerate into other forms of social interactions. I can offer only a few examples.

1. Physical constraints

The most benign and not entirely social in nature are physical constraints. Conversations become increasingly difficult when noise competes with participants' ability to listen to each other's voices, or when the number of participants grows too large for speakers to address individual participants or to distinguish individual voices, for example at mass rallies, political demonstrations, or public performances. In such situations, participants acquire collective identities that divide participants into, say, performers and audiences or demonstrators and police.

2. Dialogical inequalities

Most obviously, authentic conversation degenerates by tolerating dialogical inequalities. Interruptions of a speaker's turn can happen carelessly, but they also may be part of accepted discourse practices. For example, it is well known that men interrupt women more often than the reverse. Numerous explanations have been suggested, including a prevailing acceptance of patriarchy. More clearly explainable dialogical inequalities occur at board meetings. Authentic conversation among equals disappears as soon as the CEO or a person in charge of the meeting enters. Such situations are often explained in terms of unequal distribution of power. Power, however, is not what superiors have and subordinates lack. It is not measurable by unequal access to material resources but manifests itself in the unwillingness to hold authorities accountable for what they say or do, and, its complement, in the refusal to provide accounts when requested (Krippendorff 2009: 131–155). Power arises when accountability is not exercised and subsequent interactions are tolerated.

Therapists have sometimes been characterized as conversation managers, which makes therapy different from conversation. Managing focus groups or group discussions, for example, by instructing participants to list their ideas on a predefined issue, putting them on public display, and then proceeding to group them gives the impression of dialogic equality by granting every participant a voice while leaving the moderator in charge of the process. Widely practiced in marketing research and used as a qualitative method for generating data in the social sciences, such methods elicit information that is biased by the management of the group's

interactions, revealing something very different from what people would express in unconstrained conversations.

3. Inauthentic questions

I suggested that asking questions with unknown answers creates possibilities for participants to choose their contributions and experience respect when their answers are acknowledged by responding to them. But questions may be inauthentic as well. Knowledge tests, for example, whether administered in educational settings, aptitude tests for hiring employees, or scientific research, are not geared to understanding but to establishing a respondent's comprehension, the criteria for which reside in the questioner. Asking questions to which the answers are known is consistent with conceptualizing communication as the accurate transmission of information from one mind to another – a process that is institutionalized in many educational and administrative situations that have nothing to do with conversation.

In public opinion research, interviewees are asked to commit themselves to answer an interviewer's questions, and to give up their conversationally expected ability to ask questions of their own. In this genre of social research, questions are standardized for all interviewees, asked according to a schedule, and a prepared set of answers conforms to the interest to the sponsors of the research. Whatever results from such interviews has less to do with what people would say to each other than with what sponsors want to hear (Krippendorff 2005) – a seriously biased investigative technique. Talk show hosts on radio or television are notoriously in charge of what counts as appropriate to the institutionalized genre they enact. They define the topic, ask the questions, interrupt as they see fit, including signaling the audience to applaud. Talk show guests tend to go along with these inauthenticities for the publicity this affords them on a show.

4. Institutionalized interactions

Mariaelena Bartesaghi (2009a), studying therapists' use of questions during therapeutic sessions, found less obvious inauthenticities. The therapeutic use of questions may give clients the impression that the therapist is genuinely interested in their problems, but systematically directs the clients' answers to where therapists want to go with them. She defines therapy as an institutionalized form of interaction. Therapy includes avoiding answering clients' questions, for instance: Client: "Why can't I see you on Monday?" Therapist: "That seems to disturb you, doesn't it?" (Lakoff 1990: 69).

5. Referring to participants in terms of stereotypical categories

When addressing each other or some participants in social categories, for example, as a (typical) woman, black, Frenchman, gay, mental patient, catholic, or consumer, the ensuing interaction is no longer among mutually respecting individuals but between social categories in terms of which participants are expected to reply. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) discuss these social categories as

“typifications.” It would be difficult to hold categories accountable for what their members say and do. Similarly, when participants in conversations come to divide themselves into opposing camps with ideological, party political, or ethnic labels, for example, into progressive and conservative politicians, often resulting in the use of plural pronouns – the inclusive “we” and the exclusive “they” – communication becomes interactions among publically identified collectivities and conversation is, at best, a wrong metaphor. Party politics attests to perfectly reasonable individuals adopting ideological voices.

Even deliberately avoiding public stereotypes can degrade authentic conversation. John Jackson (2008) explores the unintended consequences of political correctness in the United States. By confining the use of racial stereotypes to conversations in the privacy of one’s home, public discourse becomes disingenuous and the realities it constructs schizophrenic, not resolving the racial tension that political correctness was thought to alleviate. This phenomenon also exemplifies how the invocation of normative theories about proper talk in public can destroy the authenticity of conversation.

6. Institutionalizing reality

Bartesaghi (2009b) identifies several strategies that therapists apply to establish their authority vis-à-vis their clients. Some authority is already presupposed in the very act of clients seeking therapeutic advice. But in therapy sessions, this authority needs to be realized in talk. Therapeutic authority derives largely from using a vocabulary that is institutionalized in therapeutic discourse in which therapists claim expertise. Therapists are trained to reframe clients’ personal narratives in professional terms, constructing a psychotherapeutic reality for them that therapists can treat with the institutional resources they command and clients lack. This practice renders clients as incompetent narrators of their own world. Bartesaghi made three important observations. (1) The therapists she observed managed to prevent being held accountable to their clients by hiding behind the professional community of therapists, referring to themselves in terms of the collective “we,” having “years of experience,” and professional affiliations. That community is physically absent from the therapeutic session. Channeled into the conversation by the therapist leaves the client no chance to address that community directly. (2) By applying institutionally established therapeutic theories to the social life of clients – theories of the clients’ mental and emotional states that they are not expected to know – client accounts are rendered unreliable or flawed. This gives therapists (3) the justification for replacing clients’ narratives, feelings, and social problems with institutional accounts that enable treating clients as individuals by therapeutic means.

Therapeutic discourse is not the only discourse that constructs institutional realities that clients are asked to accept on the therapists’ authority and with their help. Scientists, too, tend to claim possession of the instruments for establishing objective truths, realities that laypersons must accept on account of the scientific authority articulating their truths. Teachers assume their authority vis-à-vis their students by

claiming to have valuable knowledge that students need to acquire. Literary scholars presume the ability to interpret texts in ways that untrained readers cannot and authors may not be aware of. For example, Paul Ricoeur's (1970) "hermeneutic of suspicion" insists on characterizing authors as hiding their agenda behind their writing, which has given literary scholars the professional license to construct what could underlie a text regardless of what its author says it means. In effect, this scholarship thrives on institutionalizing what has been called "conspiracy theory." It permits scholars to not listen to how others – readers and authors – interpret the text they are analyzing. Conspirators must, by definition, deny being one. It follows that an author's denial of the suspected intentions can be interpreted as evidence for the validity of the suspicion – a cognitive trap. One cannot converse with institutionalized realities, only with people willing to consider them as mere hypotheses, which is what social constructivism advocates.

Not confining accountability to those present in conversations is a premise of sociological theorizing. Besides what I mentioned above, there are at least three ways this can happen and it would be important to recognize the linguistic ground, as Habermas (2001) does, that makes sociology possible.

7. Speaking for absent others

When therapists rearticulate their client's stories in therapeutic terms, therapists and clients are at least co-present. It is conceivable; therefore, that they could hold each other accountable should the evolving conversation go astray. Even institutionalized realities can be contested, although I am told that clients in therapy rarely ever do this in their sessions, which is not to rule out the possibility of expressing their misgivings in conversations with trusted friends. However, when speaking for absent others, speakers usurp the voices of individuals who, perhaps conveniently excluded from a conversation, can neither be questioned within that conversation nor be held accountable for their views as channeled into a conversation by one participant. Noble intents notwithstanding, speaking for the poor, oppressed, minorities, victims of crime, or even for familiar acquaintances is a discourse strategy in which speakers claim to have more voices than their own. When compellingly asserted, this gives speakers rhetorical strengths over those who cannot claim such backing. Reporting rumors or something overheard may not have much weight, but claiming to speak for one's boss during a contentious meeting can convert a conversation among equals into a game of usurped, claimed, perhaps invented voices, which is no longer between authentic participants.

8. Speaking as representatives of others

[One may speak as if representing] individuals, organizations, movements, or governments. Lawyers represent their clients in court mainly because untrained individuals believe they do not have the know-how to navigate themselves through the legal system. In taking on a case, lawyers translate their client's stories into legally valid narratives that a court is designed to handle and to which clients are asked to submit for fear of failing. In this process, clients become legal categories –

plaintiffs, defendants, or witnesses – whose roles are circumscribed by being treated as their category and forced to respond accordingly. Politicians in democratic governments often face the difficult choice between speaking their conscience or in the name of the constituencies that elected them. The latter has the advantage of giving those with larger constituencies more clout and allows them to defer voting until after consulting with their constituency. In all of these cases, interactions are constrained by the process of representation. Therefore, a parliament is not a place for conversations but for institutionalized debates, public posturing, behind door negotiations, compromises, and voting in the name of absent others.

9. Speaking as the occupant of an office

In social organizations, members are assigned to offices that serve particular functions with responsibilities for coordinating the work of subordinates. Occupants of an office dedicate all communications to the purpose of that office, speak from that position, not for themselves, and expect all subordinates to be accountable to them without challenging their office. The transitivity of such asymmetrical accounting practices creates and maintains organizational hierarchies, such as in business, government, the military, and even the Catholic Church. Office holders are not addressed as individuals, as would be expected in conversations, but as part of a hierarchy of which that office is a part. Such hierarchies tend to be described in terms of power relations. Through such transitively unequal accounting practices, intra-organizational interactions are coordinated and directed towards organizational goals. Thus, organizational communication deviates markedly from the mutual accountability in conversations and therefore deserves special attention. In the social sciences, that attention largely comes from sociology, which rarely acknowledges how organizational realities are reconstituted by actors (Krippendorff 2008b) and maintained in communication.

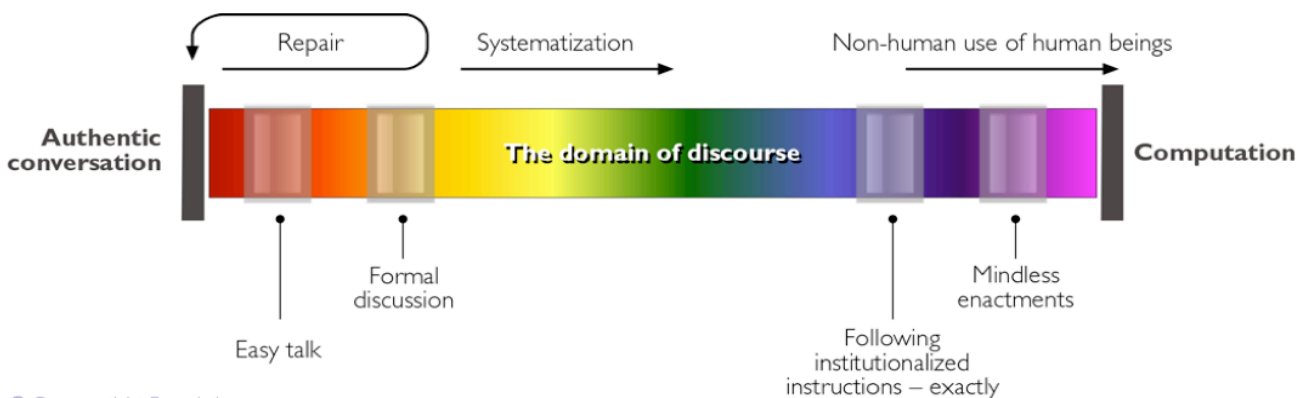


Figure 1: Continuum of linguistic/interactive participation (p. 149)

