Negotiating Participant Status in Participation Frameworks

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It is not always easy to find your *place* within a conversation. In this brief piece, I suggest that participant status (i.e., speaker and hearer roles) within a participation framework, is not always agreed upon by all members, but can be asserted, resisted, and otherwise negotiated. In an effort to address this, I will present an excerpt taken from videotaped recordings of naturally-occurring talk among three colleagues. The line-by-line analysis used in Conversation Analysis (CA) will allow a more nuanced look into what happens when a participant self-selects as speaker, and tries to either maintain or move into a central position in the participation framework. In addition to a line-by-line reading of interaction, CA allows us not only to highlight intonation and loudness of speech, but also to focus on pauses within a turn and gaps between turns. This helps clarify the various strategies that hearers may use to resist or block a move by a speaker.

First, it is important to define several concepts before proceeding to the CA analysis of interaction. An interaction *frame* (Tannen & Wallet, 1987) has been likened to a snapshot which captures what is happening at a particular moment, helps us interpret what is going on, and sets up expectations about what may happen. Within a frame, a *participation framework* (Goffman, 1981) emerges, which displays the relationship among participants, and which changes and adapts to the back-and-forth interaction between speakers and hearers. Goffman defined *participant status*, or *participant role,* as the relation of a member of a participation framework to an utterance. Participants take on their status in a speaker or a hearer role, and thereby assume their places in the participation framework for each moment of speech. Two types of hearers were identified and named in Goffman's participation framework: *ratified* (official) and *unratified* (unofficial) participants. Ratified participants were subdivided into addressed and unaddressed recipients, and unratified participants or *bystanders* were subdivided into *eavesdroppers* and *overhearers,* based on their intent and degree of interest. Although Goodwin (2007) praised Goffman's work on analyzing the speaker category, he faulted him for under-analyzing the hearer roles. Goodwin chose to focus on the importance of the hearer and his non-verbal contribution to communication, thus highlighting the hearer's influence within a participation framework. Both Goffman and Goodwin acknowledged the complexity of assigning participant roles, but it was Levinson (1988), in a study of Goffman's participation frameworks, who wrote:

> [A] speaker may seek a particular individual (e.g., by gaze) as an addressee, but that party may choose not to attend in that capacity …. Clearly a participant role is, from the point of view of participants, not something that is unilaterally assigned, but rather negotiated. (p. 176)

In the following excerpt, we have an example of how hearers use various response strategies to negotiate participant status within the participation framework.

On a weekend morning, in a closed university office, Ann is filming as Lina and Aki work together to download a computer program from an old computer to a new one. In the process, they have unplugged several computer cables, which they are now attempting to reconnect. Two minutes earlier, all three were commiserating about what they would do if they were unable to download the program. The excerpt is divided into two parts, (1a) and (1b).

(1a)
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1       Aki:    if the: program was downloaded, downloaded here
2               we could (.) make a copy °of that?°
3               (1.0)
4               [   if  not we'll have to use this one        ]
5       Lina:   [((rubs forehead with fingers of right hand))        ]
6       Aki:    take it ((motions with hand, Lina and Aki move monitor))
7       Lina:   ↑°I don't know how to reconnect this.°
8               (0.8)
9    → Ann:     Aki, do you?
10   → Lina:    uh ((Lina and Aki look briefly at Ann, then back at the monitor))
11   → Ann:     do you know how to reconnect that stuff?
12   → Aki:     °uh° ((heads down, Lina and Aki work on the back of the monitor))
13   → Lina:    ((to Aki)) There's like seven different cords coming out
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The excerpt above begins with Lina and Aki interacting in lines 1-8. In line 9, Ann self-selects as speaker, asking Aki if she knows how to reconnect the cables, since Lina said in line 7 that she does not. Both Lina and Aki respond non-verbally to Ann by briefly looking up at her (line 10). Lina adds "uh" (line 10) which does not seem to satisfy Ann, who again self-appoints as speaker and asks the question again. This time, Aki responds with a minimal "uh," but without looking up (line 12), showing that Ann is being resisted in her attempt to engage with Lina and Aki. Lina then addresses Aki in line 13, which entirely excludes Ann. With this comment to Aki, we see that Ann's second attempt to engage is resisted and blocked, this time by both Lina and Aki.

Excerpt (1b) starts with a repetition of line 13:

(1b)
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13       Lina:   ((to Aki)) there's like seven different cords coming out
14   →   Ann:    oh chee:s =
15       Lina:   =((to Aki)) turn this off.
16               (5.0)  (( Lina and Aki, heads together, bending over back of the monitor))
17   →   Ann:    this is gonna be ex↓citing?=
18   →   Lina:   =((to Aki)) Do you remember? (.) Which one's what?
19               (0.2)
20       Lina:   ((looking at Aki)) Do you remember? =
20       Aki:    = >yeah yeah yeah< it- it's no problem
21               you can hook it up into any one
22               (30.0) ((Lina and Aki continue connecting cables to the monitor))
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Ann's comment on the situation in line 14 seems to be spoken into a vacuum. Neither Lina nor Aki respond to it, and it is coupled with Aki's latching of a comment directed to Lina, not Ann. Lina and Aki work silently for (5.0), their heads together, both bending over the back of the monitor (line 16). In line 17, Ann self-selects as speaker in another attempt to engage with Lina and Aki, and move into a more central role, with a sarcastic remark on how "exciting" the situation is. There is no response (verbal or non-verbal) from either Lina or Aki. In addition, at that moment, Lina chooses to address Aki (line 18), asking if she remembers how to reconnect all the cables at the back of the computer. Aki responds with an extended answer, reassuring

Lina, and explaining how it works (lines 20-21). This effectively shuts out Ann, and keeps her from moving into a more central role, which she ultimately accepts, as seen by her withdrawal from interaction.

In sum, although Ann receives minimal responses to her questions in excerpt (1a), she is later firmly relegated to unratified participant status of overhearer in (1b). Through the use of CA, we can clearly observe the four strategies used by Ann's hearers to keep her from either maintaining or moving into a central role after she self-selects as speaker: (1) minimal response with gaze in lines 9-10; (2) minimal response with gaze directed elsewhere in lines 11-12; (3) silence in line 16; and (4) interaction with each other in line 13, and again in lines 18-22. That said, this piece presents only one context which demonstrates the negotiation of participant status. It would be interesting to examine how the negotiation might be different – perhaps more extended and complex – in an adversarial context such as a hostile family argument, a tough business negotiation, or a heated political or religious meeting.

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