THE CASE FOR THE CONVERSATIONAL CONSTRUAL

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Abstract

This paper brings together a range of commentary on conversational organisation and work on the notion of the self construal to present an argument for what is termed 'the conversational construal'. The argument rests on observations around such things as the exploration of sameness and difference, development of affiliation and disaffiliation and indexing of solidarity and autonomy that are recurrent features of spoken interaction. Such features of talk are argued to be intimately connected to expanding and contracting notions of selfhood. In employing the notion of the self construal – or construal of the self – in this way, the paper seeks to locate ideas previously dedicated to cultural examination or psychological measurement in a conversational context.

Key words: *self construal, construal of the self, conversation, sociology of spoken interaction*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of self-construal has, over the last 20 years or so, been applied in a cultural context, examining how different cultures have predominant notions of selfhood, as well as in the analysis of individual differences of the self. In this short paper I want to take up the concept, jiggle it around a little, then place it in an academic and empirical context in which it has been seldom (if at all) used, but for which it seems to hold some usefulness, namely, the sociological analysis of conversation. In a nutshell, I want to suggest how the notion of self-construal can be seen to operate not at a cultural level per se, nor necessarily a psychological one, but at a *conversational* one – as what I'll term the 'conversational construal'. I argue that *the case for the conversational construal* warrants some consideration, for it would appear to hold validity and relevance for the analysis of what goes on in, how the selfhood operates over the course of, and ultimately how persons collaboratively organise conversational interaction.

The arguments I want to present arise from a history of observations of what I shall doubly term sociable/casual conversation. Some might argue that the two 'forms of talk' should be forceably separated, but what I generally mean by this is the sort of talk we engage in when we get together with friends, acquaintances, or colleagues to talk for the sake of talking, for when we do this some interesting things occur. When we engage one another in sociable/casual conversation, we find ourselves at some moments expressing similarity, solidarity and affiliation with what our fellow conversationalists are saying, whilst at others we express ourselves in ways that signal our difference, autonomy and disaffiliation – our particular definition of, attitude to, or experience of whatever particular conversational 'things' happen to be the focus of joint attention. This is, in effect and after all, what good conversation is 'all about'.

But conversation is about more than the exploration of 'ideas', it is equally as much about the *symbolic representations of selfhood*. This is of no small relevance, as the persons we claim to be (or others assume we are claiming to be) are derived from those very same conversational contributions or lines that we take, make and claim alongside, in the presence of, and in response to our fellow conversationalists. Knowing the nature of selfhood – of what might be regarded as the 'construalistic context' – is fundamental to knowing the conversational state of symbolic play as much as grasping the ideas advanced in talk. By understanding this state of play, we are able to know the state of conversational – of construalistic – relations we hold at this or that moment in talk with our fellow conversationalist(s).

The ideas presented here may well have something of an embryonic feel to them, presented with some brevity. Indeed, by definition they do. The reader is asked to overlook this, along with a certain degree

of self-indulgence that runs though the paper. These features of conversation have interested me as a sociologist for some time, and this paper is to some extent an initial 'outing' or laying down of a conceptual marker of those ideas and observations. The academic contextualisation, re-conceptualisation and potential research promise that have been substituted for 'hard empirical evidence' should hopefully be sufficient to make this paper worth the while reading, and ideas worth considering. At the very least, I hope to have touched on something, enough to warrant my comments being taken with interest, and ideally, application.

2. THE EBB AND FLOW, TO AND FRO, OF SOCIABLE CONVERSATION

Various studies of sociable conversation have pointed to how the expression of autonomy from and connectedness with others might be an organizational feature. Reference to these relational propensities can in fact be traced back to the German Sociologist Georg Simmel in his study of sociable interaction:

" ... the forms with which this exchange develops: arguments and the appeals to the norms recognized by both parties; the conclusion of peace through compromise and the discovery of common convictions; the thankful acceptance of the new and the parrying-off of that on which no understanding is to be hoped for - all these forms of conversational interaction, otherwise in the service of innumerable contents and purposes of human intercourse, here have their meaning in themselves; that is to say, in the excitement of the play of relations which they establish between individuals, binding and loosening, conquering and being vanquished, giving and taking" (Simmel, 1949 [1911], p.259)

In and through this conversational 'play of relations', the need for both *communion with similar others* and *individual expression* can be satisfied, all as part of what Simmel termed a "happy equilibrium" (Simmel, 1964, p.53). Later, more systematic, studies of sociability (Riesman and Watson, 1964; Watson, 1958; Watson and Potter, 1962) echoed Simmel's observations and suggested that conversation in sociable encounters was characterised by two things: the development of shared values and 'definitions of reality'; and participants' expressions of themselves as 'unique individuals'. Watson and Potter (1962) suggested two key dimensions along which conversationalists tend to move over the course of conversational episodes: 'matching' and 'polarising', and 'sharing' and 'presenting'. In conversational matching " … individuals assert that they are in fact alike, because they have – or say they have – similar positions, attributes, views, or experiences" (ibid: p.256), and, conversely, in conversational polarizing " … individuals differentiate themselves from one another, exaggerating their differences" (ibid). 'Presenting' functions to establish " … each participant as a unique and separate entity ... a process in which the self-boundaries of each participant remain intact", whilst sharing refers to conversational action that sees self-boundaries " … give way to a larger boundary which joins the [them] together" (ibid: p.250; see also Maynard and Zimmerman, 1984). In a similar vein, Eggins and Slade (1997) later argued that, although the joint establishment and maintenance of solidarity in conversation was shown to be a fundamental concern for conversationalists engaged in what they termed casual conversation, equally as important was the exploration of difference. Casual conversation is characterised by " … a tension between, on the one hand, establishing solidarity through the confirmation of similarities, and on the other, asserting autonomy through the exploration of differences" (ibid: p.22), with these two opposing conversational orientations effectively driving casual conversation forward.

Although various nomenclature has been applied, these fundamental conversational features are reflected in a range of other sociological studies of naturally occurring talk. Tannen (1986) for example has explored how balancing the need for involvement and independence can influence spoken interaction; Malone (1997) has shown how affiliating and individuating styles of talk operate routinely at a conversational level; Schiffrin (1984) has demonstrated how consensual and argumentative alignments can be routinely and collaboratively oriented to in 'sociable' conversation; and Earley (1997) has drawn on the fundamental tendencies of affiliative and self-definitional orientations that participants in conversation regularly orient to. In short, conversational interaction is 'typically

regulated by varying degrees of an affiliation motive and a desire for self-definition". (Earley, 1997, p.62).

The idea underpinning these observations, that persons everywhere have the need for *autonomy from* and *connectedness with* others has featured in a range approaches to understanding human relations such as relational dialectics (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996), communication accommodation theory (Giles, 1977), psychological theories of personality (Freud, 1922), studies of motivation (e.g. Maner et al, 2007) and in Schopenhauer's (1964 [1851]) oft cited "Stachelschweine" dilemma, with the analogy of two hedgehogs having both the desire to come together and stay away from each other lest the spines inflict injury. These two interpersonal propensities to draw us towards and push us away from others are seen as both fundamental needs of the self and as features of social relationships. What this points to is the relationship between person-al needs, and conversational properties, for the two would seem to be intimately related.

3. FACE AND FACEWORK

One particular concept that has employed these ideas, and is grounded in the notion of the self and selfhood, is that of face. The concept of face in Western academic literature can be traced back to Goffman's (1967) seminal arguments outlined in 'On Facework', in which face was defined as the 'positive social value' claimed by persons in and through the particular 'line' (in effect, how they were using their conversational contribution to express attitudes, present definitions, recount experiences etc) they took during episodes of spoken interaction. However, the work conducted by Brown and Levinson (1987) more clearly reflected needs of persons and features of talk evident in the literature outlined above.

Central to Brown and Levinson's argument was the re-conceptualisation of Goffman's general notion of face into two quite particular face needs that all persons held: positive face needs and negative face needs. Positive face referred to the need for solidarity with (or expressive/relational closeness to) others, whilst negative face referred to the need for autonomy from (or expressive/relational distance from) others. Both needs were posited by Brown and Levinson as being universal, i.e., held by persons everywhere, irrespective of cultural background or individual psychology. From a communication perspective speakers recognised such needs and encoded messages to show that such needs were being respected (in and through what Brown and Levinson termed positive and negative 'politeness'). Thus, a key organisational feature of utterances was face needs.

Although often read for, and predominantly focusing on, its identification of specific strategies for realising particular speech acts (apologies, requests, complaints etc) rather than ongoing sociable/casual conversation, contained within Brown and Levinson's (1987) work on face were some suggestions on general orientations to conversational interaction. For example, certain politeness strategies – most obviously forms of positive politeness – were identified that pointed to what might be regarded more as 'general orientations' to conversational participation. For example, 'exaggerating interest in others' in talk, 'seeking agreement' and 'avoiding disagreement', 'pre-supposing and identifying common ground', and 'assuming reciprocity' were cited by Brown and Levinson as being examples of positive politeness strategies (ibid: p.102) which essentially allowed persons in talk to show that they were "of the same kind" (ibid: p.72).

Social relations also lay at the heart of Brown and Levinson's understanding of how face informed spoken interaction Although there was a degree of emphasis placed on hierarchical relations and degrees of social distance that speakers 'brought with' them to spoken encounters, relations between interlocutors as emergent and generative, rather than simply prescriptive and deterministic was something Brown and Levinson did recognise. For example, positive politeness was regarded as essentially 'approach-based', with the relational potential to bring speakers closer together. Conversely, negative politeness was described by Brown and Levinson as 'avoidance-based', with the potential to signal distance and cater to others' desires for claiming territories and self-determination. The potentially dynamic use of strategies in spoken encounters meant that the use of both positive and negative politeness in spoken interaction had the relational potential to, in effect, " … move the

speakers … back and forth between approaching and distancing in their interaction" (ibid: p.231). Moreover, Brown and Levinson intimated to both the sensitivity of interaction to these two relational forces, and the skill and competence required of interlocutors in managing them. Any change in relationship between speakers had the potential to be " ... a painful jerk, if clumsily done, or it may be smoothly integrated to maintain satisfactory balance in the quality of interaction between [the speakers]" (ibid).

Thus, a demand made of competent interlocutors was to display both a sensitivity to emerging and changing relations and an ability to make adjustments to maintain what Brown and Levinson described as "the delicacy of the interactional balance" (ibid):

"…positive and negative politeness strategies may operate as a social accelerator and a social brake, respectively, to modify the direction of interaction at any point in time. Interactants, in any situation where the possibility of change in their social relationship exists, are constantly assessing the current 'score'… and may make minute adjustments at any point in time in order to re-establish a satisfactory balance or to move the interaction in the desired direction towards greater closeness or greater distance … a given interaction may juggle back and forth from moment to moment between devices for reducing and widening social distance. Thus the linguistic realizations of politeness strategies may be a very revealing index of the quality of social relationships and the course of their development" (ibid).

Although not fully developed in terms of its application to sociable/casual conversation, this recognition of the ongoing fluidity of talk based on fundamental human face needs reflected much of what has been outlined above (see e.g. Arundale (2010) who has more recently begun to explore some of these issues in the context of ongoing talk)

A key contribution made by Brown and Levinson's seminal work was not only to locate face at the centre of spoken interaction, but to posit it as universal – as both needs applying across all cultures and, by definition, potentially all moments, instances and episodes of talk.

4. THE SELF CONSTRUAL IN EXTANT RESEARCH

The concept of self construal is a way of conceptualising selfhood based in essence in 'the degree to which [people] see themselves as separate from others or as connected with others' (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p.226). In their discussion of the cultural context of self-construals, Markus and Kitayama identified two main construal types – *independent* and *interdependent* self-construals. Each of these construal types pointed to the way individuals perceived of themselves, others, and the nature of the relationship between themselves and others. Independent self-construals (often associated with Western cultures in the literature) were seen to be, in essence, autonomous, individualistic, egocentric and separate from other 'selves', displaying a correlate focus on one's self, with persons holding such a conceptualisation of selfhood possessing a 'desire to maintain a sense of separation from and distinctiveness from others' (Cross 2009, p.955). In communicative encounters, for such construal types, individual traits, motives, values, experiences and opinions, autonomy and their expression are afforded primary significance. Interdependent self-construals (often associated with Eastern cultures) are geared more towards fitting in with and establishing harmonious interdependence with others, are generally more connected and less differentiated from others, and actively co-defined by others. For persons holding such a conceptualisation of selfhood, such things as opinions and emotional expression are generally 'controlled and regulated to come to terms with the primary task of interdependence' (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p.227). In both cases the self is conceptualised and defined as the 'self-in-relation-to-other' (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p.225).

Much of the work on self-contruals has focused examining whether particular cultures can be shown to be independent or interdependent, in terms of how persons from those cultures communicate with each other in a range of contexts. Likewise, work on individual differences has focused on determining to which of these particular construal types persons display some orientation to, or primarily belong. However, this use of the concept runs the risk of oversimplifying things, implying that the two

construal types are, for example, mutually exclusive, and that this or that culture, or person, fall into one or the other category. Reading the notion of the independent self construal, for example as one oriented solely towards establishing autonomy from others overlooks the fact that, as Markus and Kitayama pointed out, although more important for those with interdependent construals, 'people everywhere must maintain some relatedness to others' (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Likewise, it would seem fair to assume that people everywhere must also maintain some autonomy from others. To that extent, although there is a general assumption that one or the other construal is 'dominant' (Hara and Kim 2004, p.7; Gendrin 2010, p.13) there is a recognition that persons possess, and have at least some concern for, both interdependent and independent aspects of selfhood (Gudykunst et al 1996). Indeed, some research suggests that persons exposed to both predominantly independent and interdependent cultures can 'shift' between these frames (Wong and Hong 2005). The term bicultural has been used to describe such persons (see Kim et al 1996), although 'bi-construal' might be a better way to conceive of this.

In short, 'everyone has both independent and interdependent constuals of the self' (Oguri and Gudykunst 2002, p.580). Thus, these two fundamental aspects of selfhood might be more usefully conceived of not dichotomously of categorically (with persons being *either* independent *or* interdependent) but more in terms of continua (Hara and Kim 2004, p.7). Such a notion has been posited by scholars such as Mao (1994), Drawing on notions of 'ideal individual autonomy' and 'ideal social identity' which correlate to independent and interdependent self construals, Mao suggested that independent and interdependent aspects of selfhood might best be conceptualised of as being mobilised simultaneously in communication – a 'matter of more or less, not absolute expression of one or the other' (Mao 1994). Morever, rather than slavishly orienting to one or the other ideal, 'speakers are constantly in the process of pursuing one ideal or the other' (1994, p.472).

Indeed, there may be significant risks of orienting 'too far' in either direction (see Drew and Walker (2009) who examine this conversational phenomenon). For example, Markus and Kitayama, and much subsequent work, recognised that that there are '…significant cognitive, emotional, and motivational consequences' of holding independent or interdependent self-construals (1989, p.231) of self-esteem and self-construals, Joseph (1994 cited in Morisaki and Gudykunst) suggests that absolute independence and absolute interdependence of the self may lead to 'social alienation' or 'mindless conformity' respectively. Discussions of the concept of face have also touched on similar notions. For example, Brown and Levinson's (1987) refer to a similar paradox in respect of negative and positive face, with one essentially threatening the other, Scollon and Scollon's (1995, p.38) point to the threat that independent and involvement aspects of face poses to one another, and Janney and Arndt (1992) suggest that persons involved in interaction might attempt resolve this paradox by negotiating 'personal' and 'interpersonal' aspects of face in and through their interaction with others.

Finally, the notion of context has also been drawn upon to understand how this or that context may inform persons' communicative behaviour. As Lalwani and Shavitt (2009, p.88) recently noted, 'although both independent and interdependent self-construals are present within each of us, they can be activated as a function of context'. Such a notion allows any given cultural member, any given person, in a range of contexts to be placed somewhere along this continuum, in terms of his/her perception of self, other and the nature of the relationship between the two.

5. UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF SPOKEN INTERACTION: A LITTLE SOCIAL SYSTEM OF SYMBOLIC SELFHOOD

Although there is significant reference to the ways in which self-construals may influence language use (independent self-construals for example have been associated with greater levels of direcetness, more elaborate talk and more openness, expression of internal attributes and disclosure of personal information, whilst interdependent self-construals have been associated with greater levels of indirectness and ambiguity, taciturnity, conflict avoidance, avoiding threatening others' faces, adjustment to others, careful listening and a greater propensity to infer others' intentions and needs), little has been written in respect of conversational features outlined above, or of *conversational*

organisation in the way that sociological approaches address this. Scholars working on self-construals have employed the term 'conversation', for example Markus and Kitayama do briefly mention how self-construals may influence the 'rules of conversation' (p.234) and subsequent work has employed the notion of 'conversational constraints' (Kim 1994) or 'conversational styles' (Kim et al 1996). The commentary contained in these works focuses more on 'concerns' that persons, by virtue of prevailing or pre-disposed construal types, bring to encounters rather than features of conversational organisation per se.

Sociologists have however for some time now examined the organisation features of naturally occurring conversation. The two main approaches to understanding the organisation of spoken interaction are those advanced in the work of Conversation Analysis and Goffman's work on The Interaction Order (Dennis et al 2013). A key focus of the first of these two approaches to understanding conversational organisation is the sequential aspects of talk, i.e., how any given conversational 'turn' has a bearing on the immediately subsequent turn. Talk in effect gets built up on a turn by turn basis, with 'next turns' displaying their speaker's understanding of prior turns, and projecting possible next ones. Although particular sequence types are recognised by Conversation Analysts, talk is taken to be some way from being prescribed in advance but is rather worked out as a collaboratively sequential accomplishment. What this generates is not simply an exchange of ideas, but conversational context, within which sense can be made of any given utterance (and without which, meaning of this or that utterance may often be inaccessible). In other words, conversational contributions – conversational organisation – is all about generating conversational context, and it is within the immediacy of that 'hearably available', 'happening now' context that persons make their 'hearably relevant' contributions.

The link between more abstract notions of solidarity and conversational organisation has also been noted by conversation analysts. In particular the solidaric function of what is generally termed 'preference organisation' (the way in which certain response such as agreements, acceptances and similar assessments are done quickly and directly, whilst disagreements, declinations and different assessments are delayed and done indirectly) has been highlighted (e.g. Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Heritage, 1984; Holtgraves, 1992; Jefferson, 1979; Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff 1987, Lerner, 1996; Pomerantz, 1978, 1984; Sacks, 1987; Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks, 1977) the " … organizational consequence of [this being] to maximize the likelihood of affiliative, social solidarity actions, and to minimize the consequences of disaffiliative, socially divisive ones" (Heritage and Raymond, 2005, p.16). Conversely, in some cultural settings, what might appear at the first instance to be disaffiliative conversational contributions (e.g. direct disagreement, criticism etc) has also been shown to have positive functions in terms of both sustaining positive social relations between participants in talk and allowing speakers to conversationally carve out some salient point of difference (see e.g. Katriel, 1986; Schiffrin, 1984; Tannen, 1981; Byrnes, 1986; Kotthoff, 1993). In both cases, conversational contributions, in their immediate context, may be used to establish, sustain, or change relations between speakers.

Although employed in a rather technical sense in Conversational Analysis, the self in talk has been recognised to be central to understanding how conversation is organised. One might legitimately argue that 'we are never *not* in the process of constructing our 'selves' Mao (1994, p.472) when we engage one another in spoken interaction. Indeed, engaging in interaction involves not simply reflecting or embodying culturally dominant forces but 'constructing oneself' (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p.226) and, by definition presenting 'ones self' to fellow participants in interaction. Somewhat surprisingly, according to Lalwani and Shavitt (2009, p.88) '...the link between self-construal and pursuit of specific self-presentation goals has been overlooked', although a history of sociological analysis of spoken interaction shows that the self presentational aspects of talk are central to understanding what goes on in spoken interaction.

Perhaps the leading figure in this regards was Erving Goffman (Dennis et al 2013). Goffman argued that, during spoken interaction participants take what 'lines', that is, essentially, definitions of, attitudes towards, or (particularly in cultures that favour storytelling) experience of this or that. In doing so, a particular 'character' may be presented, 'image' of self generated, and 'face claimed.

Spoken interaction is not simply an ego-centric, presentational free-for-all though. The general notion of intersubjectivity underpinning spoken interaction rested on the idea that subjectivity, although located in such things as persons' attitudes, experiences or definitions, was something that expended beyond persons to include the subjectivities of co-present others. Reference is sometimes made in the literature on self-construals to the mental overlapping of those where interdependent construal is dominant – leading to what Hara and Kim refer to as 'mind-reading' (p.9). This notion of mental overlap was something Goffman pointed to, with spoken interaction often involving the 'sharing of mental worlds' (1983a). Thus, in effect, the two drives for both self-realisation (via characters presented, images generated and faces claimed) and submission of the person to the wider (inter)subjectivity underpinned Goffman's arguments around the organisation of spoken interaction.

A second notion used by Goffman which might shed light on how conversation can be taken to be a construalistic activity was that of 'frames' (see Gofman 1974). Rather than being located in the person, frames are shared understandings (including what might be taken to be understandings of appropriate behaviour) that participants in face to face encounters work to collaboratively generate. Importantly, frames are not fixed 'scripts' for action, but are rather quite vulnerable things, and routinely 'changed', 'shifted', 'switched' or 'broken'. Of relevance to the current discussion, work has shown, for example, that sociable talk can be characterised by frames which signal the pursuit of solidarity or of difference, and that participants in talk can switch between these frames, creating, in effect solidaric and differentiating contexts (see e.g. Schifrin 1984). More directly, notions of 'bi-construalistic' activity outlined above also point to this ability of persons to switch frames, and in doing so, switch the nature of prevailing selfhood in talk.

6. A CASE FOR THE CONVERSATIONAL CONSTRUAL?

Is there a case then to be made for the conversational construal? I would argue, yes, and it might look something like the following:

Participation in spoken encounters with others involves not merely the 'presence' but the 'presentation' of self. This presentation of self is a key – vital – feature of conversational interaction – *a never not in the process of* phenomenon. This is done (one would suspect universally) via the taking of lines in talk, consisting of such things as definitions of, experience with, or attitudes towards the this or that of the current talk. As has been argued above, this is not simply (or even predominantly) an exchange of ideas, but a symbolic activity – a presentation of character, generation of image, claiming of face. The self is fundamentally and intimately tied in with what we do in spoken encounters and, by definition, at the very least, *a conversational co-presence of selfhood* arises as a consequence of our conversational contributions.

There is always a relational side to this presentational coin, though. Work on sociable/casual conversation has shown that the pursuit of sameness and difference, indexing of autonomy from and solidarity with others, and development of affiliation and disaffiliation is a recurring feature of such talk. Moreover, reflecting commentary from conventional work on self construals, the contraction and expansion of selfhood to shrink in towards individual persons and inflate to include others within selfhood boundaries is a central feature of such talk. In other words the conversational self operates as a dynamic symbolic (but none the less for conversational participants real and important) phenomenon. Thus, we shift routinely between talk in which the locus of lines is our-*self*, and those where the locus is our-*selves*. Another way of conceptualising this is between an "I" mentality and a "we" mentality (what I/we have experienced, define, believe to be true etc). As has been noted above though, this is perhaps best not conceived of as a pair of binary, mutually exclusive *poles* where any participant stands at any one point in talk, but rather as oriented *positions* which participants occupy *vis-a-vis* each other.

Work on face highlighted above has pointed to the relationship between these conversationally manifest features and fundamental, universal 'needs'. In this sense, it might be argued that what we are really examining here are *(personal) needs as (conversational) features*, and if those needs are taken to be universal, *universal features of conversation*.

But what about organisational principles – how might *conversation* be seen to be organised as a construalistic activity? As noted above, a main concern for conversation analysts, for example, has been how turns at talk are sequentially organised. But is there any case to be made for the *sequential organisation of selfhood*? Bearing in mind the framing strategies used by speakers to signal, for example, argumentation or consensual frames, it would seem less ludicrous than one might think. When we engage in conversation with others, we tend to go through *sequences of lines* that are, in essence, solidaric, exploring sameness etc, or, conversely, autonomous, presenting difference etc. In other words, what I'm referring to as our conversational construals would seem to be sequentially related to/directed at immediately preceding construalistic positions held by others at that point in talk. There is then, it would seem, in this sense, some sequential underpinning to presentation of selfhood. This construalistic sequencing allows participants in talk to build up the "I" or "we" mentality noted above, but at a level closer to turn by turn.

This notion of construalistic sequencing (or, at least, construalistic activity that is sequence sensitive) allows us talk of context. Context is never far from discussions of self-construals. What I have tried to stress here is not cultural context but, *conversational context*. For participants in talk, the conversational context tells us if this or that moment in talk is oriented towards the presentation of predominantly independent conversational construals or interdependent ones. It also tells us as analysts what participants are doing with selves, and one wonders how any notion of construalistic activity can be conducted without reference to the conversational context in which it occurs.

As noted above, the notion of conversational constraints has been touched on in literature examining self-construals. Even the sort of spontaneous talk with which we are concerned here cannot be a wholly unconstrained affair, nor can the construalistic activity that it consists of. It would seem to be the case that the individualistic construal must always ensure it does not become *too detached from* other conversational construals; the interdependent *not too consumed by*, or itself threaten to consume other construals. The notion of going too far touched on recently by some scholars would help to understand this. What seems to happen in conversation is that the extent, duration and nature of our construalistic relations with fellow conversationalists is very much guided by the constraints operative at that point in talk. To clarify this seemingly obscure proposition, there are moments in talk when we can use our lines, present our characters, generate images, make face claims, that are quite extreme in either their difference, or in their similarity. At others, our expressions of the same may be quite subtle. The appropriateness of how far is too far, or how close is too close, rests on the conversational context. In others words, a sort of construalstic contract tends to guide our conversational activity. It may be the case that talk does sometimes display sudden, violent jolts of alignment, but it would seem that conversation, particularly of the sociable/casual kind discussed above, moves more gently, with points of difference being explored, or areas of sameness being exploited rather too cautiously than too hastily.

Finally, there is also something of a cultural norm running through a lot of work on self-construals. Although there is no doubt some validity to this argument (often 'proven' via the use of various 'scales' and 'methods' to ensure their valid application), I would argue that this is perhaps a tad overly deterministic. Conversation would appear to be just as much norm-generating as norm-following, and in one sense, one might be able to speak of the 'conversational culture' (i.e., is it, at that point, for those persons, predominantly oriented towards independent or interdependent self-construals?).

7. CONCLUSION

This, in a nutshell is what would seem to point in the direction of such a notion of the conversational construal lying at the heart of conversation. It may well be influenced by wider notions of cultural context, or quite narrow personal predisposition, but in between these two frames of reference would seem to lie a reality of construalistic activity in and of itself, or rather, in and of its selves.

The case for the conversational construal then rests on the degree to which persons overlap with other based, not on their cultural membership or personal disposition, but on their conversational contribution. One feature of interdependent self-construals is that 'others are included within the

boundaries of the self' (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p.245). Conversely, for independent self construals, others are 'less centrally implicated' in self-definitions or identity and 'the self is assumed to be a complete, whole, autonomous entity, without the others' (ibid). This is precisely what conversationalists would appear to be expressing in and through their conversational contributions in defining, expressing an attitude towards or recounting experiences of this or that. What I have tried to suggest here are ways in conversation might start to be examined as a construalistic activity, including suggesting how notions of sequence, context and constraints might be regarded as relevant to this way of examining talk.

The term self-construal has been used throughout the preceding discussion to examine how this particular cultural/psychological phenomenon can be employed as a conversational one – as a feature of talk, rather then a trait of personal psychology of facet of cultural tradition. Perhaps, in the light of the preceding discussion a slightly different take on this concept might be employed (and more appropriate) for any subsequent research in this field, namely, construal-of-the-self. By employing such a notion we might move away from focusing on *the person*, or *the culture*, to examine *the conversation*, out of its cultural context and away from it' personal psychologies (not men and the moments, but moments and their men, as Goffman once said). In this sense, the focus is not on 'cultural modes of being' (Kitayama et al 2007) but 'conversational modes of being'. This might allow Sociologists of talk to take a more focused examination of the sort of stuff that previous scholars have argued lies at the heart of sociable/casual conversation.

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