

THE LANGUAGE OF CONFLICT

Bernard Guerin

Psychology Department, University of South Australia, Australia

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Contents

1. Introduction to a Framework for Analyzing Language Use
 2. The Strategies of Using Language
 - 2.1. Using Language to get People to Do Things
 - 2.2. Using Language to get People to Say, Believe or Like Things
 - 2.3. Using Language to Keep People in Social Relationships
 - 2.4. A Note of the Uses of Writing
 3. The Strategies of Using Language in Environmental Conflicts
 - 3.1. Conflict and Getting People to Do (and Not Do) Things
 - 3.2. Conflict and Getting People to Say, Believe or Like Things
 - 3.3. Conflict and Keeping People in Social Relationships
- Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

A systematic way of analyzing the uses of language for social science analysis is presented. Language can be used to get people to do things, to get people to say or believe things, or to stay in relationships with people. Within these rough categories, many strategies for influencing through words are given and the ways those strategies can be challenged or prevented. These are then applied to conflict situations and examples given.

1. Introduction to a Framework for Analyzing Language Use

The use of language makes up a large part of our lives. Most times when we get things done, we get them done through other people and we organize and make that happen using language. For example, while I could make someone wait a few minutes for me by physically taking away their car keys, more often I would just say, “Oh, can you please wait for me a few minutes?” or “Would you mind waiting for me?” If I had high status or great power I might say something more like, “Just wait a few minutes before you leave. I’m not ready yet.”

There are some important points in the last paragraph for developing a framework to analyze the use of language, and the language of conflict in particular.

- Language use is just a way of getting people to do things, and this will include getting them to believe, like or want things
- Language use by itself is powerless and cannot change the world at all
- Language only works if the resources, status or power are already in the social relationships between the speakers (see *Structural Sources of Conflict*).

The first of these points actually means that using language is just an extension of every other way that we get people to do things. We can hammer a nail in the wall, or we can ask someone else to do it. The latter is easier for us but will only work if the social relationships and resource exchanges are appropriate. This in turn means that in analyzing patterns of language use, we are really analyzing patterns of social relationships, as has been done in previous chapters. We can never divorce the language from the social relationships. This also means that we can use the analyses of game theory to examine language patterns.

The second of these points means that talking to dogs or cats or trees does nothing to change the world (except for a small amount of training we can give animals). Words only have effects on other people and in some contexts on ourselves (although this is very tricky to analyze). For our framework of analysis, this means that when someone speaks we need to find out whom that language use has an effect upon, and whom it has affected in the past. We need to find out the past and present audiences. In real analysis this can be difficult because our training is that when we hear someone say, “There is a tree,” we look to find a tree or picture of a tree. However, if we are trying to analyze language use we must look to see how those present are affected and try to find out how similar statements by that person have affected others. The point is that what the sentence is doing might have little or nothing to do with trees.

The third point emphasizes that just saying something does not mean it will have an effect. If I walk up to a stranger and say, “Excuse me, could you please stand on your head for me?” I would need much more in the context to make that actually happen. What would need to be in place to make that stranger do it? I could be a very high status person; I could have a loaded gun in my hand; I could have movie cameras and a famous film star nearby; etc. In each case we need resources, status or power in the social relationship for the language to have an effect. This is important for analysis because when you hear something said, a lot of what makes those words get something done is not present in the words themselves but in the surrounding context and history (see *Why the Social Sciences are Different I, Why the Social Sciences are Different II*). If you hear me say, “Get your books and leave” to a student, and the student does leave, you can be sure that my words alone did not make it happen but that other things were going on in the social relationship—resource games, status games, or physical threat. The student might even be a relative of mine and have a long history of social interactions with me.

Analysis Lens: To begin our analysis of language use we must therefore look for the past and present effects of saying statements, the audiences or readers of the statements, and the likely resources that give any power to the words to get things done.

2. The Strategies of Using Language

For the purposes of the analyses here I will divide language use crudely into three functions; three things you can do to people using words:

- You can get people to do things with the environment
- You can get people to say, believe, think or like things
- You can get people to remain in relationships and to like you, so as to maintain the generalized social outcomes (see *Why the Social Sciences are Different II*).

There is considerable overlap and blurring in these three categories, and they are only meant to guide the presentation. For example, doing things with words is really doing something to the environment also, since there is no clear divide between people and the environment, so the second category is really a specific example of the first. Likewise, getting people to remain in relationships with you is really an example of the first point also. Different types of strategies are used in the three categories, however, making them useful for discussion and analysis.

Instructive Messages. In all the areas to follow there are some warnings about what has been written. First, in most cases researchers have spent time trying to categorize the language forms, both grammatical and prosodic features, and also social influence strategies. The problem with this is that strategies are fluid and change, and as soon as one form works the recipient can use that regularity to counter with another strategy. This means that while *lists* of language influence strategies are useful for some purposes, using them to analyze real instances of conflict often distracts us from the real task.

Second, most analyses look at one part of the language use, and typically do not study the use of language in the context of social relationships and what resource games are going on. This is often done when studying texts or transcripts that do not have the background social context analyzed. As will be clear by now, such analyses can only go so far, and much will be missing. Doing this is not silly, however, because it has already been mentioned that social behavior works best when the resources controlling the activities is hidden. If I can give instructions and the recipients just seem to follow my instructions, it will certainly look like the words themselves are controlling the activities. All you see in that context is my shouting instructions and people obeying promptly, but it is the social relationships (or monetary exchange in the case of organizations) that actually make things happen. You just cannot see them without more intensive analyses over time.

Analysis Lens: To continue our analysis of language use, when someone says something we need to analyze whether they are getting someone to do something (carry something out), getting someone to say, believe, think or like something, or talking just to remain in an interactive relationship with the person for all those benefits.

2.1. Using Language to get People to Do Things

One prevalent form of language use to analyze is that of getting people to do things. This encompasses obedience, compliance, persuasion to do things, and instruction- and rule-following. There have been many attempts to categorize such language forms into strategies of exchange, commitment, authority, threat, suggestions, hints, promises,

instructions, etc. For example, I can ask you with words to do something for me in exchange for some verbally-specified event: “Can you get dinner ready and I’ll rub your back later?” Notice, again, that what is missing from most of these analyses is the social context; if I asked the Queen of England to make dinner in exchange for rubbing her back later she would almost certainly not comply! To reiterate, the resource relationships need to be analyzed as part of any analysis (see *Structural Sources of Conflict*), even when focusing on the language used.

Every language community has forms of speech that “soften” or make it more likely that the recipient will comply. These include forms of politeness and hedging. In English, instead of demanding rudely, “Get my dinner ready!” I might ask more politely, “Would you mind doing dinner tonight, please?” The actual words used in any group or community are again fluid, and change regularly. The “power” of them can also be used strategically. For example, something that might normally be said as a relaxed exchange within a family (“Ok, time for bed now you kids”) can utilize the “power” of formal politeness: “Excuse me, young lady, would you please mind getting upstairs to bed right now, thank you very much!” The “politeness” words here are utilized and actually become aversive and threatening rather than polite to the “young lady” involved. This is an example of how “lists” of word types can be misleading when put into social context.

Words are very useful for getting people to do things because, if the social relationships context is right, and the recipient will obey the instructions, then we can pack a lot of instructions into even a short sentence -- instructions that would take a long time to demonstrate physically: “Can you please go down to the back shed, get the key from under the nearest rock and open the door, find the red spiky hoe and weed out those purple flowers near the fish pond?” This makes it very useful in everyday life, so long as the recipient is compliant, which is another good resource reason for maintaining good social relationships and networks (see *Why the Social Sciences are Different*). Giving commands and instructions is often a verbal bluff or Chicken game involving the resource relationships utilized to make someone carry out the instructions. This means that frequently these exchanges will escalate so the recipient gets more for carrying out the instructions (see *The Chicken game*). This can be very subtle, especially if it involves resources of liking and status:

Can you please get the garden hoe for me?

What, me?

Would you please?

Okay, but aren't I just the most wonderful person you know?

Yes, you are so nice!

The escalation can also involve verbal threats of physical punishment (using physical force as a resource).

Get the garden hoe for me!

Get it yourself!

Get it now or you're going to regret it!

You and whose army?

Get it now or you better start looking for a new job, buster!

One of the most common and influential verbal resource bluffs follows from what has been said so far. If belonging to social groups is vitally important because we gain most

of our resources through such networks, then belonging to the group itself can be made part of the bluff. This is very common with both adults and children: “If you do that one more time I’m never going to talk to you again!” “Please don’t make me get angry,” or “You better watch yourself or you’re out of here!” In each case the speaker is putting liking, friendship, and all that goes with generalized exchange relationships as the bluff. This can be very powerful excepting that it is usually in the speakers’ best interests also to keep the relationship going so the bluff is only half-hearted. Many abusive relationships use this strategy but also block the recipient from having other relationships to turn to, thereby increasing the likelihood of going along with the bluff: “If you do that again I’m going to throw you out of here and you have no one but me to turn to remember!” Once again, a counter-strategy can rely on the fact that the speaker (in this case) also needs to maintain the relationship, except that they might respond, “...and you need me more than I need you!” Like the Chicken game discussed as non-verbal, this can lead to weird properties: the one who acts as if the relationship means less to them is the one who can use that relationship better as a bluff and be more likely to win, although the whole point of winning the bluff is to keep the relationship going. This way they actually win what they are pretending not to want.

What can also be seen now is that part of convincing someone that your threat will happen is convincing them of some facts about the world—convincing them to believe what you say. This leads us into the next topic, of influencing people so that they believe, think, say or like something. This will be especially important in analyzing verbal conflicts, where the problem is not just that of *what* you will use as a resource but also of whether you can convince the other person that your verbalized outcomes will happen.

Analysis Lens: When focusing on the analysis of instructions or commands, look carefully at the resource relationships, as they will be the primary factors behind compliance or noncompliance. The words themselves will give clues as to the relationships between the speakers, in the uses of strategies of politeness, hedging, deference, and trust. If there is opposition to compliance then watch for bluff games and escalation of resource commitments.

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Biographical Sketch

Bernard Guerin is Professor in psychology at the University of South Australia. Before this he studied at the University of Adelaide, took a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of Brisbane, and taught at James Cook University in Townsville, Australia. His interests span the entire realm of social science, and he has been concerned for some years about the superficial barriers erected between the "different" social sciences. He has finished two new books: one on integrating the social sciences and one on practical interventions to change the behavior of both individuals and communities, again incorporating all social science approaches. He has published over 45 peer-reviewed papers, and has presented this integrative material on invited visits to Japan, Mexico, Brazil, Hungary, Sardinia, and across the United States. His two earlier books are *Social Facilitation* (CUP) and *Analyzing Social Behavior: Behavior Analysis and the Social Sciences* (Context Press).