Seizing the Moment:  
The Problem of Conversational Agency*

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In conversation, actors face constraints on when they can speak, whom they can address,  
what they can say, and what they can safely expect from others by way of cooperation.  
This is the backdrop against which people pursue their idiosyncratic interests and  
objectives, success at which constitutes conversational agency. In principle, agency is  
made possible by the “looseness” of conversational constraints. This does not create a  
clear path for the advancement of personal ends, however, since options are always  
limited by the context, and success is always contingent upon the cooperation of others.  
Ultimately, the most agentic people are those who readily exploit imperfect options  
though this means abandoning the inflexible pursuit of pre-conceived objectives.

INTRODUCTION

In conversation, people face the problem of getting things done—like registering com-  
plaints, probing for information, and recruiting allies—in spite of myriad constraints on  
when a person can speak, whom he or she can address, what can be said, and what can be  
expected from others by way of cooperation. This is a problem we recognize as participants in encounters, whether these are formal meetings, seminars, informal luncheons,  
imimate dinners, or late-night soul-searchings. Too often, the “right moment” never arrives  
for the broaching of some sensitive topic, and if it is broached, the response is frequently  
not what we hoped for.

As social scientists, however, we have so far avoided taking the problem on directly. A  
likely reason is that those most concerned with constraints, conversation analysts, have  
demonstrated little interest in agency, with how particular people fare in the struggle for  
control—and in the pursuit of their idiosyncratic objectives—over extended periods (e.g.,  
Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). Conversely, scholars concerned with who wields  
influence in conversation—expectation states scholars in the small group research field—  
infrequently delve into the details of interaction, and have expressed almost no interest in  
how conversational constraints might confound the effects they hypothesize, focusing their  
thoretical energies more on cognitive processes (e.g., Knottnerus 1997; cf. Smith-Lovin  
and Brody 1989). As a consequence of scholarly specialization, then, a question of both  
practical and theoretical importance has gone unaddressed.

My objective here is to formulate the problem of conversational agency more precisely,  
to identify some of the constraints that make it difficult, and then to explore some ways in  
which agency can sometimes be exercised through the leveraging of opportunities that  
arise within conversation. My argument, in the end, is that conversational constraints not  
only thwart many attempts at agency outright, but reward malleability and opportunism to

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the point that the most agentic people are those least likely to be found aggressively pursuing preconceived interests.

WHAT IS CONVERSATIONAL AGENCY?

In a paper entitled “What is Agency?,” Emirbayer and Mische (1998) distinguish between three dimensions of agency along which any act can be placed: the iterative dimension, which dominates when the act is a routine response to a typical situation; the projective dimension, which dominates insofar as the actor is concerned to carve out a trajectory that appears to lead to the advancement of personal goals (which may be shared with others); and the practical-evaluative dimension, which dominates inasmuch as the actor is preoccupied with dealing intelligently with immediate exigencies, that is, with problematic and consequential aspects of the here-and-now.

In these terms, my concern in this paper is with how people cope with iterational pressures tied to established rules of interaction, and practical exigencies tied to the co-presence of others, as they attempt to advance their personal projects through the medium of conversation. While this means that I am concerned with all three of Emirbayer and Mische’s dimensions simultaneously, for rhetorical purposes I wish to change the terms of the discussion. In particular, I intend to apply the concept of agency more sparingly, so that most action is classified as non-agentic. To this end, I propose an alternative distinction. First, there is agency in the colloquial sense with which I began, referring to action that successfully advances a person’s preconceived objectives. Agency in this sense is often frustrated by constraints on behavior that are necessarily indifferent to individuals’ idiosyncrasies, including the aims they arrive at the encounter with; some of these constraints are reviewed in the next section. To the extent that agency in this sense is sometimes possible anyway, it is due to openings for a more restricted “technical” agency, entirely defined with respect to conversational constraints. Technical agency entails introducing developments into conversation that those constraints did not render inevitable. Without technical agency, there is no colloquial agency, though the former is not sufficient for the latter since one can be technically agentic without achieving any of one’s objectives. Because of the way that these are interrelated, when I simply speak of “agency,” I have in mind colloquial agency achieved through technical agency; when I mean one or the other alone, I indicate as much. The implication of the argument, however, is that technical agency is so constrained, so situationally occasioned and delimited, that it yields colloquial agency only indirectly, if at all.

CONSTRAINTS

What are these constraints, where do they come from, and how are they enforced? Here I review some of the most salient constraints; that there are doubtless some that I do not touch upon only bolsters my overall argument.1

The One-Speaker Constraint

Normally, by “conversation” we mean a focused encounter that is primarily verbal, and in which, predominantly, only one person speaks at a time (Sacks 1995b: 645–6; Sacks,

1Here I limit myself to constraints that are actually depicted as such by the scholars in question. A more exhaustive inventory would include those related to physical location—e.g., seating/standing position, and the way that this influences a person’s ability to speak (Mehrabian and Diamond 1971) and availability as a target (Goodwin 1989)—and those related to the presence or absence of shared background knowledge (Hanks 1996).
This does not mean that there is never contention over who the solitary speaker should be at any particular moment, only that everyone understands that “success” in speaking requires beating everyone else out (or down). Since the speaking floor accommodates only one person at a time, it might better be thought of as a speaking pedestal which only one person can occupy; when people are talking over one another, it means that no one has successfully made the ascent, that the pedestal is unoccupied just as much as if no one at all were speaking. Accordingly, sustained overlap is rare (Dabbs, Ruback and Evans 1987), and when it occurs, it is often at the margins of speaking turns, when one person has signaled that he or she is almost done and another begins speaking preemptively so as to secure the right to speak next (Schegloff 1987).

That the one-speaker rule is experienced as a constraint can hardly be doubted since we all know the experience of not being able to “get a word in edgewise.” The rule is constraining even in dyadic conversation, and the larger the group in question, the more constraining it is, because for every person added, the less the average person can expect to speak. While nonspeakers are not completely passive, their agentic prospects are greatly diminished, so that the practical result of the one-speaker rule is that most people are deprived of agency most of the time.

Participation Shift Constraints

By “participation framework,” Goffman (1981: 137) means the assignment of the “participation statuses” of speaker, target (i.e., addressee), and unaddressed recipients (i.e., everyone else). But participation frameworks are always in motion, so that we can view conversation as a constant reshuffling of the participation framework, or a succession of what I refer to as “participation shifts.” Thus, from one speaking turn to the next, the initial target can become the speaker or an unaddressed recipient, the initial speaker can become the target or an unaddressed recipient, and any one of the initial unaddressed recipients can become speaker or target.

Not all participation shifts are equally likely, however. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) hypothesize that the target of a remark has an advantage in speaking next, especially when that remark is an “adjacency pair first-half” such as a command or a question. Setting aside the adjacency pair component for the moment, this amounts to saying that a person’s odds of speaking are significantly improved following a speaking turn in which he or she was addressed, while everyone else’s are correspondingly diminished. Common sense and research (e.g., Burke 1974) support this prediction.

Gibson (1999, 2000) has recently uncovered a related constraint. In research on meetings of management teams, he found that participation shifts that move people from the status of unaddressed recipient to that of target are quite uncommon. Operationally, this means that a speaker must address either the last speaker or last target, or else the group as a whole, and this appears to hold regardless of the size of the group, and thus regardless of the number of people residing in the unaddressed recipient category at any point in time. While the finding needs to be reproduced in other settings, preliminary analysis of other meeting data corroborates it, as does casual observation of various group encounters, such as workshops, seminars, and research team meetings. Henceforth, I refer to this as the “targeting constraint.”

But do people experience these as constraints? I argue that they do. The experience of having something to say but not being able to grab the floor is often tied to the fact that the floor is being monopolized by some pair of individuals who address one another in turn. Breaking into conversation is difficult because, as noted, the target of a remark has an advantage in speaking next and the implication of Gibson’s (1999) targeting constraint is
that you cannot expect to be addressed unless you first manage to speak. On the other hand, also common is the experience of having something to say but not finding the “right moment” to say it, which I submit is also related to the targeting constraint. Most remarks formulated with a particular target in mind are inappropriate when addressed to someone else. Thus, “John, that was a fine idea” makes sense when spoken to John but not when addressed to Sue. And since once a turn has passed during which John was neither speaker nor target, he cannot (normally) be addressed; the remark that was tailor-made for John can no longer be made. Conceivably, one might modify the remark so as to make the same point but using a different target: “Sue, I think John had a fine idea.” But this will not have the same import, in part because, as I indicate below, the remark will be interpreted as bearing at least as much on what was said in the prior turn (e.g., by Sue) as on what was said some time earlier by John.

Relevance Constraints

I just suggested that appropriateness considerations constrain to whom a particular remark can be addressed. Conversation analysts (e.g., Sacks 1995a, 1995b) have made a more general argument about appropriateness, though in this connection “relevance” may be the better term. Specifically, there is a conversational maxim that reads: speak to whatever was just said. The maxim has a dual nature. On the one hand, it is a maxim that speakers tend to respect. If a colleague describes his or her weekend to you, you do not ask for the return of a loan or complain that you got stuck in traffic coming to work. Rather, you show interest in their account, possibly followed by talk about your own weekend or about the last time you engaged in the same activity. On the other hand, it is a maxim that people apply when interpreting what someone else says. Thus, saying “I think John had a fine idea” after Sue has described her own thoughts will be taken—by Sue and other listeners—as much as a commentary on the speaker’s (possibly low) opinion of Sue as on his or her opinion of John. People assume that whatever you say is a response to what was said last, and will interpret it in this light.

The relevance constraint is especially potent in conjunction with the one-speaker constraint. Combined, they severely limit actors’ ability to take advantage of any given conversational opening. The reason is that any given remark is only fleetingly relevant, and is available to only one person. Thus, for instance, if someone describes a near car accident to a circle of colleagues, there is a fleeting opportunity for someone to respond with, “Oh, are you okay?” A moment later, once the conversation has shifted to some new topic, the same response will seem inappropriate. And since only one person can speak at a time, it may be an opportunity which only one person can effectively seize. Similarly, after a supervisor explains his or her strategy to a group of subordinates, there is likely to be a short period during which concerns can be delicately raised. But once this period has passed, subsequent discussions will likely build on whatever was seemingly agreed upon, so that further objections are quickly rendered moot. (In this example, however, it will be easier for several people to speak to the same point in succession.) The implication, as Harvey Sacks observed, is that “If you want to talk to something that’s just been said, then you know you have to talk to it ‘now’ or you may not get a chance” (1995a: 556).

This has important implications for topical development in conversation and thus what people can, in this more general sense, speak about. When someone speaks, argues Schank

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2The expression is Grice’s (1975), whose “maxim of relation” amounts to the same thing.
3This constraint may explain the last, though only after the fact: given knowledge of the relevance constraint alone, it is not obvious that the targeting constraint would necessarily follow.
4The quotation is from Sacks’s published lectures (1995a, 1995b), hence the colloquial phraseology. These lectures are a great, and virtually untapped, gold mine for micro-sociologists.
(1977), he or she is obliged to combine some element of what was just said with something new, contributing to the gradual evolution of topic. “A sentence said in response to an input [i.e., prior utterance] must at the same time stick to the topic and introduce potential new topics, thus sticking and shifting at the same time!” (Schank 1977: 424).

The implication of Schank’s model, as well as of Goffman’s and Sacks’s thinking, is that, at any point in time, most things cannot be said since a given utterance only permits a limited number of responses. There are, however, circumstances under which a punctuated (rather than incremental) topical shift is permissible. Jefferson (1984), for instance, argues that abrupt topic changes are allowed when the current subject is depressing and, in particular, when it pertains to “troubles” such as illness or financial difficulties on the part of one of the participants. And Maynard (1980) suggests that new topics may also be explicitly introduced when conversation is flagging, in which case the person most eager to continue the conversation has an incentive to find a more engaging topic, even if this means testing out several in succession. Finally, topics with respect to which participants harbor opposing views often cannot be pursued beyond the point at which this becomes apparent, at which juncture everyone may be happy to move on to something entirely unrelated.

But even when circumstances permit an abrupt change, speakers are constrained in what topics they may introduce. The issue of topical avoidance has been little explored, probably because conversation analysts are neither inclined to ask their subjects about their topical choices nor to follow any given conversation long enough to infer which topics are avoided. Progress on this front, consequently, has had to come from without. Political sociologist and ethnographer Nina Eliasoph (1996, 1999), for instance, assembles evidence suggesting that talk about consequential political issues is often proscribed in “public” settings. Sacks argues that this sort of avoidance is a reflection of people’s preference to believe that their opinions place them in the clear majority and disinclination to engage in conversation that might reveal otherwise (1995b: 701). And, of course, there are all manner of “sore topics” that tact dictates one not bring up (Zerubavel 1999). The general implication is that some topics are “off-limits,” accessible neither through Schankian incremental segues, nor through the situationally warranted leaps of Jefferson and Maynard.

**Ritual Constraints**

People talk for different reasons, but a universal feature of all conversation—possibly in all cultures (Brown and Levinson 1987)—is a concern with safeguarding “face,” or the implicit claim participants make to positive social standing (Goffman 1967: 5–45). This translates into both a rule of self-respect, whereby an actor engages in various kinds of “face-work” to ensure that his or her self-presentation is not undermined (e.g., by slips that reveal contradictory information), and a rule of considerateness, whereby each actor actively avoids issuing any serious challenges to the self-presentation efforts of others while assisting them with repair (e.g., by ignoring their faux pas). “The combined effect of the rule of self-respect and the rule of considerateness is that the person tends to conduct himself during an encounter so as to maintain both his own face and the face of the other participants...A state where everyone temporarily accepts everyone else’s line is established” (Goffman 1967: 11).

There is an implication in this for topical constraints, described in the last section. Some topics are embarrassing for particular participants and thus problematic from the perspective of face-work. Consequently, we would expect actors to shy away from them whenever possible. Indeed, it seems likely that conversation gravitates towards topics which offer participants the means of positively bolstering their ability to present themselves—and, if Goffman is right about the rule of considerateness, one another—in a positive light.
Uptake Vulnerability

Most “performatives,” such as commands and questions, require “uptake” if they are to be successful (or, as Austin (1962) says, “felicitous”); that is, someone else, often the target, must make some complementary move, acknowledging the command or answering the question. The same applies to performatives which are not solely verbal in nature, such as gift-giving, since there is no gift-giving unless there is someone willing to accept and thus to incur whatever obligations accrue as a result (Leifer 1988; Mauss [1950] 1990). Failure to secure uptake results in a loss of face; imagine the embarrassment of someone who makes a request or a suggestion or ventures a criticism, and is entirely ignored. In this light, it is worse to try and fail than never to try at all.

One might think, on the basis of Goffman’s rule of considerateness, that uptake would never be a problem, since failure to cooperate with someone’s attempt at a performative would result in that person losing face. The problem is that the person initially addressed, the person who is expected to provide uptake, may stand to lose face by cooperating if this amounts to admitting that the person issuing the command or request or suggestion is entitled to do so by virtue of his or her higher social status (Brown and Levinson 1987). In addition, complying with a request or command may be costly in other ways. Thus, the people we speak to may have an incentive not to cooperate, which is why performatives are so dangerous. With considerations such as these in mind, Goffman concludes that “nature abhors a performative” (1974: 547) and claims that most talk is nothing more than light story-telling with an eye to eliciting sympathy from others (508).

Parties to a conversation are thus constrained in myriad ways, related to when they can speak, whom they can address, what they can say, and what they can safely expect by way of cooperation from others. Not surprisingly, there are consequences for violating these constraints. Some violations directly threaten the conversational order with a possible breakdown in civility and/or mutual comprehension, which combined are sine qua non for accomplishing anything in conversation. In the wake of a breakdown, it is all participants can do to rush to repair the rift in the hope of returning to the status quo ante so that the business of talk can continue. But even when repair is possible—and sometimes it is not—the party responsible for the infraction is not likely to return glibly to where he or she left off at the moment the error was committed; indeed, a short period of sheepishness is probably expected, as a sign of contrition.

Some of the constraints can be violated on particular occasions without lasting damage to social order—such as the one-speaker rule and the constraints on who is supposed to speak and be addressed, described above under the rubric of participation shifts. The consequences in such cases fall principally upon people who are frequently in violation, who may suffer a loss of standing by flouting the ground rules accepted by everyone else, or who may goad others into retaliation, especially if the same person is consistently victimized (e.g., interrupted, snubbed). Imagine the frustration of having someone else constantly answering questions put to you, or speaking over you, or speaking after you but always to someone else. One instance of such behavior is barely worthy of notice, but repeated instances raise serious questions about that person’s intentions, to the point that you may be required to seek redress to maintain face.

In the wake of the encounter, reputational effects take effect, as stories are told about how people behaved, and judgments rendered accordingly (Sacks 1995b: 639). Gossip is dangerous because generalized personality attributions are easily made on the basis of a

5 Or this, at least, is the conclusion that Goffman arrives at in Frame Analysis. Elsewhere, however, he concludes rather differently: “every statement, in one way or another, is a performative utterance” (1969: 136).
small number of observations, irrespective of easily forgotten situational details (Ross and
Nisbett 1991). Thus, someone who fails to respect the one-speaker rule, or who repeatedly
speaks after others have been addressed, or who abruptly introduces new topics without
justification, or who challenges the veracity or competence (i.e., face) of others, or who
makes demands that no one is inclined to meet, is described after the fact as boorish or
clueless (or worse), with the likely consequence that he or she will be avoided in the
future, and possibly deprived of opportunities and resources of other kinds as well. And, of
course, the person about whom such things are said is generally not around to offer a
defense. Consequently, your control over your reputation depends almost entirely on your
ability to avoid making mistakes to start with.

With all of these constraints at work, it is a marvel that people are able to accomplish
anything in conversation. It is, in other words, remarkable that when people converse, they
are sometimes able to do more than simply talk about the weather and their vacation plans.
Of course, much of the time they do not, even when they want to. We can all think of
times on which we had some difficult topic to broach, some sensitive proposal to
make, but discovered that the “right” moment never quite came up. And this experience of
not being agentic, of failing to realize our objectives, is not specific to any particular type
of conversational setting, for it can happen at work or at home, during formal meetings or
over coffee, over the phone or in person. On the other hand, most of us have been success-
ful from time to time, having tactfully conveyed a grievance, persuaded someone to do
something he or she was initially opposed to, or broached a topic with a significant other
with a resulting “deepening” of the relationship. My concern in the remainder of this paper
is with how such agency is sometimes possible, and at what price.

IN SEARCH OF AGENCY

Clearly, in light of the foregoing argument, agency is not simply a matter of marching into
an encounter, announcing your intentions, and then waiting for others to jump to their feet
to accommodate you. And yet, people do sometimes accomplish things in conversation,
and some people seem to do so consistently. If the first part of this paper exaggerated the
extent to which conversation is constrained, this was necessary as a corrective to the
common-sense view, which we nurture in moments of solitude, that we can accomplish
anything at all in conversation given enough resolve. In this section, I begin by qualifying
my initial argument by describing how “looseness” in conversational constraints can be
exploited by actors straining against the shackles I described above. But lest the reader
think that agency is a simple matter after all, I argue that what looseness creates are mostly
opportunities for “technical” agency, for acting unpredictably vis-à-vis conversational rules
that are by nature under-determining anyway. Only once this point has been established do
I take up the question of how fleeting opportunities for agency of the humble, technical
variety can be leveraged by skilled actors in the pursuit of biographically-given objectives.
Ultimately, my claim is that conversation gives actors some latitude to do small things
with respect to conversation itself, but that these modest interventions coagulate into col-
loquial agency only circuitously, if at all.

Latitude Through “Looseness”

Goffman was better at identifying constraints than at theorizing how people circumvent
them. Speaking of ritual constraints:

The general method is for the person to introduce favorable facts about himself and
unfavorable facts about the others in such a way that the only reply the others will be
able to think up will be one that terminates the interchange in a grumble, a meager excuse, a face-saving I-can-take-a-joke laugh, or an empty stereotyped comeback of the “Oh yeah?” or “That’s what you think” variety (1967: 24–5).

While people do sometimes act this way, it is hard to imagine that this is the main route to conversational agency, to accomplishing things with respect to people with whom you are likely to have to interact in the future. (Goffman admits as much a few pages later [41]). While I will argue below that there are ways to push ritual boundaries, a better, and more subtle, starting point in this discussion of conversational latitude taps Goffman’s later, and more careful, writings on conversation proper.

Goffman believed that conversation analysts had overestimated the strength of sequential constraints, and as counterpoint, argued that people actually have considerable latitude in deciding how to use a speaking turn.

Although any conversational move is appreciably determined by the preceding moves of other participants, and appreciably determines the moves that follow, still much looseness is found; for at each juncture a whole range of actions seems available to the individual, and his particular selection is a matter of free choice—at least at a given level of analysis (Goffman 1974: 501).

While the various caveats in this statement reduce his culpability, in one sense Goffman was obviously wrong: The one-speaker rule severely restricts actors’ freedom to say anything in response, since not everybody can decide to speak at once. (Even if there is freedom of expression, everyone is not free to exercise it simultaneously.) And yet, contingent upon having the floor, the speaker does have choices, or openings for technical agency, from which colloquial agency might spring. For one thing, that a speaker may choose between three permitted targets—the last speaker, the last target, or the group as a whole (Gibson 1999)—ensures that he or she can say a larger range of things than if, say, only the prior speaker could be addressed. And because people tend to speak once addressed, the choice of targets also translates into influence over who speaks next.

People also have more latitude in terms of when they speak than I implied earlier when I described the participation shift constraint favoring the target of a remark as the next speaker. In fact, Gibson (1999) found this to occur 61 percent of the time, which means that 39 percent of the time someone else spoke next, and Burke’s (1974) findings are similar. This means both that someone cornered in conversation, say by a challenging question, may be able to avoid answering if, through a brief pause, he or she permits someone else to speak instead, and that someone who was not addressed is not completely blocked from speaking next. However, it cannot be the case that 39 percent of the time, anyone whosoever can speak, since that would severely compromise conversational order. Rather, there must be additional constraints operating, weeding out most unaddressed recipients most of the time as prospective next-speakers. (This also applies after an undirected remark.) The implication of Gibson’s (1999) analysis of Schiffrin’s (1987) “discourse markers” is that the floor often goes to whomever can signal, by means of the first word she speaks (“but” is especially potent), that her remark urgently bears on whatever was just said. Violations of the targeting constraint, though much less common (occurring 7–10 percent of the time6), are similarly “marked” so that it is clear why they are justified—often, to draw some implication of what was just said for someone else in the room (as

6 And when they do occur, the target tends to be someone who spoke or was addressed very recently.
signaled by an opening “so”). In both cases, violations of participation shift constraints are warranted by overriding relevance considerations.

But the relevance requirement is subject to looseness as well, and this was Goffman’s principal interest. He took issue with the conversation analysts’ claim that the content of one speaking turn strongly delimits what can be said next, including as this occurs in conjunction with “adjacency pair first-halves” such as questions and commands which, according to Sacks et al. (1974), are especially forceful in fixing the range of possible replies. In “Replies and Responses” (1981: 5–77), Goffman argues that this underestimates the freedom people have to interpret the “meaning” of whatever was just said. That is, when someone speaks, he or she gets to choose what aspect of the prior utterance to “respond” to, and is not bound to respond to questions with answers, to requests with agreements or refusals, and so on, since an adjacency pair first-half can always be interpreted, ex post, as something else—a question as a rhetorical question that does not require an answer, for instance. This may explain Gibson’s (1999: 48) finding that 15 percent of all questions fail to select their target as next speaker. Goffman’s conclusion is that “our basic model for talk perhaps ought not to be dialogic couplets [i.e., adjacency pairs] and their chaining, but rather a sequence of response moves with each in the series carving out its own reference” (1981: 52; cf. Schegloff 1988).7

What good is looseness? Sometimes a little looseness is all you need, particularly when the point you wish to make is not far afield from the current topic and when you expect your audience to be receptive, even eager to see the issue raised but perhaps also waiting for “the right moment.” But as a general strategy, looseness cannot be relied upon too heavily. For one thing, the range of options is still constrained by sequential context; recall Goffman’s initial equivocation: “Although any conversational move is appreciably determined by the preceding moves of other participants . . .” (1974: 501). This means that, to exercise any discretion at all, you have to avail yourself of the options produced by the actions of others—options as to when you speak, whom you address, and what you say. In terms of directness, this is a poor substitute for unfettered action since it introduces circumlocutions that may or may not, given enough time, take you any closer to achieving your objectives. Looseness lengthens the chains, but does not release the manacles.

Another problem is that however creative you are in exploiting sequential looseness, you remain dependent upon whoever speaks after you for uptake. Attempts to shift topics Schank-style, or to dodge a difficult question by only responding to some peripheral aspect, or to wrench control of conversation out of the hands of the few by redirecting it to the group, only succeed if the next speaker carries the torch—pursuing the new topic, building on the deflecting answer, or shedding reticence and speaking before the voluble minority can reassert control. Uptake vulnerability remains, precisely because the sequential looseness that trails what you say means that the next speaker need not play along.

Of course, some actors are less constrained by relevance and uptake considerations than others. Obviously, people who are already powerful—especially those who control the allocation of resources—can expect more reliable uptake, even after they have broken ritual constraints by, for instance, ordering someone around (Brown and Levinson 1987). But having formal power rarely amounts to a license to do anything whatsoever, a point made forcibly by both Weber ([1921] 1978: 212–301) and Elias ([1939] 1994: 443–60). With power comes increased conversational latitude, but only insofar as this is warranted by, and supports, formal position. Informal “network” position can loosen conversational

7 At times, Goffman’s argument, Sacks’s (1995a, 1995b), and Schegloff’s (1988) do not sound very different. The principal clash is over the amount of discretion speakers have in formulating responses to adjacency pair first-halves.
constraints as well: Friends, and allies more generally, can be expected to provide uptake\(^8\) (for instance, when one claims to be an authority in some area), and a close friend may be willing to tolerate mild ritual insults (for instance, being made the butt of a joke). But informal “ties” come with expectations and obligations just as formal position does, and there is ample evidence that these are no less constraining (Gargiulo and Benassi 1999; Krackhardt 1999). Meanwhile, “tag-team” exchanges, whereby team members take the floor in turn, affirming and building upon one another’s remarks, each require a string of turns that others may not be ready to concede. Finally, a person’s movement between encounters may enhance his or her ability to manipulate conversational openings inasmuch as a positive exchange may leave an actor with a surplus of both “emotional energy” and conversational capital (e.g., stories about past encounters and other information gleaned from them) with which to operate in subsequent encounters (Collins 1981; Erickson 1996). However, while both resources enhance one’s ability to seize and hold the floor, by themselves the stories and factoids of conversational capital do not translate into agency, while the kind of conversational success that produces emotional energy to start with is part of what I am trying to explain here.

My point is that while there are things that can enhance one’s ability to seize conversational openings and work within conversational constraints, none of these solve the basic problem of turning technical agency—based on limited freedom of movement in terms of when one speaks, whom one addresses, and what one says—into colloquial agency, or the successful pursuit of one’s cherished objectives.\(^9\) Straightforward, unilateral movement remains dangerous, even when one is bubbling with emotional energy, brimming with conversational capital, and confident that there are sympathetic and cooperative souls—whether friends or subordinates—about. Instead, one must work with the imperfect means at one’s disposal, which are opportunities to move a little to one side or a little to another, but rarely very far at once, and more often than not in the wrong direction either way. My question in the next section is how this can sometimes translate into colloquial agency anyway.

**Making the Most of It**

It has sometimes been suggested that the best strategy for dealing with conversational constraints is ambiguity, crafting remarks so that they have some vague bearing on what came before but not enough content to render one vulnerable to uptake failure (e.g., Leifer 1988). Insofar as it is difficult to offend someone with an ambiguous remark, this may also provide a way around the ritual constraint of tact, and if the target is also left vague, a way out of the targeting constraint. But unmitigated, this is hardly a sufficient strategy, as noted by Wardhaugh:

> Carried to extremes, equivocation must prove unsatisfactory, because it is not ultimately cooperative behaviour. A perpetual equivocator really has nothing to offer others in a conversation. Since cooperation involves giving as well as taking, if you refuse to give you become a burden to others, who will find that talking to someone who has nothing of substance to say is a complete waste of time (1985: 183).

\(^8\)This is how I translate Goffman’s analysis of “teams” in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959: 77–105). And some translation is needed since the conversational dynamics of teamwork are vague in this early work while in his later, more careful work on conversation (1974: 496–559; 1981: 5–77; 1983) he ceased to speak of teams.

\(^9\)I emphasize active “pursuit” here since some people’s objectives are realized irrespective of any agency they exercise, or fail to exercise, in conversation.
Furthermore, as Padgett and Ansell (1993: 1307) observe, “Others are too shrewd not to see through behavioral façades down to presumed self-interested motivations,” which again will make that person undesirable as an interaction partner, though the suspicion of self-interested motives may not warrant an attempt to publicly unmask them. Finally, by itself, ambiguity does not accomplish anything, making one a conversational place-holder rather than a conversational mover. Ambiguity, in short, may seem like a safe strategy, but it is not a good way to get yourself invited to parties and not a good way to get things done once there.

In this section I wish to identify some of the strategies that remain once the conversational constraints have been taken into account, strategies that exploit sequential looseness and the technical agency that it makes possible for the sake of making conversational “moves” that can pay off down the road—whether this means five seconds later or a month later. My concern here is principally with the use of these strategies in encounters that are on the problematic side, perhaps because one is dealing with adversaries or at least with individuals whose sympathies have yet to be secured. Not all of these strategies involve ambiguity though all are at least implicitly sensitive to the concerns that ambiguity was intended to address. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list, and the reliability of any particular strategy is contingent upon skill and luck, by which I mostly mean the strategies that others are following.

**Topical steering.** We benefit more from the discussion of some topics than from the discussion of others. The former include topics in regard to which we are especially well-informed, topics that evoke standards of behavior with respect to which we measure up well, matters on which we hold opinions that are likely to resonate with the views of important others, and issues that, once raised, can be expected to culminate in some decision from which we, and our allies, can hope to benefit. It is sometimes possible to steer conversation in such a direction without being obtrusive about it. Out of respect to the relevance constraint, this should involve putting a particular spin on what was just said, selecting from the available interpretations that which directs conversation in the more favorable direction.\(^{10}\) Ideally, someone else can then be counted on to recall, for instance, that you have some expertise on a subject that, a moment earlier, you managed to introduce, or perhaps to ask an adversary, whom you know to be under-prepared, for his thoughts on the matter. The important skill here is to be able to steer effectively and subtly, to craft an utterance that tightens the screws on the next turn, without giving others cause to wonder whether in so doing you are being anything other than a good conversationalist, free-associating as needed to keep the conversation going.\(^{11}\)

**Reactive scoring.** The flip-side of Leifer’s (1988) strategy of ambiguous action is blitzkrieg disambiguation the instant that someone is so indiscreet as to make a claim to which one can respond with an advantageous riposte. This may entail gently affirming the prior speaker’s self-deprecation (“well, there’s nothing you can do about it”) or challenging his

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\(^{10}\) Were conversationalists to have more time to think this through, a more precise standard would apply: Of those remarks that are sequentially available, select that with the greatest expected payoff, factoring into the equation the likelihood that the remark will steer conversation in the desired direction, the likelihood that some reward will eventually be forthcoming as a result, and the value of that reward. In the heat of battle, actors are hardly capable of such calculations, however.

\(^{11}\) Sacks analyzes how this might be done, in a rare lecture on topic (1995b: 752–63). The precise way that an utterance is formulated, he claims, defines the axis along which the conversation can then slide, though the wording may not actually be vital for the meaning of the utterance taken by itself. That is, two ways of saying something may make the same point, but constrain subsequent talk differently. Sacks uses the example of, “I was at County Line yesterday.” If the speaker’s audience understands that surfing is what one does at County Line, this utterance will be equivalent in its isolated meaning to “I went surfing yesterday, at County Line.” However, Sacks argues that the first utterance constrains talk to the topic of surfing while the second admits remarks from other people about what they did yesterday (1995b: 758).
or her prerogative to make a request or issue a command. In each case, the terms of the dyadic relationship between the initial speaker and the person who responds is altered to the latter’s advantage, in terms of their respective levels of status, as perceived and enforced by third parties (see also Skvoretz 1996). When done properly, there is either no violation of ritual constraints, or if there is, responsibility will seem to fall on the person who made the initial blunder, for example, by being so presumptuous as to “boss around” someone who was not a confirmed subordinate.

While Leifer’s (1988) interest is with this sort of status struggle, reactive scoring can be used to extract more tangible benefits from conversation, for instance, if you can swiftly accept an offer of assistance extended reluctantly or as a token gesture, or respond to someone’s expression of uncertainty with some self-serving advice. (Rapidity is of the essence in both cases, since if you do not react, someone else will.) It may also be possible to exploit the conversational “preference” for an initial show of agreement (Sacks 1987) by, for instance, accepting as complete a compliment originally intended as a polite prelude to a more critical remark. Indeed, reactive scoring may be widely possible because of an even more fundamental feature of talk, the inescapability of linearization, or the fact that a speaker can only produce one word at a time (Brown and Yule 1983: 125). Since it is impossible to articulate both a straightforward claim and the associated caveats simultaneously, and since the latter are generally only sensible in light of the former, speakers tend to begin by speaking plainly even if this means temporarily caricaturing what they ultimately intend to convey. This leaves them momentarily vulnerable to a response that takes the part for the whole by slamming the book on the utterance before its intended point of completion.12

**Piggybacking.** Imagine that John takes some stand vis-à-vis Mary by addressing her, whether by challenging her prior remark, taking a position known to be contrary to hers, or by commanding her. In the brief space between the end of John’s utterance and the beginning of Mary’s reply, there is an opportunity for someone else to “second” John’s remark by re-addressing Mary. (Note that this is consistent with the targeting constraint.) Goodwin and Goodwin (1990) refer to this as “piggybacking” and argue that it provides a way for someone to forge a potentially valuable alliance with the initial speaker, who in their account is apt to be a more powerful actor. The strength of this strategy is that it allows the piggybacker to take a firm position that is clearly relevant to the prior utterance but with a diminished risk of retaliation from the person so ganged up on, who is more likely to respond, if at all, to the original antagonist (John). Note that whether the piggybacker actually agrees with John is incidental. What matters is that John’s remark has created an opening for someone to offer reinforcement with a supporting remark that might not have been possible a moment earlier and might not be safe or appropriate a moment later. The remark signals that a relationship is in the works—between the piggy-backer and John—that goes beyond this particular occasion, by means of a statement that may actually be untrue to the piggybacker’s actual views about Mary. While this sounds duplicitous, this is only because we put such stock in the convictions that we assume people carry around in their heads. Sometimes the important thing is to forge or reaffirm a relationship, to the point where our “actual” views may temporarily fade from memory, perhaps to be replaced by whatever views we espouse in the effort to negotiate a viable network of relationships (Emirbayer 1997: 296; Kim and Bearman 1997).

**Grandstanding.** Grandstanding seems like a risky strategy given uptake vulnerability, but there are moments in conversation when forceful articulation of a position is possible.

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12 Whether this happens on any particular occasion depends in part on grammatical considerations; see Schegloff (1996).
Especially in meetings, there may be time set aside for the airing of opinions, during which one person is understood to have the floor until finished. Also, some types of impasse may permit, and even beg for, a harangue—such as when the impasse is of the muddled variety, in which case a clear statement may provide much-needed focus. Obviously, however, it is important to know what position to identify with—say, one toward which others are drifting, or had earlier converged upon, or which is ardently opposed only by marginal individuals. Ideally, this will be a position that you actually subscribe to, but as was the case with piggybacking, there is no assumption here that you actually believe in what you are saying, and a greater number of opportunities will be available if you are not determined to.

But what is to be gained by championing a position that you do not actually believe in? In addition to strengthening ties to people who also hold this view, being the center of attention is emotionally energizing (Collins 1990), and this in turn may enable you to better negotiate conversational constraints. Relatedly, some ideas are especially potent in creating feelings of solidarity in a group—specifically, those that lie closer to the core of the group’s identity, or those that were central to a recent and emotionally positive gathering (Collins 1998: 48). This may be desirable if you are trying to mobilize the group for some kind of collective effort. Finally, strident advocacy of a viewpoint will convey something important to others: that you are someone who can get things done in conversation, someone who is not afraid to stand up for his/her opinions and capable of doing so forcefully. Irrespective of whether these are opinions you held earlier in the day, this makes you a force to be reckoned with, someone to be wooed as a friend, and dealt with cautiously otherwise.

Topical steering, reactive scoring, piggybacking, and grandstanding are strategies by means of which the technical agency that can be wrung out of conversation, thanks to looseness in some of its rules, can be wielded in the service of the multifarious objectives people come to conversation with—such as finding allies, soliciting help, building consensus, and winning status. What the strategies have in common is that none entail straightforward, unilateral movement. Colloquial agency in conversation, or at least a consequential subset of conversations, entails seizing the moment to do whatever can be safely done, but selecting from the menu of available options that which is more likely to yield some advantage, immediately or down the road. People are agentic not because they march through conversation military-style but because they join the complicated dance of conversation, locking arms and stepping and spinning as the rules require, and ending up where they want to be only if they can exploit the limited options at each step to forge an overall trajectory.

CONCLUSION

Collins writes that the “question of agency and structure is not an explanatory question but an ideological one. It is an argument to show that human beings control their own destinies; it is a defense of free will” (1992: 77). My way around this objection has been to define agency not as free will but as action that furthers an actor’s idiosyncratic ambitions

13 Though Collins does not spell this out, emotional energy probably quickens one mentally, thus making it easier for one to formulate clever and forceful ripostes. And it probably contributes to a more commanding physical presence by improving posture and increasing the frequency of eye contact, which together signal an interest in speaking (Duncan 1972) and availability as an addressee (Goodwin 1989).

14 Whether these are ends in themselves, or merely means to other ends, is a complicated question that I do not discuss here. Suffice it to say that allies and status have interactional value as resources with which yet other objectives can be pursued.
in the face of localized constraints that otherwise suppress the very same. In a sense, the problem of conversational agency is the problem of how biography is interjected into the present without undermining it.

There is, I have argued, no straight path to conversational agency, only fleeting openings for modest opportunism that furthers personal ambitions circuitously, if at all. Conversational openings are scarce, and when one can be had, the use to which it can be put is constrained on both sides, pulled taut simultaneously by the immediate past and by the anticipated future, and further weighed upon by the overarching requirement of ritual tact. From this comes the common experience of not “finding the right moment” to say what we intended to say, of not standing up for our convictions, of backing down when we meant to hold our ground, of losing our tempers when we resolved to avoid exactly that. That agency is sometimes possible anyway is due to the “looseness” of conversational constraints. The agency that results, however, is of a distinctly second-rate variety, consequential for conversation but difficult to wield with a clear objective in sight, technical more than colloquial. In the end, the most agentic people are those who abandon the notion of the “most direct route” as chimerical—or worse, mined—opting for the conversational back roads instead.

REFERENCES


